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Tabula rasa, Latin for “blank slate,” is Vanderbilt School of Medicine’s journal for medical humanities. Tabula Rasa is dedicated to the idea that the mediums of pixels, paint, pen, and paper lend individuals the means with which to explore the nature of humanity and enhance their medical experience. The journal is published annually, and we invite submissions of original short stories, poetry, essays, interviews, artwork, and photographs from medical students, residents, faculty members, alumni, patients, and members of the Nashville community.
The role of family in an individual’s life is considerable. When undergoing diagnosis and treatment for an illness, a patient’s family can serve as support, motivation, and guidance under difficult circumstances. For those considering the medical profession, family can function as a powerful inspiration to pursue a career that provides care to the public. Society is significantly affected by this relationship, as family support is not only fundamental to accessing care and receiving treatment, but also to leading healthy lives.

The definition of family is not simply biological, but also can unite people throughout communities, regions, and nations. In light of recent natural disasters in Haiti and Chile, those affected have relied increasingly upon the compassion and outpouring of generosity by families throughout the world. As members of a caring community, all of us have a responsibility to seek help when we need it and to reach out to those in our community who are in distress.

This edition of Tabula Rasa aims to recognize, celebrate, and better understand the impact of family on healthcare, medicine, and society. The journal receives submissions from not only Vanderbilt University Medical Center, but also from the entire university and the Greater Nashville Area.

This past year has been a period of profound growth for the journal, receiving record levels of submissions from the Vanderbilt community. My goal has been to make the journal a forum for individuals to express, develop, and explore concepts related to the interaction between medicine and society. I encourage anyone with an interest in the field of medical humanities to submit their work to our journal.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to our superb editorial staff that has worked diligently and with great care to produce our current issue. Their determination to contact faculty, students, organizations, and patients has been instrumental in generating the high quality submissions that have been selected for this issue.

Kevin K. Kumar
Editor-in-Chief
Tabula Rasa

Please visit the Tabula Rasa website for past issues, unabridged writings, and additional poetry, prose, and works of art. The pieces displayed in this print edition represent only a small selection of the works submitted to the editorial staff for review.
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- **“Knowledge he patiently prepares her for”**
  - The Psychoanalyst’s Daughter
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  - p. 7

- **“...separated in time and space, we forgot.”**
  - Newborn Faith
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- **Why we have Cats in our House**
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In the quietness of falling snow outside her father’s office,
She hears the hushed hiss of passing cars negotiating
Transformed terrain. The muted clank of tire chains.
Skidding carcasses of steel and glass, sliding, uncontrolled
On icy streets. Safe inside, lolling on a chair, its tall back
Hovering above her head, a flaming wave of red,
About to fall and break, she reads. This morning,
Before she left for school, her father, as he always
Does, had combed her hair, and clamped it back
Behind her ears with two neat clips. She still feels
His movements there, his hands separating her frothed-up
Locks into shining, straightened lengths of reddish-brown.
She’s ten years old, a colt-like girl her father
Calls “my colt.” Her legs two knobbly lengths
Of bony strength, her eyes twin drams of dark, blue depths.
On the other side of an insulated wall, her father’s patients
Lie, uneasy, on his aqua-colored couch.
She must know they weep and rail. With wet faces
And bruised fists, they weave their private stories’ knotted
Clots of tangled images for him to sort. Just like
Her hair… He reads them, like a book, he’s said. She loves
To read. Today, the story of a girl who adored her horse
So flagrantly it felt like pain. She laid her head into its butter-
Colored mane and breathed until her whole face flamed
With scent-filled waves of damp horse heat.
Sitting on the side of her canopied bed,
Her father has read to her a hundred books,
Or more. Washed and brushed, warmly buttoned
In the matching halves of her summer
(Or her winter) nightie, she has lain there
Dreamily, inside the tidy boat her small bed makes.
Often, his glasses (the silly, half-there ones he wears
To read) have slipped from his nose and dangled,
Caught, on the chain around his neck
While he has gone on reading, unaware,
And she has gone on listening to the calming
Timbre of his familiar voice. Once, she was alone
Inside her privacy. Now, he's there, but not there,
Too: a mystery she loves. Somewhere, Mother
Must be moving busily among her many
Tasks, rubbing cream from the gold-rimmed pot
Into her face, or forking the remains of the evening’s
Roast into crumpled foil and placing it, as always,
On the second shelf to chill. But mother's role,
Like weather, has undergone a change. She recedes.
The girl has moored inside her long enough for now.
Somewhere, mother's back there, bobbing in the water
While the girl has swum away. The gritty beach and higher ground
Are what compel her now. She shelters in the covered bed
Her father visits every night, unfailingly ascending
In just this way: book in hand, requesting permission to enter,
Permission to sit. She senses his desire is nothing more
than to sit beside her, reading, quietly, a book she loves.
He touches her  
So gently, she sometimes feels a silvery squinch  
Of wincing feeling from which she backs away. Like blood  
Rising to the surface of a shallow cut and taking on  
The shape of pain that hasn’t yet begun to throb, she’s not  
Quite clear what’s happening.

A horse’s brain  
Is very small, her father has informed her. And yet  
It grows into a creature twelve hands tall, or taller.  
Like that, this thing will grow: the germinating  
Knowledge he patiently prepares her for.

The day is coming when he’ll no longer brush her hair,  
Or sit beside her, reading, on the bed, and she’ll decline  
To raise her hand to trace the curl of gray above his ear.  
And neither will she minimize herself to cuddle on his lap  
And be embraced by chest and arms. Something grows  
Between them that he, so far, protects her from.  
Thus far, it is a tiny spark, a wave of fire not yet aflame.  
The conflagration that awaits still lies ahead. Its heat  
Lies in the story of the horse-adoring girl.

Kate Daniels is an associate professor of English and Director of Creative Writing. She has been the recipient of a number of awards for her works and has just completed Slow Fuse of the Possible: A Poet’s Psychoanalysis, an inter-genre prose work that explores connections between psychoanalysis and poetry, focusing on the writing process.
4 Faces
Zachary Greenberg

The man on the metro
his face burned off
glued back on
hopefully his own
rides the metro

The man on the motorcycle
woke at dawn
washed his face
hopefully in water warm
to prepare for his death
7am rubble side
of the Pacific Coast Highway

The rumswallowed man
slayed open
at the rehab home
sits with a Spiritual Counselor
and she brings in his dead girl-friend
who hung herself
in his basement
he sees her too
when she looks at him
I don’t blame you

The pillriddled man
at the rehab home
once was a boy
molested by his science teacher
and his mom disbelieved him
and his mom married the science teacher
so yes I saw a psychologist
after ten years of analysis
I learned one thing
he looks up
you would be like this too

Zachary Greenberg is a first year MFA student in Creative Writing and Poetry. Zachary has a background in integrative healthcare, most notably working for three years as a counselor at a substance abuse rehabilitation center in California.
Radiation
Jenny Yuji Qi

You’re very bright, the doctor
Decided when I asked him
About the implications
Of my mother’s treatment plan:
A minimum of five weeks
Of high-intensity beams
Aimed at the renegade cells
Invading her head, her chest,
A precaution against feared
Metastatic growth of cells
Missed by the lobectomy
And surgical resection—
Borderline-lobotomy.
She might lose her memory,
Her voice, her strength—side effects
He was willing to induce
To combat an even less
Desired end. My mother
Smiled, nodded, understanding
Only his last words of praise—
Your daughter is very bright.
The medical jargon masked
Future loss, now our shared pain.
What use is radiating
Beams when I can’t direct them
At renegade particles
Now eroding memories
Of the placement of her keys,
Of lullabies she once sang,
Of our early morning strolls
By the pond where a crane once
Walked into its reflection.

Jenny Qi is a junior undergraduate student from Las Vegas, NV. She is majoring in Molecular and Cellular Biology and hopes to someday conduct biomedical research. She also enjoys painting and writing poetry.
Uncle Mike
Destiny Birdsong

i remember
the night of the fight
over smoked-up dope
and too much owed money
and him
coming home from the hospital
all balled up tight against
himself
his nose running.
my mother held one narrow elbow
and a bean-shaped pan
they took from the emergency room.

his opened skin looked oily, tight
with bruises a different color of dark
from his hair and beard.
i thought of jesus then
my uncle—
who used to be the King of something
once—
but now
a bloat-faced monster
with the heart and lungs of ninety
and the small, crumpled body
of a boy.

this was the night they decided
he would do better at a rehab in Jackson
where dealers couldn’t catch him

where he would die
across the river—away from kin
and with new wounds:
running from relapse.
running
and falling
running
and falling again.

i had not seen that grave since
we put him in it.
there is a small plaque there

with his name,
a bible on a stand, open to some
unreadable page:
verses now blackened
from neglect,
and the faithful bullies:
sun,
wind-chased
dirt,
rain.

Destiny Birdsong is a PhD candidate in the Department of English. As a researcher and poet, Destiny is most interested in black female familial relationships and representations of madness in African American literature. Her current poetry manuscript is tentatively titled Sugar: Poems.
Holy Week
Lisa Dordal

For one week, my mother didn’t drink.
Laid-up in the heart wing because her valves weren’t right,
she couldn’t get to her bottles hidden in bookcases throughout the house.

I feel fine, she’d say, every time I called,
going on about the terrible smells and noises and strangers’ proddings.

I loved her being there. That whole week,
I loved. That whole week, a clean bright patch
stuck to the stink and slur and soil of every week before.

Several times a day I called, to hear the clearness in
her voice. As if I could store it up somehow, capture it,
go back to it, again and again. To that week,
that one week, when she came back.

Lisa Dordal received a Master of Divinity degree
from Vanderbilt Divinity School in 2005 and is currently enrolled in Vanderbilt’s Master of Fine Arts program for Creative Writing (in poetry). She lives in Nashville with her partner, Laurie, and their three very spoiled greyhounds.
My little brother is in medical school. He is the first person on my father’s side of the family to go into medicine. For the most part, we are a family of teachers. Sure, there are other callings – a cluster of farmers, a murder of engineers – but two out of three, at least, go into teaching. It’s congenital.

The words “My brother is in medical school” still stun me. When I see him – at my parents’ farmhouse or, more frequently now, in Facebook photos – I see a person I couldn’t see, or even imagine, when we were younger.

My mother had three children in three and a half years. My brother, Jacob, and younger sister, Darcy, were born thirteen months apart. They went to college together, and long before that, they inspired strangers to congratulate my parents on their beautiful blond twins. Jake and I, however, were (and are) probably the most alike: stubborn, single-minded, and desperate for new experiences, preferably outside the southwest Ohio town where we grew up.

I have no especially bad memories of my brother, only the knowledge that we irritated each other for most of our childhood. As the oldest, I was a born know-it-all, thin-skinned, easily nettled to tears. Like any brother, Jake was an expert nettler. Of course, sometimes our roles reversed, and I tormented him. We both kept a long leash on our tempers, and only the occasional shared punishment reconciled us.

One of our better moments came after my seventh-grade science fair. I had done poorly, earning a “Good” rating. (“Superior,” of course, really means “good,” while “Good” is code for “try not to give yourself a paper cut with this certificate.”) When I got home, I sat alone in the living room with the lights off, scrunched into one corner of the couch. After a few minutes, my mother walked cautiously over to me, Jake trailing behind her. He was holding something with a blue paper tail.

“Your brother made this to give you before we got home,” she said. “I told him that he could give it to you now, but you might have to thank him when you feel better.”

Jake held it out on his palm, as if offering sugar to a temperamental horse. It was a medallion, cut out of construction paper, meticulously notched into a star. “Science Fair, First Prize,” it read. I don’t remember anything about my experiment, or the fair itself, or whether I thanked my brother. But I still have that blue paper ribbon.
Another story – not a memory, since I wasn’t there:

The summer before my brother’s freshman year of high school, my parents took him to the school’s open house. The biology teacher, an older, notoriously tactless man, gave him a once-over and said: “Well, well, another Ark. Are you as smart as your sisters?”

Jake, who was not tactless, gave him a polite laugh and some brief, generic reply. Yeah, sure. Of course. I guess so.

As he walked away with my parents, he said: “Dad, I didn’t say what I wanted to say.”

“What did you want to say?”

“Yeah, I am. Are you?”

God have mercy on the teacher’s child, the farmer’s child. My brother and sister and I are both; and it shows in our drive to succeed, to jump in, to wade through, to get it done – as if, centaurlike, we are both driver and animal, spurring ourselves. Being the youngest, after two divergently overachieving sisters, played an inevitable part in my brother’s trajectory from high school to college to medical school. Growing up in a family where, for generations, stoicism has been revered and you can frankly never work hard enough undoubtedly played a great part as well.

But the greatest factor, I have come to realize, is what Schopenhauer would call my brother’s character – the I that desires and wills, the force which is both innate and mutable, genotype and phenotype, nature and nurture.

My brother fell in love with medicine while working in a biology lab during his first year of college, a job that lasted through all four years. His mentor professor didn’t drive him like a pack mule; he stood back and allowed Jake to drive himself, through endless data collection that led to frequent overnights at the lab, observing and charting while his friends went out without him. Even before Vanderbilt, my brother worked harder than I would have thought possible, for him or for anyone. It was during these days, when he gave up so much in pursuit of this new love, that I realized how little I really knew about him ... and how much I regretted that.

Paradoxically, since he is farther from home than ever before, Jake’s decision to go to medical school has drawn our entire family closer. We have a shared pride. When he visits, we stay up talking until 1 or 2 a.m., exclaiming over what he’s learned and sharing the ordinary things happening in our lives, which are as foreign now, to him, as medicine is to us. And I can finally see my brother clearly, as a man I’m proud to know – and as the person he always had the potential to be.

Alyson Ark Iott is a middle-school math and Language Arts teacher who graduated from Kenyon College in 2003.
He's staring with eyes that don't make out much.
He's reaching, but his arms only contort in spasms.
He's shrieking because no words flow from his tongue.
He's kicking, but his legs weren't made for walking.
Helpless he may be, but he is not without hope.
Because she is, and has always been, here,
To read his face and locate the end of the gaze,
To find the meaning in his sounds,
To serve as functioning hands and feet,
To do for him, the things which he cannot do for himself.
She makes her way across the room,
And he shrieks again, this time out of happiness,
Instead of frustration with his inability to act.
Then a smile crosses both of their faces,
Because she's done it, she's really done it.

Background: This poem was written about my 11 year old brother, Seth, who has cerebral palsy (a condition that limits his ability to walk, speak, or see) and his relationship with my mother, who has cared for him unceasingly since his birth.

Newborn Faith
Lauren Mioton
Graphite on paper

Lauren Mioton is a first year medical student at Vanderbilt from New Orleans, LA. She is interested in sketching as well as painting with acrylics.
Impairment/Empowerment
Brian Barnett

Background: This poem was written about my 11 year old brother, Seth, who has cerebral palsy (a condition that limits his ability to walk, speak, or see) and his relationship with my mother, who has cared for him unceasingly since his birth.

He’s staring with eyes that don’t make out much.  
He’s reaching, but his arms only contort in spasms.  
He’s shrieking because no words flow from his tongue.  
He’s kicking, but his legs weren’t made for walking.  
Helpless he may be, but he is not without hope.

Because she is, and has always been, here,  
To read his face and locate the end of the gaze,  
To find the meaning in his sounds,  
To serve as functioning hands and feet,  
To do for him, the things which he cannot do for himself.

She makes her way across the room,  
And he shrieks again, this time out of happiness,  
Instead of frustration with his inability to act.  
Then a smile crosses both of their faces,  
Because she’s done it, she’s really done it.

She’s helped him conquer this most difficult challenge,  
Changing the channel that is,  
Because it’s time for the next episode of Phineas and Ferb.  
And though this will drive everyone else in the house crazy,  
He prepares to bask in the glory of his prize.

Doubtless, these two lives have been put on hold,  
For their entirety most likely,  
But she knows, and maybe he does too,  
That beautiful, captive souls endure much longer  
Than the cells that hold them for the time being.

Brian Barnett is a second year medical student from the true middle of nowhere (Salyersville, Kentucky).  
He enjoys expressing his thoughts through writing poetry and prose, especially when he should be studying for class instead.
I was two days late. If she could have waited just a bit longer...I would have made it to San Francisco. And she would have met a bouncing baby niece.

My sister was a stunner. No lie. It was her face – I can only describe it as purely disarming. The tallest, eldest, and most outgoing (read: least inhibited) of three sisters, she came to the US first. She married a history professor at Berkeley with dark, curly hair. From what I could tell he adored her. He seemed like a nice guy- although I don't keep in touch.

A few years later, I followed my sister to the US. The land of Opportunity. I ended up living in Hawaii, where I eventually met my husband.

She called me unexpectedly. My sister thought she might be pregnant because she felt a bump, so went to see a doctor. She wasn't clear about his conclusions and wanted to hear my thoughts. I told her I was unsure - after all, this was my eonni. My big sister. I wasn't used to giving her my opinion. She told me they would do more tests. She would call me in a few weeks. I told her not to worry.

Her doctors eventually suspected cancer, but said successful treatment was likely. I told her to do everything the doctors suggested. They're experts, eonni. But she adamantly refused! She calmly informed me, God is in control. She would pray. I told her she was being ridiculous and stubborn. She was young, and there was no reason not to go through with treatment. I begged her to reconsider. Please, eonni. This is for real. She laughed and stated the obvious- prayer was her only medicine.

I immediately got on a flight to San Francisco. I was two months pregnant. After much persuasion, my sister grudgingly agreed to go to the hospital with me. Fine. I’ll do this, but just so you’ll stop nagging me about it. It looked as though she would go through with whatever the doctors advised. I flew back home.

Time passed too quickly. I was eight months pregnant. It was a Tuesday when my mom called me to tell me my sister was dying.
I found out that my sister never went back to see her doctor. Instead, she had prayed. And not just to the Holy Trinity or the Virgin, but to the whole gang. Theresa, Amatus, and Padre Pio. She prayed to saints I’d forgotten about since bible school. Saints I had never heard of. Of all that is Seen and Unseen. The more she prayed, the worse she became. Over the past few months she had begun to deteriorate.

I was possessed with all emotions. How could I have been oblivious to my sister’s condition for so long? I was angry at her for completely abandoning an easy chance at life. But mainly, I couldn’t comprehend why God would let my sister down after she had passed the ultimate test of faith with flying colors.

I talked to my sister on the phone. There was no mention of God or Medicine. We chatted about mundane things.

The news. The weather. The latest Tom Cruise movie.

Then I told her I was due in three weeks, and that I’d be able to fly to see her once the baby was here. She asked if I was having a girl.

Yes, of course.
A girl.

We cried when she told me she had always wanted a bouncing baby girl.

This story ends like all others: she never got what she wanted.

Sometimes, in just the right light, my daughter reminds me of my San Francisco sister. I smile at the resemblance and tell her a story about the aunt she never met. That her favorite saint was Theresa, the little flower. She would have really loved you, I say. I know, mom.

After over twenty years, these are the only moments when I miss her, really.

Victoria Wurster is a second year medical student from Dale City, Virginia. She pleasantly surprised herself by finding the time to write this piece. She hopes to be a non-surgeon when she grows up.
S.C.A.L.P.
Rishi D. Naik

S.kin
Is removed as the surgeons stop an infection that may spread
Removing the top layer that covers the head
Of a family united but now divided and led
To believe it will be alright if they just nod their head
And trust that the doctors knows all that they said

C.onnective Tissue
Retracted, thin and long
This layer served to symbolize the bond
Between not just the head, see this goes beyond
Into not just one life, but to all that belong
To this country so shook but cannot respond
The aftershocks shake their lives, not just the ground.

A.poneurosis
Connect the front to the back
Like a fabric of cloth meant to prevent an attack
But for this boy, his surgery may fail due to lack
Of medical supplies that many doctors never unpack
His vitals fall just like his country – fading to black

L.oose Areolar Connective Tissue
That allows for an easy separation plane
But has allowed bacteria to travel through his emissary veins
This “Danger Zone” must be removed and contained
Or else this boy will never fly a plane
As his dream was, before the earthquake ravaged his terrain.

P.ericranium
The source of nutrition and repair
That once sutured closed will save this boy’s career
And dream of getting out of here
And back to Haiti, where his country cannot bear
Another 7.0 shot, sometimes it’s just not fair

S.C.A.L.P.
For some students serves as a memory aid to read
But hopefully will serve as a reminder for all those in need
That we are all united by our common ties that bind
And must join together and not be so blind
To see that as doctors we serve all mankind

Rishi D. Naik is a first year medical student from Chattanooga, TN. He is very interested in writing poetry and short stories. He is inspired by Mahmoud Darwish and is working to be a surgeon who never stops being a humble student of medicine.
Family in Ghana
Grace Shih

Grace Shih is a second year medical student from Rockville, Maryland. Grace has long cultivated an interest in international medicine. Her recent volunteer work in Ghana strengthened her desire to work abroad long-term, and she hopes to someday serve in a community clinic in Central America.
Affair
Kevin Carr

He finds himself another cold December night enraptured by the decadent folds of her physique. Mesmerized by her words and the lure of her wisdom, this lothario begins as he has so many nights before a night of lustful passion with her that lasts until early morning. On occasion, the whisper of her closest acquaintances adds the ever so sinful thought of that alluring ménage. On first glance such extramarital affairs though seemingly blissful and lacking the decency of remorse seems to be the honey that fantasies are made of; at least the fantasies that don’t include the taste of steel as you kiss the head of your favorite club.

These encounters, more like long term affairs, when involving the texts of your favorite anatomy or biochemistry author are the way of life for the unsuspecting medical school student. As he or she labors through the immeasurable cache of information that is required of a physician, in time these texts become animate living breathing succubae, intent of ravaging a once peaceful existence. On occasion the married or almost married student will feel the guilt of the extramarital affair; they will miss the warmth of a real bed, and definitely feel the sting of a woman scorned. These absences can strain relationships, make lively pillow talk as elusive as the end of this academic tunnel.

While times are hard, and absolutely nobody understands the stresses of the undertaking, there must be a balance. It is the ties that bind, and the vows unrealized that form the foundation of that which is dear. Time must be spent, irrespective of how small, to reconcile the demands of academia with the joys of nuptial bliss, else one finds himself hemorrhaging sentimental capital over the loss of what once was.

Kevin Carr is a first year medical student. A Jamaican native, he graduated from Morehouse College. In his leisure Kevin enjoys playing soccer, cooking and enjoying the comforts of his two year marriage with wife Romona.
Caretaker's Daydream
Ryan Lang

Ryan Lang is a first year medical student from Huntsville, Alabama.
Door to a Himalayan Home
Nakul Singh Shekhawat

Nakul Shekhawat is a first year medical student from Georgia. His hobbies include reading, traveling, and photography.
Frances Cheng

Frances is in the graduate phase of the MD/PhD program and is from Holmdel, New Jersey. She is interested in international health, travel, and photography. She hopes to work as a pediatric hematologist-oncologist one day.
God, Do Not Let Me Cry
Alan L. Graber MD, Anne Brown RN MSN, Kathleen Wolff RN MSN

Mothers worry—especially mothers of children with diabetes. They worry every day and every night, and they continue to worry even after the children have grown up. “I never went to bed without my stomach knotting up about him,” acknowledges Robert’s mother, thirty-one years after her son was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. “Our life revolved around this child, and everything he did depended on us. I remember the day—Robert was twelve years old. We were on a trip, and he seemed to go to the bathroom forever; then he would drink this huge glass of water. When we stopped at McDonald’s, he said he didn’t want anything to eat, just the biggest glass of water they had.”

Her grandfather had had diabetes, so she knew the symptoms. The next day she took a specimen of Robert’s urine to the doctor’s office “for my peace of mind . . . and I [have] never had a moment’s peace of mind since that day.” She continues, “I had to go home and tell my son he had diabetes. It was devastating, but I didn’t want him to know how devastated I was. I was afraid I was going to cry. Before I talked to Robert, I had a talk with God and said, ‘Listen, God, I’m depending on you. Do not let me cry.’”

When she tried to tell Robert that he had diabetes, he covered his ears and walked away. She followed him from room to room. She remembers telling him, “Robert, this is our lot in life, and we’ll deal with it. Everybody has some problem. This is our problem. You can do everything you want to do; you’ll just have to do this, too.”

“From then on,” she says, “he was never upset another time. He was a wonderful child, never defiant or belligerent, he just accepted it. Nobody else in our town had a child with diabetes, no one in the school had diabetes, so no one knew what we were dealing with. I was determined that Robert wasn’t going to be different from other children. That was a huge thing with me.”

It was 1975. Their family doctor sent them to a specialist in Gainesville, Florida, but all she remembers from that visit was the physician warning Robert that he should never scuba dive. They didn’t go back. Robert’s parents drove to Panama City each month to attend a support group. His mother states, “I was desperate for that kind of support.” They learned about a summer camp for diabetic children, but Robert didn’t want to go to a camp.

A daily insulin shot was prescribed, as was the custom during that period. “You had to take that shot and take the food to match it; you had to eat that lunch and eat that snack,” his mother recalls. “We had to test the urine: mix two drops of urine with five drops of water in a little test tube. When
it turned orange, it was called ‘four plus’; when that orange color appeared, my stomach just knotted up, and I worried myself to death.”

Searching for more information, the parents took Robert to the Joslin Clinic in Boston for ten days. “We met another mother there; her son was named Jimmy. She would take apart a Big Mac sandwich, weigh each part on a balance scale, then reassemble the sandwich before letting Jimmy eat it. If I had done that sort of thing, I wonder if it would have changed anything.”

They began seeing an endocrinologist in Jacksonville, Florida—a five-hour drive from home. After several visits, the doctor said that Robert needed two insulin shots a day. His mother told the doctor, “Oh, no, we don't need two shots a day. That will just make it harder.”

She recalls, “The doctor took me into another exam room, cut off the lights, and shut the door, leaving me in the dark for fifteen minutes. When he returned, he asked if I had cooled off. You really don't want two shots a day, do you?” the physician said. “OK, we can handle it with one for a while.”

Two days after returning home, she called the doctor, saying, “We're ready for those two shots a day now.” The doctor replied, “Well, Robert and I have been ready for a long time, we just had to wait for you.”

“That doctor handled me pretty well,” she admits. “But back then, those two shots a day was a huge thing for me. I know that now they take four shots a day, right from the start.”

Robert did everything his peer group did. He never thought that he was particularly inconvenienced by diabetes, but his mother continued to worry about him, always concerned that his blood sugar might be too low. When he played high school football, his mother would discreetly send his father to the locker room at halftime with a sandwich for Robert. When he played on the baseball team, she would bring Gatorade to the whole team. The night before he left for college, she admitted to Robert, “I’ve lied to you all these years; you’re really not normal. Now I have to tell you the truth. When I brought Gatorade to your whole baseball team, I was really bringing it so that you wouldn't have low blood sugar.”

“I knew that, Mama,” he said.

She says, “He tries to keep me from worrying, and I try to make him think I’m not worrying, but he knows me.”

His parents agree that Robert does not consider himself abnormal. In college, he once had to write a paper about something in his life that had affected the whole family. He called home and proposed with a questioning tone, “I can't think of anything to write about. I guess I could write about when I got diabetes.”

“I guess you could,” his mother replied at the time. “Do you remember how you had to eat snacks when you went hunting up the river
with your father? Do you remember how we always were careful about eating on time, how we couldn’t go to the movies late in the afternoon because it would delay supper? What about when you took an insulin shot in a public restroom at Disneyland, how we were concerned that someone would think you were shooting up drugs?”

Robert’s mother now recalls, “I didn’t want to bare my soul and tell him how bad it had affected me. I told his dad that Robert doesn’t think anything he did was unusual, it was just a way of life for him. He’ll tell you to this day that he has no problems—he’s that kind of person.”

Robert is forty-four now, married, and a father. “Even now, when he gets in my car, I ask him if he brought a Coke or something sweet with him,” his mother admits. “But now I’m getting into the part that I’ve always worried about, eye and kidney problems. This has been on my mind all this time. When the doctor told me that Robert had diabetes, I thought, ‘I can deal with this, but down the road is going to be my big problem.’ Eye problems have been devastating. The worst thing is worrying about the kidneys. He deals with it and tries to get his mama to deal with it. He says that he’ll probably need a kidney transplant eventually, but it’ll be fine.”

“You deal with what life hands you,” Robert reminds his mother.

“Using the insulin pump the last few years has changed Robert’s life,” according to his mother. “It has freed him from always having to eat right on time. Now he tests his blood sugar ten or twelve times a day. Still, I called him the other night and said, “Why don’t you take a piece of candy before you go to bed?”

Robert responded to his mother playfully, “I’ll eat two M&M’s. Will that satisfy you?”

“I’ll always worry about him,” she sighs.
The Illuminated Death of Melinda Sanchez
Lynne McFarland

Day 1

The east light fills the living room.
You finally fell asleep near dawn.
“I want clarity,” you said, dropping off.
Marina, nina amada, eyes dark,
Crawls into her childhood bed.
And Shadow whines to go out.

When we return, he silently
Shakes snow from his coat,
Then moves from room to room,
Nails clicking on the wooden floors.
He sniffs your breath, and touches
Her closed eye lids softly with his nose.

I settle in your rocking chair
And enter
The circle of clarity
You’ve gathered to surround you--
An archipelago of journals, Zen books,
Watercolors, old letters
From El Leon, padre de Marina
(El ya esta meurto. Triste.),

I’m thinking
Nights here are Not Good.
Last night not even Gary Oldman
Could match your intensity:
“Help me!” Flying out of bed
Astonished by pain,

Day 2

The cancer nurse in jeans shows me
How to set the PCA pump.
“You can go up to 4,” she says, clicking through
the buttons.
I nod, uncertain.

You say you’ll die when Sharon comes.
Sharon, Older Daughter, is estranged. I think
That’s bad. That’s good. That buys you
Lots of time.

In plastic containers, Marina has ordered
The stuff of dying at home.
Pre-filled syringes, tubing, alcohol,
Each in its own tray, like lingerie.
Ativan is in the frig. And carrot juice--
Your only sustenance these days,
Though you plan the meals for us--
Telling me to steam the rice Your Way.
Su forma…
Is the only way.
Day 3

Suddenly, like a light coming on:
“I’ve had six years to prepare,” you say,
Your eyes connecting so directly I feel
I’m in an intimate place after years of absence.

Day 4

Doug, su mejor amigo, comes daily.
His visits have gravitas;
You sit regally,
Holding up your finger for us all to wait
In silence
While a wave of pain passes.
He is gently embarrassed–
The invisibility of his mother’s death
(His haunted adolescence)
Now replaced by the Illustrated Illuminated Version.

Day 5

Dilaudid or clarity....
Today brings clarity.
Sitting beside you,
I read all your poems, 174 pages:
Leo, Leo, Leo.
…And the mountains where his ashes are…
Now Marina will lose her mama too.
She says she plans to move to the ocean.
This hits you hard–there’s life after you are gone.

Day 6

After the pain, you meditate
While I play with Shadow
And look for a stone
To slip into my pocket.
He is happy to run after sticks
Thrown far into the silent sky.
I haven’t upped it
And you haven’t said to.

Day 7

One of Marina’s old boyfriends
Has camped out in the living room,
Hoping her need for comfort will relight
sparks.
She hates him loudly from the middle
Of your big four-poster.
You hold a finger in the air
To say silencio. ?Por que causan dolor?
Sunday morning
Light and silence.

Sunday afternoon.
Marina puts on something white,
A la Kahlo,
For a nearby neighbor’s party.
You cry. You’re afraid you’ll die while Marina
Is eating barbeque.
I promise to call her right away
Should I notice this is happening.
After she goes, we laugh, giddy girls.
Dilaudid or clarity.
I hold the small stone,
Worry stone or rosary…

Day 8

It is even brighter next morning by the chair.
The rich chocolate coffee you can no longer drink...
You are shutting down.
Last night the ileostomy tube
Came flying out,
The stoma was a pursed mouth blowing.
We looked, shocked. What was that?

At the ER you flirted with the doctor.
(Marina and I could not believe
You flirted with the doctor.)
On the other end of the phone
Your oncologist
Must have said,
“She won’t last long,”
Judging by the stillness of the nurse’s face.
(We drove back home, your stoma
Symbolically repaired with a Foley.)

Dying is like a Fellini movie;
We are present and watching,
Watching from inside.

Day 9

You say you’re cold. Doug climbs in bed,
And holds you close to warm you.
Marina drives to pick up Sharon.
Her plane is sinking through the clouds
As you are breathing/not breathing in his arms.

Home in Tennessee,
Small stone in my window sill
Catches morning light.

Lynne McFarland is an advanced practice nurse and an associate in the Department of Psychiatry. At Vanderbilt, she has worked with older adults in the Geriatric Psychiatry Clinic and has conducted research at the Center for Human Genetics Research. She has read and written poetry for years and views it as the most compact form of communication.
Weighing Child
Ravi Parikh

Ravi Parikh is a second year medical student who has an interest in photography. In this photograph, families and village health workers weighing children in rural India (Jamkhed) to ensure they are properly growing and not malnourished.
A Family Trims the Fat

Laila Hassam-Malani

Family, Healthcare, and Medicine

Family → Health card → Medicine.


Fail Eat. Care? Die?

Feat. Cared, i.e…

Fat. Care? Die.

Fare? Die?

Free.

Laila Hassam-Malani is a first year medical student from Duluth, Georgia. She was born in Hyderabad, India but immigrated to the States at a very young age. Her experiences as a first generation immigrant has shaped her understanding on the sacrifices a family must undertake to provide proper care for one another.
Phases
April Christensen

She goes through phases about once every eight months or so. I don’t remember when it started, just that by the time we were in sixth grade, she was going through her collecting lint balls phase. Then there was the walking on hands outside of school, saying the state capitals every time she crossed the street, and drawing mice in the bottom right hand corner of every page on every assignment she turned in. Her no shaving phase actually lasted thirteen months, and was ended only by her newfound interest in swimming; that, and her ugly sweater phase. She went to the Salvation Army and Goodwill stores, buying up sweaters that had sagged from their hangers for well over two years.

Right now, she is singing to the entire soundtrack of Phantom of the Opera every day. And by singing, I mean belting out the lyrics. Twice, we received angry knocks on the door from neighbors. When I opened the door, she smiled and waved at them, as I quickly escorted them to the hallway and tried to explain. By the end of the third week, two couples and a stray canary that flew through the building had left the apartment complex.

She told me once several years ago, as we sat at her parents’ table, her pencil busy scratching away at another tiny mouse, that she doesn’t know why she has these phases. Her parents said it was OCD. I looked at the dozens of pages covered with painstakingly drawn mice and said they were probably right.

I take walks. Lots of walks. It’s become my coping mechanism for all sorts of situations. Like when we first moved into the apartment and she vacuumed the place each day between the hours of 11:32pm and 12:47am. Or when she collected over one hundred fish all over the apartment. Once, as I sat down on the couch, I felt something crunch beneath me. When I looked down, I saw a smashed plastic container and a beta fish flopping helplessly on the cushion. For once, I didn’t care. The beta fish went, still flopping, down the toilet.

She never had any other siblings. I always felt maybe this had something to do with it, as if the phases were her attempts at entertaining herself. Or competing with herself for her parents’ attention. Or creating all the trouble of five kids.
Today, as she begins to sing, and I shrug my coat on and head for the door, she grabs onto my sleeve. “Stay.” I glance at the door, then the window, the peaceful silence of the park across the street. “Please, sing with me.”

She brings her computer from the bedroom and cranks up the music while I watch, my hand still resting on the door handle. “Come on.” She beckons, and my hand slides slowly off the handle, my feet dragging me into the living room.

As the first few lines of “Think of Me” blast around us, her voice screeches through the air. I can feel her eyes on me, but mine are focused on the window. The music stops, begins again, this time softer. “Listen with your whole body.” I force myself to stop watching the robins flickering past the window, and close my eyes.

I don’t feel anything at first. The vacuuming, the mice, the fish, the capitals, all the phases run through my mind in a long succession, my muscles tightening with each memory. But then the music begins to break through my thoughts, and I begin to listen. Think of all the things we’ve shared and seen. I begin to feel.

When the song is done, she pauses the music and whispers. “You can go if you’d like.” I open my eyes, look at her, at the robins, and then back at her. Without waiting for the next song to begin, I start belting out the lyrics at the top of my lungs.

April is a first year medical student.
Safe Harbor
Michael Wolf

Michael is a second year medical student from San Diego, CA.
Three Generations

Jacob Ark

My grandfather’s hand was that of a farmer
My father’s hand is that of a teacher
My hand will be that of a doctor

Jacob is a second year medical student.
From Addiction
Rebecca Ingle

You, who came so tiny, so fragile
Full of life
Smiling a smile from the beginning
  that would lighten
  even the heaviest of hearts
You—searching, suffering, learning,
  slowly believing in…..
You.

And I, loving you anew each day
  like it was the first,
See you.
Beautiful-eyed, strong, generous,
Daughter  granddaughter  cousin
  niece  friend  helper

See me---mother, yes,
But daughter  sister  wife
  aunt  friend  helper
See me too.
Alike and different, pushing and pulling
We awake to new separateness
And find our common heart.

Becca Ingle is a Hematology Nurse Practitioner with
Tennessee Oncology and is an Instructor at the School
of Nursing. She lives outside of Nashville on a farm
with her husband and two dogs.
Family Tree
Hannah and Amy Fleming

This quilt was made by Hannah, 7 years old, with the help of her mother Amy. Hannah created the design for a school project about family trees. Hannah sits on the swing with her two sisters. The swing hangs from two branches (one from each family tree). Her parents’ names are on the branches, and her grandparents’ names are on the trunks of the trees. The other branches of the trees represent her parents’ siblings and their children. There are flowers on the ground representing her great-grandparents. Hannah loves to paint and sew. She and her sisters also love to play with the many Vanderbilt medical students who have become a part of their family in Nashville.
Light in the Tunnel

Anonymous

Of all the things
that I’ve been told
over the phone,

you’re the only one to say

“I can hear you smile.”

Of all the smiles that I have crafted,

for friends family
colleagues professors
strangers acquaintances,

mute smiles that win ‘most optimistic’

It’s this one

that you hear, and not just see
that you light from across the country

that reveals
my favorite self.
my happiest self.
my truest self.
Why doctors are better than people: a scientific study
Samuel A. Mudd

While medical school may often seem like a tedious and fruitless gauntlet of mind-numbing coursework and obscene work hours, when one takes a moment to step back and observe the forest, it is clear that, in fact, we medical students are really growing. Not only are we well on our way to becoming great physicians. We are also well on our way to becoming great people. As I reflect on my education thus far, I recognize several ways in which I have developed as a human being.

I am now smart. Just before coming to medical school, I was told that my vocabulary would triple over the next four years. Impossible, I thought. Looking back now, though, I’m certain it’s true. I’ve mastered all kinds of obscure and specific terms, like “gender”, “dropsy” and “space elevator”.

I am now useful. For instance, many of my non-medical friends are having babies. I’m happy to report that I am able to accurately diagnose the gender of these babies nearly 60% of the time. This may not seem all that impressive. But some couples without medical backgrounds have to wait years before determining their child’s gender, first going through an awkward – and often traumatic – purgatory of neutral nicknames and ambiguous clothing. By the time the child is finally old enough to respond appropriately to the parents’ question “Are you a little boy or a little girl?” irreparable damage may have been done. Thanks to my medical training, up to three children may be spared this fate.

I can now treat illness. Just one fortnight past, the great calamity of a Dropfy befell an acquaintance. Following instructions to ride with great haste to my dwelling, he arrived, in a truly wretched State. After first draining the Water, by 3 smart purges, I instructed my friend to prepare only light Victual, cook’d with abundance of Garlick and Horfe-Radif, and to confine himself rigorously to a half dozen Pint of hard Cider each day, wherein a hot Iron has been quench’d several times. His Recovery is nearly compleat.

I can now save lives. I haven’t actually tried this yet, but I’m pretty sure I could do it.
I can now kill people with great efficiency. With my knowledge of anatomy and physiognomy, I have become a deadly warrior machine. My legal counsel has advised me to refrain from publicizing any details, so I will say only this: I killed the Jonas Brothers. Now, I know what you’re thinking: “The Jonas Brothers? They’re not officially dead.” Well, just wait. Soon the cumulative doses of organophosphates that I’ve been sneaking into their breakfast each day will result in a massive outpouring of autonomic discharge in their adorable little bodies. They will begin to salivate profusely and urinate uncontrollably. And this will be my cue to shoot each of them in the heart. With a gun.

I am very, very strong. Then again, I have always been very, very strong. This has nothing to do with medical school. I also exude a pleasant masculine scent.

I am now entertaining. Anecdotes from the wards make great fodder for cocktail party gossip. This works especially well when the anecdotes involve really famous patients. And you know what the best part is? HIPAA doesn’t apply when the stories aren’t true! I can’t tell you how many phone numbers I’ve collected after describing the way Tom Cruise looked at me as he was dying in my arms.

I have now earned the love of my parents. As a child, I was frequently denied my supper if I was unable to recite Ranson’s criteria or explain in detail the pathogenesis of atherosclerosis. Now that I have completed two-and-a-half years of medical school, I still don’t know a thing about Ranson or his stupid criteria, and all I know about atherosclerosis is that babies that are born with it usually require emergent cosmetic rhinoplasty. However, it has become clear to me that my parents know even less than I do, and they’ll believe whatever I tell them. These days, when I’m home on holiday, I eat like a king.

So don’t fret. I assure you that the rigors of this education are already paying off. And if you, too, take time to step away from the demands of your coursework – have you considered taking the next two months to hike the Appalachian Trail? – you will find that you’re probably a much better person than the twerp you were when you first arrived at medical school.

Samuel A. Mudd is a third year medical student. He was born and raised on a tobacco plantation in Charles County, MD. When he is not studying medicine or tending his crops, he enjoys carpentry, dabbling in politics and the sweet smell of freedom.
Why we have Cats in our House
Ryan Darby

The waiting room in a Psych hospital is not the place to pick up women of esteem, but I figured I’d try anyway. I was nervous, and it showed. I calmed myself by reciting lines I had heard in a bar last night, which seemed to fill the awkward silence with a familiarity we could both appreciate. “So, what’s your mom/dad/sibling in for?” I smiled, shifting my weight from left to right as I tried not to think about the smell of vomit I still hadn’t washed out of the bathroom walls. The beer was the only thing that had saved her life. “Brother. Schizoaffective. Broke into our neighbor’s house to find the spy tapes they had made.” She spoke rapidly, blonde bangs covering painted eyes that only looked down. I tried to look straight at her so I wouldn’t have to look at my dirty shoes and un-ironed pants. I hadn’t changed clothes since last night. She looked up, suddenly, which seemed to startle herself, and she backed away, slowly. “You?”

I looked at her without listening. “huh?”

“What are you here for?” It was a simple question but I didn’t have a good answer.

“There was vomit on the walls of the bathroom.” It was the only answer that made sense right now. She seemed to understand, slowly hiding her head behind the magazine she had come in with. “You know, I cleaned the walls, scrubbed them real good, but I can’t get that smell out. I just can’t.”

The walls in the waiting room were old and poorly lit, as if colors were too dangerous in a place like this. No one really opened their eyes here, anyways. Our faces all hid behind magazines and expressionless banter. I tapped my foot to a beat I had never heard before, but no one noticed. They were all listening to their own feet tapping silently beneath, listening to the stories they read in magazines that weren’t really opened, looking at 30 degree angles towards the floor.

Her brother was crazy. So was my brother, but he wasn’t in the hospital. The patients marched in, one by one, but there were only 3 families. Were they even families? There
was an old couple with dark glasses there to see a man scared of saliva. There was the blond who was there to see her brother, who had recently discovered Russian spies posing as a retired mechanic and his ornery wife. And then there was me, the devoted son who scrubbed vomit off the bathroom walls. We weren’t families, we were representatives. We were symbols that stood for what families are. I hugged her and she gripped onto anxieties and fears that hid woven into the thin fabric of my shirt. We talked and I looked off at the crazy folk with no family. Some of them came and tried to join our family; this was particularly disturbing for all parties involved.

After we talked and cried I asked her about the vomit on the bathroom walls. “I scrubbed and scrubbed but I can’t get it off. What should I do?” She gave me several plausible suggestions, but none of them had worked. “Should we sell it?” She looked at me, confused. “The house?” “No, mom. The bathroom. We can’t fix it. I can’t get the vomit off the walls.” I don’t think she really understood because at that point I just took her hand and held it until the man with no family finally let theirs. I turned to the blond haired girl with the crazy brother and winked at her as she wiped tears from her cheeks. The tears weren’t for her, anyway. Neither was the wink.

We said goodbye, and she was home by the end of the week. We never could get the smell of vomit out, but eventually we learned to live with it. The stains were invisible, but the rotting smell of vomit lingered. It reminded me of the urine stain on the rug in the front hallway, or the feces in the cabinet where we no longer stored pots. These smells had slowly become a part of the home, until they were what defined it, what made our home unique. We scrubbed and rinsed and cleaned, but the smells always remained. We sat and watched tv in the living room, trying not to think about the vomit stains on the bathroom walls. And for moments, separated in time and space, we forgot. One by one we left the home, but every time we returned the smells remained the same as when we left them. We blamed them on the cats; it was our little secret.
Twins: I’d hoped for identical. Frances, my late wife knew this, she knew this in the same way she knew many
things we’d left unspoken, shoved to the edge of our membranous marriage, imbedded in silence. No matter
what one did, however, things trickled through; secrets still shuttled between us, if by no other way than osmo-
sis. I’d wanted identical in the same selfish way, I suppose, that one hopes for a boy, or a girl. When the doctor
announced we had both, Frances, bone-tired on the gurney, saw my look of dismay in one instant, snatched it up
like a hawk and held onto it, never forgot it. Years later, on one of our countless long drives back from vacation
late night, when Linny and Nate were several years older and we could no longer count on the mercy of sleep,
fully recharged from cola and candy, their questions unfolded like moonflowers at midnight as their voices floated
from the germinal darkness of the back seat: How far up is heaven? Why is hell dark if they have fires? How did
you two meet? Did you want a boy or a girl? Did you know you were going to have twins? And sooner or later,
one would ask the inevitable: Did you ever wish we’d been identical?

“Of course not,” Frances always said. “I’ve never had matching anything. Why should I have started with you
two?”

Sometimes I was silent. Sometimes I chimed in. “It made it much easier to tell you apart,” I might say. And if I
happened to glance over at Frances that moment, I’d see my falsehood clutched there on her lap like a cheap han-
kerchief, in the glow of the dashboard. It was one thing to pretend with one’s children; quite another to pretend
with one’s wife. Mimicry offers some forms of protection in nature, but never enough camouflage for the truth.
And the truth was that I’d wanted identical.

What better way would there have been to watch the whole nature/nuture debate unfold from the playpen?
Right in one’s living room? Double feature, no intermission: how two genetically identical beings started exactly
out the same and could end up so different? Fraternal complicated the matter. There was testosterone now, there
was estrogen; there were variables. Nowadays I suppose you find these things out quite ahead of time, from the
ultrasounds; the sighting of phalli has become quite the sport in Mumbai and Beijing: Ahoy! A boy! But back
when Linny and Nate and been born, fathers weren’t even allowed near the delivery room--twins were sometimes
not even suspected. Back then, one didn’t find out the sex of one’s infant until it squeezed its way out under the
hotlights, pinkened and raw.

Of course they came early; Frances went into premature labor the first week of June. She cursed every day of
her bedrest. She tried to keep busy with Agatha Christies, would switch to her jigsaws when she’d read enough.
She couldn’t stay cool and I carried in flowers and talcum. Near the end of her pregnancy, what she craved most
was strawberries. Each week I went down to the Market in Charleston to pick up a fresh pint before heading up
to the hospital, the back of my shirt nearly soaked by the time I arrived. The berries were early that year, like our
children. On weekends the farmers drove in from the islands with fresh produce they sold from the back of their
pickups--new potatoes and asparagus from John’s Island, sweet onions from Wadmalaw. And baskets of strawber-
ries; it was easy to see why they belonged to the rose family, when one saw the bouquet of their redness, gathered and glistening, a few still unripe, their leafy green crowns still rimmed with white and pinched pale of color. Frances could eat a whole pint at one sitting, a whole flat in three days.

“The big ones never have any flavor,” she would say as she bit into one the size of a small plum. “Why is that, Professor? Does it just get diluted by size?” Then she would thump her abdomen with the tip of her finger, the same way I’d seen her check melons. “Look at me. I’m huge. I hope the same rules don’t apply to these fruits of my labor. I want these kids to have flavor. I want them to have character.”

“I’m sure they will, darling,” I said. “Enough for us both.”

“My grandmother said if you crave strawberries and don’t get them, your baby will be born with a strawberry birthmark.”

“I don’t think you have to worry,” I said. “Sounds like an old wives’ tale to me.”

Frances took a small sip of her water then looked at me sharply. “Louis, I’m nervous. About having two. I haven’t had one yet. Much less two. I wish my mother were here.” She gazed out the window a moment in thought. “I never thought I would say that. Not that she did a terrible job of things.” Her mother had been died when she was twelve, and whenever she spoke of her (which wasn’t often) it was like opening up a vacuum-packed jar: pain always seemed to hiss near the rim of it before she quickly resealed it.

“You’re going to do fine,” I said. “We’re going to do fine.”

“I’m going to get bed sores before it’s all over with.” She sat up on the edge of the bed for a moment, stretching her feet out. Her ankles were puffy and doughy after days of unuse. “Please move my puzzle close to the bed.”

I lifted the card table gently and carried it over, careful not to disturb what she’d already assembled—a thousand-pieced jigsaw of a village in Switzerland. She’d already completed most of the border; a few straight-edged pieces still sat in a pile.

“If I finish this before these babies come, it’ll be a miracle.” She played with a piece for a moment, trying to see if it would fit. Then put the piece down and started to weep. I rose from my chair and went over.

“What’s wrong?” I placed my arm on her shoulder a moment, rubbing her back.

“I just have this feeling something bad’s going to happen,” she said. “Pregnancy’s supposed to be pretty, you
know? Just like this damn picture of Switzerland.” She paused for a moment, grabbing a tissue and wiping her eyes. “We don't know the first thing about raising children. We're like a couple of Swiss village idiots. Pretending that everything's fine. When there's a Nazi or avalanche, just waiting somewhere to undo us.” I refilled her water and got her a washcloth. “The more I pretend the worse off I feel,” she continued. “I just wish they would come. I just wish they would be over with.”

“It won't be much longer,” I said. The convex white flesh of her abdomen looked like a snowdrift waiting to tumble. Convex slopes were statistically more dangerous than concave, I started to tell her—but I knew any reference to physics, would only upset her more at that moment. Instead, I cupped my hand over her belly, feeling its fullness, amazed at its tightness, then lowered my ear softly and listened.

“It's beautiful, Frances.” I lifted her gown up, tracing her stretch marks with my fingers. The puckers and squiggles almost appeared to be drawn on with crayon, already a hint at our reckless four-handed future to come.

“My grandmother said to rub baby pee on them to get rid of them,” Frances said as she looked down at her belly. “I don't think I can do that. Isn’t there something I can put on these, prof?” She lowered her gown like a curtain and sighed. “We can put a man on the moon but we can't get rid of stretch marks? What use is science, professor?”

What use was science indeed. Even twenty years later, after her first round of chemo, Frances reported that coffee and meat began to taste funny. This wasn't uncommon; I’d heard that many others reported the same. What had surprised me was that her craving for strawberries, dormant for years, re-emerged now like a famished cicada. They weren't in season when she'd started chemo; I purchased frozen and tried to revive the icy pink hulls in the blender with yogurt. It wasn't much use. They lacked the flavor which she'd remembered the summer before.

One day after I’d thawed a bag for her, and added whipped cream, she held up a berry and studied it. “I never knew strawberry seeds were on the outside.” She took a small bite then swallowed. “Imagine wearing your ovaries out like a coat. We might have seen this thing coming sooner, you know.”

I didn't say anything, just sat and watched. As she licked the cream clean from her lips.

She worried so much about Linny and Nate; she frequently fretted over my sperm. My time spent in the field inspecting the flora and fauna at the nuclear plant was a constant source of anxiety. The first day I came home from work, I almost believe she expected my ejaculate to glow in the bedroom. I tried telling her that the levels of radiation were safe, were monitored closely. More spills happened on freeways and grocery aisle than power plant. “It's plutonium, Louis,” she'd say. “Not yogurt.” Sixteen years later, when we found out Linny had a syndrome and was missing some chromosomes, Frances insisted she'd been right all along.
“I’m sure they will, darling,” I said. “Enough for us both.”

“My grandmother said if you crave strawberries and don’t eat them, the baby will be born with a strawberry birthmark.”

“I don’t think you have to worry,” I said. I fetched her a glass of ice water. “Sounds like an old wife’s tale.”

Frances took a small sip and looked at me. “Louis, I’m nervous. About having two. I haven’t even had one yet.”

“Wilkie’s willing to help,” I offered. Wilkie had been my family’s maid for years, but Frances had already made it clear she did not need any assistance from the Gibbs.

“I wish my mother were here.” She looked out the window. Frances’s mother had been dead for years at that point. When she spoke of her (not often) it seemed like opening a vacuum-packed jar of memory; pain always seemed to hiss near the rim before she quickly resealed it.

“You’re going to do fine, darling,” I said. “We’re going to do fine.”

“I’m going to get bed sores before they deliver.” She sat up on the side of the bed. “Bring me my jigsaw.”

I lifted the card table and carried it over, careful not to disturb what she’d already assembled. It was a photo of Switzerland; rustic chalets with flower-filled windowboxes sat underneath crisp alpine peaks and a pristine blue sky. The puzzle’s border was almost complete; a few straight-edged pieces still sat off to one side in a pile, the rest in the box.

“If I finish this before these babies come, it’ll be a miracle.” She played with a few pieces of sky.
Somebody’s Stranger
Nicole Hames

After one of those days that seems like it will never end, I find myself walking through the empty halls of the hospital. The only sound I hear is the solitary echo of my tired footsteps down the corridor. In my appreciation of this simple silence, I nearly neglect to notice that it has been broken as a resident walks past me. Clutching his coffee and reading through notes, he walks patiently but purposefully towards a part of the hospital that never sleeps.

This diligent young physician and the patients who are entrusted to his care remind me of a very different time in my life. Looking back, I can see myself sitting in one of those little rooms that seems specifically crafted so you can suffer in silence. In this room you are meant to wait without the constant reminder that life is going on all around you, just as it did the day before. Every minute seemed like hours, and I held my breath with the passing footsteps of every stranger who roamed the halls. With my brother’s life hanging in the balance, my desperation was obvious. My whole world waited on the words of a total stranger.

You see, I have already spent my first night in the hospital…and my second and third. To pretend that I could count them would give my memory of that tragic time in my life more credit that it deserves. Yet somehow my mind has collected pictures, and a precious few remain painted as perfectly as the day they were inspired. I will never forget my brother’s doctor. A source of comfort in a sea of unpredictable emotions, he delivered every piece of news with patience and compassion. Although he couldn’t offer me back my brother’s life, somehow he helped me find strength to push mine forward.

The memory of his unbelievable commitment to my brother and our family serves as a poignant reminder that one day I will be someone’s stranger. I ponder my own sleepless nights. I imagine the patients that will bring warmth to my soul and those that will send tears running down my face. I envision my greatest successes and my most crushing defeats. I am in awe of my own future and the possibilities which lay before me. In the same breath, I am reminded of the heavy burden which accompanies them. For I may one day have to be much too like the man who brought my brother’s death to me.

Nicole Hames is a second year medical student.
They told me that he cried when he heard the news, which surprised me: I hadn't even cried myself.

“We let your brother know that you'll need to get injections once a week with the new treatment,” my mother said as we were headed from the clinic waiting room to the car that my father and my brother Jimmy had retrieved from the parking garage. “He was so sad for you.”

At age 9 and in my second year of living with an aggressive case of juvenile-onset rheumatoid arthritis, I didn't feel very brave, and I was still terrified of needles. But I saw my parents' optimism that this treatment—weekly gold injections--would tame the raging flares of my illness, an illness that was already well underway with the havoc it would wreak, eventually destroying most of my joints. And even more, I'd already learned that my doctors and other members of my care system had little patience for sadness. “You should smile more—you look pretty when you smile,” one doctor said to me, when my face lit up in a rare moment that belied my chronic anxiety and depression over the way my life had so changed in two years. I was trying to hard to hide my “grumpiness,” and I think I was still a bit numb about this treatment decision by my doctors. Hearing of Jimmy’s reaction, my heart melted a bit with gratitude; his tears expressed for me what I could not.

Jimmy was 2 ½ yrs younger than I and a robustly healthy child—just as I'd been before my illness struck me suddenly. Even though I was the elder child, Jim did most “normal” childhood things before me, as we grew—in part because my disease so hampered my mobility that I was confined to a wheelchair much of the time and was painfully shy. Jim had his first dance, first date, his driver’s license, and even—because I had to take several medical leaves of absence while in college—his bachelor's degree before I achieved those milestones. I was sometimes envious of Jim for the “normalcy” of his life. But my illness tore at the fabric of his childhood, too. Needing to find support when so much attention was given to my illness and my care, Jimmy was sometimes creative in seeking a small fraction of attention for himself. Once, early on in my illness, Jimmy was struck with a slow-healing, deep pain in his side, which our family doctor diagnosed as an “inflamed flank muscle.” Many years later, Jim admitted to our mom that he and the doctor had been in collusion: the pain was feigned, but our doctor understood Jimmy's need for his own illness and gave him a diagnosis and a prescription for rest. But common childhood ailments aside, I was the one who was
ill, and Jimmy showed an uncanny compassion for his older sister, often soothing my fear on the 4-hour monthly drives to my specialists with jokes and little “hand-puppet skits.” I would get sick to my stomach on those trips from anxiety, and a brother’s gentle affection was, while not a cure for nausea, still invaluable.

We grew separate in many ways—my dependence on our parents contrasting with his dependence upon his friends; his agile intellect becoming ever more that of a rational scientist, while I responded to the emotional pull of the piano, my first love—and we certainly had our share of sibling spats. But our brother-sister bond was strong, and Jim came to my aid so many times: helping me carry my schoolbooks, driving me to doctor’s appointments when my parents couldn’t do it, even driving me and my things over a thousand miles home after I graduated from college. I’ve only rarely had the opportunity to repay his generous thoughtfulness.

Last year, Jim’s three-year-old son needed surgery to repair a heart valve, and in the midst of all of the family’s concern over the little boy, I was touched by the gentleness with which Jim and his wife, Meredith, helped their son cope with his fears, even as they certainly had their own. Then, and in many instances before and since, I’ve smiled with familiarity at the tenderness and compassion that Jim shows his family. Yes, this is, and always has been, my brother.

Alyson Knop was first diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis at age 8 and is happy to share her experiences with others. While trained in historical musicology, she currently works with the Eating Disorders Coalition of Tennessee. She lives in Nashville with her husband, Rob, and their three cats.
Cancer sucks big time

Pam Martin

Pam Martin works as a lab manager in the department of Cancer Biology. Pam has been a cancer survivor for 19 years, she is very active in the area of research advocacy, and volunteers for a number of local cancer support organizations. She uses proceeds from her design to benefit Gilda’s Club Nashville, a free of charge cancer support community.
A Surgeon’s Ode to Pregnancy
Anonymous

Dancing on my duodenum
You twirl on your axis
Acid fills my mouth

You tap and roll
As I slip the knife over skin
Burn and push muscle away

The red tide of blood ebbs
While I tie the knot
You stretch and pull

I search for death
Finding none, I wash and close
Staples and tape

But his life still slips away
And as I pop my gown
You finally settle to sleep
Voices
Lorre Leon Mendelson

Sweet lovekisses decorate my neck, his cheek, our heartbeat.
Hands lovingly entwined as we seek out each other’s tender places.
Hot, slow, fast, deep love with my husband: my beloved-waited-until-I-was-46-and-found-the-right-man-
husband, now sleeping in our warm, winter bed, cloaked by quilts of down, wool and a “babe I am the
luckiest man alive” glow.

I, once joyful in our lovemaking (was it just 2 hours ago?) Now feel numbness setting in my legs, sudden-
like with not a single warning alarm visible to any other late night soul. Fast and furious like Colorado hail.
No longer do I hear the music on the radio, with teasing southern drawl inviting me in: the rush of silence
blocks my ears.

I am glad he is asleep, my thoughts leap out as voices only I can hear, grateful that I don’t need to say, just
one more time- really honey, I’m okay, I’m just feeling a little off tonight, just a little depressed and just a
teeny bit anxious because making love with you is an act of love and spirit and all things good that I cannot
enjoy for more than a moment’s reprieve without my body recalling years of violence by a
stepfather-man-monster whose only gift to me was a time reference of before and after.

I listen to voice for they are stronger, much stronger than I. I hold breath, fighting voice, I stand in river
to change its flow. But they rush me: I cannot hear their individual voice nor can I find my own. Over-
whelmed, knowing I fight this war without comrades: I alone hear. I set shield down and retrieve accep-
tance- Oh, yes that is what you look like. I had forgotten, you are CLEAR!!

I embrace voice, this voice I hid from
…self
…others.

I still hear voice but now I also hear you too, heartbeat, you husband, turning in the night, the rain on
leaves outside the window where I stood just a moment ago- looking in, always used to be looking in. Now,
I am in. Alone in darkness-morning, fear clings for a moment, surrenders to compassion.

My thoughts unssssstick and I can
breathe.

Lorre Leon Mendelson is a Human Rights Activist, Educator, Author who identifies as an individual with
psychiatric diagnoses. She is witness to the existence of voice as a symptom. “We are not our illness. No
matter who we are, what our symptoms or diagnosis, we are individuals first and always.”
A doctor possessed of the writer’s art will be the better consoler to anyone rolling in agony; conversely, a writer who understands the life of the body; its powers and pains, its fluids and functions, its blessings and banes, has a great advantage over him who knows nothing of such things.

THOMAS MANN, 1939