Dear Readers,

We are thrilled to present the 24th annual edition of The BEAT, The David Geffen School of Medicine’s Journal of Art and Literature. For this year’s edition, we asked community members to reflect on themes of identity, social justice, and health equity. The following works, reviewed and selected by medical student committee members, demonstrate the wide array of talents of the members of our UCLA Health community. You will gain a glimpse into the psyche of our fellow students, providers, and staff as they navigate the successes and tribulations within healthcare and within daily life.

The past year has been challenging for us all. It is our sincere hope that you, the reader, may gain some distraction, some pleasure, and some fulfillment in reveling in the beauty of artistic expression and the insightful work of our community.

We open this year’s edition with a remembrance of beloved medical student Kwame Firempong, memorialized by his classmate, Michelle Miller.

Stuart Fine and Lauren Taiclet
Editors-In-Chief of the BEAT, 2022

Vital Signs Awards

Literature
Perfume - Kate Coursey
To Do List (MS2) - Beau Sperry

Visual Art
In Memoriam of Kwame Firempong - Michelle Miller
not far from home - Jaylyn Chong

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The BEAT is a non-profit journal produced by students at the David Geffen School of Medicine. All rights are reserved. Nothing may be reproduced without written consent. All medical student submissions are eligible for Vital Signs Awards. Pieces for publication and the Vital Signs Awards were selected based on anonymous ratings by the selection committees.

We welcome submissions from all faculty, staff, and students at the UCLA Health Sciences community at medschool.ucla.edu/current-the-ucla-beat.
In Memoriam of Kwame Firempong  
By Michelle Miller

“The fragility of life is apparent when you walk the halls of a hospital and experience what might be the end of a journey for some patients. We spend our lives trying to arrive at a destination: going to work, going to school, rushing to a soccer game, getting a job, getting married. We, myself included, tend to focus on the end destination and forget to appreciate the journey that it takes to arrive. When we share personal moments with those at the end of their life journey, it reminds us of remaining present and enjoying the process to any destination we wish to arrive.” – Kwame Firempong

“In Memoriam of Kwame Firempong  
By Michelle Miller

“Dedicated to our beloved classmate, friend, and healer. In his life, Kwame touched innumerable people with his magnanimous spirit and uplifting energy. A natural leader, he operated with a unique blend of gregarious vitality and quiet humility. As the Class of 2022 graduates this Spring, we will remember how Kwame inspired us to remain true to our own identity while pursuing our dreams.” – Michelle Miller
Moses
By Beau Sperry

When I expel / From this mortal shell / Will I die for living numb?
-Moses Sumney, “Doomed”

The manner in which
He descends to us
is a gust, which is his whisper,
which is the flaunting of each leaf
in the canyon’s ruddy mane—
man and canyon and spectral rampart
resplendent, threadbare, clothed in such darkness
that the light comprehended it not.

It’s always like this
when He calls: Pirouettes
and gyrations of air-heart biblical
and unfurling, each word
melting wax which holds our bones
together, each subtle sinew fallen,
the weak ribbons to which I attach to I.

He says now, Los Angeles
and the city unhooks its smoggy dress—
freeway straps drop from mountain clavicle
as we prepare our offering.

His the crows, His the deluge
overdue, His the taillight rubies shining necklaceld
and forever into outer dark, plastic wings
and oiled waters, our dullen concrete stars,
false idols all, hollowed-out
but hallowed, still withering,
still waiting for his want.

He says again, Los Angeles
He says now, you may clap.
Honeysuckle

It had been her mother's favorite perfume—sweet and heady, a shimmering golden oil that her mother dabbed on each wrist before going to the symphony, or the theater, or a concert at the sprawling botanical gardens near the University. Vivian was never allowed to try it—for expense, her mother said. But even as a small girl she would hover next to the gilt-trimmed vanity, gazing at the crystalline perfume bottles arranged beneath soft, muted lights.

After her mother left and remarried, Vivian's memories of their life as an intact family grew dilute, bleached by time and resentment. The month she spent each year with her mother, stepfather, and two new half-sisters somehow filled these early memories even more unreachable. But Vivian never forgot her mother's luminous skin suffused with honeysuckle, and even sometimes as an adult she awoke, unsettled, from vague dreams with the scent clinging to her skin.

Jasmine

It was the first thing Vivian noticed about Serena—she smelled like jasmine, which grew in clay pots on the
staircase outside the coffee bar where they both worked. It was the summer before Vivian's sophomore year of high school, and she and her father had recently moved from Denver to a town in western Colorado, where he'd taken a job teaching at a community college. "A fresh start," he'd told Vivian, who hadn't spoken to him for weeks, the upheaval of her mother's abrupt departure now magnified tenfold by an unfamiliar school, a new house, friends left behind.

The coffee bar was a cluttered little shop with mismatched tables, floors tiled with glazed pottery pieces, and overflowing plants hanging from the ceiling. Fueled by the summer rush of tourists visiting the Colorado mountains, the shop had hired several new baristas, Serena and Vivian among them.

Serena was the same year in school as Vivian, a head taller with sun-bronzed cheeks and shimmering black hair that she kept swept up in a messy bun. "You're new around here," Serena remarked on their first day of training, elbow

Instead, Serena said, "Was that you I saw running past the old bridge yesterday?"

"Me and my dad," Vivian tamped coffee grounds, unable to meet Serena's gaze. Already

"Who's we?"

"I don't know. Maybe not. I'm not very fast."

"Yeah.

"Yep."

"Yeah, it was." Vivian had started running shortly after her mother left, and lately she found she could go for hours, traversing the network of paths in the forest beyond the bridge. She relished the chill of fog parting on her skin, the way running wiped her mind, mercifully blank, her feet beating out a percussive rhythm on asphalt.

"It's one of my favorite routines. You gonna run cross country this year?"

"I don't know. Maybe not. I'm not very fast."

Serena shrugged. "Doesn't matter. They let anyone on the team. But there are a lot of

vivian's memories of their life as an intact family grew diluted, bleached by time and resentment.
Jasmine, again

Vivian shrugged. “I don’t know. I mean, I do, but I’m scared. There’s a lot of ways to fuck up a kid.”

Serena didn’t answer immediately. She dragged the elastic out of her hair, letting it cascade down and whip back and forth. “Yeah, I think you’ll have kids,” she said. “I just have a feeling. And yeah, there are ways to fuck up, but we’re not going to make the same mistakes as your mom. Or my dad.”

“Well,” Vivian said. “You’ll make the best mom.”

She met Pranav at a spoken word poetry performance in a Washington D.C. dive bar, two years after graduating college. She was working as an architect, he as a research analyst. He was exceedingly gentle in every way—as a friend, an older brother, a lover. After they moved in together, she came to bask in the smell of his mint soap, the subtle fragrance of his aftershave, the warmth of frying butter and cloves when she came home to him cooking dinner.

But she knew it meant a lot to Pranav, and so in June she boarded a flight, blessedly nausea-free, prepared to sip virgin cocktails with his old college friends.

They were a nice enough group. At 20 weeks Vivian’s pregnancy was noticeable, but not enough so for strangers to assume her condition, and Vivian did not volunteer the information.

Pranav had tackled the printout from their first ultrasound on the fridge, next to expired Bed Bath and Beyond coupons and glossy Christmas cards. Sometimes, when she got up to get a glass of water at night, Vivian would stand in front of the fridge, bare feet pressed against the cool, ridged tile of their kitchen floor, and try to convince herself of the life growing inside her. For the longest time she hadn’t wanted to tell their families, even well into her second trimester. She knew the most vulnerable period had passed—still, she couldn’t shake the memories of sitting hunched over on the toilet, cramps rolling through her body, the sticky slick of blood on her thighs. She had cried and bled until she felt utterly depleted, a cloth wrung until it frayed. Three miscarriages later and finally a pregnancy took, yet despite her doctor’s reassurance that everything was normal, Vivian was sometimes struck with the overwhelming sense that her body was hostile, uninhabitable.

That night in the hotel room, she sat curled against Pranav’s chest, flapping vaguely through an interior design magazine.

“You’re awfully quiet,” he murmured. “Something going on?”

“Um, I’m just... I’m tired, that’s all.”

“Are you worried about the baby?” She smoothed her hair, hooking a strand behind her ear.

“No.”

She didn’t have the words to tell him, just as she had never had the words to share with him that she’d felt the moment Serena left the world, felt it in her core, irrevocably. He would listen, she knew, and would not laugh or mock her, but he would not fully understand.

“I think I need to go out for some air,” she said softly. “Just to clear my head a bit.” “Do you want me to come?”

“No, you should rest.” She kissed him lightly. “I won’t be long.”

Outside, she didn’t bother putting on shoes. The grass of the bluff curled up through her toes, left skeins of moisture around her ankles as she crossed toward the cliffs overlooking the sea. The moon hung suspended, wreathed in wisps of cloud, and by its pale light she made her way down onto the sand.

Vivian walked—for how long, she didn’t know—until the ground beneath her changed, morphed into glossy, slicked rock peckmarked with tidepools. She stopped, closed her eyes, breathed in the fine mist of salt.

And then, the feeling—her stomach dropping away, a lurch so profound Vivian cried out in surprise, although there was nobody to hear her. She lowered herself to the ground, gripping the rock so hard blood drained from her fingers.

Vivian met Pranav at a spoken word poetry performance in a Washington D.C. dive bar, two years after graduating college. She was working as an architect, he as a research analyst. He was exceedingly gentle in every way—unfamiliar.
scorekeeping
By Grace Yi

vulnerability sits at the acromioclavicular joint,
ready displacement with each fall from grace, and

lust lives in the outer folds, wet, inviting weight
seeping through your fingertips, heavy
in your outstretched palms, an offering and a vice

a mother’s love lives in the cubital fossa,
cradled in the crook of the elbow – a nursemaid’s first sacrifice

resentment hides in the brachial plexus, mangled innervations of ganglia and rami
extending rootlets around your neck that strangle you from your sleep

resolve carves out the glenoid fossa;

forgiveness comes through the extensor digitorum,

and in the inferior rectus, you learn that a warrior can contain both unspeakable bravery
yet cowardice when they decide the fight isn’t theirs to win,

that the sight of your ghosts
can make your esophageal plexus stick like gum to the back of your throat,
encase your diaphragm,

and when you finally gag the parts of yourself you keep
hidden spill out of your open mouth like
marbles into the hands of passersby, eager to collect

as you saw at your vagus nerve, scars
from an instinct for blind self-preservation

grow in the erector spinae that contains your composure

in a lacrimal gland with a finite amount to give

Flow
By Sahar Ashrafzadeh
Places Like These
By Jorge Salcedo-Sifuentes

It's not the struggle that makes us
I humbly ask myself
If I was hunted or fleeing
Or hungry
Was I running towards it?
And even if I was,
Why would being hungry be what made me run?
Is it because of or despite it
The reason that you did
Is not the reason that you wanted
And the end's the same
It doesn't matter where you started
But obviously,
People like me started farther from a place like this
So people like me walk farther to a place like this
And we're traveled
But we're hungry
And our faces ache
From the masks
That keep us safe
They should feel light by now
We've borne them since we learned
Some for safety some for luck
Disarm, no alarm
One of the heavy tools you'll find on those who've walked far
What are they hiding?
Bad question
Whom are they playing?
Better
And the traveler?
The real traveler
Are they strong?
Does the journey make them strong
Does it matter?
When you lose a race
You still get stronger,
But only if you run
And when people like us
End up in places like these
At the same time
As those who started off more closely than we
You know one thing, and it's not why
It's that no matter where we're from,
We had to run

Reflections of Resilience
By Shivani Dayal
Teach my eyes
To forget those scenes
The rush of beauty so painful
And hurt so deep
That long after the embers fade
The vision is changed.

One hears of defiant survival
Beyond the end of breath
Medical miracles
Eyes that have seen God.

But do they ever tell
Of the reeling
Crashes
Of worlds turned on their heads
How sight is restored once
The lens of normaley has shattered.

How one faces the wonder
Of witnesses to resurrection
But amidst the alleluias
The separation
Of nothing being the same.

Tell me
Whether glimpses of eternity
Illuminate ever after
Or blind the seer.
Whether one ever recovers
From
Being locked immobile in body, only mind free.
The slow desperation of asphyxia, clammy then black.
Skin torn, gagged dry,
Branding pain beyond pain,
Agony screamed
Without voice, into the solitude of silence.

But also
That space where
Every day was a battle conquered
Every movement, a defeat of the enemy
Every love shared
And drop of compassion so sweet,
That one touch warmed to tears.

I have walked with You through the valley of the shadow of death.
Teach my eyes what to remember.
Let my soul never forget.
life is so gentle,
sometimes
it hurts.

i tried once,
to feel the weight of winter;
feel the delicate dance of snowflakes
brushing my skin,
so fragile;
i cried.

i'm scared sometimes.
i'm scared to forget how to hold onto
sadness.

how to lose the capacity,
to love
so much that the world is fire
i'm burning
and dying
and living

isn't the wind
so beautiful when
it caresses autumn leaves,
the ground an empty
promise
falling,
falling
i'll catch you.

i want to hold onto the sky,
so tenderly· to be touched by
the world

to let melancholy
paint the rain

in the barren snow,
a rose blooms.
To Do List (MS2)

By Beau Sperry

1. Ascertain, catalogue experience of living body; determine ailments therein
2. Publish meaningless, low-impact tract on cytokine storm
3. Be something more than what is offered
4. Publish erratum to meaningless tract on cytokine storm, beg for forgiveness
5. Purchase human hamster wheel, if available
6. I am hurting—
7. I want to be both body and rampant wind, flown in each direction
8. Cook more
9. That stuff I said about the rampant wind, please disregard, I was just tired
10. Stack the unused facts you memorize, determine whether they are the combined thickness of single human femur
11. Consider quitting
12. Determine whether each illness you learn fills the hole inside yourself
13. Reconsider quitting
14. Act like Zoom is not the actual geographic center of a gravity of loneliness, coordinates infinitesimal, inching through a godless galaxy one thumbs-up emoji at a time
15. Change the system (activist poem?)
16. Make time to write, edit better poem than this
17. Abandon writing as hobby, augment time spent memorizing rare genetic phenomena
18. Zoom therapy (note: 3 remaining free sessions)
19. Sacrifice 50 minutes to phone, at altar of distraction economy
20. Shame spiral for said wasted minutes, bring up in therapy (note: 2 remaining free sessions)
21. Not so much a cry for help—more of a poorly written ransom note to your future self, really
22. «THIS IS A MESSAGE FROM CVS. YOUR PRESCRIPTION IS READY FOR PICKUP»
23. Pretend to understand the heart sounds of others (remember: “lub” + neurotic, confirmatory “dub”)
24. Review HR video on the improper washing of hands
25. Fill up your own heart—
26. This just-intact heart this slack-jawed heart this melted ice-cap heart this distractable heart this dial-up screech of a heart this undertow this current this prayer to be something else this stillness this absolute shitshow this thirst trap this smoke signal pirouetting into a valley full of larger smog these bickering parts singing tuneless in unison this illness so large it could dam the world’s unceasing flow, this something else

27. Remember to complete evaluations:
   a. Was this poem helpful?
   b. Did this poem adequately address the issue?
   c. Are you beholden to a lonesome future, the tracks of which splay out before you like a forgotten desert railroad?
   d. Did the poet communicate clearly?
   e. Were you satisfied with the poet’s handout materials?
   f. How are you really feeling?
   g. Will it ever be enough?
I reached into my bookbag and pulled out the syringe. Next came the bottle. I felt sluggish and could feel the fatigue creeping in. I looked at the clear liquid inside, drew some of the contents into the needle, and carefully measured it. I didn't want too little, but I definitely didn't want too much. I had to get it just right. I held the syringe in front of me and gave it a few gentle taps with my index finger. I pierced my skin with the needle and released the contents. When I was done, I exhaled and sat down on the floor to relax. The room was silent except for the loud hum coming from the Nintendo Entertainment System that had been accidentally left on. I ran my fingers across the carpeted floor and looked around. There were posters of different celebrities, movies, and shows. There were also pictures ripped out of teen magazines. Of course the biggest poster was the Back to the Future one. Ever since we saw the movie in theaters, Jackie was obsessed with Michael J. Fox and began counting the days until the VHS release. On the nightstand beside the bed, there was a bright orange Garfield cat house phone. Jackie always had the coolest stuff. The cord was tangled and bundled up. My eyes then scanned over to the window. I saw my friends outside playing tag. "Come on, Bre! I thought you said you were going to the bathroom."

I turned around and saw Jackie standing by the doorway. I rushed and placed my insulin bottle and syringe in my bag before she saw them and jumped up from the floor. "Yeah. I thought I forgot something in my backpack, and then I was just taking a break. Who's 'it' now?" I asked.

"Peter is 'it'," he said, but he's fast, so he'll probably get somebody soon. Let's go!" she said and ran off. With a weak smile, I followed behind her and hoped that the tiredness wouldn't return. Jackie was right. The moment we ran outside and closed the screen door, Peter had Lenny's arm in his hand. "Tag! You're 'it'!" he shouted with triumph.

Lenny jerked his arm from Peter's grasp. "No fair! You ain't count all the way to 20. You cheated."

"I ain't cheat. You're just slow," Peter replied and stuck out his tongue.

Lenny whipped up his hand and flashed a middle finger. Our eyes widened, and we looked around to see if any adults saw Lenny's one finger salute. There was an air of silence and stillness. I looked at Peter, and he just bit his lip. "1..." Lenny abruptly said.

We were still in shock until Lenny boomed out loudly, "2... I ain't starting over, so y'all better hide." We snapped back into our game and ran in different directions. We didn't play the typical game of tag, but really more of a mix between hide-and-seek and tag. You hide first, and if you're found, you have to be caught in order to be tagged and be "it". This meant I had to find a good place to hide. Behind a tree? Too predictable. In a bush? No. Last time I did that, I was pulling twigs and leaves out of my afro all day. I ran behind the house and saw two can bins. I hid behind them and pinched my nose to avoid the smell. I heard a faint "Ready or not, here I come!" and kneaded closer to the ground. I mentally prepared myself to sprint away if he found me. I wasn't worried, because I knew that I could easily outrun Lenny. When I wanted to, I could run faster than anybody. I was easily the fastest out of my friends, neighbors, and classmates. Everyone had always told me that I should be on a track team, so when I finally went to middle school, it was the first thing I signed up for. When the coach found out about my diabetes, I was cut from the tryouts. The same thing happened for every sport I tried out for.

Every coach was afraid to let me participate. They didn't know much about it, and they never wanted to take the risk. They never understood that I was like the other kids. I can run. I can jump. I can kick. I can dream of being the next Olympian like Wilma Rudolph. "I see you!" I heard Lenny say right before I spotted him closing in on me. I jumped from behind the bins and let the world rush behind me. I heard Lenny's heavy footsteps tumbling after me, but it wasn't long before the sound of his footsteps began to grow fainter. I smiled and passed by Jackie and Peter. They laughed at Lenny who was starting to see his goal was a lost cause. "You're it! I heard Lenny scream. I slowed down and turned to see a panting Lenny grasping Jackie's arm.

"Anybody want an apple turnover?" we heard a voice ask.

We all paused from our game of tag and looked at her. She held a plate of large freshly made apple turnovers. We could see the steam floating above them, and a small wind pushed the delicious scent to our noses.

"Mom, why couldn't you have asked that ten seconds ago before I got tagged?" Jackie replied.

With a smirk, Lenny said, "I would have still gotcha. I'll take one, Mrs. Charles."

"Me too, please," Peter added.

"What about you, Breanna?" she asked me.

"No thank you," I replied with a sheepish smile.

"Mom, you know Bre's picky with sweets and food. That's how she stays so skinny."

"I see that, but you have to try one of my apple turnovers. I made them myself. I insist!" she said with a warm smile.

I wanted to tell her. I wanted her to know that I didn't have any more insulin. I wanted them all to understand, but I knew they wouldn't. Everyone I had ever told treated me like I was glass and always saw me as the "fragile kids with diabetes". My old friends stopped inviting me to play. They never invited me over to eat because they were always afraid that I couldn't eat what they cooked. I could eat more food than they could ever cook, but they never gave me the chance. Even family members would greet me with a look of pity. I cringed at the thought of family dinners.

Last Thanksgiving, my family had dinner over at my aunt's house. The entire family gathered there. There were cousins and great aunts I didn't even know I had. Auntie Ellie greeted us when we arrived at the door. "Oh, you brought potato salad. Looks delicious. You can just set it down on the table with the other food. I made pound cake and your favorite chocolate mousse cake, Margaret," she said to my mom.

She then directed her giant owl-like eyes at me, pursed her bright red lips into a smile, and said, "Don't worry, sweetie. I made sugar-free pumpkin pie just for you!"

She patted me on the shoulder, and I laked a smile. I hated pumpkin pie. When it was time for dessert, I was the only one at the kid table that had pumpkin pie. "Why'd you get pumpkin pie?" my cousin, Tim, asked with a grimace on his face.

He looked at my strangely colored slice of pumpkin pie and popped a piece of chocolate mousse cake in his mouth.

"Because I like pumpkin pie!" I quickly lied.

He scooped up a big piece of his cake with his fork and waved it in front of my face. "Oh, well. You're missing out. I saw my mom make the chocolate mousse cake. She even put chunks of browines in it."

"Stop it, Tim! You know she's die-bet-it," Mindy harshly said from across the kid table.

"It's 'diabetic' I corrected her.

"What's that?" Tim asked.

"It's a disease where you can't eat sweets or a lot of food without getting sick," Mindy replied.

They both looked at me to confirm or deny this claim. It was much more than that, but I knew they didn't care to understand it fully. I just nodded my head and took a giant bite out of the disgusting pumpkin pie.

Wilma Rudolph
By Ashley Washington

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Mrs. Charles held the soft apple turnover in front of my face as if she expected me to gobble it up instantly. I looked at it carefully before taking it in my hand. She smiled at me, and I returned the favor. I looked around. The others were almost finished. Lenny was licking his fingers, and Jackie was down to her last bite. “I ate before I came here, so may I save it for later?” I asked.

Satisfied with my offer, Mrs. Charles extended her megawatt smile and replied, “Of course! I’ll wrap it up for you while you all finish playing. I’ll even wrap one up for your mom!”

“Let’s not play tag anymore. What about another game?” Jackie said as she wiped her hands on her pants.

“You’re just saying that, ‘cause you’re ‘it’!” screamed Peter.

“No, I’m not! I’m just tired of it,” Jackie quickly defended herself.

Annoyed, she rolled her eyes before continuing, “I know! What about kickball?”

Our eyes lit up, and we rushed outside. As usual, we gathered around in a circle to quickly pick our teams. “I want Bre on my team! Girls versus boys,” Jackie screamed before anyone else could.

Lenny and Peter groaned but didn’t dare to argue. There was no point in arguing with Jackie. “Alright. Who’s got a coin?” I asked.

Jackie and Peter shrugged. Lenny scrambled in his pocket and pulled out a coin. He held it out in front of us and asked, “Heads or tails? Whoever wins gets to pick what they play first.”

“Tails are always better than heads!” Jackie replied.

Lenny flicked the coin in the air. When he reached out to catch it, he missed, and the coin rolled a few inches in the grass before flopping down. We all bent over to look to see which side was facing up, but the coin was too dirty to tell. Peter picked it up and started scraping dirt from it with his fingernails. “Lenny, you need to get better coins!” he said.

“I found it earlier at the school playground. Nobody else even had a coin, so stop complaining!” Lenny retorted back.

After a few seconds, Peter stopped scraping and looked down at the coin again. “It’s tails, so it’s the girls’ call,” he declared.

Jackie looked at me to see if I had a preference. “We’ll kick first,” I replied.

We ran to the makeshift kickball field and got into our positions. I went up to the plate to kick first. Jackie waited behind me for her turn as Peter went to the center of the field and gave a devilish grin. He held the brown kickball up to his face like a pitcher does right before throwing a mean pitch. I looked at Lenny who was guarding first base. He was scratching the back of his ear and then started rubbing his hand over his tangled afro. The sun crept into my eyes, and I wiped the drops of sweat that were starting to roll down my forehead. Before I realized it, I saw a flash of brown speed past me. “Strike one!” I heard Peter say.

Jackie threw the ball over my head back to Peter. He caught it effortlessly and got back into his “pitcher” position. I concentrated on his hands now. They tightened as he lowered his arms. He released the ball, and it seemed like the ball was taking a journey towards me. I raised my foot behind me. The ball closed in on me, and I let my foot swing forward. When the ball left the ground, for a moment, I could hear the sound of a starting pistol being shot and the Olympic crowd roaring. I pushed off from the starting block—and ran.
The Breach
By Chanel Calhoun

Resistance was futile,
Evasion, impossible.
I’d been exposed.
Those three sweet words
Linger in the air,
Like an airborne pathogen
Watching, waiting,
Slowly drifting,
Riding the gentle breath from which it came.

I love you.
I shook my head and scowled.
How could I have let this happen?
When did I turn a blind eye to this
Seemingly innocent trickle of emotion,
Spreading slowly, lazily,
Gleefully hiding in the shadows of suspicion,
Dodging my intuition
To overtake my system,
Cell by cell,
Forcing the strongest of my wills to crumble
To the obedience of
Desire.

I swallow thickly,
The dryness in my throat
Betraying the insatiable thirst
That drives me towards you.
But why, you?

No one has ever come close to breaching these walls,
And yet...you climb them with ease,
Patience even.
Navigating through the pitfalls and infinite cloud cover
Seemingly unfazed.

My eyes narrow.
But even so,
The entrance to this chamber has been barred,
Barricaded by priorities and sealed shut
With dreams and goals that will
Set the foundation for my future—my success.
The beginning of my
Empire.

So...tell me,
Sly fox.
What crack did you slip through?
To gain access to such uncharted territory,
An area I have yet to map,
Refused,
To map.

Because love is a distraction.
A roadblock to success threatening to derail me
From everything I have worked so hard to achieve.
With every triumph threads form,
Woven with praise and words of wisdom,
A tether, concealed,
Holding me straight—steady.
Until the constant pull, pull, pull of curiosity
Is quietly subdued—suppressed.

Being conditioned as such,
Then I should know better,
Right?
And yet if this is so then tell me
Why you follow me into darkness,
Flickering delusions of curiosity
Against the back of my eyelids as I slumber,
Revealing to me
A dangerous world of
Possibilities.
Where everything is
New, exciting,
A distraction.
I fight so hard against it,
Tear myself away from an alternate universe
Of what could have been, can be, or rather
What I want.
You.

My stomach tightens at the mere thought,
Fed by a foreign yearning coursing through my veins,
Like oxygen to a flame,
A spark trapped in a cyclical maze
Desperately searching for escape—direction.

(contr. pg 28)
My eyes dart up and I pause, 
Suddenly entranced by a sea of dark brown. 
Radiating so much warmth—understanding. 
And for a second, I am stunned. 
How could a soul so beautiful 
Be the cause of such tragedy—my downfall.

He takes a step forward, 
And the proximity shocks me back to reality.

“I can’t,” I say, voice cracking. 
Consumed by guilt, 
My mind instantly flies, 
Back to a prison of my own making, 
Where I’ve put the needs of others above my own 
Without once stopping to question, 
Why?

Enraged, my heart slams against my chest, 
Refusing to be shackled by the paralyzing chains of vulnerability. 
The frantic thud, thud, thud 
Now a deafening roar, 
Desperately trying to drown out the familial voices begging me to run, 
That this was a mistake.

“What are you afraid of?” he asks softly. 
I immediately stiffen. 
Again and again 
I’ve asked myself those same words, 
And like ghosts they linger, 
A monster without a face, 
A question without an answer.

Until now.

As our eyes lock, 
Clarity begins to rise 
From the ashes of chaos. 
And it hits me.

“Freedom,” I whisper.
Mobius Rock Lighting the Milky Way

By Neil Parker
Memories in situ
By Farnaz Haji

She sits
I stand
She smiles
I examine
She unties her gown
I remove the tape
She glances
I unravel the bandages
She stares
I turn
She worries
I turn
She looks away.
I turn and turn and turn
Like a whirling dervish.
Seeking a center.
Until that last turn of bandage around her torso,
Where the unnegotiable asymmetry reveals itself.
And she looks down
At the empty space
The desolate site of her puberty
Her first kiss
Her first romance
Her first lovemaking
Her first breast feeding
Now...an eviscerated flat space
With the blood soaked steri-strips stretching to contain the memories.
I Am From

By Jose Negrete Manriquez

I am from the fruit of the valley.

From my father, who is the Gardener, and from the deep, sinewous roots of my Latinx heritage,
nourished by the sweat and blood of agricultural labor and rays of resistance radiating from
our ancestors.

I am from the beautiful brown Earth, where the soil is rich and the land is vast, resolved to serve
and uplift those who may need their thirst quenched, their bellies filled, or wounds healed.

I am from the fruit of cacti.

From cactaceae, who endure the tests of time, thriving in harsh environments, and
illuminating the land with beautiful, complex, and psychedelic flowers.

I am from the selfless act of giving and persevering,

bonded to community through hardships and resilience, for hard times yielded stronger
bonds,

¡Sí se puede, Mijo! We were told.

I am from the Chichimeca and the Guamares, who fought against Spanish colonization and
whose fervent spirit flows through me.

From my mother’s unconditional love, my father’s ganas, my siblings’ strength, my
chingona wife, and my community’s hustle,

I feel my resolve is born from their ideals, working to propagate ripples of resistance against
the waves seeking to wash over our land, culture, and right to live beyond existing.
What You Can’t See
By Grace Riley

One brick
you stole from the center of my being
with no damn rhyme or fucking reason.
You smashed it to pieces and cut me like glass ’til
I nearly collapsed.

I’m too close to crumbling for comfort.
You were too close for comfort.

Take a brick from the side or the top.
Trust me,
I’ll be fine.

But break my foundation and
it could be the last time.

Like a house built on crumbling rock
I ache, I cry, and I wonder,
Will I ever recover?

I look the same—
unchanged.
For goodness’ sake
I only lost

one brick.

Desperate to fix the hole, yet
too weak to do the work,
I wandered in fear of collapse, ’til
finally Time spoke:

I can’t make you a new brick,
says Time.
I don’t know how or when, but
I make this promise to you:
You will be strong once again.

Morning Dew
By Chanel Calhoun
Note to Readers: The following work is a creative piece about fictional persons.

Ava wept as she read her boss's email, addressed to the lab, about the recent passing of George Wilson Charles, MD, PhD. Although she'd composed a draft of the email herself at her boss's request, so that he could announce George's passing to their UCLA colleagues, it still deeply affected her. She re-read the opening line, “It is with a heavy heart that I share the news with you all about the passing of our dear friend and colleague...” Squeezing her eyes shut to keep them from spilling over, she couldn't stop crying—she was so intensely saddened by this message.

These tears blurred her vision as she read the final section of her boss's email, where he’d included George’s wife, Sarah’s, loving tribute to her husband. Sarah wrote about how he’d won her heart with his joyous habit of cooking big holiday meals for their extended family; his tendency to break into spontaneous dance moves in the kitchen while still wearing his chef’s apron; his neat whiskies; his love of jazz, poetry, and fly fishing. All these thoughts raced through Ava’s mind as she tried to make sense of the incredible loss she felt right now. Though she’d only known George for three years, he had affected her in profound and deeply meaningful ways.

George was the first lab member she met as she was newly hired Executive Assistant, back in August three years ago. He had come into her office, seeking a signature on a grant application from her boss, Dr. Stanley Abramson, MD. As George waited for Ava to finish her phone call, he watched as the florist delivery driver arrived with a spring bouquet. He’d leaned over, smelling the roses, and glanced at the card. It was from Ava’s husband, wishing her well the next, and the subtle ways it affected those around them. From their very first meeting, Ava felt accepted and valued by George.

George was a lot like this character, Tom. Seeing his life as a part of the whole. A miniscule, but nonetheless vital component of the overarching sea of humanity. And it hit her, suddenly, that in knowing George, and knowing his gentle spirit, and his quiet courage throughout the course of his illness, that her life had been blessed by George’s life. And equally blessed by Dr. Abramson’s life. As well as all the other members of the lab, and confluently, by all of humanity. And it hit her, suddenly, that in knowing George, and knowing his gentle spirit, and his quiet courage throughout the course of his illness, that her life had been blessed by George’s life. And equally blessed by Dr. Abramson’s life. As well as all the other members of the lab, and confluently, by all of humanity.

Dr. Abramson had grown to rely on George to not only help proofread and edit the grad students’ research papers, but to guide their research as well. George helped them analyze their data in a more scholarly way, which in turn allowed them to tell a more compelling story in their research. He understood how essential mentorship was, and he was always willing to help the postdocs, and graduate students in the lab, who had taken up the baton during George’s prolonged illness and were now working on continuing his research. If only they could facilitate a breakthrough with this project, it might help secure George’s appointment as an Assistant Professor. Because of Dr. Abramson’s influence and affection for George, he’d been able to acquire for himself some of Dr. Abramson’s most endearing qualities, namely his ability to turn even the worst of days into something positive. George had also contributed to this lab as no one ever could; he had been there for every member of the lab, and the subtle ways it affected those around them. From their very first meeting, Ava felt accepted and valued by George.

As Director of The Medical Research Institute, Dr. Abramson had mentored George as a postdoc, and then helped secure George's appointment as an Assistant Professor. Because of Dr. Abramson's influence and affection for George, he'd been able to acquire for himself some of Dr. Abramson’s most endearing qualities, namely his ability to turn even the worst of days into something positive. George had also contributed to this lab as no one ever could; he had been there for every member of the lab, and the subtle ways it affected those around them. From their very first meeting, Ava felt accepted and valued by George.

Ava had found the time to ask how she was doing. He genuinely took an interest in her as a person, and not just as the gatekeeper to Dr. Abramson’s busy schedule. Although she’d composed a draft of the email herself at her boss’s request, so that he could announce George’s passing to their UCLA colleagues, it still deeply affected her. She re-read the opening line, “It is with a heavy heart that I share the news with you all about the passing of our dear friend and colleague...” Squeezing her eyes shut to keep them from spilling over, she couldn’t stop crying—she was so intensely saddened by this message.

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could lead to an effective treatment and eventual cure for this deadly cancer. Ava gazed out the window, remembering Dr. Abramson’s 70th birthday celebration at the Luskin Conference Center on campus two years ago. The Medical Research Institute had thrown a birthday bash for him, and George had been asked to give a speech. As the senior member of Dr. Abramson’s lab, George was uniquely qualified to speak about Dr. Abramson’s talents as a researcher and mentor. George had not spoken about Dr. Abramson’s many awards, prizes, and accolades received during his long and distinguished career, but instead George had described the overriding defining characteristic that Dr. Abramson possessed above all else—that he was kind.

George had described Dr. Abramson’s kindness as the key motivating factor that allowed him to excel as a teacher and mentor, guiding his trainees with his expertise and wisdom. George had concluded that although Dr. Abramson’s delivery may sometimes come off as being a bit gruff, his actions were always undeniably motivated by his desire to see his mentees succeed and achieve their goals as young scientists, and this was invariably influenced by Dr. Abramson’s innate kindness and his generous spirit, his constant willingness to mentor, teach, and guide his students.

Ava knew this kindness first-hand, from her dealings with Dr. Abramson. And she saw how it translated to a spirit of kindness in the lab. More than one mentee had remarked to Ava in passing, about how the Abramson Lab had offered them a unique educational experience, where they treated each other like family, with unbridled support and respect. Ava also recognized that George contributed heavily to this spirit of family. His quickness to review the graduate students’ research papers, his constant encouragement and guidance both complemented and augmented this familial bond. Ava often felt gratitude for being included in this family, even if her contributions were only of a small, indirect nature. She felt tied to, in theory at least, the pursuit of a noble cause—namely, to rid the world of several types of cancer.

Sadly, Ava returned to her desk and began downloading and printing all of George’s published research papers, as requested by his family. There were many. In fact, three papers had already been submitted and were awaiting publication confirmation from various medical journals. Ava wrote a quick note to Sarah, George’s widow, letting her know that she would send her these remaining three papers as soon as they were published. She wanted Sarah to have them all, to reaffirm her husband’s legacy and to have something solid that she could hold in her hands and look at later to reflect on George’s life and many contributions to science.

She sealed the mailing envelope, and then walked to the post office to mail Sarah the compilation of her husband’s life’s work. The sun was shining, and the streets were crowded with students returning to campus for the fall quarter. All around her, Ava felt George’s presence. The undeniable thread of his value, worth, and power emanated out from her heart, crossing the paths of all the people she saw on the street, while simultaneously causing her to appreciate the value, worth, and power of everyone that she saw around her. This emphasized and reinforced the interconnectedness of all life—bigger than any one individual, where the sum of all individuals was so much greater than anyone could be alone. Yet the sum of all would be irrevocably diminished if it were missing even one of the many billions of individuals who made up the total of the combined whole.

The light changed on the corner of Westwood Plaza and Wayburn Avenue, and Ava stepped into the crosswalk, along with all the other people crossing the street. She thought of Anthony Doerr’s story and wondered if he was wrong to think the world would never run out of life. What if climate change, and the depleted ozone layer, and global warming—what if the sun’s rays to parch the earth so much that life as we know it ceased to exist? The burden of this thought weighed on her as she blended into the stream of pedestrians—pulsing, pulsing, pulsing with such unbearable light and fragile beauty that it angered her to ponder the end of life on Earth.

To generation—all of us lucky to have lived, however briefly. So incredibly lucky.

How does one respond to that? The injustice was intolerable. She had chosen to say nothing; she simply listened, and tried to believe in good things to come. This helped her feel better. She thought of George’s determination to continue his research—despite his cancer—and she knew beyond any doubt that George and people like him would never allow the world to run out of life. Science would prevail, fueled by humanity’s unsinkable life force. Passed on from generation to generation—all of us lucky to have lived, however briefly. So incredibly lucky.

Sarah called to thank Ava for the video, so Ava took this opportunity to ask what George’s favorite song was, and what song, if any, they had chosen as “their song” for the two of them together.

“How does one respond to that? The injustice was intolerable. She had chosen to say nothing; she simply hugged him and listened to him vent.

After returning to the office, Ava searched her files for jpgs of George to send Sarah. She found a video clip of George carving the turkey during their holiday feast from 2018, while everyone in the lab gathered around the table. She immediately emailed it to Sarah.

The next day Sarah called to thank Ava for the video, so Ava took this opportunity to ask what George’s favorite song was, and what song, if any, they had chosen as “their song” for the two of them together.

“I want you to know, it gets easier with time. And like George said to me, holding onto the happy memories will help you through this.”

“Of course. Take good care.”

After a bit, Sarah said, “If you find any more pictures of George with the lab, please send them. I want to add them to the memorial website that George’s brother is building.”

“Aha, that’s a great idea.”

“Yes. We’re setting it up so people can post stories, or special memories of him, or just photos if they like.”

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Then it occurred to her that this is exactly what George must have felt when the cancer had caused his heart to race out of control, his breathing to become shallow and rapid, his face to go pale—when the cancer had consumed him. The cancer had claimed him. The cancer had ended his life. The cancer had ended his life’s work.

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Butterfly
By Qiang Zhang

my grandpa was killed, by a butterfly, a tumor with white wings, that didn't know how to fly, so it rested on his brain, closed his eyes quietly. sleep. listen to the world turning on its axis, it told my grandpa:

forget your name, the wisdom of your hands, it whispered in his ear, trickling down into his mind;

forget those dumplings you used to, fold so tenderly, for your granddaughter, and the mountains in China, you climbed over and over, and over and over again because you were strong.

forget the sound of gravel when the red army came and pain the rain falls on your loveless marriage.

forget the way you yelled at her and I heard.

forget the music of, your terrifyingly beautiful lost life.

in the hospital bed, i hold his hand, he calls me son.

Hope
By Guadalupe Maya Solorio
My mother is a Chimera.
According to the Ancient Greeks, that means she is a fire-breathing hybrid monster composed of various animals.
I like to think it means she is wildly imaginative and dazzling — she knows how to bring disparate things and people together.
I've only ever seen her breathe fire once or twice when her offspring was threatened, so I keep that skill our special secret from the world.
I think the Greeks described the Chimera as a monster because she had more power than the men could handle.

That Chimera made my bones, body, and blood from scratch.
From molecular building blocks made out of atoms that used to be stardust, she built intricate and delicate systems to sustain life.
Her womb was the origin of my universe.

Then there was a Big Bang
— or rather, a forced migration from one Universe to another through a rather narrow canal.
I was suddenly untethered from my old home.

But I recently discovered that I left a piece of myself behind.
"Fetal cells have been found circulating in the mother's blood for over 30 years after giving birth," my Rheumatology professor said casually.
He moved on to the next slide as I sat with this puzzle piece that had just fallen into place.
My mother has not just her parents' DNA within her, but also mine.
Bloodlines, it turns out, are bidirectional.
Before my heart had even started beating, my cells were circulating throughout her body — and after I left, those cells remained.
A permanent marker that I had once been there.
I always knew I was genetically part my mother, but now I know she is part me too.
Puzzle pieces interlocked in a unique way.

"Maybe this is why we are telepathic," she says.
It makes sense now...
— why we seem to call each other right as we are thinking of the other
— why we are different and yet similar
— why I can know her thoughts at the slight twitch of an eyebrow
— why I can read her face like a well-loved book whose pages I've memorized

In the Iliad, Homer said, "[the Chimera is] of divine stock, not of men" — I couldn't agree more.
Only something of divine stock could create a universe inside themselves in which they create new life and exist as a composition of DNA from multiple creatures.

Thank God for Divine Monsters like my mother.

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My Mother Is a Chimera
By Shivani Dayal

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The waves crashed into the harbor
And the children chortled a sweet melody
And the songbirds arrived just in time for birthday cake
For it was spring and new beginnings
That’s what the fisherman told his son
As they saw the green helicopters falling from the trees

The waves crashed into the harbor
And the mosquitoes snapped in disgust
And the humidity hissed like a bad omen
And life moved slow and sluggish like an insect caught in honey

The waves crashed into the harbor
and the sky bestowed a dark rage upon the masses
Seabirds cackled, but with fear
Ravens came out instead
And flapped away into the twilight

The waves crashed into the harbor
And the sky was an icy blue of ultimate disappointment
Of failed expectations and could-have-beens
And the red cardinals came and shook their heads merrily
For it was time for presents
and time for sleep

The waves continued to crash
And would keep doing so for quite some time
For they operated independently of any expectations
And answered only to the moon.
Indifferent to their cyclic constancy,
To the meaning infused into them by man,
To the life they could form and take away.
Indifferent to all they could mean to so many.
to what remains  
By Grace Yi

what was lost to the world when it lost you?
I wonder if you looked at your reflection in the mirror, if you had wanted to remove that mole,
if you marveled at the body you were harbored within, wondered with whom and with what you had shared this soul;
in the toughened pads of your feet,
I wondered if you traversed mountains by the dim glow of headlamps on an alpine start,
what you imagined as you paused for rest next to a cliff face and gazed up at a starless sky
if you smiled at the sliver of sun peeking through the Sierras
as you stood at the summit, looking at the pinpoint where you started,
I wonder who you missed

in your cardiac plexus, sticky with webs of residue and lined with your ghosts,
I wonder what you regret, which secrets you buried in those half-moons on your palms

I wonder how you felt about blue cheese, because everyone seems to have opinions about blue cheese
I wonder if you danced with someone in your living room,
curling up to them, delirious with tiredness, laughing until you cried

in the imprint on your ring finger – who did you leave behind?
I wonder if they grieve a piece of themselves,
or if you both rejoice, now, in a vow fulfilled now, looking down at you, these are the only parts that still remain a mystery

leave it to us to cut open, prod, dissect until we suck away the magic of it that’s what we wanted, we remind ourselves.
in our hands you slip away

His Story a haiku
By Melissa June Burdette
History is fixed, unless you talk to Grandpa.
He tells it his way.

SubI intraoperative sketch
By Michelle Miller
Devil in the Mirror
By Cristian Cole

Recognition
By LeeAnn Li

The familiarity of your face
I have seen
Somewhere:
Uncertain gaze
Desperate agony of hope
Stubborn strength,
Wearily borne.
In that space between breath—
Recognition
Like smoke of forgotten dreams.

It baffles justice, sometimes,
The fickle whimsy of life
Like beams of sunlight
Illumination freely given, but never secured
Beauty in transience,
Winking in, winking out.

Where you languish
I had once lay
One rises, one falls
Who was I to walk away?
Now

On the edge of flight
Yet tethered here
Teetering on this craft of trust
A hand to grasp yours,
Lost at sea.
Speaking the message in a bottle from my shadow self.

In white coat I stood
As the divide dissolved.
Past and present ebb and flow
In holding your heart
I lose my own.
In you I’ve seen me.
In me, I see you.
It's 1989 and a young woman in her emerald green park uniform is climbing Vernal Falls in Yosemite National Park. There is a slight heaviness to her breath, but it is strong, controlled. This has been a usual hike for her in the mornings. She pushes past slower families on this crowded day, frustrated her journey was lengthened. She can't wait, there's something waiting up there. In record time, she reaches the top of this three-mile trek, looks down, and sees a vast wilderness speckled with moving black dots.

It's now 2015 and that same woman looks up from the halfway point at Vernal Falls in Yosemite National park. Her body has changed in the past 26 years. Her joints don't move quite the same. On her face is a faint butterfly-shaped rash. She slowly trudges up the uneven trail, careful not to over exert herself in fear of any number of consequences. She passes the occasional large family or stubborn kid, but mostly she finds herself stepping to the periphery, making way for energized twenty-somethings racing up the path. There is someone waiting for her at the top, but she knows she can take her time. There's plenty of daylight left.

A brief escape from the city has filled her with a vigor she hasn't known in decades, so she picks up the pace, even overtaking some of the twenty-somethings from earlier. Then, the smell of ammonia creeps up her nose. Cat pee. Shortly after, sensory overload. She forgets where she is, who she is and what her goal was. Spatial awareness has left, and she is drifting dangerously close to the edge of the unguarded trail. She stumbles, guesses she is near the edge facing the rocky waters below, and pauses long enough to get to the side and collapse, overridden by a coming migraine and the flare that has been chasing her the past few days. Exhausted, she looks up at Vernal Falls.

A doctor sits in front of her peering over a medical chart on screen. This is not the trail. This is a stiff reclining chair in a gray-walled office; fluorescent light washes over each drab countertop and chair. This is a memory she wishes to forget. The doctor said she likely has lupus, and that her unusual sense of smell is a seizure aura.

Years passed. Her condition remained the same. The woman prided herself as an ICU nurse. Schedules were inconsistent and work was demanding on body and spirit, but there were rewards. Her fondest memory is caring for an elderly patient who knew they would soon pass and spent their final hours cheerfully getting to know the young nurse's visiting son.

But her joints ached. Her shoulders carried an unseeable weight that bared down on her with every step through hallways lengthened by tunnel vision. All the time, doctors were still confused by her condition. One doctor would prescribe a drug only for another to take her off it. Not long after her diagnosis, maybe a couple years, her doctors proposed an operation that may help her with her seizures and cognition. The procedure would be invasive. She may lose memory and motor function for a while, they said. Telling her son the next time he sees her, she may no longer recognize him was the hardest conversation she ever had.

She needed a moment to breathe. Since the diagnosis, an autoimmune disease ruled her life. So, she chose to return to the valley that held her youth. She would trace her steps up the waterfalls and look out on that same wilderness. It would not heal her, she knew; but if she could just make it to the mountaintop, she may feel lupus's grip loosen.

Two strangers, a couple, check the woman immediately after she fell. She is slowly waking, her consciousness exploding from within after what felt like hours of drifting through her worst memories. "I can't wait now. There's someone waiting for me up there," she says, not missing a beat. Her new caretakers try to slow her down, but she stands before they can get ahold of her. Her joints scream. She doesn't push past the pain. Instead she recklessly ignores it. Shesteadies herself above shaking legs, weakened by the seizure and her flare up. And she walks. She walks faster than even her younger self, weaving through families along the narrow path. The couple follows closely behind her. Water splashes on her and the ground dampens.

At the top, she sees her son.
Florencia’s throat burned as though she had pharyngitis, but she didn’t dare show her face near the Pyxis machine. Everyone would see her tear-stained cheeks, her puffy eyes, and the crumpled front of her scrubs with which she’d wiped her nose.

It was dark in the supply closet, the smell of ammonium and latex overbearing. The voice in Florencia’s head that had gotten her this far tugged at her again, urging her to get up, to dry her eyes, and to finish her first day of clinicals. But every time she thought she was ready, a fresh wave of sobs seized her chest and had her ruining her freshly pressed scrubs even more.

She’d been so nervous this morning, her hands shaking as she ran through the process in her mind. Grab the thermometer stick from out of the box. Apply a plastic cover. Place it under the patient’s tongue and wait for the beep of the final reading. Record temperature and dispose of the cover.

She had it down to the last detail, and performed her most flawless vital signs assessment until Linda walked in and gasped.

“Where did you get that?” she demanded, all but snatching the thermometer from the patient’s mouth.

“From the supply room,” Florencia replied, indignant. She’d followed all of Linda’s directions, but her supervising nurse had acted as though Florencia was a ticking time bomb of mistakes since the start of their eight a.m. shift.

Linda heaved an irate sigh, not bothering to lower her voice for the patient’s tongue, and to finish her first day of clinicals. But every time she actuated all of Linda’s directions, but her supervising nurse had acted as though Florencia was a ticking time bomb of mistakes since the start of their eight a.m. shift.

Linda beamed an irate sigh, not bothering to lower her voice for the patient. “You were supposed to use the oral thermometer. This is the rectal.”

Florencia covered her mouth. The patient gagged. And Linda lunged at him, wrestling the mug out of his hands. His heart monitor accelerated, and several seconds later, a team of frantic nurses rushed in.

“He’s an NPO!” Linda said, jabbing her finger at the board above the man’s headboard. He looked peevish now that his blankets were soaked, but none of the nurses fussing over him paid any heed. “Didn’t we go over this chart this morning? Dr. Hall won’t be happy if we have to postpone the procedure another twelve hours!”

Florencia wasn’t happy about it either. She glared at the man, who was already asking the CNA for another cup of coffee.

“I was, um,” said Florencia. She winced at the sound of her own voice, still thick with tears, but Linda only placed her hands on the man’s headboard. He looked peevish now that his blankets were soaked, but none of the nurses fussing over him paid any heed. “Didn’t we go over this chart this morning? Dr. Hall won’t be happy if we have to postpone the procedure another twelve hours!”

It was only as Florencia rounded the last corner of the wing, the NPO patient’s door in sight once more, that she realized she had no idea where the linen closet was.

Securing her student badge, she walked up to the reception desk, her knees weak and her feet aching. The woman at the desk didn’t look at her, even when Florencia cleared her throat.

“Excuse me,” she said meekly. “Can you tell me where the linen closet is?”

The middle-aged woman gave her a sharp look over the top of her glasses and said, “By the elevator.”

Florencia covered her mouth. The patient gagged. And Linda walked in and gasped.

“None of the other girls are so attentive,” he said, voice warbling, eyes twinkling. “They didn’t even let me have breakfast this morning. At this point, I’ll be asleep even before they stick me.”

Florencia’s throat burned as though she had pharyngitis, but she didn’t dare show her face near the Pyxis machine. Everyone would see her tear-stained cheeks, her puffy eyes, and the crumpled front of her scrubs with which she’d wiped her nose.

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Linda rounded the stacks of shelves, her footsteps heavy. When she saw Florencia, she stopped short, her eyes narrowing.

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“Just go,” said Linda, gesturing at the open door. Florencia’s heart dropped, but Linda’s face remained stony. “Find him some new linens or something. I need to call Dr. Hall.”

It was just as well. If this was how Florencia performed her first day on the job, maybe she just wasn’t meant to be here.

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Florencia blinked, the knot in her chest loosening just a bit. She’d disappeared for the better part of an hour, unable to find even a set of bedsheets. Was she not in trouble? “Yes.”

“There’s a new admission patient,” said Linda, already turning for the door. After a beat, Florencia stumbled after her, legs stiff from sitting on the cold tile floor for so long. “Dr. Jimenez and Nurse Benitez aren’t here yet, so there’s nobody else who can translate.”

Florencia’s steps found rhythm at Linda’s side. She pushed her hair out of her face, clearing her throat and asking, “Did she say where she’s from?” Some dialects and accents were harder for her to understand than others.

“Maybe,” Linda said forcefully. “It’s not as though I could understand.”

They reached the ward where the new admission patient was propped up on some pillows, shaking her head as Nurse Tran spoke to her in broken Spanish. When Florencia followed Linda through the door, both of the women turned to look at them with pained glances.

Linda gave Florencia an expectant look. With a steadying breath, Florencia adjusted her student badge and stepped to the patient’s side.

“Buenos días, señora,” she said, and smiled when the woman’s eyes lit up.

“Me llamo Florencia. ¿Qué le aflige hoy?”

“¡Se habla español!” The patient extended her hand, the corners of her eyes creasing slightly.

“Estate teniendo un infarto, señora,” Florencia answered. Those were words no one ever wanted to hear: you are having a heart attack.

“No se preocupe, nosotras la cuidaremos.”

Florencia nervously smiled at Victoria for another beat before Linda caught her attention with a wave.

“¿Que me esta pasando?” asked Victoria, her eyes wide and fearful.

“Está teniendo un infarto, señora,” Florencia answered. Those were words no one ever wanted to hear: you are having a heart attack.

“Me cuesta mucho respirar lo suficiente para hablar.”

“Well! Don’t just stand there, get the oximeter!” It wasn’t until break that Florencia was actually able to sit down and send her mother a quick, error-riddled text about the first part of her morning. Just one morning in and already, she was exhausted. But she had barely wanted to take her break. She’d wanted to stay with Victoria, with Linda, and do more.

“So,” said Linda, taking her lunch from the microwave and settling down across from Florencia at the table. “How do you think you’re doing so far?”

Florencia grinned, stuffing another empanada into her mouth. “It’s been mostly a disaster.”

Linda smiled too, taking a long sip from her coffee. “I made a lot of mistakes on my first day of clinicals too, you know. Started inserting an NG without measuring first. Having to explain to the patient why we had to pull it out and start the procedure again was horrific,” Linda recounted with a shudder.

She turned to Florencia with surprising fondness in her eyes. “But you have a good head and a good heart. That’s what will keep you going.”

“Right,” said Florencia. “I mean, I do. Want to keep going, that is.”

“Well, good,” said Linda, pulling out her phone. “We honestly need all hands on deck, at all times.” She paused, then met Florencia’s eyes. “How do you say ‘No you can’t get out of bed, you’re a fall risk’ in Spanish? There’s a man in 109 who doesn’t understand a single word I say. Either that, or he just pretends.”

Grinning, Florencia took a fueling sip of coffee.
Ashley Washington is a second year medical student at DGSOM. She was born and raised in Macon, Georgia and graduated from Brown University with a bachelors in biology. In her free time, she enjoys writing, playing piano, cooking, and playing video games.

Beau Sperry is an MD Candidate at UCLA. His creative work has appeared in SEED (Bates College), Rainy Day (Cornell), Blind Glass (U. Washington), “An Anthology of Emerging Poets” (Z Publishing) and elsewhere.

Chanel Calhoun - I am a third year dental student who loves traveling, writing, and creating works of art in my spare time.

Kate Coursey is a third-year medical student at UCLA. In her spare time, she enjoys writing novels, short stories, and haikus.

LeeAnn Li is in her 8th and final year of the MD-PhD program at UCLA and is pursuing Neurology. Her personal experience with illness powerfully shaped and informed her path today: in life perspective, PhD research, and career. She has always had a love of words, and has found that writing, both prose and poetry, has enabled her to reflect on and process experiences, just as being in medical school has re-contextualized them. She believes in the power of dialogue and narrative to cultivate empathy.

Melissa June (Mel) Burdette is an accomplished poet and public speaker from southern Louisiana. She and her Carolina Dog, Honey the Dingo, now fondly call Los Angeles home.

Melissa L. White is a screenwriter, novelist, and short story writer, whose LGBTQ+ film, “Catch the Light,” premiered in Mumbai, India in June 2019. Melissa’s biopic script, “WHITENESS OF BONES,” based on the life of female artist, Georgia O’Keeffe, was a FINALIST in four different Screenplay Contests in 2021, and her LGBTQ+ Rom Com script, “Modern Marriage,” won 4th Prize in the Writer’s Digest Screenplay Contest 2021 (from over 3,000 entries.) Melissa is currently in Pre-Production for her latest film, “Sunrise Hollywood,” which she will write, direct, and co-produce.

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Crístian Cole - Los Angeles born and raised with dreams of being an athlete and always thought I’d be in front of the camera but found a passion behind it. For more information please check out my website at Coleworldproductions.com. Thank you in advance.

Cindy Ye is a 4th year medical student and believer of reckless optimism, radical compassion, and (terrible) dad jokes.

David Lee - 1 document things I love through the lens and the sensor.

Emma Ruskin is an MS1 who has sold and exhibited her sculpture and ceramics across NYC. These pieces were created during the height of the pandemic and were inspired by themes around separation, connection, and isolation.

Guadalupe Maya Solorio is a first generation medical student who has enjoined painting and writing poetry since childhood. Guadalupe gains inspiration from themes that she is passionate about such as equity, social activism, social and environmental justice. She gains also inspiration from her own experiences, medicine and the overall human experience.

Jazlyn Chong - I am currently a third year dental student who loves traveling, writing, and creating works of art in my spare time.

Jazlyn Chong - California native who has always loved to draw and paint.

Medha Shukla is a third year Pediatric Gastroenterology Fellow at UCLA Mattel Children's Hospital. I made this painting, titled “Focus,” as a gift for my brother as he graduated from his Vascular Surgery Fellowship, but I felt that it also reflected the atmosphere that all of us in healthcare have been experiencing this past year. This painting depicts a need to maintain our focus during a time of chaos that we have never experienced before.

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