The theme of this issue is “Tensions.” When equilibria are upset, they reveal insights into what it means to be human. Tensions take the parts of life hiding in the shadows and force them into the light, for better or worse. They give situations their stakes. We chose this as the theme for this issue of Anastomosis because of the multitude of tensions that we face in medical education - between action and inaction, spoken word and intended meaning, personal and professional identity, service and sacrifice, and more.

The authors and artists featured this year have faced this theme head-on, with courage and vulnerability. First-year medical student Chenming (Angel) Zheng opens the issue with “Last Breath,” a stunning, visceral painting of the tension between life and death, the opening of an uncertain future amidst a swirling past. Third-year medical student Nirvikalpa Natarajan celebrates the generosity of body donors to our anatomy lab in her poem “The Still Ones,” in which she underscores the solemnity and gratitude of the experience. Second-year medical student Caroline Yao explores the dichotomy of words as powerful and dangerous in “Patient Education.” Third-year medical student Nathan Makarewicz presents a striking collage in “Facial Collage 1,” which examines the history of facial prosthetics and grapples with concepts of completeness and identity. This is just a small selection of the incredible talent and earnest reflection we are honored to feature in this issue of Anastomosis.

In addition, we are delighted to feature the 2022 Paul Kalanithi Writing Award Winners, a contest created in memory of Stanford Neurosurgery resident Dr. Paul Kalanithi, who moved millions with his powerful memoir “When Breath Becomes Air”. The award-winning pieces are phenomenal. They are all evocative works of art that serve as exemplars for the healing and reflective power of engaging in writing and the medical humanities.

We hope you enjoy, and welcome to Anastomosis Volume 5.
A connection between two normally divergent structures. From the Greek *anastomoun*, to provide with a mouth.
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Last Breath
Chenming Zheng

Chenming (Angel) Zheng is a first-year medical student at Stanford.

Issue Theme:

Tensions

Wherever the art of Medicine is loved, there is also a love of Humanity.
— Hippocrates

Medicine sometimes snatches away health, sometimes gives it.
— Ovid
Nicolas Seranio

What we call “good training”
Is to get dressed in darkness
Realizing your bed
Has already forgotten you
Its shape rebounded
Your warmth
A ghost

It is to watch her sleep
Held by arms of cotton
That never push her away
Or break a promise
A small planet of guilt
Swells amidst your ribs
Knowing that she will only find lack
When she wakes

It can feel like your stomach
Being split open
With want
Its walls sagging to a kiss
Like some sad tent
Unsatiated by the snowfall
Of powdered enamel
Molars pestled with concentration
As you operate

“Good training”
Is picking up your phone as you leave
Finding more work
And less friends
The seaford drapes of the operating room
Spill out onto the street
Their tide pulling
At your frayed scrubs

Sometimes it’s the rumble of your car
As you jolt awake to swerve back into the lane
Wheels crunching free from the dirt
That was almost your grave
Or going
This time

“Good training”
Is to care for the man
Who careens into the trauma bay
His brave neck
A disaster of meat and scurrying blood
Cut into the shape of a smile
By his own knife
Because if not for him
I would not know how it feels
To squeeze someone’s bare heart
For them

Nirvikalpa Natarajan

“This is an ode for the gracious people who chose to donate their bodies to the anatomy lab in lieu of a traditional funeral.”

Ashes to Ashes
Dust to Dust
This Inevitability
One day, face we all must

Yet we go through life
On the deluded wings of immortality
Unhinged words, callous acts, reckless trespasses
Pretending to close our eyes to reality

We come empty handed
And we will go the same.
Holding onto Grudges, Pain, and Conquests
We can’t see, it’s all a game

Oh, still ones - you seek no memorials or epitaphs
Though in your silence, you speak the loudest
Reminding me in awareness to awaken
And live a life to my fullest

The ones who lay tranquil before me
I bow down to you with regard eternal
By giving yourselves with the purest intent
Realized have you the essence of life-
Which is ephemeral

Nirvikalpa Natarajan is a third-year medical student at Stanford.
More than 200 poems were carved into the barracks of Angel Island, a processing station in the San Francisco Bay which detained Asian immigrants in the decades following the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. These poems, in Tang Chinese style and other languages, memorialized the grief, anguish, and broken dreams of poor laborers in the mining and railroad industries.

I came across these poems last year while making calligraphy inspired by Asian American history, and compiled more this fall from the Judy Yung archives at Stanford and "Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940" by Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung.

Excerpted in this painting:

Poem 135: 莫道其間皆西式, 设成玉砌便如笼
"Don't say that everything within is Western styled. Even if it is built of jade, it has turned into a cage."

Poem 41: 芳草幽兰怨凋落, 那时方得任升腾?
"The scented grass and hidden orchids complain of withering and falling. When may I be allowed to soar at my own pleasure? By Lee Gengbo of Toishan"

The physicality of etching characters into wood—as scratchy imperfection, burnt edges, and forceful urgency, felt more honest to the workers' pain than elegant brush and ink calligraphy did. Moving from Angel Island to other borderlands, thinking about migration, incarceration, estrangement, "a condition of terminal loss" as Said described in Reflections on Exile—how desperate is the grasp for beauty in despair; how obsessive the desire to be remembered and understood; how powerful, lasting, and fundamentally human is imagination in the spirit's fight to survive.

---

Lucy Ma is a third-year medical student at Stanford.

Though healing can be fickle, you did not even get that chance
I used to feel anger at the injustice
I wanted to fight
Someone!
I didn’t really know who
Incompetent government officials
Kids partying recklessly
God
Anyone would do
We did not even get goodbyes
We did not even get a funeral
Are you at peace?
Maybe we will never know
Maybe it is not important
What you did
want most for us
is to know peace
Within ourselves—
Not an answer, an End state, or the ultimate goal
But a state of being.
Whether we choose to fight, to just move forward, to focus on ourselves, Or to solve all of society’s problems
Perhaps the most and best
We can ask for, amidst it all,
Is simply
Being at peace
Ascension
Shada Sinclair

Was it her root or her leash?
She was pulling on it so hard - one day it gave way.
She swung out into the open,
terrified to look back and realize,
that it was the root,
or the leash?
She flew fast and far,
pieces of her burnt off as she pierced the stratosphere,
so free
so weightless
so lost.
One day becoming a piece of space debris, frantically chasing gravity.
Every planet a desert,
The vacuum numbing her song.
Did she ever fly, or just drift?
Was she a plant? Was she a bird? Was she a seed?
Did she rip out the root that fed her?
Did she tear off the leash that held her down?
Is her cradle now a forest
or an empty nest?

Shada Sinclair is a third-year medical student who stitches colorful dreams and realities.

The seed, the plant, and the bird
Solomiia Savchuk

Was it her root or her leash?
She was pulling on it so hard - one day it gave way.
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terrified to look back and realize,
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Is her cradle now a forest
or an empty nest?

Solomiia Savchuk is a fourth-year medical student at Stanford.
Fear creeps into the patient’s eyes. His legs start to shake.

The physician nods, “I understand. I want you to feel comfortable with making the right decision.

“But… doctor…”

Gulp, silence.

The patient shuffles his feet. “I may not know everything. But I will try my best to answer your questions.”

The physician looks the patient in the eye. Sincerity so intense it burns.

A gloved hand calms the patient’s writhing fingers, and his legs stop shaking.

The patient grins sheepishly. Spoken and unspoken text, with authority, they can break and shatter. With empathy, they give us peace of mind.

I put on that white coat ecstatic to emblazon my name across my chest in blood-red letters the color of Covenant but the most important label was missing because a white coat possesses a power unlike you have ever known have ever wanted.

In it Trembled requests reverberate around me in the hollows of my egg-white shell commanding strangers to splay themselves Eyes fixed on eyes both unsure of what they will find.

In it The closed mouths of passersby fall open Thank you unleash a delude of admiration for your service that pools at my feet Drowns my shoes with the weight of the reality that my fumbling fingers would provoke pain before praise.

Without it I am who I once was The splayed, not the splayer if only there were space to remember Trust and a white coat.

Given before earned given before warned A wonder that taunts me from its dangled dais reminding me of a service I can’t provide a sorcery I can’t yet control

Forgive me. For I knew not what it meant to seal fates into pressed seams Devil in the details And etch my name in blood.

Bunmi Fariyike is a third-year medical student at Stanford.
"Just the bright lights" is a piece of mixed digital media. You are operating, fixated on the flesh beneath the sheets. You know the problems and solutions, and delight in navigating constitutional topography. You blood pulses steadily as you inhale in meditation.

But the entity beneath the sheets - what do they see?

Sarah Jane Rockwood is a first-year medical student at Stanford in the MSTP program.

When a heart breaks, where does it split?
Where do the seams first start to sunder?
Where do the cracks first start to splinter?

Do the chambers collapse, or do they crumble?
Are they chipped away by their frost-bitten frays?
Do their pulses pound too hard, straining the cells?
Or do they wither to a murmur, too faint to fight?

Do the vessels rupture, or do they start to snap?
Do the anterior arteries rip as they ripple?
Does the great cardiac vein lose its grandeur?
Is LADA the great lavish no more?

Does the circumflex artery lose its trajectory?
Straying into the perilied pericardium?
As the aorta descends, does it start to deteriorate?
Does the vagus nerve start to blur, vague and unresponsive?

When a heart breaks, how does it fracture?
Does it bisect or trisect, dissected at the septum?
Does it tear along the tendineae?
Do those choral chords snap for good?
Does it unravel at the valves?
Do they fail to flap, flounder to flow?

Can a suture mend the mangle?
Can a stitch salvage the splinters?
Can a bypass inverse the infarct?
Or is the love-torn tissue beyond repair’s realm?

When a heart breaks, is that how it builds?
It’s a muscle, after all, this messy mangled mass
This orchestrated palpitation might just be the start
A myocardial muse in the making

Sarah Jane Rockwood is a first-year medical student at Stanford in the MSTP program.
The face is arguably our most visible feature and is a central part of our identity, communication, and expression. It is easy to take normal facial appearance and function for granted, but when the window that frames how we interact with the world is damaged, the consequences can be devastating. Unfortunately, those with facial deformities understand this psychosocial burden implicitly.

This work is a collage of individual linoleum prints, each of which is based on a facial prosthetic made during World War I. The unprecedented trauma of World War I greatly increased the need for reconstructive solutions to war time facial deformities. While this period ultimately served as an inflection point for the developing field of reconstructive plastic surgery, initially it was classically-trained artists crafting facial prosthetics who provided the only solution for soldiers with facial injuries.

At the time, physicians and artists worked together sculpting and painting tin prosthetics by hand to recreate a soldier’s face. Despite this level of care, these masks could do little more than cover gross anatomic defects.

This collage uses these historic facial prosthetics to grapple with the universal concepts of completeness and identity. The inorganic and incomplete source materials used to reconstruct this face highlights the contrast between living flesh and the masks once sculpted to mimic it. By juxtaposing hollow, fragmented masks with the composite human form they create, this work attempts to illustrate the human toll associated with facial trauma.

They don’t tell you that you’ll water the cadavers.

It’s an ironic ritual: when you water a flower, you expect it to grow. But we water our cadavers to prevent growth.

I’ve been pondering the paradox for a bit, in between trying to memorize all of the superficial facial nerves, and I think I’ve figured it out. The ritual marks our own growth.

We’ve gone from ex-undergrads to knowing some semblance of how the body works—for the sake of our patients.

All that at the behest of the hands of our cadavers. I hope, with today, our appreciation for the cadavers grows too.

These hands felt love and hate. They kissed their children and grandchildren. They made the choice to let us learn with them. Their final choice.

So thank you for our cadavers. May our practice be all the better for them.

Our practice to help our patients to kiss their grandchildren, to learn, to love.

Our practice—remembering the human in the patient. And today, we remember the human in our cadavers. Showering us with knowledge, watering us—making us grow.

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At the time, physicians and artists worked together sculpting and painting tin prosthetics by hand to recreate a soldier’s face. Despite this level of care, these masks could do little more than cover gross anatomic defects.
At the time of submission, Christine L. Xu was a third-year medical student at Stanford.
I have barely enough time to stop for coffee. I glance towards the exit. Where I thought the exit was. I’m confronted by four walls covered by stacked tomes. While messily stacked, there is no evidence that the books had fallen over the entrance. Am I still –

“No sir, you are not dreaming,” interrupts the dark-haired man, “and, no, I can’t read your mind.” Somehow, he sounds… rehearsed. I have never realized what it was like to feel like your jaw hit the floor until that moment.

I sit in stunned silence. I must have stumbled into some elaborate prank game show. No hidden cameras in sight. Of course, they wouldn’t be. The slight thunk of porcelain on wood adds just enough normalcy to quell my rising panic. “Here you are, Mr. Jones,” says the cashier before hurrying back to the register. Holding the cup and smelling the aroma of freshly brewed espresso snaps my reeling mind to the here and now. The warmth seeps into my hands and the first sip singes my tongue. Dark waves of espresso rise, fall, and still as I blow into the steaming cup. The next sip is bitter, but sweetness darts through like jokes in a eulogy.

Even in this bizarre café, caffeine works. The remnants of bleariness melt away. The click-clack of typewriter keys fills the air, punctuated by the occasional clang as the carriages rush backwards across paper. Placing my fingers on the keys, I notice that somehow the machine has been set to a comfortable position within my arms’ reach. Feeling the faint outline of the letters press into my fingertips, and having no idea what I am doing, I begin to type.

The shock of warm air coats my glasses with condensation as I rush into the café...

At the time of submission, Peter Alexieff was a fourth-year medical student at California Northstate University College of Medicine. He is now Dr. Peter Alexieff, MD, a first-year resident in child neurology at Lurie Children’s Hospital in Chicago.

A Woman with Three Kidneys

Nadia Kirimani

Renal failure was the explanation.

She is a petite woman in her sixties silver hair shorn down to the skull, golden skin dulled by death to a paler countenance. We weren’t given a name for her, just a number She is Table 9.

My first day I unzip the plastic blue bag, pull back the beige fabric covering her length to the navel. Stillness hangs between us, a claustrophobic finality one which cannot be commemorated long before a voice urges me to begin, and so I do.

It doesn’t take much force to open our bodies My scalpel meets your skin, fascia, thin layers of gloopy adipose I take my time, discard them in the biohazard bag between your feet. Starting at the thorax, down to the abdomen, then the pelvis - you have a kidney in your pelvis!

My professor exclaims over the teaching moment So it’s not a uterus? My teammate mumbles. We learn that in the embryo, kidneys developed in the pelvis for their blood supply. Medicine, I think, has a way of returning back to the beginning.

A single kidney has a million nephrons Blood vessels freed, I hold that statistic in my palm Three million nephrons If I could, I would ask you – How did it feel? Was it different than before? Or maybe what I really wanted to know was, how could that not be enough to sustain you?

Months pass before I see your face, and the first thing I notice is your eyes. A gelatinous ring of blue. I know it may sound absurd but when I muster the courage to look directly in them, you say you’ve known what was to happen all along.

It is now our parting day, and what I want to say is this - Before I met you, I hadn’t known our vessels could tell stories how the source of pain we carried persists after death. Perhaps the way we learn is by sharing with others that which we harbor inside of ourselves, reflecting on past pain to better handle what we will meet in the future.

Nadia Kirimani is a first-year medical student at Stanford.
The weeks surrounding the winter solstice have always felt particularly tender for me, like a bruise, a sludgy stasis of blue-black-green-purple simmering underneath my paper skin. The ache that runs through my body is a reminder of simultaneity: of life and death percolating beneath the fallen leaves at the feet of barren trees, of my father, of the procession of family members who departed in the years after he did, of the passage of time circling back to my birthday this month, of endings begetting beginnings.

I believe that our bodies tend to somaticize the ancient wisdom that shorter days and longer nights are signals to ease deep into the soft, slow, slush of wintertime. It is a season to sleep, and dream, and integrate, and metabolize. I wonder if there is an interplay between my innate reactions to the chill of winter and my molten memories of this season in years past. The slumbering glow of the winter sun offers me the wisdom of potentiality: I feel that it is becoming more possible for me to unravel the dual, tightly-wound knots of grief and joy that bind my ribcage to my clenched heart.

This year, grief feels like an untethering from the story about the grandparent who relaxed in his favorite chair, his hands and wrists, a microcosm of canyons and valleys, carved and re-carved with each gesture. I remember gathering sweaters from underneath the floor, the minute movements of the bones and tendons in his hands and wrists, a microcosm of canyons and valleys, carved and re-carved with each gesture. I remember gathering sweaters from underneath the stacks of boxes in his closet so that he would have some options to choose from whenever he felt cold, which was nearly every day. I remember guiding him by the elbow to a nearby shopping mall so that we could get a few links removed from his favorite watch.

I still have the recording I made that summer afternoon. The audio is distorted by the whir of the aircon contending with the slick press of Chengdu’s humidity, and my grandfather’s voice fades in and out of focus, his volume undulating with the ebb and flow of his diaphragmatic effort. He runs out of energy to speak while he is telling me about how and why he and my grandmother fell in love with each other.

Grief feels like time. It feels like this city that seems to seep and ooze and gelatinize into unfamiliar molds while I am away, a collection of freeze-frames which was nearly every day. I remember guiding him by the elbow to a nearby shopping mall so that we could get a few links removed from his favorite watch.

Grief feels like an untethering from the story about stacks of boxes in his closet so that he would have some options to choose from whenever he felt cold, which was nearly every day. I remember guiding him by the elbow to a nearby shopping mall so that we could get a few links removed from his favorite watch.

Grief feels like the sun slanting through the rows and rows of gingko trees outside, their yellow wings spiralling into careless heaps on cars, roads, sidewalks. And I am trying to breathe all the while.
"My works explore the tension between matter and spirit. The chaos within the human figures spills from the confines of their physical bodies and saturates the background. ‘Ophelia’ and ‘last breath’ represent the feeling of drowning in distress; the subjects struggle as the murky water swirls around them, slowly pulling them deeper into turmoil.”

Chenming (Angel) Zheng is a first-year medical student at Stanford. Her other piece, “last breath,” is on page 1.

Shada Sinclair is a third-year medical student who stitches colorful dreams and realities. Her other piece, “Ascension,” is on page 7.
To think that 18 years of my life fit into one suitcase of 50 pounds packed by the family I would not see anymore. Where do you pack your fears? What to leave behind, and how to make room for the new and enticing American dream? On the day I left my home country, my suitcase carried the most precious cargo of them all: the dreams of the mestiza and indigenous generations before me, those that sacrificed everything for one of us to have a chance at economic stability and freedom of thinking. Here is the story of how I carried the lessons of my Ecuadorian elders to become a woman in STEM, an activist, and a future physician in a country that did not always welcome me.

Lesson one: grow in resilience by building community. No posters hanging from the wall, no bed risers to make the room feel bigger. My college dorm, the only space I had some right to in America, felt empty and sad. Proud parents roamed around the dorms settling their kids in. Where do you pack your fears? What to leave behind, and how to make room for the new and enticing American dream? I regretted the day that I thought I belonged here.

Lesson two: use your voice to act on injustices. Multiple days had passed since I developed a dry cough. With no urgent clinics around the area, I tried to push through. I wasn’t able to hospitalize me. I couldn’t afford missing work. Even then, I understood the medical opportunities given to me are oftentimes denied to many immigrants who are not insured and face language and cultural barriers. That is why I’ve decided to use my privileges in service to others. As minority students we have a superpower, one of relating to communities in need; we understand their herbal medicinal practices, religious traditions, frustrations with the immigration system, and their experiences with food insecurity and homelessness. We minority students have the superpower of acting for them, with them, because we are the future of medicine, future physicians with a life purpose centered on rebuilding the trust of marginalized communities in the healthcare system.

Lesson three: choose to grow even when things don’t work out. To be an international student is to be a second-class citizen. I didn’t have a say in the jobs I could take, the loans I could sign up for, or even the medical schools I could apply to. So how do you compete when the odds are already against you? How do you love this country when it does not love you back? You choose to grow above all else. You embrace the culture that raises you, you take advantage of every opportunity given to you, and most importantly you surround yourself with people that believe in you. In your life, you will come across people that see your spark, that believe in your talents and strengths. Hold these people close to your heart, and nourish these relationships because they are not prepared to see the change we bring to this country.

If there is one thing you must remember from today, it is that we minority students are forged to be defiant, to stand up for what we care for, and to bring our communities along the way.

Sofi Vergara is a first-year medical student at Stanford. This piece is a transcript of her speech delivered at a conference for minority students in prehealth.
Asim

As a child, Asim always wondered why he couldn’t touch light. By the time he was a teenager, he had multiple scars crawling over his body—indicative of his proclivity to pass his fingers through open flames. His mother likened his nature to that of a moth drawn to the darkness. He had loved her name ever since the day he first heard it. It reminded him of the Urdu word for sky. Before they got married, he had seen her so lifeless, like a body of dead cotton. Asma’s fragility touches to begin to glow. As he smooths her hand on his own, she feels none of the sky. Asma attempts to register in his mind simply from practice. He knows he should be distracted, but he almost hears his father’s voice in his head, saying the words with him. The moment is sacred—and he wants to stay there. He repeats the motions and exhales every Surah he can think of; lips moving and moving and moving. He feels wetness slide down his skin; the droplets create streams on the floor. It had been the happiest day of his life.

Now, claustrophobia overcomes him. They are situated in the darkest corner of the hospital. Its walls are covered in sheepskin. The room is not small, but Asim feels as though the four corners have been pulled into the center like a tarp. He feels none of the sky. The room is windowless and lightless. The room is dark. They are situated in the darkest corner of the hospital. It seems. Windowless and lightless. The room is dense at night. He uses his knuckles to brush the wet hair from her forehead. He remembers kissing her neck and smiling till his cheeks hurt. The first look does. His son. His son. His son.

Shrieking. He wordlessly rushes outside of the room to find the doctor. He prays with his eyes open. Because he lives by himself, he says his prayers, enunciating every syllable, makes him feel less alone. The volume of his conversation with God is enough to keep him company.

Asma

When Dil was a child, his father took him to his first pottery class. There, he engaged his hands, shaping the wet clay into vessels that stored his mother’s favorite flowers. He quickly grew bored with pottery, though, and asked his father if he could pursue sculpting instead. The first person he sculpted was his mother. He spent hours brushing his hands over her face to feel the contours of her features. He made gentle strokes under her eyes, over the bow of her nose, and with his fingertips, he traced her lips. He had sat and watched her for most of his life. When he worked the clay, it was as if he had been practicing his whole life. Like water taking the shape of its vessel, the clay shifted to the mold of her mother. He could not see to confirm that he had gotten it right, but it felt perfect.

Behind Dil now sit blocks of unformed clay, dried from being left outside. Uncared for and uncreated. He thinks about the way his fingers used to move in his youth, the way he used to be able to create beauty that could be felt. He misses the tactile and agile nature of his own hands—the same ones that lay on the prayer mat as he cried, limp on the ground, so quiet that he can barely hear himself. Pinpricks of adoration that spills from his face. Asim brings the baby to his chest, placing him just below his collarbone. He lays the baby’s head against the skin that thurs with the deep beat of his heart. He can feel the vibrations echoing between them.

The doctor had warned Asma about the complications before their son was born. He was developmentally not ready to face the world. The first cry doesn’t ring in his mind. He knows what is coming but does not feel afraid. Asma attempts to brush the wet hair from her face, but he almost hears his father’s voice in his head, saying the words with him. The moment is sacred—and he wants to stay there. He repeats the motions and exhales every Surah he can think of; lips moving and moving and moving.

Dil

Dil thinks it is to his benefit that he never saw the world in the first place. He thinks that if he had, he would have certainly fallen in love. Then, he would have known what he was missing all along.

He prays with his eyes open. Because he lives by himself, he says his prayers, enunciating every syllable, makes him feel less alone. The volume of his conversation with God is enough to keep him company.

Dil

As the child is surrounded by the divine melody, he closes his eyes. He is small and delicate like a drop of morning dew. Just a lantern. He is small and delicate like a drop of morning dew. Just as Asim brings his son to his lips. ‘Dil’. That’s his name. I will call you my heart. The first cry doesn’t ring in his mind. He knows what is coming but does not feel afraid. Asma attempts to brush the wet hair from her face, but he almost hears his father’s voice in his head, saying the words with him. The moment is sacred—and he wants to stay there. He repeats the motions and exhales every Surah he can think of; lips moving and moving and moving.

Dil

As Asim delicately walks toward the crib that cradles his son, he has the urge to present himself in a more raw form. He lifts his hands up and down, as though dusting himself, laying his threadbare shirt next to his wife’s bed. He wraps his fingertips around his premature child, letting his thumbs swirl around the baby’s shoulders. He looks at him and finds no adoration that spills from his face. Asim brings the baby to his chest, placing him just below his collarbone. He lays the baby’s head against the skin that thurs with the deep beat of his heart. He can feel the vibrations echoing between them.

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Asim

Dil holds out his palms to the sky and then brings them to his face to cup his heart. He knows what is coming but does not feel afraid. As he feels his spine losing strength and his mind losing consciousness, he lets the heavens in his chest consume him. His forehead hits the edge of the bridge of his nose. The way his body curls, he looks as though he is peacefully sleeping.
Streaming Sapience
Anshal Gupta

9, 10, 11
through the jugular foramen
in parallel passes the jugular vein too.

Red blood cells speed away like race cars at a flag wave
streaming sapience with persistent systole.
In suspension for hours, my brain tries its best
curating model memories to later retrieve
anatomy, physiology
knowledge that leaks faster than cells speeding sinusoid street.

Why are red blood cells absent at parties?

In the garden of knowledge grow
temptations of fruit
consumed as courtesy by the usual suspects.

Rowdy delinquent neurons in the back
cackling with glee and distracting from task
axons lighting up on EEG
like telephone wires on Christmas Eve.

Why are red blood cells absent at parties
where rhesus pieces are served on platelets?

Neck extension with mouth wide open
air rushes past laryngeal folds.
Bass in the neck meets acoustics in the chest
tricuspid tendineae strum like guitar chords.
Sapience is joy at the silliest of jokes.

Why are red blood cells absent at parties
where rhesus pieces are served on platelets?
They are busy (RBC)

Throughout my medical education and residency training so far, I’ve been indebted to my amazing mentors. They have taught me invaluable clinical and doctoring skills. They have imparted their wisdom with patience. I especially recognize the great degree of trust mentors have in us trainees. We cannot learn how to do procedures—or, indeed, how to become doctors—without their guidance and their willingness to step aside for us to learn. “Mentorship”, therefore, highlights this incredible and important relationship with two surgeons’ hands working together on a procedure. With subtleties apparent in body language and the pictured surgical instruments, the sketch illustration aims to portray a mentor, who allows the mentee to take an active role.
Whether I was walking into my MCAT testing center or donning my White Coat, my path to medicine has been filled with endless warnings of Imposter Syndrome.

“You belong here, Henry.” “You’re THAT DUDE, Henry.” Stanford ain’t ready for someone like you, Henry.” These are all words that I consistently read to myself to ensure that I had a steady supply of ego boosts during my first weeks of medical school.

Why? Because that should have stopped the Imposter Syndrome from forming? That’s the wrong thing to focus on! Damn straight I’m good enough, right? I just had to internalize the fact that nobody’s perfect, right? After all, that’s what all of these papers, experts, deans, etc. are pinpointing as the source of Imposter Syndrome: the thought that we’re not good enough for medicine.

The belief that we somehow fooled numerous admissions officers with decades of experience to accept our beautifully polished application over thousands of others… Right? When in reality, we’re imperfect humans who sometimes can’t even recognize the seemingly perfect person we presented on paper.

If these feelings of self-doubt were truly the core of Imposter Syndrome, why then – did I feel like I didn’t belong in medical school only a few days into MoFo? Why were the phrases of warnings of Imposter Syndrome. Why didn’t my Imposter Syndrome seem to form, right? I just had to constantly remind myself that I’m good enough, right? I just had to internalize the fact that I’m good enough.

“Stanford ain’t ready for someone like you, Henry. “ These are all warnings of Imposter Syndrome.

I stealthily weave through the bodies around me that are practically gyrating against each other. Even at this proximity, I do not find any evidence of the 2 meters the newcomer keeps asking like the chorus to a song everyone is tired of listening to. I will never forget the night he first came on air with his pursed upper lip and authoritative glare as he looked right at us. Mai had cried that day. She hadn’t cried quietly. It was one of those yelps you would hear when they are beating a dog – sharp, crisp and full of sorrow. On the other side of the walls, I could hear the scratch of the neighbors’ ears as they pressed their heads firmly against the cool, corrugated metal dividers that separated each homestead, eager to acquire gossip that could be sold in the market for a meal or two.

I secretly wish I could sell some gossip too. After all, it made big money fast, and I could use it to stop my mother from crying so much. Yet, she would never accept goods bought with dirty money. I wanted to tell her that poverty and morals are an unnatural pair, that she could be sold in the market for a meal or two.

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I refused to give my thief the satisfaction of taking her peripheral vision. She shifted the metal tin box holding that day's three, started to gather their belongings, drawing them closer into her mouth. Instead, my eyes searched frantically for the women selling blue, yellow and green cloth. Her lips, oiled with globs of Vaseline, extended his eyes into the opening. His evil grin gave away his plan, teeth, now more angry than cautious. The old man did not pause for my response. Instead, he lifted the bag I kept the merchandise in and mocked the emptiness in my eyes.

"Mfana, what are you selling?"

"Just Qinquiso's, ma." I replied. "Give me a bag, and I'll sell it to you.

The figure takes no such pause, claiming my personal space as his own instead of the downward curves of my throat, squealing with joy like a child on a flying debris in my nostrils or temporarily scratching until we bore holes into our skulls.

Qinquiso was a brain. He had won a scholarship at 6 years-old to attend the prestigious private school: St. Joseph's Preparatory. In his dapper blue trousers and executive-level collared shirt, he would walk five kilometers to the bus stop just on the edge of Sandton to avoid offending the other children with the contradictions between how he lived and how he schooled. At home, he shared a bathroom with ten people. At school, he could sit in the stall for as long as he wanted without anyone ever asking him to leave. He ate like a king at school so that at home, his brothers and sisters could have a few morsels to stop their stomachs from digesting themselves. Only Qinquiso and the bus driver knew the truth, and they both would have taken it to the grave.

When the lice attacked, the truth could no longer remain hidden. The distressing creatures dove into the TRÉSemé-shampooed hair of Qinquiso's classmates - a nutritious incubator. It didn't take long until the children with offending the other children with the contradictions between how he lived and how he schooled. At home, he shared a bathroom with ten people. At school, he could sit in the stall for as long as he wanted without anyone ever asking him to leave. He ate like a king at school so that at home, his brothers and sisters could have a few morsels to stop their stomachs from digesting themselves. Only Qinquiso and the bus driver knew the truth, and they both would have taken it to the grave.

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There’s a part of the story of patients and their families that we often struggle to capture in healthcare. We can’t find it during our history and physical, and it’s not revealed by lab values or radiographic images. It’s a nuance that can only be conveyed by patients and families themselves.

Over the course of several months, we partnered with pediatric patients between the ages of 4 and 18 and their families at Lucile Packard Children’s Hospital to learn about their experiences with healthcare – through their own eyes.

In giving these patients a camera, we asked them to capture the parts of their hospital experience that were most meaningful to them. We asked their caregivers to do the same. At the end of the experience, we interviewed families about the photos they took to understand why they took it, what they saw in each photo, and what they hoped other people would see in it. We are honored to share with you what our partner families had to say.

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“[When] I got discharged, it was kinda hard to walk from my room to the stairs, so I wheelchaired over there, and I climbed up the stairs.”

What does this picture tell us about your life?

“You can always achieve your goals.”
– J. (age 10)

“[This photo] is a really cool cactus tree that was trying to lean towards the sun ... It has tons of spikes along the trunk, and it made me think how brave it was and how kind it was like me.”

Yeah, what does that mean for you?

Being brave?
– E. (age 10)

“If I drew a really nice heart. It was almost a perfect heart, and I wanted to keep drawing more, because I was just very happy with my parents being here. Because, you know, not a whole lot of patients have parents that they can see almost every day. Some people do, but they’re not always here. So, that’s why I have three hearts that have my dad and then me and my mom”
– C. (age 10)

“This is the first time that I got to wash [C’s] hair after surgery. And I think this was over two weeks after surgery. We had washed it in the bed once, but I just was dying to like get in there, like clean her head and like to take care of her. It feels...you can really feel hands-off in medical situations, especially when she was so fragile. With the pacemaker situation I couldn’t, I couldn’t get her out of bed. I couldn’t hold her, I couldn’t do all these things.”
– S. (parent of C, age 10)

As burgeoning medical professionals, we spend so much of our time learning from who we consider to be experts. Professors, scientists, doctors, nurses: these are all people we typically associate with the type of infallible wisdom upon which we hope to build our own careers. But these photos and quotes remind us that sometimes the greatest wisdom comes in small packages and the most important lessons from simple words. It was our honor to be able to stop and listen, and we hope that we have given you the opportunity to do the same.

Freja, Bunmi, and Niisoja are part of a larger team of graduate students who put together this project to give pediatric patients an opportunity to play and express themselves through photography. If you are interested in supporting their work, please contact them at pediatricphotoproject-bounces@lists.stanford.edu.

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“Still Life (sutured)” portrays a familiar situation for medical students as a surreal piece. Early in medical school, I developed interest in surgery as a career. Senior students and resident mentors encouraged me to practice knot-tying and suturing as preparation for my surgical clerkship and sub-internship rotations. I collected old needle drivers and expired suture packets, using chicken cutlets and various fruits—oranges, bananas, grapes—to zealously practice my interrupted stitches, running “baseball” stitch, and vertical and horizontal mattresses. Using mixed media, including collage and embroidery, I sought to create a whimsical ode to a fundamental skill all medical students learn and to the concept of “practice makes perfect.”

Adela Wu, MD is a fifth-year neurosurgery resident at Stanford.

Paul Kalanithi Writing Award

Paul Kalanithi was a physician writer and neurosurgery resident at Stanford University. In the final years of his training, he was diagnosed with metastatic lung cancer. His memoir, *When Breath Becomes Air*, beautifully chronicles his reflections on living with illness and the meaning of legacy. The Paul Kalanithi Writing Award was created in his memory.

1st Place: *Sick Girl Goes on a Date* | Alyson Lee
2nd Place: *To Sit With* | Brian Zhao
3rd Place: *What That Poem was About* | Fiona Miller
4th Place: *I Wear You Like a Memory* | Nicolas Seranio
Honorable Mention: *Junk Journal* | James Hyun Lee
For my first date as a sick girl, I wore a black shirt with ruffles that exposed my midriff and a pair of expensive jeans borrowed from my sister-in-law. I felt pretty. I practiced giggling in the mirror because I was afraid I had forgotten how to smile.

They say you shouldn’t talk about anything traumatic on a first date but we had not even finished our appetizer before I told him that at age 20 I had a stroke, I lost function of my fingers and legs, I had a worm in my eye and got de-wormed like a horse, and I am slowly losing vision in my right eye.

I had meant to tell him the cute version, that I had had a stroke and it was “crazy.” But he never interrupted and looked at me without pity so I kept telling him more. I said, “once a month I get lasers burned in my retina to kill cells that are trying to attack me.” I said, “at one point they thought I had cancer, but no one had the heart to tell me.” I said, “they never figured out why this happened.” And I laughed the whole way through, with a few well-timed self-deprecating jokes, watching him carefully to see if he laughed too.

I said, “Well yep. That’s my shit,” and looked at his eyes, the hands in his lap to see if he was anxiously picking at them. But he looked me in the eye, without a note of irony, and said “I guess what I can say is, you’re incredible.”

I can say then that other things happened on this first sick-girl date. He told me he read Pilgrim’s Progress three times cover to cover and I laughed and said, “that’s hot.” He asked me what my favorite basic science class was and I said, “Cell Biology.” The C-train was late so we took the 1 and he told me when he was little, he played Schubert at a recital and an old, dying lady in the crowd was so moved she bought him a baby grand and paid for his piano lessons until she died. And I laughed and shamed him for not playing piano now when this lady had died thinking she had found the next Mozart.

And because he dropped me off at my apartment and said, “When can I see you again?” the first sick-girl date became a symbol, a memory to signify the moment when I realized that I had told him everything and he didn’t run away, that you could tell someone you have broken blood vessels but they still desperately want to know why you think N-linked glycosylation is so elegant.

The next day he sent me a picture of his finger, freshly cut from a kitchen knife, wrapped in a band-aid with a smiley face he drew on with a pen. He called his bandaged, smiling finger Rex for “Right Index” and sent photos of Rex accomplishing various tasks throughout his day.

I told him that I named the hypothetical parasite in my optic nerve, Edworm, and said “we are basically the same.”

I guess you could say I was ecstatic but I could not help but be worried. Because I had found the first boy to say, “I’m thinking about you” after my body had fallen apart and I did not trust myself to know whether he really liked me or just liked taking care of me, whether I could call this love when it was really sympathy.

In my darkest of thoughts, I can say I am glad. Because I wonder whether this illness I have is heritable and if I would just be giving birth to a broken baby. I can say I am relieved because I do not want my baby to resent me.

Sometimes, though, I picture myself in mismatched pajamas, a t-shirt from college and gingham thermal pants, and my head is in my hands and my hands are in my hair, pulling, and my hands are on my belly and they are pressing down on my belly button trying to feel whatever it is that is empty and cold.
Sick Girl Goes on a Date

I pre-mourn the disappointment. Because it will be another way my body has failed me. Except in this case, it would fail a lot more people than just me. Because in my picture, I am always alone and I know it is because we had tried but it was too much for him to bear, because he had not pictured his life to turn out this way, and even though this is the 21st century and he told me I am more than my birthing body, he leaves me for a woman with wider hips and greater follicle-stimulating hormones.

Sometimes, though, I picture the moment after the doctor tells me bad news, when she tells me the days I have left. I picture what it would be like to sit my children down and tell them, mom's not doing so well anymore. And I mourn the wails I will not hear and the words of comfort I will not get to say.

I do not even know if this is something I have to mourn. But I am too scared to find out. So I just mourn what I do not know, waiting for the day I do.

2nd Place Kalanithi Award

They couldn't get a clean cut, that space between abdomen and gut-feeling. A year to live or four—they cannot say. You are incandescent with unknowing. How hard it is to be human in the thrown shadow. Like everyone else, you once dreamed of falling asleep forever. But even this peace eludes you now. What can I do but sit with you.

Uncle, at night you had no teeth. Your tongue stuck out like a parched nub of sunflower. What did we talk about during those hours, when there was only my crisp American and your gum sounds and the soft slur of electricity. Perhaps at the end you knew enough, my touch unfelt against your swollen fingers when I asked you to wake up and the machine cried out.
They tell me I have my father’s face
But I know my features belong to my grandmother
They belong to Shirley

Our faces are round
With a glassblower’s cheeks
All orbiting a bulbous nose

Sometimes I like to imagine them
Back in their home of Kingston, Jamaica
Sniffing the char of roasted breadfruit
Or savoring the last morsels of curry goat and callaloo
Before they dance down her throat

The same throat they find the mass
A time bomb of flesh
That leaves no room for boiled dumplings or beef patties
Only liquids

My parents pulverize her food down to the atom
Made unrecognizable
And her face follows
She is all angles now
As islands of bone emerge from the receding fat
Her sunken cheeks an offering bowl
I had never felt her ribs until we hugged for the last time

I learn of her passing on my way to the operating room
And I let myself shatter briefly
Before promptly returning to work
I intend to schedule my grief
As I know she must have
Between the pummeling of her husband’s knuckles
And the whimpers of her three little ones
Between working every job at every hour
Only to cut her feet on shattered glass
After Oakland robs her once again
I know that grief is a luxury

I carry her face to her funeral
And even soggy with tears
It stirs the souls of all who know
Every crease a lyric
Every smile a eulogy
What a gift
To carry this legacy and to comfort others
With this face

My mother in her blue flannel nightgown shuffling down the hall, dragging her left foot like a block of wood behind her. Squinting. My mother’s soft body in and out of the sarcophagi of MRI machines, objects falling from the hands she thought were clenched. Words like numbness, blindness, scarring, scared. My mother on the toilet seat holding a needle long as her middle finger, diagram of a faceless body showing her where. Forty, with a walker. Saying my MS, my MS, like it was a thing that belonged to her. And me, in the middle school courtyard with my friends, saying words like sick, brain, autoimmune. Me, in the spoken word workshop at writing camp with the only poem I ever wrote about disease. Me, on the stage beginning too fast and the teacher saying Stop. What is this poem about? Making me say it. Me, swallowing. Commanding the tears to stay back. And behind me my classmates, against the wall, knowing, each of us clutching our losses like they were the last things in the world we owned.

I wear you like a memory

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Honorable Mention Kalanithi Award

DAD – a photograph of his father dressed in hankie, beaming at the son in his lap. An empty miniature of diet ginger ale. A final hospital bill.

On your first date, he told you about how Joel died. Queer dating is just exchanging equal parts pleasantries and trauma.

He told you how he could not remember much about his father. For some reason, the memories of Joel were inaccessibl...
He tied a blindfold around your eyes, and a small, stupid part wobbled a panna cotta. He asked if you trusted him. You did.

"I wanted to make you a dessert that was as dynamic as you are to me."

You never expected that a Tinder date would lead to a wooden anniversary. Later that night in your bed, he made some terrible joke about how wood and tinder were actually the same thing, and you slapped his shoulder in faux annoyance. In retaliation, he kissed you and tickled you and embraced you so warmly that you couldn’t finish your thought about how crazy it all was and how quickly it could come crashing down.

W O O D - five pieces of tree bark. A gay anniversary card with two stick figures in top hats holding hands.

He had insisted on coordinating the entire date. It was going to be a good day. The voices were under better control. He felt normal. Excited, even.

He had decided on a scavenger hunt as your anniversary gift. Each stop had a clue to the next, accompanied by a treat. He had decided five years ago when he thought someone was spying on him.

He accepted the whole package because you needed all of him. You couldn’t imagine him without his schizophrenia. He enriched him – made him more sensitive, thoughtful, intense. It was not a cancer that could be resected, not a cut that would scar over, eventually paling from both vision and memory. You accepted the whole package because you needed all of him.

JUNK JOURNAL - a dresser filled with forty-nine boxes of various sizes and shapes, each box wrapped in twine and tagged with an index card labeled with silver Sharpie.

"DIAGNOSIS" "CHEF’S KNIFE" "THROWING HANDS" "NEGATIVE SYMPTOMS" He loved mementos. Holding something familiar and summoning the memory back, making sure that it was real, that it happened.

Nancy could not tolerate the mess. Honestly, neither could you. The clutter from one-punched punch cards and colorful bobby pins and the disintegrating bag from his first Five Guys burger and dust bunnies and loose jokers made his room a minefield. So, a compromise between everyone. He got to keep some of the mementos, but they had to be organized in some way and fit into his dresser. Throw everything else out.

You helped him clean his room so that he could at least see way and fit into his dresser. Throw everything else out.

You kiss the box you made for him, its contents neatly space for you to fill.

In the case that he died before you could say goodbye, he left a kid to mourn. You politely declined, and she nodded with understanding and perhaps the slightest twinge of an apology.

Now that he is gone, you go through each of the boxes and take in the contents. You’re familiar with some of them. Some of them are about you. Objects you never thought he’d notice or keep - the napkin from your first date, an empty bottle of your keys on the desk. Breathe in the lingering wisps of gochujang sauce. Breathe in the lingering wisps of gochujang sauce.

You were shocked when Nancy told you the time and address, but you couldn’t muster the energy to go, to be surrounded by the people from her church who pitied him, who prayed for his psychosis to be quelled by God's omnipotence, who knew him only from Nancy’s paternalistic lens. You couldn’t watch him be flattened into some sick kid to mourn. You politely declined, and she nodded with understanding and perhaps the slightest twinge of an apology.

You close the drawer. Take in the room around you. Set the keys on the desk. Breathe in the lingering wisps of gochujang sauce and vanilla and apricot and the generic laundry detergent that reminds you there are clothes to fold back home.

Nancy was livid. For the first time (Nancy was livid). She thought you were the devil, you thought she was a hooker. She agreed with her, she agreed with you. He needed both of you. He needed the opposition to keep him intact. And as much as you resented each other, you achieved some semblance of synergy to avoid breaking the boy down the middle.

IDENTITY - a shard of the bathroom mirror that he shattered five years ago when he thought someone was spying on him.

He had always been skeptical of who he was as a person. Were his voices a part of him, even if they quieted on Ability? Was he always a paranoid person, or was he a person underneath a schizophrenic facade? Was he the good obedient patient who took his medications or the rebel hero who faced his symptoms head-on? How many layers of his surface did he have to peel back before revealing who he truly was?

He then turned to you and asked which parts of him you loved and which ones you could leave behind. You told him which parts you loved and which ones you could leave behind. You told him.

You could not tolerate the mess. Honestly, neither could you. The clutter from one-punched punch cards and colorful bobby pins and the disintegrating bag from his first Five Guys burger and dust bunnies and loose jokers made his room a minefield. So, a compromise between everyone. He got to keep some of the mementos, but they had to be organized in some way and fit into his dresser. Throw everything else out.

Now that he is gone, you go through each of the boxes and take in the contents. You’re familiar with some of them. Some of them are about you. Objects you never thought he’d notice or keep - the napkin from your first date, an empty bottle of your keys on the desk. Breathe in the lingering wisps of gochujang sauce, the wig you loaned him when he tried drag for the first time (Nancy was livid).

It hits you that this was his way of saying goodbye. Just in case.

FINALE – a secret between the two of you.

He always talked about his death, trying in his quivery, anxious way to prepare you. He knew his illness could sweep him away without warning. DKA, car accident, hanging, overdose, getting lost and starving to death. Every grotesque catastrophe.

He tried breaking up with you three times to save you the trouble. He urged you to move on, to feel relief more than sadness, to leave his sorry ass to die alone. He made you promise you wouldn’t grieve, and he knew your promise was a lie.

He thought you wouldn’t be invited to the funeral. Christianity had its limitations. You were shocked when Nancy told you the time and address, but you couldn’t muster the energy to go, to be surrounded by the people from her church who pitied him, who prayed for his psychosis to be quelled by God's omnipotence, who knew him only from Nancy’s paternalistic lens. You couldn’t watch him be flattened into some sick kid to mourn. You politely declined, and she nodded with understanding and perhaps the slightest twinge of an apology.

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