Letter from the Editors

In the piece *Simplify, simplify*, artist Dana Leonard encourages us to “fight the impulse to examine and capture every intricacy and instead [...] take a step back and appreciate the big picture”. In this issue of *Anastomosis*, this is what we seek to do.

Medical and scientific training often feels like a very active process. We are constantly doing—seeing the next patient, writing the next grant, preparing for the next final, filling our days with back-to-back classes and meetings and events in the belief that this constant active motion will get us where we want to go. In our haste, we tend to overlook the flip side of this coin: we forget that even the things that we do are things that happen to us, and we forget to take time to consider how we change as a result of what has happened in our lives. This issue of *Anastomosis* showcases work from authors, poets, and artists who each take a moment to appreciate their training from a few steps back—reflecting on the ways people in their lives have shaped the questions they ask, revisiting a patient encounter to consider the words that weren’t said, grappling with the weight of witnessing other people’s stories.

As they tell you their stories, we hope we can encourage you to take a moment to consider how you’ve changed as a result of your stories. It has been a delight to work with our wonderful contributors and, as always, we hope you will enjoy reading this issue as much as we enjoyed putting it together.

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LAYOUT EDITOR

/A·nastomosis/

*n.* A connection between two normally divergent structures. From the Greek *anastomoun*, to provide with a mouth.
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The Anatomy of Table 12
MORGAN MCMAHON

A silence as we move the zipper that trembles, fearful of all that it distinctly resembles. A breath as we touch the winding lungs that we breathe, delicately, honoring her generous creed:

To expand thoughts into weight
to swell arrows to stages
to liven lines into lungs
to bring breath to our pages
to make energy from stillness with its remnants and force
to age us all into wonders of life’s (r)everlasting course.

—Morgan McMahon is a first year MSPA student. This poem is dedicated to the generosity of Table 12’s cadaver donor.

Simplify, simplify.
DANA A. LEONARD

The human body is inordinately complex and as a medical student it can feel overwhelming learning about subjects that are sometimes not even completely understood by the world’s leading experts in those fields. We can get lost in the myriad of details. This piece reduces the human skull to a series of lines, fighting the impulse to examine and capture every intricacy of the bones and instead embracing the simple beauty of the form—reminding us to take a step back and appreciate the big picture. The title of this piece comes from a quote by Henry David Thoreau.

—Dana A. Leonard is a second-year medical student at Stanford.
The freedom to drive her big gold Mercury, albeit quite slowly, had kept her content.

During the summers after Grandad passed I stayed with Gremma at the farm for weeks at a time, running wild all over that property. I picked eggs from the chicken coop first thing in the morning; we needed at least three to make pancakes. I spent the rest of the day lugging my BB gun and my fishing rod to all the best spots. I snagged trout from the fishing hole on the far side of the farm and shot swallows out of the rafters in the barn. When the weather was right, like just after a big rain, I would hike up the mountainside looking for mushrooms. Gremma had scared me enough about eating bad mushrooms that I never ate one without her inspecting it first. Before long I knew where to look to find sprigs of chanterelles and morels—usually around the roots of a large tree or sprouting from under a downed log. But even when I came back empty-handed, I’d walk along the fencerows and pick stalks of asparagus that were taller than me.

In the evenings after dinner we would sit in thatched rocking chairs on the front porch and watch thunderstorms roll over the mountains to the west. I never slept so well in my life as I did on those nights with all the windows open—the storm cooling the muggy day, the rain on the tin roof as my lullaby.

She hadn’t been in the nursing home all that long. Before that she’d lived with my parents. It was right around the time I went to college that they convinced Gremma to move in with them. For my parents, it beat having to be on call at the drop of a hat, racing over to the farm whenever she needed them. So when I moved out, Gremma moved in. She even moved into my old room, still decorated as I’d had it as a teenager—Washington Redskins wallpaper and emo rock posters.

She lived with them for nearly a decade, but the older she got, the more cantankerous she became. She’d want this dish or that dish for dinner, always cooked a certain way. She’d insist on watching the 8 o’clock news every night at full volume. It was always too cold in the house for her, so she’d crank up the thermostat whenever she walked past it and Dad would turn it back down.

She became like that—more and more disagreeable—after they took her keys away. The freedom to drive her big gold Mercury, albeit quite slowly, had kept her content. Even though she’d never exactly been Richard Petty behind the wheel, it was last spring when my parents began to suspect she was becoming unsafe. She’d come home from the grocery store or the bank or wherever with new dents in her car—dents she couldn’t explain. But what really did it was when Mom was with her one day and Gremma backed into a car in the Food Lion parking lot. Mom hadn’t buckled up yet and the impact nearly threw her out of the seat. Gremma didn’t even notice. She’d hit hard enough to cave in the back bumper, but she just acted ho-hum, like it was a slip of the transmission or something.

After they took her keys, she still insisted on going everywhere she always had. This just meant that now Mom drove her. It was Tuesday trips to the grocery store, Wednesday to the bank, Thursday to the vet—days spent drowning in the doctor’s office with my mother, the pencil in her hand, the clipboard on her knee, the order forms and paperwork andbungles andbreezes, themade-up names and thehurried doctors, thestrawberries and thegreen tea, theravens and thebluebirds, thebutterflies and theoatmeal, the right side of the office and the wrong side of the office and then back again.

1This is a chapter from a larger project, named Mother Nature’s Son.
store, Wednesday dinners at her best friend Rita’s, church on Sundays, the farm once a month. This was before Mom started fixing the place up too, before Gremma let her touch anything in the house. These trips were mainly to check the mail, even though she never got more than junk, and for Mom to mow the lawn as Gremma sat on the porch and watched.

Mom taught part time at the local high school, ninth and tenth grade biology. One day while she was teaching, Gremma fell. Mom placed the most responsible kid in a class of ninth-graders in charge and drove home in a panic. When Mom got there ten minutes later, she found Gremma lying naked, scared, and a little bloodied on the kitchen floor. Gremma had been feeling unsteady lately and Mom had her agree to only take a shower when someone else was around. And wouldn’t you know it, the one time she ignored agreement, that’s the time her legs decide to give out. We typically think of death as the end of the line. This is a common motif in the Bible, telling us, “All go unto one place.... The earth from whence they came. All are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. Adam’s body was made of dust of the earth, and so all his posterity, all of them, in which they agree with beasts, who are made of the dust also. And, when they die, return to it.”

Ecclesiastes 3:20. These words are popularly attributed to King Solomon to whom God visited in a dream and granted great wisdom.

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carries our exact genetic code with no memory of having lived our life? Whether we are the clone of a dying woman or an infant being born for the very first time, isn't it all the same to us? And how different is it really to the normal process of having children and grandchildren who we know will continue to walk around, to live full and imaginative lives, and to propagate our genetic code long after we're gone? Are all of the above just variations on the same theme—immortality in different forms?

Just before my first time visiting Gremma in the nursing home, Mom warned me that she was starting to have trouble recognizing people, that she kept mixing up the names of my younger cousins. But she knew who I was as soon as I walked in the door.

“I ever tell you about my grandaddy’s pet crow?” she asked as I pulled up a chair next to her big recliner.

“Nope, not that I can recall,” I said.

“Well, he had a pet crow,” she said. “He found the thing, just a little thing, layin’ on the ground one day. Had fallen from a nest in the tree and was left for dead I guess. Well, Grandaddy nursed it back to life, feedin’ it milk and stew out of a little eye dropper. Once he realized the crow was gonna live, he named it Otis. And ol’ Otis would perch up on Grandaddy’s shoulder as he walked around town. They say crows are smart, and that was a fact with Otis. The bigger he got, the smarter and more ornery he got too. He would find ways to play tricks on Grandaddy and folks around town. He loved shiny things and pretty soon found you could get people to act real crazy when you took their shiny things, jewelry and such.”

I laughed.

“And one day, the last day they ever did see Otis. He was perched on Grandaddy’s shoulder, but kept pickin’ at him and actin’ real restless. But he stayed perched up there as Grandaddy walked into the little store at the old gas station. And at that store they didn’t have but one set of keys,” she said, with a big grin. “And soon as Grandaddy walked in, Otis saw them keys was layin’ there. And ol’ Otis went over and picked up those keys and flew out that window, and they never did see him again.” She laughed hard.

And I laughed too.

“Anyway, well that’s true. He saw those keys just layin’ there, shinin’ like gold, and he just took ‘em and they didn’t have any way of getting back in the store.”

We talked for a long time, or mainly she did. She told me of the time Henry Ford stopped in at the local gas station, about the bear that used to be chained up beside the old diner, about her granddaddy getting lost up on Cheat Mountain for three days.

It used to be that you could hardly get two words out of her, but as soon as I sat down next to her, the memories truly flowed—either an active or subconscious imparting.

Looking at her there in her big recliner, on a really good day, I could see her grey-blue eyes light up with the re-telling of these stories. For the rest of my visit, after she’d passed to me so many memories of her world, we talked about New York and how I had to come back to West Virginia, how my parents missed me.

Sensing my visit coming to a close, she started to cry—just a few tears and a sniffle that she wiped on her sleeve.

I came in close to hug her goodbye, and she held onto my arm just above the elbow.

“You know,” she said, “life’s so short.”

Kyle Cromer is a postdoctoral fellow in Pediatrics at Stanford.
The ABCDEs of Melanoma

NICHOLAS LOVE

melanoma, warning signs:

ABCD

E

remember the ABCDEs!

What? Melanoma is a potentially deadly form of skin cancer that grows from melanin-producing cells found in the skin. The earlier the diagnosis, the better the chances of survival. Remember the ABCDEs:

Asymmetry: Notice any new or irregularly shaped moles.
Border irregularity: Check for uneven edges or scalloped borders.
Color: Look for different colors in the same mole.
Diameter: Observe any mole larger than 6mm.
Evolution: Note any changes in size, shape, or color.

Why? Melanomas can occur on any part of the body, including sun-protected areas such as the palms of the hands and soles of the feet, as well as on the palms and soles. They can also arise from a new mole or from an existing one that shows ABCDE warning signs.

Who? Melanomas are more common in people with fair skin and hair, as well as people with light-colored eyes. People with a family history of melanoma also have a higher risk.

Where? Melanomas can occur on any part of the body, including sun-protected areas such as the palms of the hands and soles of the feet, as well as on the palms and soles. They can also arise from a new mole or from an existing one that shows ABCDE warning signs.

How can I prevent melanoma? Regular skin checks, using sunscreen, wearing hats, and avoiding tanning beds can all help prevent melanoma.

How can I learn more? More information about melanoma is available from the American Cancer Society, the American Academy of Dermatology, and the Melanoma Research Foundation.

Nick Love is a 4th-year Stanford medical student.
In anatomy lab today we are faced
With the aftermath of a revolution.
The French, in one sense. Heads
Of cadavers severed and displaced

From bodies onto wooden blocks.
The usual coup of medical school.
Now we learn the cranial nerves,
And meanwhile set aside the box

Of ideas about the mind inside
The brain encased in skull behind
Her eyes, thankfully still cloaked
By a cap of cheesecloth limply tied.

They cut off her head but not mine,
And mine is experiencing the physics
Of a feeling about dying. It is gravity
Circling into the reality of this resign

From humankind to organic matter.
She is gone despite the formaldehyde
Fixing her husk like a bug in amber.
To the students buzzing with chatter

She is a history of memories we
Will never remember. This is messy.
The mind-body dichotomy is false-ish. Give me a moment to notice

Her lips are chapped. Do you think
That her husband kept her lipsticks?
Did she have a husband? A daughter
She offered her shades of pink?

My questions swell to fill the sac
We zip her into at the end of class.
It is customary to let them dissipate
Instead of ask, but I turn back

Or rather, I am pulled by a new force.
If it is rebellion to grieve, I will revolt.
The tragedy would be twice if I ceded
My core in the course of this course.
The psychiatrist’s exam is a conversation, 
A serious consideration of *How do you do?*
Up to the last two questions: *Have you thought
About suicide? Do you hear voices in your head?*
Yes peals clear as a bell. Here is a situation,
No is information in the breath it is delivered.
A scoff has never known madness. A sigh
Has swept against its underbelly, gently.

Dry mouth? Drowsiness? Diarrhea?
*No, no, no,* she replies, but I see her tilting
Into gusts of mourning. Her mother died.
What about dizziness? She nods,
*That’s it.*
My whole world is spinning these days.
A pill will not reverse her loss. At least
It fortifies rafter, cauls cracks
As a twister churns the heart.

Elizabeth Beam is a second-year Neurosciences PhD student in the MD/PhD program at Stanford.
I gave eye contact and a friendly “buenos días” to each patient waiting in the hallway of the centro de salud, my new rotation site in Ecuador. Wearing a white coat, my medical Spanish teacher taught me, means you have to be the first to say hi; otherwise, social hierarchy makes you culturally unapproachable. Apparently, my white coat eclipsed the fact that I was only a foreign student volunteer.

As I tried to show I care, I listened through my headphones to a song called “No me importa,” loose translation: “I don’t care.” Rock goddess Maria Brink belting that mantra makes me feel tough, ready for anything. I’m not usually a metalcore fan, but the song felt right for that morning, when I had no idea what to expect.

As I entered the exam room, the doctor spooned out her breakfast of maracuya, probing it the way she then probed me with her eyes. “Would you like to sit here?” The doctor gestured to a folding chair next to her, then to a cushier-looking chair by the exam table. “Or there?”

“No me importa,” I replied, wanting to be accommodating.

She looked at me like I’d insulted her mother. “What do you think that means?”

“That’s probably what the dictionary says, but here it’s more like ‘I don’t give a fuck.’”

I turned red as the cherries on my dress, which suddenly felt too frou-frou for me to be taken seriously in a doctor’s office. “I didn’t know. Lo siento,” I apologized.

She hadn’t smiled at me once and certainly wasn’t smiling now. Wanting to move on as quickly as possible, I got up from the folding chair and called in the next patient, a fourteen-year-old girl with a downcast gaze, and her mother.

“¿Cómo podemos ayudarles?” the doctor asked, her voice suddenly much warmer.

The mother told the daughter to tell us what happened. The daughter kept her eyes on the floor. We all waited in silence a few moments until she recounted, slowly and quietly, never once making eye contact:

During the storm last week, she’d been inside doing housework instead of outside working on the farm like usual. The man who rented from them had come inside, locked the door and…she couldn’t say the rest.

The doctor turned to me. “We’re going to the first response center. Know what that is?”

My voice became hushed, though the patient and her mom likely couldn’t understand me. “A rape crisis center?”

“I turned red as the cherries on my dress, which suddenly felt too frou-frou for me to be taken seriously in a doctor's office.
“Closest thing we have.”

“You drive your patients there?”

“I’m not supposed to – boundaries. But they don’t have a car and need to get there right away, so…” The doctor locked eyes with me expectantly.

“No me importa,” I finished her sentence. The doctor smiled. I finally understood how to use those words.

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Sara Lynne Wright is a second-year student in the Stanford MSPA Program.
Sonnet of the Soul, Queen of the Brain

Dillon Stull

I laugh: you scale the moat and rocky wall,
A burglar in the chamber of your queen;
I am a living hearth, so will I fall
To inquiry by all your dead machines?
Your lances probe the lightning-laden cloud,
A pulsing, buzzing, storming hurricane
Of thought, you think, but maybe you are proud,
Perhaps your scheme to take the queen, profane.

The artist shares my torchlight with the world,
Emblazons it with awe. But prison guards
Like you will only fall, for when you hurl
The chamber doors ajar in greed, you mar
The memory of who you are. O, quake!
A draught of beauty bids the mind, “Awake!”

Today, in an age of unprecedented confidence in the physical sciences, many wonder whether the soul can be located physiologically or coerced experimentally. Some believe that to do so would debunk the very fact of the soul. In this poem, the soul, “your queen,” speaks to the modern scientific community as it attempts to understand the brain. The phrase “moat and rocky wall” serves as anatomical reference to the skull and cerebrospinal fluid. The scientist, by trespassing this barrier, becomes a “burglar,” manipulating the brain toward ends that are no longer true to our human dignity and purpose. Ultimately we must ask: What is the soul? Is it the kind of thing that can be observed, imaged, graphed, or understood by scientific instruments? Or, could it be that the attitude, methods, and orientation of the artist are more fitting?
From now on, come summer’s end, I was told
my life is what I make of it:
candy shops in a land with no winter—
I could see no kind of life I knew here,
chose instead to see long saccades of
black days and charred nights, cutting ties to enter
this foreign land named Stanford.

Like a princeling of a besieged kingdom
I vowed to take up arms, knowing not
the proper use of them—these scattered talents,
weighing like useless gold on me, heavy.
So I stopped writing in med school,
Stopped singing or painting or swimming
And drowned,
hoping beyond the death of hope that
whatever Calliope I did not know
at water’s edge having returned like Salem witches,
trialed would find
her calling.

All I wanted was the verdant green
and white and citrus orange, besides,
summer days in a land whose native speech felt like
speaking the invader’s Sasanach
Béarla properly,
the salt and safety of living nowhere in the country,
and having small notions.
I wanted back in my woman’s arms,
both forgetting where we parked, and
that this time was precious, finite, limited in the scope of who we were
And would become.
I wanted,
junkie-like I thought I needed,
Bitter poisons full of longing,
my reeling mind forever recalling,
not living in real time.

My fear of becoming someone else
through this new journey
was monstrous,
feeding on memory
and time and propriety,
knowing no horizons or
Dawning of the sun,
forgetting and laying waste
to a thousand Gomorras,
Not seeing the one
innocent thing of each city, which was
Not me.

Winter, having gone to my parents’ kingdom
At the east reaches of this country,
I wanted to return like a man recalled from
Odysseys, larders thrown open,
the fire so warm,
little knowing my shapes and needs had changed.
A tongue said some words about a journey
beginning with a step,
These words unheeded.
By impulse I took quantum leaps
just like the Stanford weeks felt like days,
watching biochemistry on 2x speed,
without understanding the reality of what I Wanted,
What my junkie-self thought I needed,
Who I was in between.
In two weeks I courted and lost
my best friend out of sheer stupidity,
Promising moon and stars when I barely stood on my feet, head so clouded
Like mercury in retrograde, returning to atemporal
Summer days now past in memory,
To say nothing of sleepless knights
Or the burning of candle-wax holding together
Icarus wings:
I garrisoned myself at the impossible castle,
My mind locked away,
My eyes choosing to see long saccades of
Black days, charred nights,
Cutting ties to enter this foreign land named
Connecticut.

Upon returning to school, my mind was a dull white room—
Newly emptied out.
My eyes were raining.
For a while the weather was cloud grey everywhere I went;
My heart was raining.
I wept for these mistakes
I must claim
as my own doing,
A part of who I am.
I wept for the hurt I caused her, the loss I learned from,
The lifetime of acting without looking, or needing to.
But all this, too,
Is now a memory,
Each moment swimming like protozoa

In the sea of me,
Calliope.

On quiet nights I’ve come to realize:
What I had set out to do was an impossible dream,
To live in my past as if it were a lightless castle,
Paying no heed to the real sunlight dawning outside,
The talents like gold simply handed to me,
The vast architecture of aqueducts flowing
In and through me,
Connecting to the infinite flow of wind, water, stars, earth, tree,
The people outside who I meet every day,
whose stories I have yet to discover saying:
Hello, human woman
Calliope, I see you.
In your story
you’ve done wrong
And done hurt
to others and yourself,
but now, if you want, here’s freedom:
To make of this world
A brighter day and
Safer night, to make
With your hands music and mythology
And healing,
Never knowing exactly
The next thing happening
But always watching,
Often smiling,
And seeing.
This is the price and gift
Of living.
If seeing is believing, then I have
Ten on ten thousand possibilities
Stretching farther than I could
Have ever imagined, things I can do
To bring ruin or hope to
People I need in my life:
which is, everyone.
I am learning and growing each day,
Stellar seas of cells and apoptosomes
Collapsing all I’ve ever known,
Bringing me to this new land of
Here And Now:
Every moment renewing, giving,
Receiving.
We are here, now:
And I am so grateful
For your patience.

Calliope Wong is a first-year medical student at Stanford.
For as long as I can remember, every year my Obaachan (grandmother) visited us from Japan and stayed for a month. My brothers and I were always filled with joy to see Obaachan. The gentlest and kindest woman I have ever met, she brought us toys from Japan and played games with us. She patted us on the back lovingly and found ways to communicate warmth despite the language barrier. She cooked delicious food and taught us to make sushi. She was always easygoing and helped my parents in whatever way she could, reducing the stress of the entire household. Whenever she walked up the stairs, my brothers and I raced over to accompany her, happy to help her in any way we could. I remember telling my parents that I understand what an angel is - it is Obaachan. When it was time for her to go back to Japan, we waved goodbye for minutes after she was out of sight, unwilling to believe that she was gone. My mother cried each time she left, heartbroken to see her mother-in-law and best friend leave. We wanted her to live in the US with us, but unfortunately she could not gain citizenship or health insurance in the US.

During college, I had the opportunity to stay in Japan for three months, and I visited her as much as I could. Her friends showed me incredible hospitality and treated me like family. They explained their indebtedness to my grandmother for how she had helped them earlier in life. I also learned of the hardships my grandmother experienced throughout her life - losing all of her wealth during the war, seeing her father die, and seeing her baby die because they could not afford medicine (my dad’s brother). My grandmother’s unrelenting selflessness became even more incredible to me, and this is when I started to learn that I would derive meaning in life by serving individual people.

On my last night in Osaka that summer, I got a call from my family friend that my grandmother was hospitalized from a sudden drop in blood pressure and a fall. I beelined to a hospital in Kobe and found her lying in bed, somewhat confused. I couldn’t help but worry that this would be the last time I would see her. I stayed with her for several hours, and as she became less confused, I was struck by how content and happy she was. Upon reflection of our conversations in the past, I realized that she felt fulfilled from her relationships and by the time that she spent serving individual people. In addition to the friends whom she had greatly helped earlier in life, she also enjoyed being a professor of pharmacy primarily for the opportunity to teach and help others in a one-on-one setting. I believe that at the end of my life, what I will care about the most are the individuals relationships I formed. Content and peace will come with knowing that I did what I could for those individuals.

At that time I was considering a career in engineering, but as I started to gravitate more towards medicine in the coming years, I always recalled this incident. We often dream of making a large scale impact on society, and while that is still possible as physicians, we also have the opportunity to form more personal human to human connections. I am grateful that I realized these connections are what inspires me by seeing the peace they created in my grandmother towards the end of her life. I believe the greatest sense of meaning comes from feeling truly connected to others on this planet. To be given the privilege to care for someone in a vulnerable state – to be able to truly help someone and improve their quality or length of life – is the most powerful form of connection to the human state that I can imagine.

Obaachan, you and my parents have shown me selfless love and kindness, giving me everything a human could need. You have touched my soul and I am forever grateful. I have a duty to take care of my family, friends, patients, and whomever else I have the capacity to help.

Song:
I wrote this song for my grandmother, someone who helped me realize that the ability to impact individuals through medicine is one of the greatest gifts imaginable. Song audio and video available on Youtube.
Heading towards “Paradise”, I noted the dark irony as I punched the Silver Dollar Fairgrounds into my GPS. I scrubbed my windows spotless, checked all tire pressures, topped off the coolant and wiper fluid. Three hours earlier, my studies had been interrupted by a news alert. Harrowing videos depicted narrow-escape, all-consuming fire thundering through brush, trapped residents on heavily congested roads. I had no idea what I was driving into, but I had to be ready for anything.

There was no way I could have known I was driving towards what would become the deadliest, most destructive wildfire in California history. Heading towards “Paradise”, I noted the dark irony as I punched the Silver Dollar Fairgrounds into my GPS.

I completed firefighting training during my four years in the Navy and worked as an EMT following my enlistment. I didn’t know how or where I could be useful – soaking unburned terrain, joining the firefighting teams, or simply running hoses – I just wanted to do my part. The roads eerily empty at 2:00am, temperatures fell below freezing as I made my way from Palo Alto into the desert. Pulling into the fairgrounds revealed the massive scale of this emergency operation. Hundreds of bright red CalFire trucks, rescues from all over the Pacific coast, and bulldozers the size of a small house all filled the parking lot. Most of the crews were still asleep in temporary bunks or their rigs.

Meeting with the fire chiefs that morning, they explained the legal restrictions of having a volunteer working anywhere near the fire and recommended I check in with the local Red Cross shelters. As I drove from Chico to Oroville, the red-tinted sun obliterated, thick haze enveloping a scorched land. On the right of Highway 99, dry brush stood in protest against the apocalypse. On the left, not a single blade of grass remained. I slowed to a crawl as visibility reduced to less than a hundred feet. Ash began to fall like snow.

During my time working 911, I became accustomed to arriving at scenes of organized chaos. But Oroville Church of the Nazarene’s parking lot was... different. A bustling amalgam of cultures, ages, and backgrounds converged under a shared sense of panic, exhaustion, and shock. Partially unloaded trucks of emergency supplies stood in stark juxtaposition to the remarkably ordinary scene of parents attempting to corral restless children. While some tried to rebuff the sobering shock of the moment with conversation and laughter, others succumbed to it, blank stares at an ashen sky betraying their torment. The setting was both alien and familiar.

Like a sentinel standing just inside the front door, a haunting poster board read, “Mama! Call Betsy”, “Andrew! Please, please be ok. Call your father!” Pictures, nicknames, messages; hundreds of overlapping pleas from desperate loved ones. Each note a life, a story of friends and families torn apart, searching for one another. The board was anguish. It was hard to look away.

After a brief introduction to the chain of command and a quick verification of credentials, I was immediately...
we rounded the door, he locked eyes with his mother he politely nodded, but I could see he wasn’t listening. As in a chokehold. I attempted to sooth, to reassure. He him back. His anxiety was unmistakable; he had his hat bedridden, so after matching her description I walked to protect the evacuee’s identities, but his mother was he said. The protocol was tricky, we had to be careful alert, like caffeinated exhaustion. This was the third the front and introduced myself. They looked anxiously searching for the husband’s mother. I made my way to the room, green canvas cots were crammed wall-to-wall. As night fell and the temperature dropped, people began to crowd into the main room, watching the news present smoke were common and traffic was constant. We were now battling a potential norovirus outbreak. A few patients needed to be placed into quarantine; the bathrooms all needed to be bleach. In the medical ward, respiratory problems exacerbated by the ever-present smoke were common and traffic was constant. As night fell and the temperature dropped, people began to crowd into the main room, watching the news for updates on the fire.

I noticed a man sitting off to the side, staring, but I tried to talk to him. Eventually he opened up; the previous day he had eventually a potential norovirus outbreak. Two patients needed to be placed into quarantine; the bathrooms all needed to be bleach. In the medical ward, respiratory problems exacerbated by the ever-present smoke were common and traffic was constant. As night fell and the temperature dropped, people began to crowd into the main room, watching the news for updates on the fire.

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I checked my watch, 4:45am. I sighed – the next day had begun.

I made my way back to the medical bay. Our team, in conjunction with local pharmacies, worked to help minimize influx into overcrowded hospitals, already bearing the brunt of a displaced retirement community and the evacuation of Adventist Health Feather River hospital. After assembling a list of patients and the prescriptions they needed, we began making runs to pick up emergency refills. The remainder of that Sunday was spent overcoming a frustrating series of bureaucratic hurdles to fight for our patients’ access to emergency medication. Once everyone finally had their medications, it was time for me to leave.

On the drive home the sun appeared for the first time in days, blood red. I finally let it all hit me. I had to pull over. By far the most emotional 72 hours of my life, the weight was crushing. Parts of that weekend will forever be just between myself and my patients. The scale of the devastation was difficult to process. Once I gathered myself, I got back in my car, finding the monotony of the drive oddly therapeutic.

Josh Pickering is a first-year medical student at Stanford.