

# UC Irvine

## Plexus

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Plexus 2020: *Passion*

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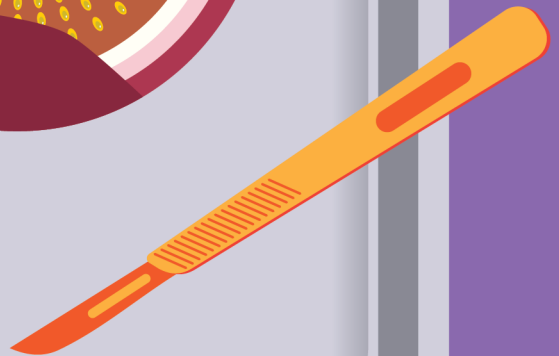
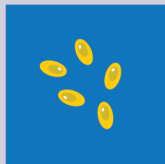
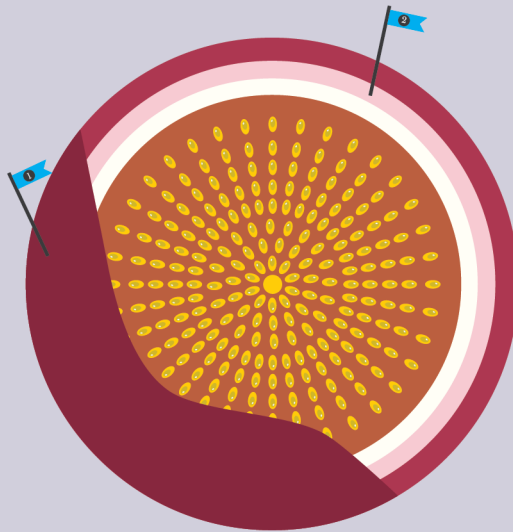
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Peer reviewed

# Plexus

*2020: Passion*



University of California, Irvine School of Medicine  
Journal of Arts and Humanities, 2020

PLEXUS is a student-organized publication that showcases creative work by medical students, physicians, faculty, patients, and others in the medical community. Through the universal language of art, the journal aspires to connect those who seek to heal and to be healed.

This year's 21st edition of Plexus celebrates "Passion" - passion that drives us to pursue medicine and inspire the lives of those we serve. Congratulations to this year's winners of the PLEXUS student competition. For writing: 1st: Anders Waalen (MS4) "Grief", 2nd: Olivia Tsai (MS3) "Practice", and 3rd: Priyanka Sharma (MS3) "The Weight". For Visual, 1st: Lauren Michelle (MS2) "Breath of Life", 2nd: Kenneth Schmitt (MS1) "Passion for Life", and 3rd: Emmanuel R.C. Santuray (BSN RN student) "Open Seat". For Performing Arts: 1st: Daniel Kwan and Kevin Wei (MS2s) "Gigue" and 2nd: Alex Richardson (MS2) "Breathe".

A huge heartfelt thanks to our amazing editors, staff, and faculty for their support in making this special 20th edition possible. We would like to give special thanks to our faculty advisors Dr. Johanna Shapiro and Dr. Tan Nguyen – this journal would not have been possible without their continuous support and guidance. We hope you enjoy PLEXUS 2020 – Passion.

2020 Co-editors in chief: Ruchi Desai (MS2), Tammy Tran (MS2), and May Hui (MD/PhD student)



Practice  
*by Olivia Tsai (MS3)*

The patient is crying.  
I am also crying.  
This has never happened before he says.  
I haven't experienced this either.  
This is overwhelming.  
Oh yes, I agree.  
The patient sits in silence, waiting.  
I shift uncomfortably, staring.  
Not a word from either of us,  
And time is running out.  
A 52-year-old patient.  
A 25-year-old medical student.  
I click.  
And cautiously scroll down to see the result  
Of this practice question bank dilemma.

(opposite page)  
"Medicine for the Heart" by  
Lauren Michelle (MS2)

"Guan Yin at Sunset"  
by Jennifer Hoff (RN)



"Breath of Life" by Lauren  
Michelle (MS2)

Post-Call Parent  
*by Baotran N. Vo, MD (faculty, parent)*

Exhaustion kicks in, wearied body shows  
Laying the head down upon a soft pillow  
The heavy eyelids drop, slowly down they go  
Calming wind chimes, peaceful distance glows

Suddenly a loud "Ehhh!" Tiny mouth screams  
Tiny hand lifts weary head from pillow  
Tiny eyes object to such peaceful dreams  
Tiny wants to play, sleep can wait, tomorrow

Fire

by Olivia Tsai (MS3)

The winds are howling,  
Hitting from every angle,  
Until the blazing fire dwindles down  
Cowering in the face of opposition,  
Bowing under overwhelming force,  
Listening to the oncoming words:  
"You do not deserve"  
"You are not worthy"  
"You cannot compare"  
But in the embers  
There is a light  
A flicker that shows that hope is still there  
A flicker that will eventually burn again  
A flicker that promises a roaring fire  
A flicker that cannot be extinguished  
A flicker that we like to call  
Passion.



"Guarded Flame" by Kenneth Schmitt (MS1)  
*In this picture, my grandmother protects a candle from blowing out in the wind. My grandmother was the first person to ignite my interest in medicine. I still talk to her when I have hard times and she always has a few words of wisdom.*



"Mother's Love" by Aurelia Thompson (RN)



(opposite page)  
"Open Seat" by Emmanuel R.C. Santuray (BSN RN Student)  
*It requires a lot of ourselves to realize who we are and to share that with others. It takes time to recognize, almost analytically sometimes, the aspects we overlook.*

I Am About To Collapse  
by Harwood Garland (Research coordinator)

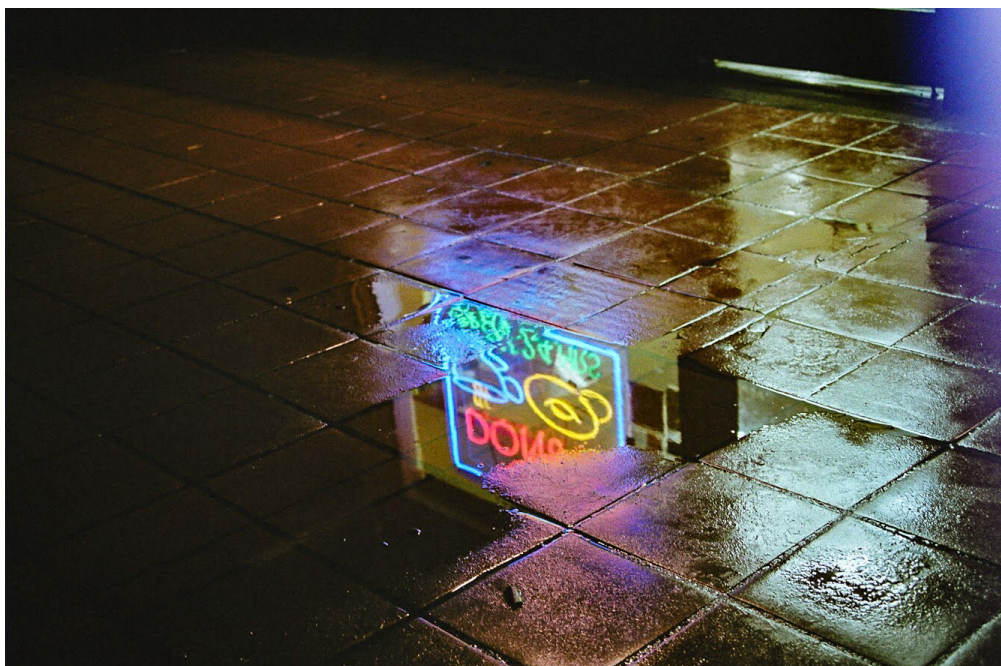
My blood, starved of every nutrient.  
A hole where my thyroid used to pump.  
My stomach, empty.

My hands are weak.  
The stairs I used to bound up,  
Haven't been used in days.

My mind a slurry.  
No sleep.  
No food.

The other patients nap in the waiting room.  
A great temptation for me,  
but I have to move quickly  
when my name is called.  
I have to get back to the lab. Back to work.

I know my body will bounce back.  
I'll regain the weight.  
I'll have tacos again.  
My sperm may be mutated,  
But my cancer cells will get the worst of it.



(opposite page)  
"Sidewalk Reflections" by Emmanuel R.C. Santuray (BSN RN Student)  
*I would often go to Newport Beach at night with my friends. Our lives, our frustrations, our accomplishments, and our future after we graduated. It was a chance for us to self-reflect on the people we are and who we are going to be. Shot in 35mm film.*



"Seaside Embrace" by  
Lauren Michelle (MS2)



"Almost" by May Hui  
(MD/PhD student)





"Ready" by May Hui  
(MD/PhD student)



"Fuzzy Feelings" by Kenneth  
Schmitt (MS1)

Prayer of Imperfection  
*by Anna M. Rasmussen (MS1)*

Let there be  
empty mindedness  
a mist of stillness  
hovering over the peaks of performance.

Let there be  
easy rest  
a close to the day  
when there is still work to be done.

Let there be  
kindness within and without  
a warmth that widens  
the walls of self-discipline.

Let there be  
wildness  
a stubborn commitment  
to stay human.

Let us find  
in medicine and ourselves  
a line we can walk  
a life we can truly live.

"Passion for Life" by  
Kenneth  
Schmitt (MS1)



"Portrait of an  
Impulse" by  
Jessica Wang  
(MS1)



The Weight  
by Priyanka Sharma (MS3)

The strain in my neck was growing with each passing minute  
My white coat pulling me down and making me hunch over  
Exacerbating my already injured back and worsening my posture  
Why does it weigh so damn much.  
As a young, bright-eyed third year medical student  
My pockets were stuffed with my stethoscope, reflex hammer, cell phone, protein bars,  
hope...  
**The weight added up.**  
Day by day my shoulders would feel weaker and more tired  
I would take out item after item, trying to lighten the load, consolidating when I could.  
But day after day my shoulders felt heavier and heavier,  
Continuing to bear the weight of new responsibilities and the ever-so-constant emotional  
fluctuations only a fellow medical professional could understand.  
I would quickly find out that this was the weight of the white coat in and of itself  
The weight I chose to always carry on my shoulders  
The weight of my patients' and their loved ones' growing trust in me.



(left) "New Growth" by  
Daniel Jacob Meller (MS4)  
*Leaves come forth to protect  
a womb, the ultimate vessel  
of new growth.*



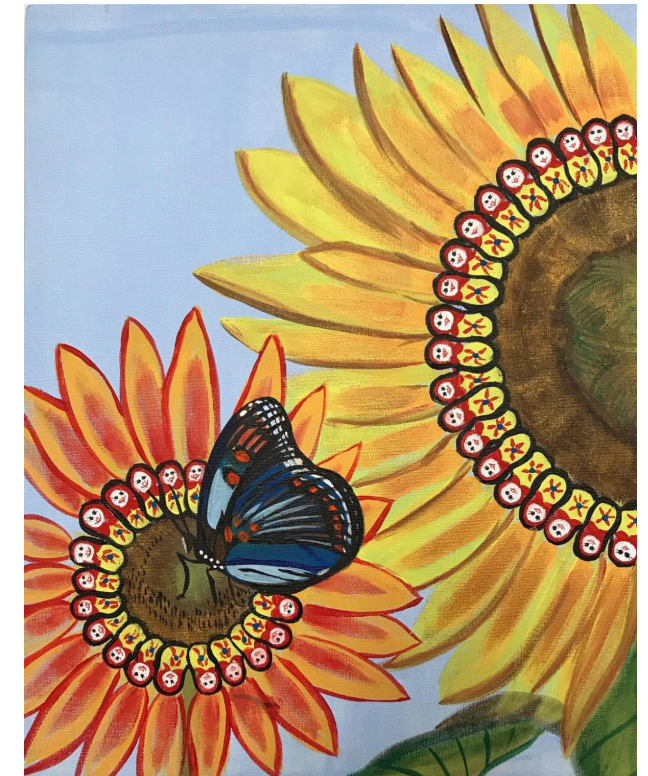
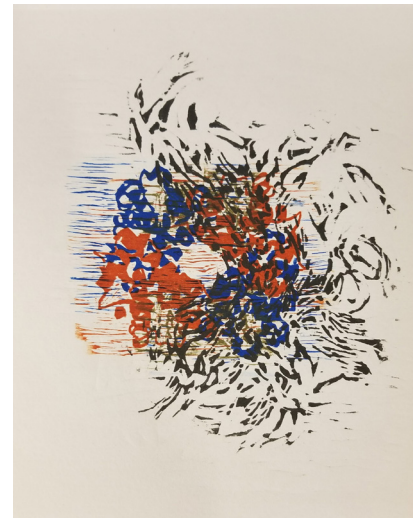
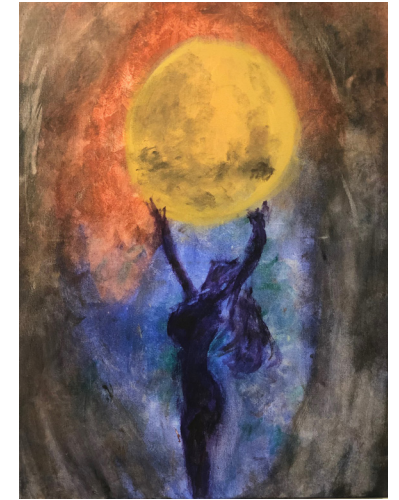
"Fellini on the sea" by  
Jeremy Rouanet (MD/PhD  
student)

## Petrichor

by Gianna Fote (MD/PhD student)

There had been no rain for 149 days. The super bloom, waves of 6 foot tall green and yellow mustard seed, had dried into fields of crackling brown skeletons. Finally in November, there was a feverish downpour from an eerie blue sky. Someone yelled down the hall that there was a rainbow. We huddled momentarily on the stairs, taking grainy cell phone pictures of the double rainbow, but then ducked back inside to the white walls and smooth black lab benches. It had been dark for hours by the time I ripped my gloves off for the last time. My hands were slightly sticky, is that sweat or the latex becoming a part of my skin? I clunked down the stairs, staring down at my phone absently (there are never stars anyway, too much light pollution). I was fiddling with my bike lock when I sensed motion in my peripherals-close. I turned to a raccoon only a couple of feet away, nibbling trash and eyeing me calmly. We watched each other as I put my helmet on and hopped on my bike. I slipped my phone into my pocket; I had been shaken into reality. The moon was full, the sky clear, and the air cold and damp.

As I left the parking lot, a coyote, strong and bold, seeming more like a wolf, trotted past me down the middle of the street, as unafraid as the raccoon had been. The cold numbed my hands, I picked up speed past a dark grove of trees, and then a powerful sensation trickled into my consciousness on a stream of that cold air. I breathed in through my nose, accepting the sting, my eyes tearing up. A smell, musk, earth, animal, alive, so close, all around me. I breathed deep, intoxicated, naked, and I remembered why I became a scientist, a child sticking her finger in slimy tentacled sea things, admiring a seedling's first stubby leaves, digging shiny white crystals out of the dirt. And I remembered why I had entered medical school, to be close to people, hear their stories, heal them, discover them. I love the natural world, and I love people, and now wrapped in my lab coat and temperature controlled walls I have forgotten both. I need to get back to the things I care about, hold their hands, feel their rain, smell them. I cried and laughed, without forgetting to breathe the magic air, lost and inspired, but mostly determined.



(clockwise, from top left)  
"Craftmanship" by Justine  
Maher (MS3); "Woman  
of Power" by Sidharth  
Puri (UCI Ophthalmology  
Fellow); "Fibonacci: Labor &  
Delivery" by Rhonda Reeves  
(staff); "Lifeblood" by  
Zachary Engfer (PhD  
student)



Grief  
by Anders K Waalen (MS4)

"The Dance of Grace" by  
Tammy Tran (MS2)

I once worked as a Life Enrichment Manager for three and a half years. I had previously been trained as a Certified Nursing Assistant and worked in home health. My Life Enrichment job was special, though, in that its job description was mainly to keep people with dementia happy, whether that be through activities, such as singing and playing at the piano, sensory exercises, or crisis de-escalation. I got to know my patients really well, which helped my job performance tremendously. But in doing so, I also became very attached to my patients. In the time that I worked there, I experienced practically a full turnover of patients, as all of them died or were transferred to higher levels of care. I found that the sense of loss often came to me at unexpected times. With each death, I would initially wonder at how little grief I seemed to feel, only to be surprised at how hard it would later hit me.

I met a 90 year old woman, Y.S., who was a new patient grieving the recent death of her husband, a former doctor. A small extroverted woman, she would sob dramatically, calling his name, and clutching my shirt as I attempted to console her. Although wealthy and successful, she and her husband lived the last few years of their life together as hermits, barely leaving their house, trash piling up, as dementia took hold of their lives.

When her husband died, she was transferred to the memory care unit in my assisted living. As one of the more talkative patients, being at an earlier stage of dementia, she revealed herself to be very intelligent, a former English teacher. She would recite poetry, from Longfellow to Frost, suited to every emotion or thought she had. These poems would let me know how she was feeling, even when she did not. In the beginning, her poor memory left her in a depressive fog. She would often sit and recite to herself, "I wandered lonely as a cloud," and other fragments from the poem by William Wordsworth, ever searching for the thread of the 2 poem she was beginning

to forget. I googled the poem and memorized it by heart so that I could recite it to her when she was feeling lost or confused, giving her a sense of meaning and stability during the chaos of her slow brain atrophy. "And then my heart with pleasure fills... and dances with the daffodils..." the poem would end. Upon hearing this recitation, she would remember, "My husband brought me a bouquet of daffodils," suddenly excited, "when he came back from the War."

Y.S.'s husband was a physician, as were her three sons, and their wives. When I told Y.S. I had been accepted into medical school, she would alternate between enthusiasm and depression. Some days she would fantasize about coming with me and helping me study, as she had helped her husband study flash cards through medical school. Other days, she would stare blankly ahead, doing nothing all morning. Unable to be cheered, she would swat me away if I tried. On her good days, Y.S. was charming and flirtatious. One of Y.S.'s daughters-in-laws, A.S., confided to me that Y.S. considered me her new boyfriend. As uneasy as it made me feel, the news did not surprise me. Caregivers frequently nudged this notion in patients' heads; it makes getting them out of bed easier, gives them something to look forward to. I was the replacement of Y.S.'s husband, a reassurance of her inner youth. Y.S. never expressed any jealousy when I hugged the other patients or sang them songs, but when it was her turn to be visited, she would cry with joy, "You *do* love me!"

Y.S. taught me more poems, like "The Arrow and the Song" by Longfellow and "Trees" by Joyce Kilmer. *I shot an arrow into the air, | It fell to earth, I knew not where; | For, so swiftly it flew, the sight | Could not follow it in its flight.* She taught me Yiddish words, like *kvell*, *goy*, *verklemp*, and *tuches*. She had been born in a Lithuanian shtetl and moved to Canada at a young age. When prompted, she would speak gleefully of Tsimmess, and Lox, and Eyerlekh, a creamy 3 and flavorful egg taken from the inside of a slaughtered chicken, cooked in soup. Though Jewish, she would scoff loudly at the existence of God when I led Shabbat services with the visiting rabbi. Even so, she never lacked a moral compass. She had once kicked a businessman in the shins on the subway for bragging how much money he would make off the War. "Shame on you!" she had said.

Y.S. loved classical music. Her favorite was "Into the Hall of the Mountain King." She would bob and step with her walker when I sang and played "Mack the Knife" or "I Get a Kick Out of You." I even sang her songs personal to me, like "Hvem Kan Seile," a folksong from my Norwegian camp about parting friends, or "Once Upon a December" a ballad of a Russian princess who lost her memory. At those times, she would recognize the eerie minor keys as a Yiddish tune from her past, *Tumbalalaika*. I later learned the folksong is about a boy who tested his bride with riddles. She taught it to me, and I learned it by heart. *I breathed a song into the air, | It fell to earth, I knew not where; | For who has sight so keen and strong, | That it can follow the flight of song?*

I would quote Shakespeare lines for her delight. "Get thee to a nunnery," I read once. She confided her niece in Canada was disowned by her Jewish orthodox parents and



Grief (continued) by Anders K Waalen, MS4

fled to join a Catholic nunnery. Y.S. had stood by her niece in defiance of her sister's religiosity, attempting to comfort her niece before she left town. Y.S. would often eye the curly hair I was growing out into a top knot. "Androgynous..." Y.S. would say over and over, with an amused but puzzled look on her face. "Yes, that's the word. My niece was androgynous." I laughed. "Is that good or bad?" I asked her, flashing a smile. "Good!" she would kvell.

A few months before my last day, my boyfriend stopped by after work and I introduced him to Y.S.. Later that night, my co-workers told me, she was seen roaming the halls weeping and crying out, "My husband has left me for another man!" Shortly after, she had a stroke. I took sick leave so I could visit her in the hospital on my lunch break. She was hemiplegic. They brought her back to the assisted living in a wheelchair. By the second day, she had a hospice caregiver, and we were told she would not live much longer. I visited her room, as I did so many other dying patients. It had been a busy Friday, and I only had a few minutes before I had to clock out for the weekend. I asked the hospice care attendant if I could spend time with her alone. *To say goodbye*, I thought in my head. I did not want Y.S. to hear me say the words. The care attendant didn't move. "I've been told not to leave her side," she said. I didn't recognize her. She was new. And young. And likely had little experience. "Yes, but I'll be with her," I explained, irritated at this worker's illogical obedience. "The family said I can't leave her side." *I need to be alone*. I had never felt comfortable crying in front of others and that wasn't going to change today. "But I work here," I insisted. I didn't want to miss my chance to say goodbye. "I can't leave you alone," she said stubbornly. Now I was angry. Who was she to treat me like some creepy stranger? "Please leave," I said, my tone more forceful. The care assistant left in a huff and waited outside the door.

I knelt at Y.S.'s bedside. A Delftware coaster lay on the nightstand. A scene of a windmill and a bridge crossing a river flashed across its glazed surface, not unlike one Y.S. would have come across living in her Lithuanian shtetl. Y.S.'s eyes rolled, unfocused, her sagging mouth drooling. She took one look at me and swatted me away with her one good hand. Something about my presence disturbed her. Was her heart still broken? Was she embarrassed to be seen in this state? I tried to give her a hug, but she seemed to smother easily, so I backed off. Self-conscious of the care assistant listening just outside the door, I sang Y.S. *Tumbalalaika*, the Yiddish song she had taught me, recalling how she used to dance around the 5 room to my music. *What can grow without rain? What can cry without tears?* My voice broke. Tear drops fell on her blanket.

"I told him he couldn't be alone in here," a righteous voice came from the hall. It was the care assistant. "... but he insisted." Anger replaced grief as I realized my time was up. I left the room as quickly as I could, rushing past the care assistant. The door behind me slammed too hard.

I almost bumped into Y.S.'s son just outside in the hallway, who saw me as I must have been, eyes red and nose dripping snot. "Hey, do you want to talk?" he intoned, not with reprimand but empathy. He was a psychiatrist, after all, and I was his mother's caregiver. "No, thank you. I'm all right," I said and rushed passed, embarrassed. I had to clock out of work or I would get in trouble. I bumped into another family member on the way. She was the daughter of another patient, V.P.. V.P. was also actively dying. V.P. had been here a lot longer, had practically lost all language, and lay in bed with bed sores all day. I felt instantly guilty for not crying over her, too. Her daughter was also a psychiatrist. "Oh, I'm sorry for your loss. Listen, when my son died...." I listened and nodded appreciatively, barely listening as I searched my pocket for a tissue. I left the conversation as soon as I could. These psychiatrists were taking their mothers' deaths better than I was. It should have been I who was offering condolences, not they. Maybe that was the role they were used to. I realized later, maybe they wanted someone to talk to, too.

The next day, Y.S. died. They took away her body before I came back to work on Monday. It was hard not to feel on some level responsible for her death. As an Activities manager, I was not privy to patient medical records. But looking back on it during my studies in medical school, I realized her stroke had many warning signs, the times she would come to me 6 panting with anxiety, saying, "Something is wrong. I must speak to A.S.", the times she would have to sit down from dancing because she felt too woozy, or the time I took her to the respiratory therapist and watched her oxygen desaturate in a few seconds of walking. These were likely pulmonary embolisms, and she was likely throwing clots left and right. She had been put on oxygen after that, but she of course forgot to use it, and the caregivers were too busy to replace her empty oxygen tanks regularly. We weren't a medical facility, and the family knew it. I think they were more prepared for her to die than I was.

Her family moved her things out a few days after. The eldest daughter-in-law met me in the elevator and thanked me for taking such good care of her. "She was in love with you, you know," she said, handing me a ceramic tile. I recognized it as Y.S.'s Delft Blue tile. A corner of it had broken off and been glued to a cork backboard. "Thank you," I said.

There wasn't much time to think about my former patients once in medical school. The medical curriculum wasn't like learning facts about the '40's or memorizing poems. I went through half a year's worth of schooling before I would be reminded of how much I missed Y.S.. One rainy day after Anatomy lab, I attended a process group about the experience of dissecting cadavers. I had never visited the dead bodies of my former patients after they died. There was nothing to prepare me for the experience of cutting into an old woman's dead flesh. I had brought a collection of excerpts from Y.S.'s poems. Reading the musical words on my ipad, my voice began to break. *What can grow without rain? What can cry without tears?* Tear drops fell on the glass.



(clockwise, from top left)  
"Antelope Canyon on New Year's Eve" by Lily Hui (MS1); "Lantern Festival" by Aurelia Thompson (RN); "Flamingo Love" by Stuart Green (Professor, Orthopaedic Surgery)



"It's important to be able to cry," said our process group leader, "especially when dealing with patients. It shows that we can be vulnerable, too." *A harts ken vaksn, vaksn on regn, Y.S. had taught me. A harts ken veynen, veynen on trern. A heart can grow, grow without rain. A heart can cry, cry without tears.*

That summer, I flew back home to visit my parents. My mom and I drove to Iowa and visited my grandmother, who had dementia. She could no longer say a complete sentence let alone recognize who I was. I sang her some Methodist hymns and watched her go in and out of lucidity as she found her words in the music. Like so many of my former patients, I discovered, she was still in there. I had spent more time with each of them, I realized, than I had with my grandmother my entire life. When I arrived back home, I hung Y.S.'s broken Delftware on my bedroom wall. *Long, long afterward, in an oak | I found the arrow, still unbroke; | And the song, from beginning to end, | I found again in the heart of a friend.*

(clockwise, from top left) "Treasure Hunter!" by Aurelia Thompson (RN); "Kindur" by Justine Maher (MS3); "Desert Ghost" by Zachary Engfer (PhD student); "Thanksgiving Doodle" by Patrick Tran (Resident)



## It's the Pain Talking by Frank L Meyskens, Jr (faculty)

Five years ago the rocket exhausted its fuel,  
nearly disintegrating, crashing hard.  
Healing these past few years, ready to go again.  
But it was not to be.

Sacrificing your time to gently care for me  
as my long-hidden illness overwhelmed.  
Becoming public by a collar,  
rigid around my neck.

A beautiful date the evening before.  
Dinner by firelight, a briskness in the air,  
Your smile shining in the darkness.  
All go, even with challenges in the way,

I anticipated meaning restored to my life.  
Productivity, love, and courage within sight,  
yearning for my heart restored.  
But it was not to be.

Awakening early with nine-plus pain  
in the neck, the back, everywhere.  
My response to your morning greeting  
Hurtful

I held my breath,  
suppressing words I should never say.  
The promise of redemption put on hold,  
your kindness quashed.

The Pain talks, overriding my deep love for you,  
producing more regrets,  
adding to the burden of existence in a changing world  
that I try to accommodate, but no longer recognize.

I pull back once again from the temptations of the Golden Gate.  
Ripping off the collar, screaming in the enveloping darkness,  
for the damage to us that I have done.

I open my eyes and You are still there.



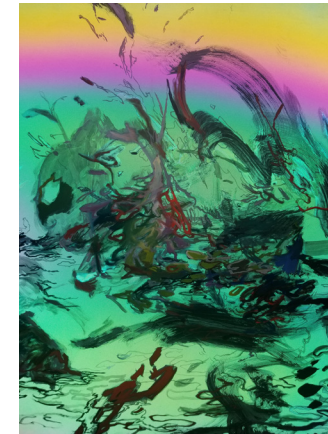
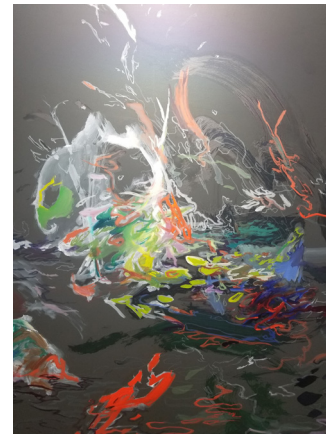
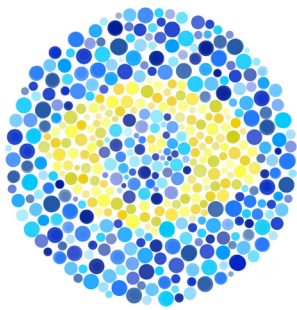


Bed Rest  
by Johanna Shapiro (faculty)

I am arguing with my surgeon  
Unsuccessfully  
Stay in bed with your  
leg elevated - for 4 weeks  
4 weeks?  
What about my work  
my household chores  
time with my husband  
brushing my teeth  
All my cherished routines  
that hold off chaos and death  
Finally she throws up her hands  
I don't make the rules  
God makes the rules  
It's anatomy!  
Talk to God

I try talking to God  
Here too I am  
unsuccessful

(clockwise, from top left) "Carry" by Emmanuel R.C. Santuray (BSN RN student); "Bondi Beach" by Joseph Conovaloff (MS3); "Connecting the Dots" by Christina Kong (MS4)



"Quanta" by Zachary Engfer (PhD student)  
Mixed media on canvas.  
Painted on a flash-sensitive material, this piece seeks to capture a duality that exists between manual and digital means of visual consumption. Under a camera's flash, the painting transforms drastically, with both the addition and subtraction of visual information- a statement on the impersonality of photographic reproduction.

