

UC Irvine

Plexus

Title

Plexus 2023: *Identity*

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Identity

PLEXUS 2023

Editor's Note

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

We hope that PLEXUS will always serve as a creative and welcoming space in which we can all reflect and express our various emotional journeys in medicine and in life. Medicine, especially in recent years, may feel like a solitary endeavor. Now, more than ever, we hope PLEXUS provides solace and community to all who contribute to and view its pages.

Identity is the fact of being or knowing what and who we are – an intrinsic property of ourselves and our world that can be challenged, taken for granted, and ultimately shaped by how we choose to live. This year's 24th edition of PLEXUS, *Identity*, focuses on the experiences and reflections that make us who are. We are moved by forces and convictions that define our individual identities, our motivations in healthcare, and our society. Let us celebrate the triumphs and mourn the losses that carry us to the present and remember the hopes and ambitions we have for the future.

We are incredibly grateful to our amazing community for their support in sustaining PLEXUS. We would like to give special thanks to our faculty advisors Drs. Juliet McMullin, Tan Nguyen, and Frank Meyskens. As well as the Endowed Program in Medical Humanities & Arts and the Department of Family Medicine. This journal would not have been possible without their continuous support and guidance.

We hope you enjoy PLEXUS 2023: *Identity*.

Kenneth Schmitt (MS4), Celina Yang (GR1), Ashley Hope (MS4)
Editors in Chief

Connected
Sunia Khan, MS2

"Exploring nature with my family is a big part of my identity. Looking back on this photo, I reflected that over the years my family has taught me that challenging times can help us grow into better people, just as rainy days can lead to wonderful super blooms."



Fourth of July 2018
Gabriella Miotto, MD, MPH

Lady Liberty, may I borrow your sandals?
I know it is a funny question
and I would only ask it on a day without rain
so you would not tumble off the pedestal
that men have made for you.

Yes, I know these sandals are way too big for me,
but I think perhaps between the ridges of the sole
I might find
ashes from your torch,
buffalo hair from the prairies,
sweat from those who have landed here
tempest-tossed.

And with these ingredients
my friends and I would like to form new clay
make a talisman,
something we could wear over our hearts
to help us recognize each other again,
whether standing or kneeling
in this *land of the free*
this *home of the brave*.





Resilience
Sunia Khan, MS2

"My inspiration is my dad. His identity includes his passion of caring for patients. It was terrifying when my dad himself was admitted to the ICU for COVID-19. I never thought he would recover, but here he is hiking. I realized the importance of making the most of everyday."

Our Journey
Chalat Rajaram, MD

I have been on an unlearning spree,
The knowledge is out there for free.
Staring openly, like all parts of the tree.
Buried in a single seed, the result for all to see.

Why then these divisions? desire to be free.
The self in one and in all, this racial diversity?
The body, ego, mind, all that control me,
The thoughts, leading everyone separately.

Life matters, in every story.
When everyone should address equity.
The bright light within to guide you and me,
Honesty and courage, in our everyday journey.

The Color of Invisible
Amish Dangodara, MD, FACP
3 June 2020

My diction does not reveal my degree upon the wall,
The eloquence of my speech upon deafened ears does fall,
The silken thread of my vest does not appear as the finest,
My Italian leather shoes must either be stolen or used,
The lines on my face lack character and my smile seems a frown,
I am not someone's father, someone's brother, or someone's son,
The manner of my stride boasts too much pride,
When my eyes greet you, you wonder where can I run, oh where can I hide?

My wisdom lacks the knowledge to know my place
When you wield power and the privilege of your race,
There is nothing I can say, nothing I can wear, nothing I can do
To make you see more than the blur of my most obvious trait,
When fear fills your heart, fear that you learned to replace
The love that once was there, the child's love innate,
There is nothing I can say, nothing I can wear, nothing I can do
To make you see more than the blur of my most obvious trait,
To make you see past the color of my skin, the derision of your hate,

But what if we spoke and learned we shared the same fate?
What if we learned we both have hopes and dreams and loved ones to regard?
What if you chose understanding, would that be so hard?
What if you saw me with the eyes of our shared God?
Would you see the man within or still only see the color of my skin?
Would I still be invisible, dismissible, easily divisible by the color of my skin?
Is that how you would be judged when the Judgement begins?
We are all flesh and blood and dust in the end.



Support
Sunia Kha, MS2

hometown homophobia

Nicolo Betoni, MS2

poem dedicated to the victims of the Club Q shooting

as i return home to
colorado springs for the holidays
i feel captivated by the idea of
regressing

back to:
the child, who hid behind academic validation
to distract from talking about crushes at dinner

the classmate, who wore polo shirts and plaid shorts
to blend in with his peers and not make them suspicious

the customer, who deepened his voice when ordering
to ensure not even the starbucks barista would snitch

back then,
he created this façade for fear of
bullies and everything they said

now,
i crave this façade for fear of
bullets and ending up dead

Anatomy Flow: A Medical School Rap
Anonymous, MS2

Verse 1:

Anatomy's the base, for every medical feat
I gotta know my bones, from my skull to my feet
Muscles, nerves, blood vessels, gotta be in the know
Or I'll be lost in the ward, like a ship without a bow

Chorus:

First-year med school, I'm learning so much
With every page I turn, I feel like I've been touched
By the science of anatomy, and the art of healing
I'm on my way to becoming a physician, aye feelin'

Verse 2:

The brain, the heart, they're the center of the show
I gotta know their functions, they're the ones that make it go
The respiratory system, I gotta keep it airtight
The digestive system, gotta make sure it's just right

Chorus:

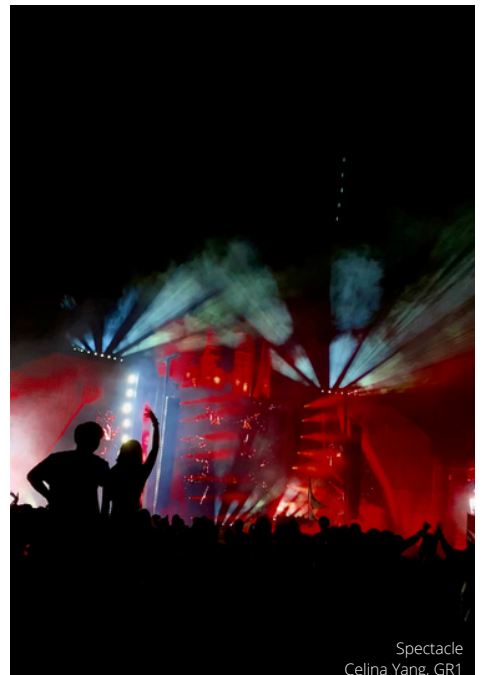
First-year med school, I'm learning so much
With every page I turn, I feel like I've been touched
By the science of anatomy, and the art of healing
I'm on my way to becoming a physician, aye feelin'

Verse 3:

The endocrine system, gotta keep it in check
Or you'll have a patient, that's always feeling deck
The urinary system, gotta keep it flowing
Or you'll have a patient, that's always slow going

Chorus:

First-year med school, I'm learning so much
With every page I turn, I feel like I've been touched
By the science of anatomy, and the art of healing
I'm on my way to becoming a physician, aye feelin'



Verse 4:

The circulatory system, gotta keep it on beat
Or you'll have a patient, that's always feeling the heat
The immune system, gotta keep it strong
Or you'll have a patient, that's always feeling wrong

Chorus:

First-year med school, I'm learning so much
With every page I turn, I feel like I've been touched
By the science of anatomy, and the art of healing
I'm on my way to becoming a physician, aye feelin'

Verse 5:

The nervous system, gotta keep it wired
Or you'll have a patient, that's always feeling tired
The skeletal system, gotta keep it sturdy
Or you'll have a patient, that's always feeling dirty

Chorus:

First-year med school, I'm learning so much
With every page I turn, I feel like I've been touched
By the science of anatomy, and the art of healing
I'm on my way to becoming a physician, aye feelin'

Outro:

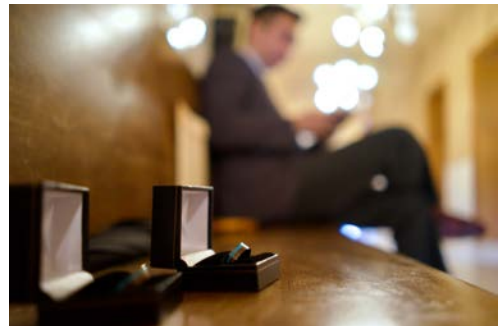
So listen up y'all, this is what I'm tryna say
Being a doctor's not just a job, it's a calling each day
With every patient I see, I'll always do my best
In the world of anatomy, I'll always do the rest.



Highlight
Kenneth Schmitt, MS4



"I Do"
Kenneth Schmitt, MS4



Rings & Kings
Anonymous



Nowhere
Clifford Danza, MS1

Elegy for Karen of Lemon Heights
Catherine Diamond, MD

Driving in the dark before dawn
through unincorporated Santa Ana
near Karen Carpenter's mansion,
Christmas carol playing on the radio

It's past Thanksgiving now
Karen had no saint to intercede,
no Catherine with her wheel
We sisters must close ranks,
control what we can —
what passes our lips —
until there is no body left,
only a record
of weightless
words

Make America Heal Again
Chalat Rajaram, MD

This new acronym MAHA,
In my heart, I feel the word heal.
One does not need to go far,
There are no layers to peel.

Just reach out, or just be there.
Keeping still and observing,
Detach, remove this ego here.
Grief has stages, and we are experiencing.

This Nation has been dealt severely,
A pandemic, this unrest to boot.
Pick ourselves up, lovingly.
Yes Love, go to your very root.

These are trials America must face,
No escape, we need to trust.
In ourselves first, then keep pace.
Avoid negatives, our healing a must.

Pray in our hearts, to God or not.
Take hold of yourself and heal.
This moment will mean such a lot,
For life, the giant turning of this wheel.



Family of Super Blooms
Sunia Khan, MS2



Vastness Within
Jenny Wang, MS2

What We Don't Talk About

By Rajeev Dutta, MS1

Lately, I've stopped boasting the ability to articulate myself clearly. While I have never gone as far as to say, explicitly, "I express myself well" (since the need to produce this utterance would, by some of the cardinal rules of expression, negate its content), I regularly boasted this ability by using it. From distilling the complex concepts of medical school among family to relating themes from analytical philosophy to a lay audience and beyond, I concluded that my grasp on expression was strong, for all intents and purposes.



Joy
Sunia Khan, MS2

That is, until a new intent and purpose was introduced.

--

Everyone experiences something when they see a dead body for the first time. Sometimes the something is distressful, sometimes it's noticed by the observer themselves, and never is it precisely the same in the next observer. Regardless, the something has that one facet of consistency: everyone has a something when they see their first lifeless body.

I prepared myself to struggle with the something when I entered medical school, but confusingly did not struggle much at all. For me, there was a moderate sense of discomfort that eventually disappeared as I transitioned to tearing apart layer after of layer of fascia and exposing the inner workings of the body. But we would be wise to remember that there is a difference between getting used to something and understanding it. Though in our basic science studies we often skip over a difficult concept when we deem it "low-yield," it reeks of impropriety to take this route when contemplating the body ab anima.

So, if we were to dissect the something of seeing a dead body for the first time, what would we find? Is it the remnants of an underlying primordial horror, blunted into transient discomfort? Is it the maximum that we can manage when confronting the terminal experience, the only one which we cannot now experience? Or is it, colloquially, "not that deep," meaning that this reflection is a supererogatory effort to expose an understanding that is no less available to us than the dermis?

Regardless of the correct answer, there are moments that undeniably rouse the something; moments when the dead suddenly take up the character of the living. A tuft of hair blows in the air, like one imagines it would in an autumn breeze. A hand hangs idly off the cold dissecting table, like one imagines it would over the edge of a bed after hastily turning off a 5 AM alarm. A heart stands still, like one imagines it did when it was surrounded in a hospital bed by loving children and a spouse. I imagine the last thing they were thinking about was how a young medical student would see more parts of their loved one than they ever did. How shameful is it, I wonder, that I'm here writing about how hard the something is for me?

--

Seeing a body without its accompanying mind makes my own mind speak to me in a language that I cannot hope to understand. Maybe it's because the seeds of empathy between my mind and the one departed germinate in barren soil, the former sneaking a taste of the divine nothing that awaits just beyond living. It is a flavor that I possess no tastebuds capable of discerning. Or maybe empathy has nothing to do with it, and this precisely is the problem: that neither my perceptual nor intellectual faculties are incompetent to comprehend what so often lies before me, but rather my emotional faculties.

--

Perhaps, then, it is becoming clearer why I no longer boast the ability to articulate myself well. Because the something I had when I saw a dead body for the first time not only evaded my understanding, but my lack of understanding evaded my understanding. And that lack of understanding also evaded my understanding. Encased in an infinite regress of incomprehension, a place which most, if not all, aspiring physicians are foreign to, it makes sense that we categorize the feeling as either non-specifically unsettling or strikingly impotent.

Death, however, is anything but.

It is at once horrifyingly complex and stingily simple. It is at once diffusely specific and precisely unspecific. It is at once an ugly unfolding and a poetic senescence.

Death occupies the entirety of a spectrum that we spend our entire lives failing to envisage, much less embody. There is some kind of knowledge gained when everything is lost: maybe this contradiction, along with all the others that death encapsulates, is what fuels our simultaneous (and also contradictory) fascination with and aversion to death. With that in mind, I set aside my doomed efforts to communicate the one thing that we are incapable of fully experiencing, much less communicating. When my heart, too, stands still, I hope you will check to see if I can finally articulate the something to you.

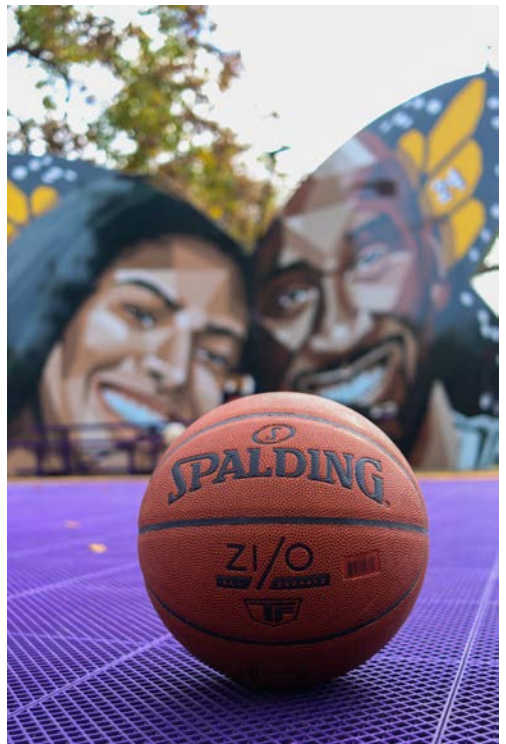


First Frost of Winter
Ashley Hope, MS4

Hoop Dreams
Luigi Gonzales, MS2

You came to me, almost by fate,
When I was at my lowest.
When nobody wanted to be my friend,
Because I came from a different country.
You rolled towards my feet,
And gave me the courage to reach out.
On that day, you turned my life around,
On that day, you became my dream.

We enjoyed our time together,
The wins, the losses,
The sweat, the tears.
It was a shame that we were forced apart
By this disease called cancer.
But you taught me,
That what matters isn't if I get knocked down,
It's if I have the will to get up.
So, I did.
To continue chasing my dream,
To continue chasing you.



(top right) Follow Through
(bottom left) Legends are Forever
Luigi Gonzales, MS2

But I've grown older now,
I understand that we weren't meant to be.
As much as I'd love to be with you,
Until my bones can't take it anymore,
It's just not written in the stars for us.
But you are still my dream.

My love for you made me realize,
That although I may not be on the court with you,
It is just as meaningful to me,
To be at the sidelines or in the clinic,
With a white coat as my jersey,
Helping others pursue,
Their dream of you.



Reflection & Community
Jenny Wang, MS2

For my brother, wherever he should be
By Riley Scherr, MSr

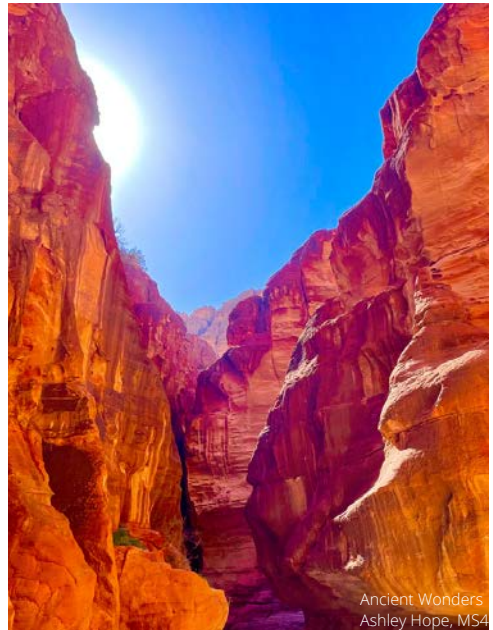
You, my brother, the first and best design
I tried to follow. Teetered where you went
on shaking legs, my knees bled scraped of skin.
With creeping caution round the outskirts,
I felt your slender fingers move the fragments
And put me back together.
You call me equal but praise instead your own
obscured reflection, for you comprise my
person like droplets make the rains.
I'd mark my sins
upon my back if rest I take too soon,
for you are older—I am older too,
and scrapes on knees have healed enough to bear
you high on shoulders long as you should need.

double-edged
Andrew Cuyegkeng, MS3

to the one in the mirror,

look at the battlefield you're standing in
all your enemies slain
and all your allies betrayed
why is the weapon in your hand?
all these unnecessary casualties
felled by your double edged sword
and now you're bleeding too
nothing good ever came from slicing or splitting
and now you're a victim of your own hands

look at all the stones scattered around
words you hurled violently at others
jagged rocks aimed for their jugular
i know you never meant ill will
and threw them in self-defense
at the parasite hiding in the fortress of your mind



i have seen you toil endlessly
your bloody hands clawing at each brick
but does that justify your actions?

look at all the bridges burned behind you
the product of spite and impulse
uncontrollable flames fueled by your deepest fears
look at the promised lands in front of you
stability and serenity mocking you for being too rash
stop yearning to find the road to freedom
when it has always been in front of you
when will you learn that songs and smirks
cannot mend these last twelve years?

look at the so-called thing they claim is love
see them champion the villains and shun the contrarian
a far cry from the teachings long ago
i see the disdain harbored in your heart
weary from the sanctimonious and hypocritical
when will they learn that their words
are only hardening your heart
and pushing you further away?



Smile with a Wave
Kenneth Schmitt, MS4

but heaven forbid a black stain running in your blood
look at your hopes and promises for the future
you pray for newfound freedom and beginnings
longing to escape from guilt and sorrow
you yearn for rejuvenation and deep understanding...
that is until your rigged coin flip lands unfavorably
and the fear and fight come back as you grip your blade
ready to start the vicious cycle again
all triggered by an inflection that didn't have a deeper meaning
remember that anyone can be cruel if you paint them to be

to the one in the mirror,
i don't know you, but i pity you
you are fighting a battle no one can understand
i see in your eyes that you are weary
battered from the turmoil you have caused yourself

to the one in the mirror,
i don't know you, but i want to help you.

Let me help you.



Time and Time Again
Kenneth Schmitt, MS4

“Unspoken”
Jamielle Rankine-Kirlew

Barely moving, as the air at 3am. When owls hoot, and in some communities; people shoot.
Both striking targets in the belly of the night.
Children unable to have sweet dreams and sleep tight.
Eyes wide shut; mind wide open. So much is on the line, and yet so much is unspoken...

Unspoken words produce unspoken feelings.
Unspoken tears reveal unspoken meanings.
Corrupted thoughts surrender to unspoken actions.
A house on fire, but that's the unspoken distraction.

A world tortured and demented by unspoken grief.
The result, misery looking for company; our most unwanted thief.
Families of all shades are experiencing unbelievable pain.
Evil holds the puppet's strings, from which racists have slain.

What's unspoken, is that communities are another form of segregation.
Always having to belong to those of a similar organization.
Based on what you believe, the way you look, feel, and dress.
Then society decides whether or not to care more or to care less.

Wealth is the value of a follow and a like. Murder is a narcissist's favorite delight.
Egocentric practices promoted to heal. Trauma, a time capsule prepared, yet, remains sealed.
Like a stain on my shirt that never goes away. If only I would throw the shirt away.
Start anew. Release all that has happened to you.



Setting on Love
Anonymous



Welcome
Clifford Danza, MS1

Potion
Clifford Danza, MS1

In shadows caught, or metal wrought,
are ingredients, sold or bought.

A blooming flower, great windowed tower:
physician's last hope in dire hour.

Hot boiling pot, warm-feeling draught,
fragile hope of recovery thought.

Quick evils sour, sickness doth cower,
from long forgotten earthly power.

"Gross"
Clifford Danza, MS1

Squibble sqap, spongy tear,
inguinal hernia repair.

Rip thack,
scissor attack, abdominal aortic lac

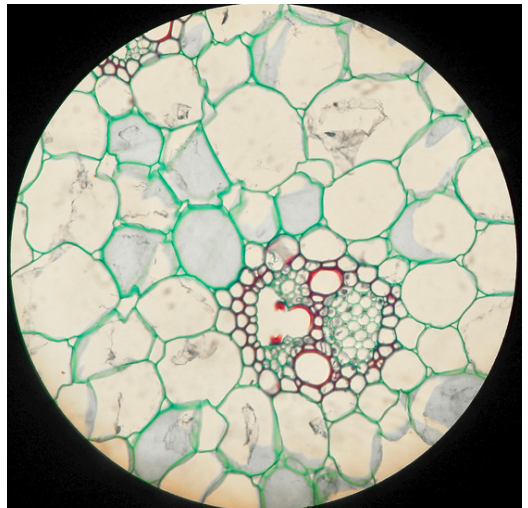
·
Vrrrr weeee, saw-see, laminectomy

·
Gloves come off; coats, we doff.

What's to say — dissection's today.

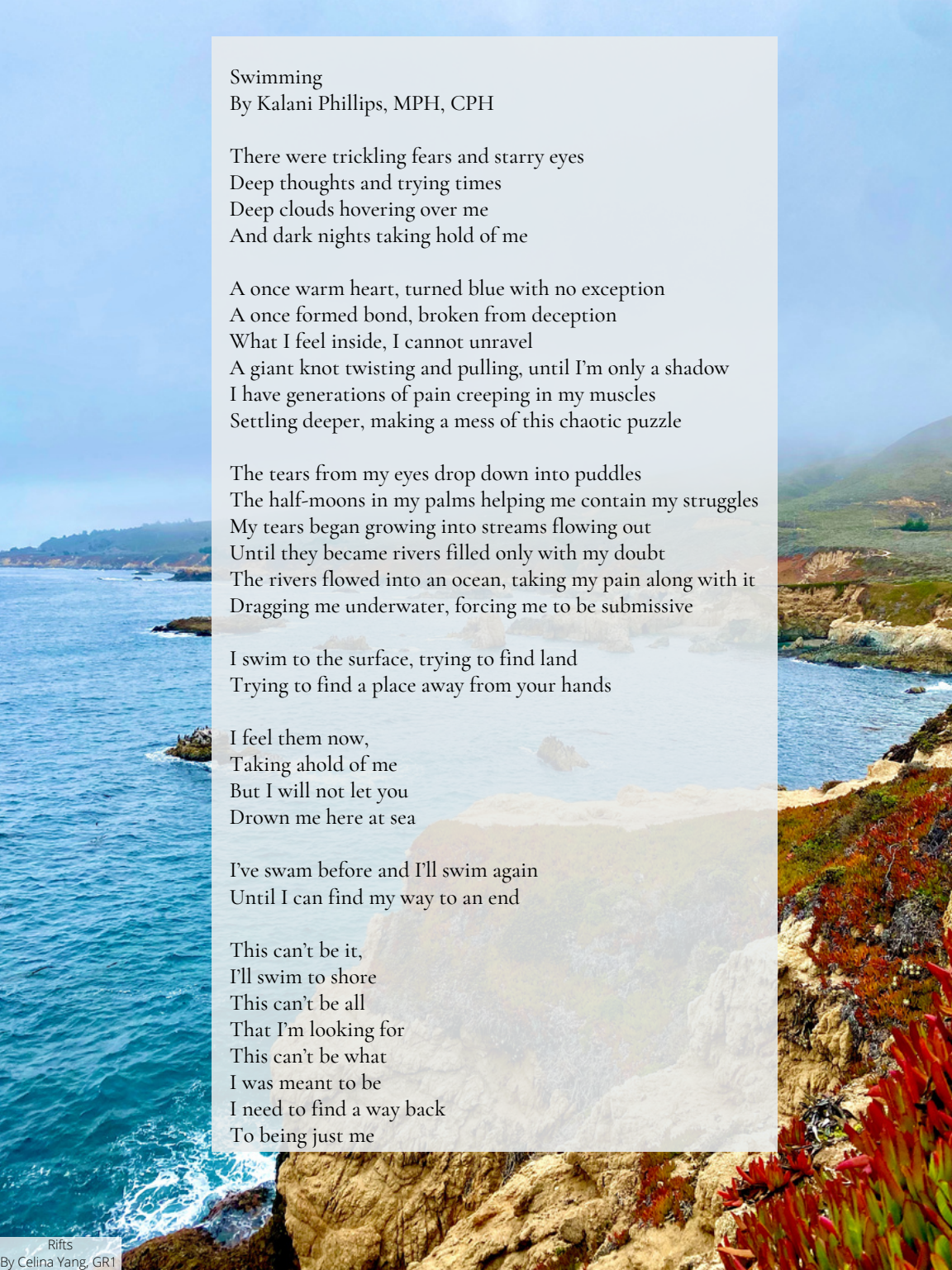
Tired or not,
this content's a lot.

Are you okay?



Find the Love
Anonymous, MS2





Swimming

By Kalani Phillips, MPH, CPH

There were trickling fears and starry eyes
Deep thoughts and trying times
Deep clouds hovering over me
And dark nights taking hold of me

A once warm heart, turned blue with no exception
A once formed bond, broken from deception
What I feel inside, I cannot unravel
A giant knot twisting and pulling, until I'm only a shadow
I have generations of pain creeping in my muscles
Settling deeper, making a mess of this chaotic puzzle

The tears from my eyes drop down into puddles
The half-moons in my palms helping me contain my struggles
My tears began growing into streams flowing out
Until they became rivers filled only with my doubt
The rivers flowed into an ocean, taking my pain along with it
Dragging me underwater, forcing me to be submissive

I swim to the surface, trying to find land
Trying to find a place away from your hands

I feel them now,
Taking ahold of me
But I will not let you
Drown me here at sea

I've swam before and I'll swim again
Until I can find my way to an end

This can't be it,
I'll swim to shore
This can't be all
That I'm looking for
This can't be what
I was meant to be
I need to find a way back
To being just me

Perpetual Conflict
By Cindy Flores, MSz

Vines and vines wrangling branches,
Mangling countless microscopic fibers,
Each with its own tranches,
Twisting and twirling with unseen desires.

Waves crashing a sea,
Colliding from every angle,
Each with its own gravitational degree,
Swinging and thrashing with scandal.

Tectonic plates sliding creepily,
Approaching with inevitable clamor,
Each with its own secrecy,
Drifting and driving in its own manner.

Versions of me floating restlessly,
Interjecting with equal tenacity,
Each with its own identity,
Which will take over my personality?



The Colorful Storm
Anonymous

Mirrors

Bethlehem Tesfaye, MS³

A mirror is the greatest truth-teller
that a mind chooses to ignore.
Neither describing or implying,
offering suggestions or adding more.

A mirror is the greatest truth-teller
if only because of its stillness.
For nothing is clear in rapids
but the rocky, turbulent hiss.

A mirror is the greatest truth-teller,
I've heard the words it speaks
telling me my body and soul are one
as I lay my hand on my brown cheek.

I am my blackness in all its glory.
I am the reflection of my ancestors before me.

But those who live life blinded to a mirror's truth
see not body and soul but intellectualize abuse.
Hissing of aptitude and ability
with divine right and superiority.

How do I choose to challenge this willful ignorance?
I hold a mirror, and watch in their hesitance
as their eyes betray
recognition and dissonance.

Trauma of the Other
Deena Ayesh
UCI Undergrad

I know it is not your fault, but how could you let him?
Your health is not because of the *baklava* you eat
Your headache is not from the *hijab* you keep
He asks you as a woman, why you don't go to the gym
He says it's because you're controlled by your husband.

I'm not saying I'm better, I'm not here to compete
But why let him drive this way, while I take a backseat?
You claim I betrayed us for studying in a foreign land
that hurt us—yet here you seek help from an unfamiliar hand
Claiming I'm the naive one, and simply would not understand.

He may have studied longer, but his coat embodies his skin.

Why not let me draw your blood, when that is what we share?
I longed for this moment, this is where I begin
He may have won his status, but he is not aware,
Of who we really are, or what we suffered through.
Soon you will see that I can heal you, with love and care,
and see the reason I chose to serve this path, and see who I committed to.

Do not pick a stranger over me, do not let him win.
Let me be the one to cure you. I know where we've been.



Appreciating the Large Wins of Life
Steve Huy Dinh Phan, MS1

Reflection(s)
Justin Yang, MSt

As I gaze upon the mirror of life, I reflect on the many facets of my identity.
The various personas I have donned, each one a distinct hue, flash before me.

The mask of jubilation, with a wide grin and sparkling eyes.

The mask of sorrow, with falling tears and a heavy heart.

The mask of trepidation, with a trembling mouth and wide-eyed panic.

Yet, who are we beneath these veneers that we assume?

These smooth, satin masks that adorn our exterior.

What is our true identity, beyond the visage we present?

Are we a mere conglomerate of emotions and life experiences,

Or is there something intrinsic, something genuine, something immutable within us?

As I ponder deeper into the mirror once more, I am struck by the realization that there are infinite things yet to be experienced.

The reflections staring back at me are but a fraction of who I am, who I will become, and who I cannot become.

I am a tapestry of emotions, thoughts, and experiences, each one shaping and defining me in its own way.

I see threads being woven into the fabric of my being, threads that have yet to become a part of me, and threads meant for others.

I am still a work in progress, constantly growing and changing as I navigate through this journey of self-discovery.

There is still a smile to be shared with a stranger.

There is still a tear left to fall in solitude.

There is still a memory yet to be cultivated in the depths of my being.

There is still love yet to be formed with another.

I may not possess all the answers, neither now nor ever.

But my identity is something invaluable, where its beauty lies in its ever-changing angles, shades, and forms.

I will persist in seeking it until I unearth it, until I am fully myself, unencumbered and unrestrained.

Whether that be in this life or never.

Thus, I celebrate all that I am, all that I am not, and all that I will become.

I embrace the summation of my individual parts, my uniqueness, my contribution to humanity.

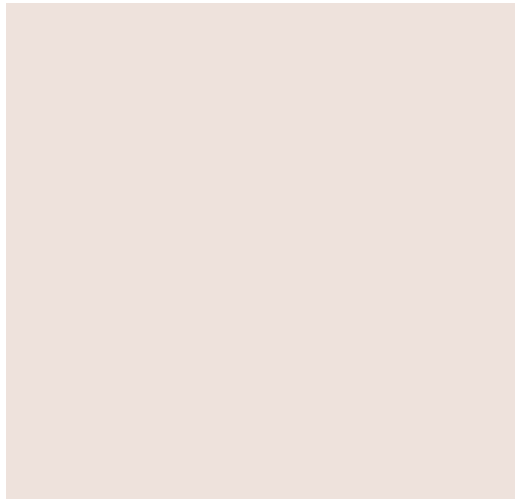
At every passing moment, I have become more mature than I have ever been, but will never be as immature again.

A duality that is equally intimidating yet refreshing that provides hope for the future and an appreciation for the past.

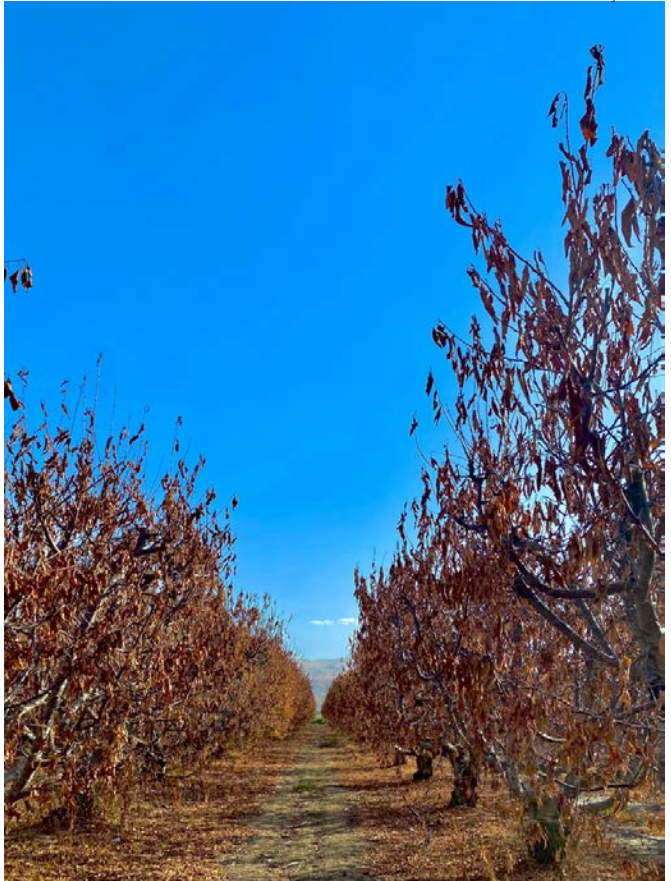


The November Song
Rashmi Bhuyan, MD

The wind of November
That alerted about the imminent rain
That blew cold in silence
The colorful leaves cold and damp
That floated around in emptiness
Uncertain if everything was going to be the same
When they get wet in the rain
As the dark clouds collect in the far mountain
This November rain did not feel the same
As if something was gone
As if something more is missed
As if something more would leave
The soaked heavy leaves that got stuck to the ground
Told me all about
To live to fill with love
To live to feel the warmth of the heart
To live to face the truth
To live to forgive
To live to let it go
To live to be grateful
And to live to embrace the new!



Opening
Anonymous



Breath

Candice E. Taylor Lucas, MD, MPH

With each breath think of all you can achieve for good...

Change is coming

Change is rising

Change is needed in this day

Change for you

Change for me

Change that cannot be taken away

As you pause in this moment breathe breath and just Be...

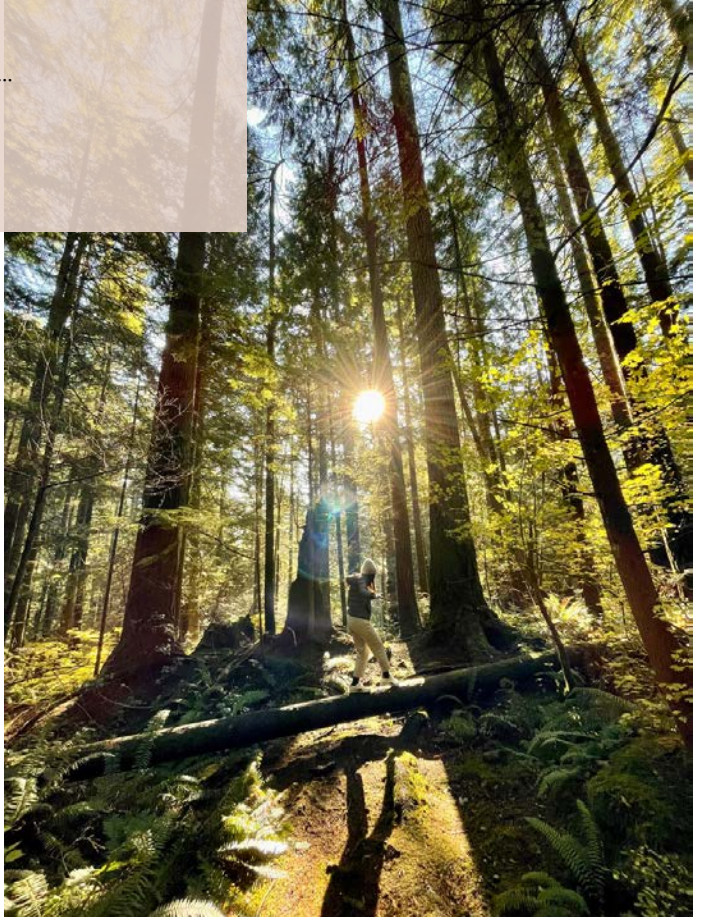
Be in this moment...

And Be the change you seek to be...

Be the change we all need,,,

And Breathe...

Balance
Keziah Tan, MS2



(Back cover) Path
Clifford Danza, MS1
"A place first tread by others,
marked with a stone greeting."

