Brain Candy: Wayne State University School of Medicine Journal of Arts and Culture, 9th Edition

Wayne State University School of Medicine Gold Humanism Honor Society

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Brain Candy
9th Edition
2022

Gold Humanism Honor Society
Wayne State University School of Medicine
Thank you for picking up this year’s 9th edition of Brain Candy. We are very proud to present this year’s edition. We have incorporated paintings, written pieces, and poetry from all the medical classes at Wayne State University School of Medicine.

The first edition of Brain Candy was published online and in print in 2009, produced by a generous grant by the Gold Humanism Honor Society (GHHS). The edition featured poetry, nonfiction, short fiction, and different types of artwork. With generous funding support from alumnus Dr. Tom Janisse, Class of 1975, the journal continues to be in print since 2009.

We hope you enjoy this edition! If you are interested in the production of this journal or would like to contribute to future editions, please do not hesitate to get in touch: mchammaa@med.wayne.edu

GHHS Journal Liaison
May Chammaa, Class of 2022

Editors
Kennedy Werner, Class of 2023
Kinan Sawar, Class of 2024
Ragda Izar, Class of 2022

Feature Cover, Breath of Fresh Air
Huda Warsame, Class of 2025

Faculty Adviser
Dr. Mary Morreale

Funders
Dr. Tom Janisee, Class of 1975
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Part 1: Poetry

ode to joy

which is a field ablaze.
    which is my hands making shadow

puppets in its light.
    i’m dancing now like a slow explosion

and you’ve caught me drunk
    with fire. isn’t that what it means to be a citizen

of aftermath? that a burning effigy
    atop its mother’s remains knows only

the sweetness of rain. the cigarette
    between your father’s lips not defeat

but a hyphen. what fractured
    syntax we’ve made of our folded spines.

new adverbs out of
    the rifle’s gaze / an entry wound / a country’s worth

of gunpowder against our cheek.
    from afar it looks like i’m moving amongst fireflies

the way the embers ricochet from skin
    and i am framed by the softest halo of wreckage.

    ●

    briefly (adv.)

    our silhouettes intersecting on the bedroom wall

    blush of summer like warm apricots we stole from the neighbor’s tree

    to feel a jasmine’s breath and name it for the single hour it blooms

    ●
And maybe what I wanted was for a way to be beautiful. That July, on the air mattress in grandma's living room with my fingers pressed to my eyelashes. Outside, early hues of honey gilded the streets of Hong Kong. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't daydreaming of the girl. One who'd been before the temple wall lighting orange peels in her offering. Only red around us. Amethyst in that chamber of altar. How the cloud of her incense had wreathed our heads just so, I swore her irises grew in mine. Maybe what I wanted was to be seen by a girl other than myself. Despite myself. My fingers timid in her hair as if vowing to that lonely hour. That the word tender could describe both a bruise and a kiss, and suddenly be enough.

Dorothy Yim, c/o 2022

**menses**

in summertime

i plant maroon dahlias

the size of dinner plates:

    heavy placentas

birthing july from a bowl

of midnight.

    this is what forgiveness is

i think, blood moon

kaleidoscoped on skin.

    i crawl into it

like a bridal gown.

    my mother’s

stained sheets wrapped

like a bodice around me.

no one is watching.

i appear like the sudden

gasp a tulip makes.

or a girl.

the autumn i turned

twelve and everything

was the taste of

rust. not even my mother

was spared.

    oh, lord.

here i am.

Dorothy Yim, c/o 2022
Finding Serenity in the Crystal Brain

Priyanka Kale ℅ 2024
Systemic Symptoms

I lay in my hospital bed,  
So quiet in mind,  
With the bustle around me,  
I’ll be out in good time.

I think to myself  
The work to be done,  
The clock strikes ten, then eleven,  
Will I be here past one?

Can you hear me?  
Yes, yes, your knee.

I cannot explain this pain, don’t you see?  
Here, take these, they’re basically free.

I gaze at the bottle,  
Then up at the man,  
But he was there no longer,  
Just pills in my hand.

The pain in my knee,  
Is gone now, you see?  
But the true pain of hunger,  
Burns deep within me.

Shall I swallow my pride?  
Just once, one last time?  
I must get to work,  
So I silently climb -

Up, out of bed,  
And straight through the door,  
With no keys in hand,  
And no food left in store.

My family awaits,  
Each day for their fate,  
For the dinner tomorrow,

May not be like today’s.  
And as the meals pass by,  
Our health does decline,  
Fresh food for the wealthy,  
Is this all by design?

My pantry is full,  
Yet ever so empty,  
Fast food within reach,  
So wastefully tempting.

I walk to the office,  
Head hung ever so low,  
To collect my last check,  
For I am now on furlough.

As our medical bills compile,  
And our food supply dwindles,  
My mind starts to wander,  
To what goods I can swindle.

Am I one to blame?  
I silently mutter,  
Our system’s imperfect,  
Surely, there must be another.

But is it my doctor?  
My city, or me?  
It seems ought not matter,  
For are we not free?

Yet it seems all so trivial,  
For the pain in my knee,  
Has returned with a vengeance,  
The doctor, I must see.

Jamil Jomaa, Alison Rousseau, Daniel Bota, Darby Richards, Emilia Clementi, Sami Nassar, c/o 2024
butterfly effect

moments on their own,
don’t amount to much
but together—
can change entire perspectives
from a dusty blanket
stolen and hidden,
to a marathon
of movies, solace, and more
from pages and pages
and late nights with flashlights
to a rekindled flame
and a richer collection
from my mother
bloomed a friendship
spanning three states
and a promise of four

from a loving nani
instilling $ vs. 5
to a gluttony of dialects
and an immersive tour
from a family friend
shedding skin, growing thicker
to a talk of balance
of acceptance and steadiness
moments on their own,
don’t amount to much
but together—
can change entire worlds

Riya Shah, c/o 2025

our individual perceptions of reality and interpretations of events are specific to just ourselves. we all live on our own axis.

Figure 1. A sample size of one.

Perception of 1
Priyanka Kale %
2024
The Phoenix

My son, proud and Black
Shoes big, ambition bigger
He’ll grow into it.

Weeks pass, pounds lost
Strength wasting, sweat sliding
He’ll grow into it.

My eyes fell, his eyes marveled
At the women in white
He’ll grow into it.

Chemo gaining, Hodgkin’s fading
Scalp smooth, wig removed
He’ll grow into it.

Curse cured, body burned
Mind in ashes, dreams alight
He’ll grow into it.

Tears shining, cameras shuttering
My boy in Black, draped in white
He grew into it.

Thomas S. Przybycien, c/o 2022
7:34pm

the dusk is waterlogged. no one knows
i'm here but i'm here, i swear it.
if i convince anyone let it be
the teal of my room.
i dream as a squid in black waters.
my retinas periscope for
some image to hold: sound waves
or the sound of waves.
once i was born in a lonely light.
so solemn was the dusk
that cracked, my silence
yawned wide open.
from its depths: a gasp of fireflies.

*Dorothy Yim, c/o 2022*

*Breath of Fresh Air*

*Huda Warsame, ℅ 2025*
Thoracotomy

Some nights I carry
my heart home,
lock the door,
rest my cheek on the table and

    crack
open
chip the ice,
pluck out
    jaded shards;
dissect away

last breaths
    bleak words
broken
    stories.

Exhale. Inhume.

I dab at
blood and saltwater,
    carefully stitch
myself
together—
let me feel again tomorrow.

Elizabeth Jakubowski, c/o 2023

This Nightmare Place

A small, pink bonnet just out of sight,
With shades of dark, hides a child’s face.
Scream, cry, and laugh from a different face,
But all faces reside in the same place.
Ideas in flight and thoughts without base,
Cannot be caught, yet I give chase.
A prophecy deep in the dead of night,
is the apocalypse we cannot erase.
Nothing remains to save me now,
If no love resides in this space.
From now until eternity,
I must live in this nightmare place.

Arif Musa, c/o 2022
Peak 8, Breckenridge
Susan Wager, ℅ 2024
Part 2: Short Stories

Two Blue Moons

When the door chime rang, I never expected to see Mr. Paprika standing there in his pajamas. It was nearly four in the morning. I had been wrapping up my night shift at the register when he walked into the gas station market for the first time.

To be frank, I hadn’t thought at all about Mr. Paprika since high school and even back then, I didn’t think about him much. He was the old bus driver at our school. Mr. Paprika used to wait in front of our homes each morning and shuttle us to class in the same yellow machine. On our last day of school, he got up from the driver’s seat and bowed deeply to each one of us as we exited the bus for the last time.

I straightened out the display of toothpaste and pain medicine on the shelf behind me while Mr. Paprika walked the aisles. I couldn’t be so sure that it was really him in the store. I knew little of his face, only seeing his reflection in the bus rear view, or the rare occasions when he half-turned from the driver’s seat to announce a stop. I remembered the strands of white in his hair that caught the sunlight like spider silk. And the tiny creases that bracketed his eyes, which I noticed on occasion when he glanced in the mirror. Beyond that, I knew nothing of him. I never found out his real name or why the kids called him Mr. Paprika.

He made his way towards the aisle of teas and cans of instant coffee. I could see his comb over above the shelves, neat and white like a freshly formed cloud atop his head. He’d aged quite a bit since I last saw him. He was rounder in the middle and the skin around his cheeks sagged a great bit. Still, he had a good head of hair and stood as tall as I remembered. In his right hand were two different boxes of chamomile tea, which he set down at the front counter. I got a good look at the navy and gold pajamas he was wearing - strange but sensible - the way I remembered Mr. Paprika to be.

“Hello, sir. Find everything okay?” The best strategy was to go on as though we were complete strangers, because we were.

“Yes, quite all right,” he responded. His voice had a slight tremor and he appeared to be deep in thought. “How much for those?”

I followed his gaze to the revolving rack of beef taquitos in their glass display. The hard tortilla shells were cracked and shriveled under the warmer.

“One dollar each. Those were from yesterday morning though. They won’t be very fresh now. I was actually about to toss them in the trash.” The taquitos continued their sad revolution on the steel racks.

“Is that so?” he said. “Okay. I’ll take three.”

I glanced at him before selecting the three least cracked taquitos I could find and placing them in a white paper bag. He smiled at me. Overhead, Schubert’s Impromptu No. 3 played from the speakers in a slow, meditative lull.

“Mari, is it?”

“Sorry?”

“Your name. Mari, right?”
I felt my cheeks get warm. “Yes.”

He thought for a moment. “Hmm. Elmwood Lane. South of Wilshire, near the furniture store.” He nodded. “You liked to sit on the right side.”

“That's right,” I let out a quiet chuckle as if I hadn't been considering him this whole time. “You were our bus driver, I remember now. Mr.-” What was I to call him?

“Paprika,” he said quietly.

I rang up the chamomile tea and the three taquitos on the register, entering a small employee discount code on the monitor for him. Besides, the taquitos wouldn't be good at this time. The digital clock on the counter read 4:13 A.M.

I handed him the plastic bag of his items, and he paid entirely in quarters. “Have a good morning,” I said.

“Do you still play the piano, Mari?”

I was taken aback by his sudden question. I had no clue he knew I played. “Well, not since high school,” I said with a pang of remorse. In fact, this was the first time I'd thought about playing the piano in some years. The opportunity never arose, and it never came up in conversation with the people around me.

“I'm sorry to hear that,” he said with a sad smile. He had a tiny chip in his right front tooth. “You played so wonderfully, Mari.”

“When did you see me play?”

“At the school talent show,” as though this were obvious. He looked up at the ceiling and said nothing for a long moment. “I really liked seeing what you kids were up to. I drove you all to school for so many years anyway.”

I suddenly felt shy and didn’t know what to do with my hands, so I tucked them deep into my pockets. The aching melody of Schubert’s Impromptu was coming to a quiet close on the overhead speakers, and the minor key transposition had returned to its original key.

“A lot has changed in fifteen years, Mari, wouldn't you say?”

“Is that how long it's been?”

He opened the plastic bag and rustled the contents inside. “I never liked chamomile tea. It tastes a little bit like well water to me. Do you like chamomile tea, Mari?”

I glanced at the clock once again then back to his face. It was as though his eyes were two tree stumps sinking in quicksand. Exhaustion drowned his expression. “Mr. Paprika, would you like to have a beer with me?”

“Right now?”

“I just think it might help you sleep better than chamomile.” I nodded toward the plastic bag in his hands and the pajamas he was wearing. Anyway, the morning shift employee wouldn't be arriving for another half hour or so, and it wasn't like he cared if I had a drink at the end of my shift. I felt incredibly thirsty, and I couldn't explain why.

Mr. Paprika nodded. “Let's have a beer then.”

I rang up two Blue Moons on the register and paid with the loose cash in my pocket. We sat down at the steel counter by the window and sipped our beers side by side without saying much. The only thing outside was the empty gas station, a few scraps of trash on the concrete, and the continuous buzzing of the neon sign that flickered the night's gas prices. An occasional car would pass by on the streets, and I'd take another sip. I liked having a Blue Moon at the end of
my shift. Usually, though, it would be at my apartment while I watched the sun come up.

“You stayed in Los Angeles,” Mr. Paprika said after some time, staring out the window.

“I was here for grad school.” The beer was cold and quenched my thirst just right. It made me feel loose. “I quit recently. I just haven’t told anyone.”

“Is that so?” he took another sip as he considered this. He then made a motion across his lips like he was sealing a Ziploc bag.

Another few minutes of silence passed. “I’m making congee later,” he finally said. “Pork and preserved egg with dried scallops. What will you eat for breakfast?”

“I don’t know. I don’t usually eat breakfast.”

“Oh, Mari. You must eat breakfast. How will you be strong?” He raised both his shoulders and flexed his biceps in the air. I could see his arms quivering ever so slightly in his pajama sleeves. Through the store window, we made eye contact with each other’s reflection. I then flexed my elbows into a right angle to match his. If any people had walked by the window at that very moment, they would’ve seen two adults bearing their pale biceps to the night like tiny half-moons.

“My mom used to make congee too,” I said, “except she’d make it with the bones of leftover rotisserie chicken from earlier in the week. That was our version of jook.”

He put his arms down. “Ah, that’s good too.”

A new piece played on the speakers overhead, the first movement of Rachmaninoff’s piano concerto. Earlier, I had set the radio to the classical music station, and I was surprised to learn the selection was keen even at these strange hours of the night.

“I saw something funny on the news yesterday,” Mr. Paprika said to my reflection. “Want to hear?”

“Oh.”

“The headline was, ‘Man wrestles alligator named Darth Gator after it bites a zoo handler during a child’s birthday party.’”

“Wow,” I let out a clipped chuckle as I imagined the scene in my mind. “That’s a lot to think about.”

“Isn’t it?” Mr. Paprika rested his head on his fist and stared off at the ceiling.

“Sometimes, I think there are so many kinds of people in the world. Just so many kinds,” he said. “Wouldn’t you say, Mari?”

I nodded my head, “Quite right.”

We listened to the rest of the Rachmaninoff concerto in silence. There was a part where the orchestra swelled to a climactic, heart-aching crescendo. Suddenly, I wanted to cry. But the moment passed and we polished off our beers. Afterwards, Mr. Paprika got up and stretched, his pajama shirt lifting ever so slightly, and I could see the white sliver of his belly like a stingray’s underside. For some reason, it made me think about the taquitos in their paper bag, waiting with their dried, shriveled shells.

“You should start small,” he said suddenly, interrupting my thoughts. “One egg for breakfast. Just one. That would be good enough.”

I considered this for a moment. “Good enough for what?”

He flexed his biceps in the air once more.

I nodded and flexed mine as well.

---
Back home, I saw I had a voicemail on my phone. It was my mother from earlier. I went to the kitchen to boil some water and played the message on speakerphone.


I opened the fridge and peered inside. Some bruised apples, an old container of leftovers, eggs, lots of beer.

How is your studies? Very good? Or just so-so? Working long nights at the lab? You don’t call me back. Hey… Mari. I saw Mabel’s mom at the store yesterday. I heard her daughter works at Walmart now...

I grabbed a lone egg from the fridge shelf and placed it in the boiling water. I wasn’t sure how long it needed to cook.

Mari, you need to sleep better. Go to bed earlier and don’t stay up too late. Okay?

Okay. Make sure to cook a good dinner. No more fast food. Call me back.

I tore off my uniform from the gas station and popped open another Blue Moon while the egg rattled in the boiling pot. When the timer went off, I peeled the egg’s shell back carefully and stared at the whites, so solid and shiny I could see my fish-eyed reflection on its surface. The egg itself was slightly overcooked. I felt sleepier than I had in a while. From the window, the sun had begun lifting from the skyline as if dragging a long, velvet curtain.

Dorothy Yim, c/o 2022

We were living in the ideal and oh what a deal it was! Let me explain. Our world was long overdue for a meaningful change, for productive advancement. You see, we had already captured life in the palm of our hands through the smartphone so it was only a matter of time before we upgraded to something of true importance, like how we governed ourselves. So, we finally got around to rewriting all the rules, updating them, streamlining them, and getting them down to a neat two-pager. And with that, the Constitution Three was born. I think we finally nailed it this time. And for proof, all I had to do was take a look around and see life with my own eyes.

Right off the bat, people started being a lot kinder to one another. What more could you ask for? Granted, I was hoping they’d be able to really reduce the word count of the new rules so that they would all fit on a single page. Then again, you know legal writing. When you use words like “behoove” and “hearsay” it really tacks on to the character count, but I digress.

Let me tell you about how life was. It was great. I mean, television news was horrible, don’t get me wrong. Nothing particularly terrible was going on so there was no point in tuning in. The ratings got so low that the news channels actually started making things up. Can you believe that? Music definitely got a lot better, too, especially the
country-rap scene. Hmm, what else got better? Oh, how could I forget! We banned buttons and zippers. Fashion was framed by the starchy crisp sound of Velcro. That’s the future for you.

Clearly, as I have thoroughly demonstrated, the world was heading in the right direction. However, despite all that had improved and all the effort that went into making it happen, there was a wretched mark that stained the utopia that we had created for ourselves. That mark, which I’m sure you are well acquainted with, was called Tuesday.

I know, my friend. It really does speak to the true nature of this life, doesn’t it? That even in a world of perfection like mine, Tuesday, like a ghost from the imperfect past, continued to haunt us as the worst day of the entire week. And you, my dear listener, who I know is of the sophisticated type, must not be surprised why our hate for Tuesday is so great. However, in the off chance that one of you has the slightest of retrograde interests in this day, then I will do you the courtesy in explaining why you should not. You see, some folks would suggest that in fact Monday, the start of the workweek, is surely the worst day. But for us high achievers who live in a bright future and are eager to put our best foot forward, Monday is reserved for starting off strong. But then there’s Tuesday. Good old Tuesday. Standing at the front of the rest of the week, arms crossed, tapping his foot, and smugly saying, “I got a lot more where that came from.” The audacity! We had grown sick and tired of Tuesday’s attitude. So, Tuesday had to go.

I know what you might be thinking, “Yeah, I know, you couldn’t be more right. Tuesday is the worst day of the week, but that’s ridiculous. How would you manage getting rid of a day of the week?” But you see my friend, let me curb your shortsighted skepticism, sprouting from that meager mindset of a long-gone world. Because I live in a perfect future, and when you spend all your time dedicated to maintaining that perfection, like an art conservator with a keen eye and a steady hand, you know how to extract that speck of dust that threatens your masterpiece, and for us the week was our magnum opus.

So we discussed our hate for Tuesday on a Wednesday, called a vote on a Thursday, and celebrated on a Friday in honor of Tuesday never seeing a calendar again. Just like that we narrowly avoided potential catastrophe. Thanks Constitution Three.

And the world turned. There was something really nice about a six-day week. You really have to experience it for yourself to understand. Real clean are those even numbers, aren’t they?

With the new calendar, when we got to Wednesday the week was already halfway over. We no longer had to suffer through an indecisive “middle of the week.” If that’s not a morale boost in this life then I don’t know what is.

Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday.

So, we lived this way for quite some time. And we loved it. Adjusting to a six-day week was like learning to dance to a whole new music. It was a little clumsy at first, but we were all clumsy, and we innocently stumbled our way through it. It was fun,
special when we all started to develop some rhythm. We could look back and see how far we came to finally dance the week with style. And that went on. And on. And on. And we finally got really good at dancing to the beat of the six-day week until we could basically do it in our sleep. But what started out as a new, rejuvenating music gradually degenerated into the dull tone of a metronome pulsing in the background. Things seemed to go back to their usual ritual. And it is at times like this, when the mind is paralyzed by routine, that it wanders upon realization. And here was ours: Tuesday was long gone, and it was never coming back. We were so concerned with getting rid of Tuesday that we never considered the unintended consequences that it might unleash upon the world. For it was only in the absence of Tuesday that we were able to clearly see the lurking threat that rose up to take its place. They had tried to warn us, but we turned a blind, arrogant eye. Because it is true that the undisputed worst day of the week was, and always had been, Monday! Yes, Monday! Hiding behind the shadow of Tuesday, but you cannot hide anymore! Our hate for Tuesday had been so sophisticated, so carefully considered, so logically reasoned through, that in an effort to turn our noses up at Tuesday we ended up neglecting the true culprit that was under our noses the entire time – Monday. Hiding in plain sight. A caricature of a hated day. But when you have lived life like us in a perfect world, really living it through and through, you come to discover that, like a proverb, the most profound of truths are also the most simple. And Monday, my friend, oh Monday, we simply hated it. Monday, leader of the week, gifting us with that sinking feeling in our stomach - that call to action to rise to the occasion. We answered that call time and time again, and I’m sure that you do the same, but here’s where our worlds differ: after the workweek was shortened to only four days, the call of Monday grew louder and louder and louder to make up for it. Over time, the leader of the week became corrupt, and it turned into a tyrant that towered over us with its increasing demands. That sinking feeling sunk to depths we had never felt before. Tuesday had kept Monday in check, but with Tuesday now gone, Monday was an uncontrollable cancer. It wasn’t healthy. And in this perfect world that we were constantly refining, polishing smooth, Monday was a splinter, not a log, and we had to pull it out. So we discussed our hate for Monday on a Wednesday, called a vote on a Thursday, and celebrated on a—oh wait! I completely forgot. The vote on Thursday hit a roadblock. No no, I know what you might be thinking, “They must have had a problem with the vote, maybe their world isn’t so perfect after all.” But that couldn’t be farther from the truth because the roadblock wasn’t due to a disagreement over voting out Monday; it was due to an addendum. You see, all the changes that we had been making to the week up to this point gave us a perspective that you would never be able to grasp. We had tasted the beauty
of a week that had an even number of days. And although that beauty was brief, we knew it was better than what had come before it. If we were to only get rid of Monday we would be down to another odd-day week. You can see where this is going, can't you? By getting rid of Monday, in a strange twist of fate, things would have ended up exactly as they were like from before – with that indecisive day at the middle of the week. Those were barbarous times that we have long overcome with our even-day rhythm. And only God knows what life would be like if we were to go backwards.

Now you see why we hit a roadblock during our meeting to vote out Monday. We discussed our hate for Monday on a Wednesday and called a vote on a Thursday, but were struck with this dilemma. Luckily, we did not move hastily. Instead of voting on Thursday, we used the time to create an addendum. And that addendum was that in an effort to preserve the even-numbered week, in addition to getting rid of Monday, we would also just get rid of Wednesday. Everyone was for this. Wednesday really didn’t have anything going for it to begin with. Its saving grace from a time long gone was its clumsy claim as “hump day.” My attentive listener, can’t you see! Wednesday was less of a hump and more of an ugly skin tag. No matter how you cut it, freeze it, or pick at it, Wednesday was a blemish that didn’t belong. Wed – nes – day; those dizzying syllables. Not to mention that it didn’t look like we were ever returning to an odd-numbered week again, so there simply was not a place for a washed-up hump day like Wednesday.

So, it all simply unfolded as follows: we discussed our hate for Monday on a Wednesday, called a vote on a Thursday, suspended the vote and created an addendum to also get rid of Wednesday, had a final vote on a Friday, and celebrated on a Saturday in honor of Monday and Wednesday never seeing a calendar again. Sunday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday. Trimmed off all the fat. Only the essentials.

Finally, a chiseled week. If someone were to ask, “If you were stuck on an island and could only have four days to live with, which would you choose?” These ones. Our very own paradise.

Ah, Thursday. Both the start and the end of the week. It’s funny how life comes full circle like that.

And then there’s Friday. That friend that we’ve had since the school days of our youth – the weekend is here! And you can never forget about Saturday. He’s like Friday’s older brother - a more mature day for having fun.

Lastly, we had Sunday. That sleepy, dragged-out day at the end of it all, injecting us with that nostalgia that comes with looking back on the weekend. Wake up at 10am and make that special breakfast that could only be reserved for a holy day like Sunday. Maybe you’ll take the dog to the park or just sit on the couch and watch a movie in the afternoon. From the outside looking in, a certain type of life lives on a Sunday, and we become very familiar with it. Because, after all, when your week is only four days long Sundays come around more often.

And the more often we got to meet Sunday the more we got to know it, for better
and for worse. Sunday was a loving mother who cradled us in her arms in the morning and held our hands in the afternoon. But Sunday was also the stern father who'd sit us down in the evening after dinner and give us the talk, “You have responsibilities that you need to take care of. You have a week ahead of you.” And we knew that Sunday evening did this out of love, but this understanding did not make the reality any easier.

Sunday evening was the harbinger of the Sunday Scaries. And if you agree that the Sunday Scaries are in fact terrifying, imagine feeling them every four days. It was with a bittersweet resolve that we decided that something had to be done, but this was more complicated than previous times. There was the Sunday morning mother and the Sunday evening father, and even though they lived in the same house it was clear to us where our bond fell, and where it did not. It was the second half of the day - the father, the stern-talker, the reality checker – who was the source of our anxiety. So, we decided that it was only appropriate that Sunday got a divorce.

No one should have to feel caught in the middle of a dilemma like we did with the Sunday divorce. But we knew that it would be for the best. We were so close to fully streamlining the week, and the second half of Sunday was the final hurdle in the way of us fully realizing the week’s potential. So, we discussed our problem with the second half of Sunday on a Thursday, voted it out on a Friday, and went on with our lives on a Saturday.

And the world turned.
And it turned.
And it turned.

Until one day, after the routine set back in and we once again found ourselves lost in the ritual, we had no other choice but to ask the question: where did all the days go? While busying ourselves with the virtuous project of crafting the perfect week we ended up forgetting how to live with the days that we had left. The week was a dance, and now our dancing partners were few and crippled. The week was a song, but now we only had a handful of notes to play. The week was a dinner, but we looked around the table to find that half of the chairs were unoccupied. And we began to wonder. Isn’t it more fun to dance with others even if they don’t have any rhythm? Isn’t the beauty of a song found in the notes that make you sad or don’t sound quite right? And isn’t a meal best shared in the company of others around a full table? Yeah, Tuesday was an abrasive uncle who made dinner uncomfortable sometimes. But now, we sit down to a table that we set for ourselves with the guests we chose to invite, and we can’t help but anxiously fixate on those vacant chairs. Is it just me or has Friday been a lot less upbeat since Tuesday stopped coming by? And ever since Monday stopped causing us problems, hasn’t Sunday’s warm embrace felt a little colder than usual? Is this world of ours actually perfect? Can we really say that we have everything we need when we’re not even capable of having a bad day? Maybe Tuesday wasn’t our favorite day, but now it’s clear that even he had something to add to the
conversation at the dinner table. I can’t exactly put my finger on what that something is, but as I share this meal with the new four-day week in the absence of the days gone by, there’s a new awkward silence filling the void. I don’t know what Tuesday would have said during a time like this, but I’m coming to realize that deep down I might have liked it.

Anthony Talaugon c/o 2024
Part 3: Reflections

Home for the holidays

A sweet tune that fills our ears from Thanksgiving 'till New Years. A perfect gift for each person on our list. A delicious meal followed by a Christmas reel. Home for the holidays. A reunion we take for granted.

It was only a few weeks before Christmas when I was assigned to assist in a brain surgery for a young woman with metastatic cancer. As I approached the designated curtains in the preoperative area, a quietness draped me. I paused. The air was still, conversations hushed, monitors hummed. I felt uneasy. I tried to imagine how the conversation would go, but nothing would prepare me for what transpired. A daughter, around the same age as myself, sat next to her terminally ill mother. She spoke softly and slowly, explaining her mother's latest symptoms. Things were getting worse. She could no longer remember her own name, the cancer had spread to the speech area of the brain.

“It’s okay momma,” the daughter said, noticing her mother's frustration with her lack of word recall.

There was a strange sense of peace amongst the two of them. It was as if they both had somehow accepted the impossibly imaginable, that these were their final days, hours, minutes, moments together. I suddenly felt intrusive during a sacred time. I wrapped up our conversation, saying, “Hopefully, I will see you two after.” The daughter looked from her mother to me with heartbreaking eyes. “Hopefully,” she said.

After the mother was asleep in the operating room, the neurosurgeon began to shave the hair to access the tumor. He conserved the strands in the front of her face to preserve her appearance.

“I want her to look as normal as possible for Christmas,” he said. Great lengths were taken to maintain a sense of normalcy in the face of an unmistakably cruel disease.

As the neurosurgeon began calibrating the device meant to translate the dimensions of an MRI image to real life, I was perplexed at the intricacy of the technology. Even with all these advanced tools, the monstrous forces of cancer were still going to rob this mother of her life.

The surgery, itself, was barbaric at times. We all took turns, drilling four holes into the skull to gain access to the tumor. Though we removed the mass in the speech area, there were numerous others buried deep within the brain's tissue— inaccessible. The surgery was deemed palliative, with the goal of potentially restoring speech, but most importantly, to get mom home for Christmas, one last time, hopefully. This all begs the question, “Is it better to know?” Is it better to know that death is
approaching, such that we can say our proper goodbyes? Is it better to know, such that we will live each day like it is our last? Or... Is it better not to know, such that we live naively in the hopes of one day growing old? It is better not to know, such that we do not have to face the harsh reality that we all are dying, just some faster than others?

Even as I stood before this mother in the operating room, I thought about how little life she had left and how much more life I have. Though, is that really a truthful observation?

Home for the holidays... hopefully.

*Kennedy Werner, c/o 2023* 

& as you are evolving in your story

forgive yourself

because at the end of the day you were just doing the best you could within your capacity of knowledge and experience at that time & that is okay. doing the best you could at the time is okay. forgive yourself for what you did not know then and know that going forward your story will be different.

*Forgiveness Starts at Home*  
Priyanka Kale ℅ 2024
STOP

“STOP!”
I don’t understand. I’ve done chest compressions for the 8th time now, concentrating on my form and strength for the sake of the mother lying before me.

“STOP!”
I hear it again. A nurse starts pushing me off the bed, tears filling her eyes.
I look over at the son on the other side of the bed. He is dressed in a pristine, pin-striped navy suit, all the bells and whistles. He rushed here from work.
Just moments prior, he was talking to his mother.

“Squeeze my hand if you’re gonna keep fighting, Ma.”
They make eye contact. She squeezes.
We continue chest compressions.
Until we stop.
We stop, not because our actions are futile, but because the son requests it. Autonomy.
The room, previously filled with “Pulse check!”, “Resume compressions!”, “Clear!”, “1mg EPI”, falls silent, except for the chilling sound of the EKG flatlining.
Dozens of healthcare workers silently gather their white coats, name badges, and clipboards and scurry out. A sheet is placed over the mother’s head, and a devastated family of four stands just outside the doorway.
I make eye contact with them and a lump forms in my throat. Just moments prior, their mother was watching CSI Miami, sending text messages, making jokes with her nurse.
I take a right out of the room and rush to rounds, trying to process what I just witnessed.
I cry, unable to comprehend how a person goes from full of life to no life at all in a matter of milliseconds.
I glance at my attending physician’s desk the next day and see the death paperwork for the mother, so impersonal and logistical, mixed in with to-do lists, new consults, prescriptions to fill. It felt in stark contrast to the harrowing scene the day before. Similar to how the space between life and death seems impossible to comprehend, likewise is the disconnect between the death of a mother and business as usual in a hospital.

Kennedy Werner, c/o 2023
Advice from Atticus Finch

"You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it".
-Atticus Finch, To Kill a Mockingbird (Lee 30)

To be admitted into an inpatient psychiatric facility is to be stigmatized by society, to be removed from the community, to put one’s day-to-day on pause in the hopes of getting better. Though I have never been admitted, as an aspiring psychiatrist, I believe it is important to consider what it must feel like to enter such a place, whether voluntarily or involuntarily.

If someone misses their Wednesday AA meeting due to psychiatric hospitalization, their peers there will likely be understanding. Yet, the individuals at one’s workplace may not have as much
experience in or understanding of mental illness. Rumors could spread like wildfire. “Where is Tom?”

“Oh, I heard he got admitted to a mental hospital.”

Suddenly, when Tom shows up to work two weeks later, he may be met by stares and whispers. The people he used to eat lunch with may no longer feel comfortable associating with him.

“Who knows what he’s capable of! He had to have been a harm to himself or others to get admitted!”

“Probably best to stay clear!”

Mental illness can be a lonely place without support or understanding. Psychiatrists are there to offer such an alliance.

Not only does one have to worry about the state of their life and relationships outside of the institution, but they also have to find their way amongst a unique group of people who are admitted alongside them. The unit functions as a microcosm of society, with people of different backgrounds, ages, and personalities, each ultimately trying to achieve the same goal of reentrance to society. Some patients forge strong friendships, others clash. Some patients socialize, others isolate. I imagine it like being a ninth grader entering high school for the first time, not knowing who will accept you and who will give you a hard time.

In a double-door locked unit, patients would watch as staff and students would carefully open the door, creating just enough space for one body at a time and quickly closing thereafter. It can be frustrating for a patient, as they are not offered the same liberties as staff and students. Emotions like jealousy, rage, and confusion were almost palpable. This can create an “us vs. them” mentality, which is in opposition to the end goal of reunification with society.

As a medical student hoping to one day become a psychiatrist, this sort of reflection is critical. To begin to understand someone is to see life from his or her perspective, or to “climb into his skin and walk around in it.” This leaves me with the question, are we really all that different? We all want similar things, to be seen as a human being, to be supported, happy, and loved. The way we treat people matters. Though mental illness may not be ubiquitous, humanity is.

References:

Kennedy Werner, c/o 2023