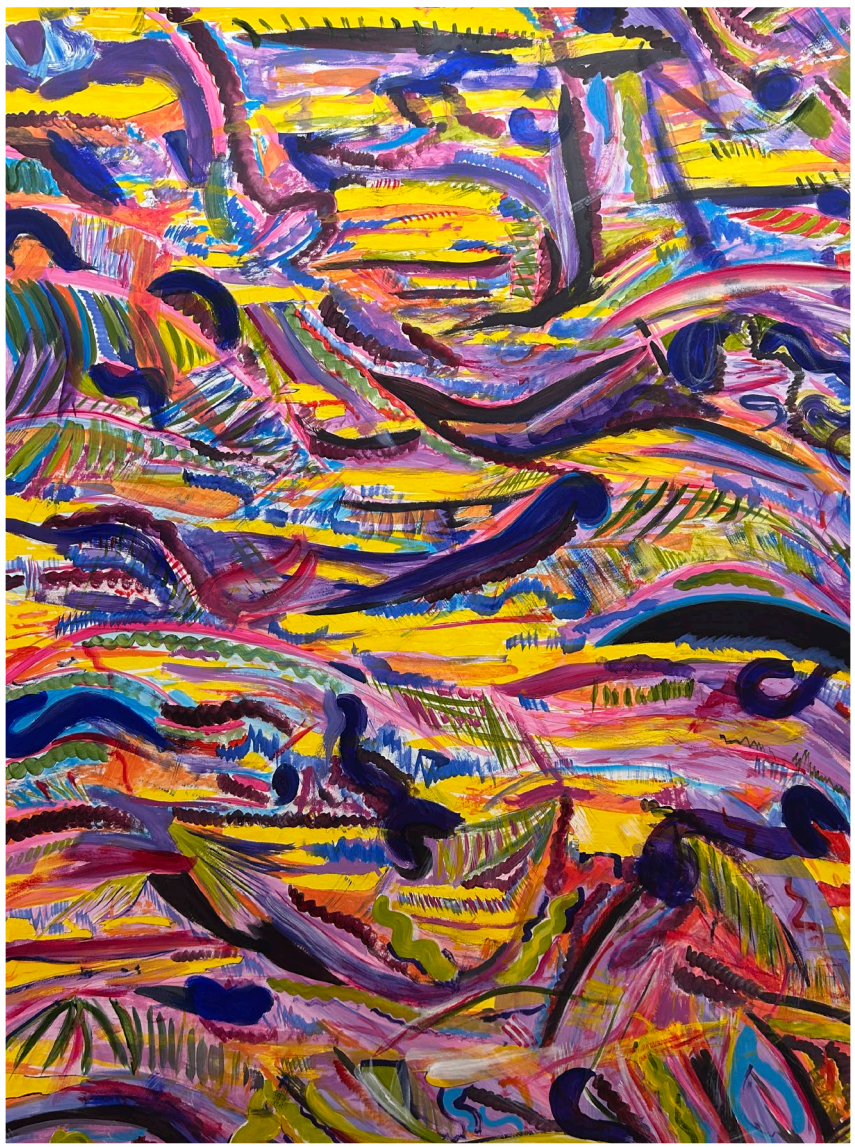


EVANESCENT

ISSUE 7: SUMMER 2026



From the Jefferson Center for Injury Research and Prevention

Cover artwork:

Guadalupe Juárez Zavala

Untitled

Acrylic on Paper

48" x 64"

EVANESCENT:

A Journal of Literary Medicine

Issue 7, Summer 2026

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The editors would like to thank Tim Flanagan for his assistance and expertise with design and layout of this journal.

ABOUT THIS JOURNAL

Evanescent: A Journal of Literary Medicine is the journal of the Eakins Writing Project, which also sponsors the Drs. Theresa and Charles Yeo Writing Prize. The Eakins Writing Project is named after artist Thomas Eakins, who painted the renowned *The Gross Clinic*, and offers programs to facilitate writing as a conduit for healing and self-reflection. It seeks to provide space for the incredible stories witnessed every day by members of the Jefferson community. The Eakins Writing Project is supported by the Jefferson Center for Injury Research and Prevention, located in the Department of Surgery of Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia.

The Drs. Theresa and Charles Yeo Writing Prize, awarded annually, invites all members of the Jefferson community—including Jefferson employees, faculty, volunteers, students, and patients at all campuses, neighborhoods, and sites—to engage in the empowering act of writing.

The mission of the prize is:

- To encourage and enable writing as a conduit for healing, self-reflection, and interconnectedness both for the individual and the community.
- To highlight and value the many diverse voices of the Jefferson community, including Jefferson patients and the communities they represent, and to foster a sense of belonging in these individuals and communities.
- To promote and demystify writing as a powerful tool for self-empowerment for all in the Jefferson community, not just those who consider themselves writers.
- To communicate and celebrate our diverse stories and experiences to the larger community.

For more information about *Evanescent*, the Yeo Writing Prize, and the Eakins Writing Project: <https://www.jefferson.edu/academics/colleges-schools-institutes/skmc/departments/surgery/eakins-project.html>

To contact us, email Evanescent@Jefferson.edu.

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ISSN 2997-0342 (online); ISSN 2997-0334 (print)

COVER ART STATEMENT

This large-scale abstract painting is inspired by the spontaneity of decisions made while in a manic episode. The yellow and purple complementary hues represent the push and pull factor between making irrational decisions and remaining in a controlled state of mind. Small, sharp strokes are synonymous with the feeling of quick and nonsensical decisions while long, dark purple, worm-like markings are existential thoughts and feelings of dread weaving through impulsive thoughts. Along with impulsivity, there are small fine-point pen doodles along the top section of the piece to add additional detail to shapes and create a “sketchier” effect.

As a designer, I aim to incorporate an eccentric style into pieces, whether that be through fashion or other artistic work. My creativity stems from surrealism paintings, absurdist movies, and scenes from my own strange dreams.

– Guadalupe Juárez Zavala

CONGRATULATIONS

To the winners of the 2026
Drs. Theresa & Charles Yeo Writing Prize

First Place

Amala Shaju

Second Place

Sandra Yang

Third Place

Laura DeLoretta

Honorable Mentions

Mary Bouchaud

Allison Chang

Edoardo Manca

Nilanjan Halder

Jacelyn Biondo

Kazi Habib

The work of the winners and honorable mentions is featured in this issue. In addition, the first-place winner was awarded a prize of \$2,000; the second-place winner, \$1,000; and the third-place winner, \$500.

The prompt for this year's prize will be announced in the Fall of 2026; please look for the announcement.

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EDITORIAL STATEMENT

Welcome to Issue 7 of *Evanescent*. We selected the topic of “Discovering Joy” for this issue to create contrast with the gravitas that suffused the previous issue exploring “Growing, Learning, Aging,” as well as out of a desire to give our writers the opportunity to focus on uplift in a time when there is so much to be concerned about. We thought perhaps it was time for something lighter, something reliably upbeat. And yet....

...throughout the process of assembling this issue, we found ourselves in sheer awe of the continual presence of difficult emotions amidst these pieces whose ostensible topic is joy. We discussed extensively how joy and sadness cannot seem to exist without the other. To consider as a metaphor in nature: *shadows cannot exist without light, and light is the creator of shadow.*

During the Renaissance period, the term *chiaroscuro* was invented to describe a technique of painting that illustrates stark contrasts by setting brightly depicted subject matter against dark backgrounds. This technique was later dramatically implemented by the famous Philadelphia painter Thomas Eakins, after whom the Eakins Writing Project is named. In his celebrated painting, *The Gross Clinic* (1875), certain elements of the image—Dr. Gross’ forehead, his bloodied fingers holding the scalpel, the patient’s exposed leg and site of the surgery—are scored with light and jump out from the background darkness, as if the painting has a Narrator who is shouting at the viewer: *Look at this! And look at this!* You will see that many of our writers also have adapted this technique in their writing, in which darker emotions provide a background of stark contrast from which something beautiful and impeccable is evinced in the bright outline of joy’s revelation, often revealed towards the end of the pieces.

After a major loss, we often feel as if we will be unable to experience joy again. And yet, there is always the promise of joy rediscovered, as described in many of the essays and poems included in this issue. Our writers describe how joy is forever changed by the darkness they have experienced. And although joy will not look the same as it did before, perhaps it deepens, becomes something more solid and unshakeable. Somewhere in the midst of our human struggle, we learn to shift our perspective and smile despite it all.

We hope that as you read this issue you will be both uplifted and struck by our collective human ability to continually seek light that emerges from the darkness. May you witness how our writers highlight their joy in the face of personal hardship.

Lap After Lap

Daniel Daschko

Student, Germantown Academy '28

The night before, I counted tests instead of sheep.

I had three, enough to make sleep feel unwise.

I stayed up late convincing myself I was prepared, even though my stomach disagreed. In the morning, I walked into school not ready for the hit my grades were about to take. At lunch, all my friends around me were eating but I couldn't even look at my food. The answers were being thrown around the table, but I didn't even listen. I didn't want to hear that somebody had a different answer and that I got it wrong. The stress traveled from classroom to classroom, and by the end of the day, I was burnt out and full of doubt. At this point, not a single shred of joy had crossed my path.

After school, I went to the pool. I didn't decide to go, my legs carried me there the way they always do, moving on habit and muscle memory while my mind lagged behind, still replaying the day. Practice wasn't a choice; it was automatic, and I arrived before I even realized I had walked there.

Inside the pool, the air was heavy and damp, sharp with chlorine, but it was still somehow easier to breathe than in those classrooms. My teammates were already there, stretching along the deck. Rolling shoulders, pulling at calves, adjusting goggles. It is crazy how much time I spend with these friends, classmates, and teammates. We exchanged jokes and talked about the drama of the day as usual.

Then I jumped in. The cold hit immediately, stealing my breath, racing up my legs and into my chest. For a moment, my body resisted. That instant when the water shocks you fully into yourself is always refreshing. I came to the wall and saw the practice written out. I wasn't even shocked at what my coach cooked up for today. Three to five hours a day in the water has taught my body endurance long before my mind learned acceptance. As a competitive swimmer, you have to learn how to adapt.

Somewhere between laps, the doubt softened. Not because it went away but because swimming demands presence. Every stroke asks something of you, lungs burning, shoulders tightening, legs heavy with lactic acid. There is no room to replay a test when you are counting breaths, reading the clock, and timing the turns.

Is this joy? I wondered mid-set. It didn't feel like when I got my new puppy, but everything felt lighter. My muscles ached and my heart pounded, but something shifted. The noise quieted, and the overthinking stopped. My thoughts narrowed until there was only movement and rhythm and breath. Without effort or intention, the rest of the day receded. This type of joy did not announce itself; it appeared quietly.

Do you find joy, or do you make it?

Maybe joy is not something waiting to be discovered. Maybe it is something constructed, lap by lap, alongside others who are also tired, but committed to finishing what they started. When practice ended, I climbed out of the pool physically exhausted, shoulders sore, hair dripping onto the concrete. But my mind felt clearer, not empty, just quieter. The doubt had not disappeared, but it no longer crowded the space.

That night, I had to study again; tomorrow's tests still mattered after all. The pressure remained, but my body had reminded me of something my mind had forgotten: there are ways to return to yourself when words and answers fall short. Joy did not erase the stresses of high school. It did not solve anything. But in the cold water, I found a brief, steadying clarity. And on days like these, that is exactly what I need.

DRS. THERESA & CHARLES YEO WRITING PRIZE
HONORABLE MENTION

The Clinical Chart of Joy

Edoardo Manca

International MD/PhD Candidate

I searched for joy
as for a thing that slips its name,
a trembling value
lost between pain and waiting
in the half-shadow of a ward.

They told me, "Not here!
It lives within the heart."

But a heart is measured
only in simple beats,
and beats, we know,
offer too many readings
to trust the meaning underneath.

So I walked farther on
to the anesthesiologists' corridor,
where silence drips like medicine
and wakefulness is rationed
to the chosen few.

Someone there murmured
that joy is imperfect analgesia:
a pain threshold drifting
just as you draw near,
a quiet easing no one can keep long.

I knocked next on the surgeons' door:
hands that mark new passages
through hills of flesh
and valleys bright with blood,
prospectors searching order
in the rubble of the body.

"Joy," one said,
"is a margin clean and final,
the line where the harm concludes
and the good begins again."

Yet something in me doubted.

I asked the cardiologists,
but their joy lived in tracings:
a perfect P wave,
a ventricle obedient
to the old metronome
of muscle and electricity.

Too much craft,
too little soul.

The neurologists spoke in maps:
kingdoms of thought
charted in bright constellations,
storms of dopamine
crossing the cortex
like lightning over distant fields.

I listened, but the soul
is more than electricity
or any chemical storm,
and so I turned away
from their flickering screens.

I wandered then at night
through the hushed hospital wards,
when darkness leans its forehead
softly on the windowpane
and the neon forgets
whether it must heal
or simply shine.

Among unmade beds,
in footsteps thin with antiseptic,
I heard a fragile voice:

“Joy is a patient who smiles
when they meet the faintest hint
of hope
that rises from within.”

Perhaps a tired nurse,
perhaps my own heart
speaking from its quiet hollow.

In the hospital pharmacy,
shelves held invisible forces:
molecules waiting, poised
between promise and doubt.

“Joy is a well-made placebo,”
the pharmacist said with a grin.

I laughed too,
yet some truth clung
to the edge of the joke,
refusing to dissolve.

In the laboratory,
among glass that waits longer
than any human breath,
a biologist leaned toward me:

“Joy is a replication error,
a stray and tender beauty
born of accident.”

And I liked this thought:
joy as a merciful mutation
in a world rushing forward
too fast to see itself unravel.

As I kept searching,
I found each physician
offered a different truth,
and each truth glowed genuine
in its own narrow light.

So I opened a clinical chart,
pages crowded with numbers,
exam notes, and diagnoses
that never fully settled.

Where, I wondered then,
does joy appear in the life
of every single patient?

Maybe in the thin gap
between two written lines
where the doctor hesitates,
where the incipient future
has not yet learned its shape.

Maybe in the breath
that holds itself steady
when everything else
has begun to shift.

I continued onward:
in hallways carrying me forward,
in the passing eyes of strangers,
in the silences
that neither accuse
nor explain.

Slowly I learned
that perhaps joy does not cure;
only leans close, like relief.

It is no therapy,
yet it joins hands with hope.

It cannot mend organs,
yet it lends its warmth
to the hours spent trying.

And so I walked again,
no longer asking fiercely.

What if joy is not discovered
but simply happens:
a window left ajar,
a pulse that thins and softens,
a voice that doesn't fix
yet knows how to comfort.

At last, I think I grasped
its brief and tender essence:
an unmeasurable flare,
a light no test can capture,
a sudden breath redrawing
the present into something
singular and unrepeated.

Now I trace these corridors
with the badge of a trainee,
half-shadow, half-witness
to the labor of healing.

In the operating room
I stand just beyond the light,
steadying retractors,
lending my hands to the field,
and watching others
compose their quiet geometry:
a choreography of peril
and repair.

Later, at a dim computer,
I also trace survival curves,
numbers rising slowly
like a fragile tide.

Joy is here too:
a small bend in a line,
a life returned
by a margin so slender
it could be missed entirely
if you are not looking closely.

I learn to love both
the scalpel and the pipette,
tools that ask gently,
on behalf of strangers,
what might be possible still.

And slowly joy becomes purpose:
not triumph,
but direction.

A knowledge that my hours,
threaded with doubt and wonder,
press the future forward
one fragile fraction
closer to healing.

In this bittersweet devotion,
where empathy and science
learn to speak one tongue,
I find joy as a quiet covenant:

a vow that somewhere
a life may tilt toward morning
because tonight
someone remained curious,
remained gentle,
remained at work.



Trinh Ta

Untitled

Serigraphy Print on Paper

15" x 15"

DRS. THERESA & CHARLES YEO WRITING PRIZE
THIRD PLACE WINNER

The Joy (and Sadness) of the Magnolia Tree

Laura DeLoretta

Writer/Editor, Office for Professional Writing, Publishing, and Communication

The day they cut the magnolia tree down was otherwise an ordinary Wednesday. Except that, as I rounded the corner on my walk home from work, there was... well, nothing. Nothing except a hacked-up trunk, a jagged lightning bolt shape against the eerie twilight of the autumn sunset.

I had been living in South Philly for a little over a year. One year filled with joy from the magnolia—basking in its shade in the summer, sweeping massive piles of leaves in the fall, seeing the stark red cardinals in the budded branches in winter, and anticipating the glorious pink blossoms in spring, which bloomed around my birthday.

The magnolia tree was a major draw to renting this house. It stood in the backyard of the abandoned house behind ours, nearly three stories high, and was home to many neighborhood birds—house finches, mourning doves, dark-eyed juncos, cardinal lovers, and house sparrows. Even the red-tailed hawk who migrated through my neighborhood in Fall perched in the magnolia from time to time. I got to know them all throughout the seasons under the magnolia, putting bird seed and suet out. It was how I became part of the neighborhood. So, when I came home that Wednesday and saw what was left of the magnolia, the branches and leaves that littered my backyard, I thought about my birds who had lost their home, and I cried.

As a child I was frequently teased for my crybaby sensibilities and how anything big or small could make me cry. To this day the right movie, or song, or words can bring tears to my eyes. As an adult I was told that this well of feeling is a *gift*—that you can't pick and choose what you feel, and that ultimately, it's better to feel everything than nothing at all. It's awfully hard to agree with that perspective when the tears come from sadness instead of laughter. This "gift" inspired me to pursue a degree in psychology, making

me (in theory) an expert in responding to sadness, anger, and fear, like the loss of the magnolia.

After the shock of the magnolia sank in, I told my husband we needed a new tree. We needed to plant a new tree in *our* yard to shelter the birds. One that the city can't cut down on a whim. This problem-focused response protects me: if I could provide the birds with a new home, then there really wouldn't be any reason to feel sad. Except that, fall isn't the right time to plant a tree, and nothing planted in a pot could possibly grow as massive as the magnolia, and how long would it even take a tree to grow so large? Even if I could solve the problem of my displaced birds, the other facet of sadness remained—that I would never again hear the wind in the magnolia tree's branches, never again play with my dog in the leaves that fell, and never again witness its blossoming pink flowers. What is there to do with a loss that only a time machine could reverse?

Months before they cut down the magnolia, I noticed one bird in particular, a female house sparrow with a swollen, injured foot, who visited my birdfeeder. I lovingly called her "Little Bigfoot" and obsessively Googled what could have possibly caused this, and what I could do to help. I found that foot injuries are common in city birds. Debris like hair or string can wrap around their feet, cutting off circulation. There was nothing I could do, except hope and worry.

Time ran its course, and eventually her foot fell off completely. As I observed the backyard birds, I realized to my delight that my worries about Little Bigfoot's survival were unfounded. Losing her foot made her one of the most ferocious birds at the birdfeeder, and she wouldn't let the other birds come close while she was eating. She didn't seem to even notice the loss of her foot; she merely moved forward.

The natural world offers lessons in resilience that I never found in the scientific literature.

Another such lesson came one summer day as I sunbathed on the roof deck. I heard the sudden cry of a mockingbird, and I looked up in time to see a crow steal an egg from the mockingbird's nest in the magnolia tree. The crow perched on a telephone pole nearby, swallowing the egg whole. As I watched,

tears sprang to my eyes. The male mockingbird continually divebombed the crow, who cawed haughtily and hungrily searched for another egg. I scanned the tree for the female mockingbird and noticed her, unmoving, pressed flatly against the ledge of my roof, either injured or in shock. I imagined her devastation—her nest invaded and baby devoured. I left food and water out for them, bereft at what felt like a meaningless offering when there was nothing that could bring their baby back. *Nature is cruel*, I thought.

The next morning, I woke up to the mockingbirds singing through my open window. I was in disbelief at the happy sound of their morning song compared to the desperate cries the night before. Tears fell from my eyes once again as I listened and marveled at nature's ability to recover.

The birds came back the day after they cut the magnolia down. Seven house sparrows perched on my fence, checking if I restocked the birdfeeder yet. Even Little Bigfoot made an appearance. I smiled at their persistence and their ability to just *be* despite the circumstances.

"The silver lining," my husband said as we watched the birds, "is all the light coming in." *Okay, Leonard Cohen*, I thought. But he was right. Without the magnolia tree, the sun pours in through the back windows. This reappraisal made the loss bittersweet. And perhaps that is the secret science of joy: a sprinkle totally changes how something tastes.

In the cold winter mornings, I keep watch over the birds. Despite (or rather, because of) the magnolia-shaped hole, light warms the kitchen. The birds chirp and sing as they make their rounds, and I dream of what to plant in spring. To remain stuck in the loss of the magnolia would go against the lesson the birds taught me: that even in the heart of sadness, there is still a song to sing in the morning.



Emily Luckenbach
Landscape study
Sumi-e Ink on Silk
18" x 24"

Joy without a jacket in the desert at night

Silvi Saxena

Patient, Community Partner

The first time I cried while running, I thought something was seriously wrong with me.

It was a fall morning like any other. The air was cool enough to wake me up fully, my breath visible for a moment before disappearing. I tied my shoes, picked a playlist, stepped outside, and began moving. My body settled into its familiar rhythm, a couple of knee clicks and toes spreading out into the shoe. The street was quiet and the grass was dewy. A few cars passed. A dog barked behind a fence on Hermit Street. Nothing in the world suggested that anything inside me was about to break open.

A few minutes into what was planned as a long run, my chest tightened. Not sharply, just enough to register in my lungs and jaw, where I seem to hold a lot of tension. I kept running. I told myself it would pass. Then my eyes began to burn, the way they do when you are holding something back, and before I could make sense of it, tears slid down my face. My face froze. I wiped them away with the back of my hand, annoyed more than anything, embarrassed even though no one was there to see me.

I focused on my pace, crossing the Henry Avenue Bridge next to the East Falls Thomas Jefferson University campus. I focused on my feet striking the pavement, skipping the cracks in the sidewalk to distract myself. But the tears kept coming, steady and blurring the edges of the sidewalk ahead of me. My breathing grew uneven, not from exertion alone. I wondered if I should stop, if I was pushing too hard, if I was about to have some kind of mental breakdown.

I didn't stop.

My legs carried me forward through the quiet neighborhood, past trees just beginning to shed their leaves, past houses still dark inside and students who didn't look too thrilled for class. I cried as I ran, my body working, my face wet, my throat tight. There was no single memory attached to it, no clean

explanation of *why*. Just a release, sudden and undeniable, as if something that had been held too long had finally found the energy to spill into the open.

When I finally slowed down, the tears eased on their own. I stood at the end of West School House Lane waiting for the train to go by, hands on my knees, breathing hard, my heart racing for reasons that had nothing to do with distance. The air felt wider then. I wiped my face and looked up at the sky, pale and open, and noticed how quiet everything was. I didn't notice the train had passed.

Nothing had changed. And yet something had. I smiled. I didn't really understand how or why I felt such opposing feelings so quickly. As a clinical social worker, I questioned *do I have bipolar disorder?* and immediately began to google it; (I do not have bipolar disorder). I sat next to the train tracks for 10 minutes reading about it before I decided maybe I'm not supposed to pathologize this right now.

I jogged the rest of the way home, my body warm, my breath settling, a strange lightness moving through my chest. It was not exactly happiness. It was not relief either. It was space, as if I had a figurative chest tube placed to excrete excess fluid to let me breathe fully into my lungs. I felt lighter than I had when I left, though I could not understand what I had expelled along the way.

After that, it happened again. Not every run, but often enough that I began to recognize the pattern. I would head out feeling steady, and somewhere along the route my body would open a door I didn't know was there. Tears would come without warning, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. Always honestly, I learned not to fight it anymore and kept moving.

Running taught me this before I had language for it. That emotion does not always arrive as thought. That the body keeps its own record. That release can be quiet and messy and still leave you standing.

On days when running wasn't possible, when my legs felt heavy or the weather pressed me indoors, music took over. I played a song while I folded laundry or washed dishes, the volume turned up a little higher than

necessary. I would pause, then move, almost without deciding to. A shoulder rolling forward. A foot tapping. The rest of my body following. Before long, I was pushing the coffee table aside, clearing space the way you do when you know you are about to need it.

Dance had once lived in a very different place in my life. When I was in college, it belonged to studios and schedules, mirrors and counts, competitions and rehearsals that stretched late into the evening in NYC, Pittsburgh, Seattle, Albany, and DC. I taught. I trained. I learned how to hold my body with precision, how to perform emotion as much as feel it. Dance was discipline then, something sharpened and evaluated, something practiced until it could be reproduced on command.

I thought that version of dance had stayed behind with that version of me.

But standing barefoot in my living room years later, no mirrors, an audience of my cat and no choreography, I realized how deeply it had stayed in my body. Even without instruction, my muscles knew how to listen. Music still reached me first. A lyric gave me goosebumps, a rhythm pulled my ribs into motion. *My hips still don't lie* I thought to myself and chuckled. I thought I was losing it again, laughing to myself listening to 2000s hits with knees of an elder millennial. I did not need a studio to understand what my body was asking for.

Some songs drew my movements tight and contained, my arms cutting sharp lines through the air, my feet grounding hard against the floor. Other songs softened me. My body swayed, bent, opened. I closed my eyes and let my head fall back. I let my spine curve. I moved without worrying how it looked or wondering if it was right.

Once, after a day that left me raw without explanation during peak pandemic days, I put on a song I knew by heart and danced until my legs shook. It was Lady Gaga's *Born This Way*. The room grew warm. Sweat gathered at the base of my neck and the top of my brows. My breath came fast and loud. When the song ended, I stood still in the sudden quiet, my heart pounding, and noticed the ache I had carried all day had shifted. It had moved somewhere I could breathe around it.

Dance no longer needed the studio to do its work. It didn't need mirrors or approval. It still knew how to move emotion through my body, how to loosen what had tightened, how to remind me that expression does not expire when performance ends. On this particular day, I was getting into sourdough bread making, the hobby that every 30-something seemed to adopt at some point during the pandemic. It wasn't a great loaf, but it still let out steam when I cut it after my solo dance party.

Baking generally arrived more quietly.

At first it was practical. A loaf of banana bread made on a slow afternoon to avoid wasting the overripe fruit. Cookies baked for a friend. But as the years went on, I found myself lingering in the details, experimenting with different types baked goods: sourdough scones, shortbread cookies and croissants. The way dough yielded under my hands felt like the putty I played with as a kid, but edible. The patience required to wait for it to rise. The smell of sugar and butter warming the kitchen.

I remember shaping a loaf meant for someone else, my palms pressing and folding, the motion steady and grounding. I thought about how it would be received, where it might be sliced, how it would be eaten. I wrapped it carefully when it was done, tying the string just right, and felt really pleased with myself.

And then there was the night I tried to fry donuts for my friend's birthday.

I thought I could handle it. I thought I knew the rhythm. But the first batch went from golden to black in seconds. Smoke filled the kitchen. The alarm screamed. Flames licked the edge of the pan. I flailed, opening windows, waving towels, panic rising faster than the heat. It was a grease fire, so I knew to not throw water on it and looked for every metal lid I could find to try to contain it.

By the time the fire department arrived, I was mortified, convinced I had pissed off all the building tenants and their animals. But the firefighters entered with patience and humor once they surveyed the damage and realized the culprit was a batch of pumpkin donuts. They lifted the metal

lids and tried the few donuts that hadn't burned. They liked them. "*I hope your friend likes her donuts well done,*" one guy said with his gloves under his arms as he licked his fingers. They all laughed, still smiling despite the smoke and chaos, still human in the face of my failure and what could have been a lot worse if they had arrived any later than they did.

That night I learned that failure can be generous. That care survives mistakes. That something made with intention can still offer warmth, even when it nearly burns everything down.

To thank the crew for their grace, I decided to bake what I knew I could do: a batch of double chocolate chunk cookies and dropped it off at the fire station. They referred to me as the *donut fire lady* when I walked into the station a couple days later. *I guess there could be worse nicknames to have* I thought to myself, chuckled, and promised to try to not create any more havoc in the neighborhood.

Travel carried these lessons farther, away from the flames for my sake.

I remember a work trip that took me to an office location in Rancho Cucamonga, California, a place that felt intentionally distant from anything I found familiar. Six hours in the air, another two or three driving through open stretches of desert. Tumbleweeds rolled across the road, so literal it felt like I had wandered into a western cartoon landscape.

The desert was full of contradiction. Heat that clung to my skin in the day and cold that arrived sharply at night. The San Gabriel Mountains rising casually outside of my office window near a lone gas station with a single pump in the forefront of that landscape. At the end of that workday, I stayed back later. I swiveled around in my chair with a cup of coffee, watching the sky turn orange and purple, and felt my quality/patient-experience worries shrink in the vastness.

I walked out of the building and sat on the hood of my rental car and stared at these mountains. They seemed a lot closer than they were. On my drive to the hotel, I decided to drive toward the mountains to see how far they really were. What was once a sight slightly above eye-level became a sight

that required me to look straight up to take in the view. The world felt larger there, standing as close to the base of this mountain range. In that largeness, I felt less guarded and defined by the need to stay safe in an unfamiliar place. For those minutes before all light disappeared, I was simply present, watching the sun set behind the mountains, knowing that nothing I had carried from home or work that day mattered quite so much in that expanse.

The temperature immediately dropped. *Damn, that escalated quickly, I should have brought a jacket* I thought, realizing I definitely only packed for the flight into Los Angeles, not for the commute into the desert.

Over time, I began to see how these moments fit together.

Running taught my body how to release. Dancing taught it how to speak. Baking taught my hands how to give, even when things went wrong. Traveling taught me how to loosen my grip on who I thought I had to be or what I should do.

None of these promised joy every time, but together they taught me how to recognize it. In the stretch after a long run or in the hum of the dishwasher when it first starts while the homemade muffins and bread cool down on the counter. In the space left behind when something heavy moves through and out of me.

When joy isn't guaranteed, I know where it has found me before and trust it will find me again.

Lately, writing has joined this quiet lineage.

It happens in the same way as the others. I sit down without certainty. I open a page without knowing what will arrive. At first there is resistance, the familiar tightening, the sense that nothing useful will come. *Where do I even start with this?* Then, a sentence opens a door and a memory steps forward.

Even while writing this, emotions I didn't know I was still holding found new language and brought frequent smiles to my face. Writing brings me the same kind of joy I found while standing in front of those mountains, feeling

my fingertips and toes freeze or laughing at my failure with firemen in the aftermath of a kitchen filled with smoke.

I am learning that joy does not announce itself. It does not always arrive when invited. More often, it finds me sideways, mid motion, mid mistake, mid sentence. It shows up when I am willing to stay present, to move, to make, to notice what emerges and let it be enough.

Mary Oliver once wrote that *"joy is not meant to be a crumb."* I think about that often now, how easy it is to ration joy, to accept it only in small, careful portions, to believe we must earn it or wait for it to be offered.

But my body has taught me otherwise.

And as it turns out, Joy has been finding me all along.

From Storm to Sunrise: Discovering Joy

Krishna Raja

Patient

I roll into the morning light,
slow wheels humming soft and low,
and the day greets me gently,
as though it already knows
the battles I've carried,
the storms I've survived—
and still, somehow,
I rise.

Nature showered me joy,
if not healing.
In the first shimmer of sunrise
I find feeling,
and while the world rushes forward,
I stay breathing.
Joy comes quietly,
yet unmistakably—
it finds me anyway.

I once believed strength
was measured in height, in posture,
in standing tall.
Now I know courage
lives inside the fall—
in rebuilding, relearning,
in the steadfast heart
that keeps choosing
to live every part.

The wind on my face
reveals a truth:
anything can translate into joy—
a sound, a shift, a passing cloud.
Even in the stillest hours,
I'm still dreaming;
discovery arrives, effortless,
an upward lift
nature keeps guiding.

Through silence and struggle,
through the weight of every day,
I've stopped chasing joy
and let it find its own way.
In laughter unexpected,
in the warmth of someone near,
in the fragile clarity of living—
I meet joy again.

And in the soft falling rain,
I find meaning.
Though the body may resist,
my spirit keeps singing—

Joy finds me anyway,
Joy finds me anyway.

DRS. THERESA & CHARLES YEO WRITING PRIZE
FIRST PLACE WINNER

Halo after the Fall

Amala Shaju

Research Assistant, Dept of Pathology and Genomic Medicine

The sky over Wayanad had always carried the smell of wet earth—an ancient fragrance that came alive when the monsoon brushed its fingers across the hills. But that particular August, the clouds had hung lower, heavier, like some giant grief waiting to be released. I had not come here looking for beauty. I had been sent—gently but firmly—by my psychiatrist.

“You need a change, Amalu. New people, new air,” she had said. “This retreat will help you.”

Help me.

I had smiled because what else do you do when someone says that after your first suicide attempt, after a breakup from a ten-year relationship that felt like the spine of your identity?

So, I packed a bag, climbed into a van with strangers, and ended up in Wayanad Heritage Resort, nestled near Meenmutty Waterfalls—a place where the mountains whispered legends and the nights smelled of cardamom and damp leaves. The resort was beautiful, but I barely noticed it. My mind was a constant ache, a heavy fog pressing against every breath. I had been hollow for months, moving through life like smoke through fingers.

The gathering was a camp for “healing through nature and community.” A phrase that made me roll my eyes so hard I almost gave myself a migraine.

On the first evening, as people introduced themselves in circles, I stayed at the back with my arms folded. I didn’t want healing. I didn’t want joy. I wanted silence—preferably eternal.

And that was when he walked in.

He was tall, slightly thin, his face glowing with a strange kind of mischief. He dropped his backpack dramatically and flashed a grin at everyone.

“Hello, hello! I am Ahaan,” he said. “Professional traveler, part-time philosopher, and accidental cancer survivor.”

People laughed. I didn’t.

He turned and looked directly at me, as if he had been searching for my face the whole time.

“And you are?”

“No one,” I muttered.

“Interesting name,” he said, taking the empty spot beside me without permission.

I instantly disliked him.

He kept talking—about how cancer had taught him that time was too precious to waste on regrets, how he backpacked with strangers to find stories, how he believed that helping others was the purest form of living.

I nodded occasionally because ignoring him felt too rude, even in my broken state.

“You don’t talk much,” he said finally.

“I didn’t come here to socialize.”

“Then why did you come?”

“My psychiatrist made me.”

He laughed lightly. “Great! Forced healing is still healing.”

I looked away, irritated. But he didn’t take the hint. He just kept chatting—tiny, meaningless things, like the shape of clouds or how the tea here tasted like childhood. I had no idea how someone could talk so much without saying anything truly important.

That night, after dinner, the group gathered near a campfire. Someone began singing ‘Oru Mezhuthiriyude...’ The melody entered me before I could stop it. It was our song—mine and my ex’s. The world blurred. My chest tightened. Every memory—the laughter, the fights, the promises, the heartbeat we once shared—rushed back like a wave I wasn’t ready to face.

Ten years. Ten years of love that had ended with one word: “Goodbye.”

I felt my breath catching. My head buzzed, and everything around me tilted. I needed air. I needed to escape. I stood abruptly and walked away from the circle, away from the song, away from these strangers and their careless happiness.

The rain had begun—soft at first, then more insistent. I walked toward the sound of Meenmutty Waterfall, the roar calling to me like an old friend. The path was slippery and steep, but my feet knew where they wanted to go.

I reached the edge where the water crashed violently below. The spray kissed my face like icy fingers. I closed my eyes and thought of everything I had lost—my love, my baby, my peace, my career. I thought of the surgery I had failed on the very day he left me... and the life that slipped away because my mind had been elsewhere.

What purpose was left for me?

Maybe the world would be better without me. Maybe I had nothing more to give.

I stepped closer to the edge.

And suddenly—arms yanked me back.

I gasped and turned. It was Ahaan, drenched, panting.

“What the hell?!” I hissed at him.

“Shh!” he said urgently. “Don’t shout. Just—just move back from the edge.”

“I don’t need your help!”

“You obviously do,” he said gently but firmly. “Come with me.”

“I don’t want—”

“Please,” he said quietly. Something in his tone wasn’t annoying; it was... knowing. As if he had already walked through that darkness himself.

I should have pulled away. But the impulse to die had vanished, replaced by confusion... and exhaustion. And I realized I didn’t know the way back.

He held out his hand. “The forest is safer if we stick together.”

I followed silently. The tree canopy shielded us from the worst of the rain. After a few minutes, he whispered:

“I want to show you something.”

I frowned, but he guided me through a narrow trail, pushing aside branches until we reached an open pocket in the forest.

And then—I froze.

Fireflies.

Thousands of them. On the trees, on the bushes, dancing like stars come to earth. The entire forest shimmered as if the night had lit candles for us.

“I haven’t seen fireflies in years...” I whispered. “Not since Kannur. They used to glow around the rubber trees after the first rain.”

“Memories,” he said softly, “are gifts. They hurt because they mattered.”

I didn’t know when the tears began, but they flowed freely. I forgot that he annoyed me. I forgot that I hated being here. For a few minutes, the beauty wrapped around me like a warm blanket.

“You know,” he said, “our pain always feels the biggest until we see the world beyond it. Then everything becomes... smaller. Manageable.”

I didn’t reply.

He glanced at my wrist. At the faint scar I tried to hide.

“You’re hurting more than you show,” he said. “But you’re here. That means something. That means you were meant to stay.”

“I lost everything,” I whispered, voice trembling. “My love, my baby, my career... I don’t know what purpose God wants from me.”

“You’ll find it,” he said gently. “And when you do, joy will follow you like these fireflies.”

We walked back slowly. Before separating for the night, he grinned and said:

“Maybe tomorrow you can have a cup of coffee with me? As a thank-you for the magical fireflies?”

I didn’t trust my voice, so I only gave him a small nod.

It was around 2:30 a.m. when the earth shook.

A rumble. A growl. Then a terrifying roar.

Before I could register anything, water and mud smashed into my room, pulling me into darkness. I felt myself thrown, hitting something hard. Then—nothing.

When I regained consciousness, there was only pain. And darkness. And the muffled sound of water rushing somewhere nearby.

I tried to move. A rock pinned my leg. My entire body throbbed. For a moment, I wondered if I was dead.

Then I heard them—voices. Crying. Calling names. I forced myself to shout.

Nothing came out at first. Then, slowly—a rasp.

A light appeared. Someone had heard me.

Hands dug through mud and debris. They pulled me out and carried me to a temporary shelter—just a tarpaulin stretched across broken beams. Around me, wounded people lay with blank, shocked eyes. I saw bodies being pulled from the soil, lifeless and covered in mud.

Twelve villages had been swallowed by the landslide. Roads were wiped out. Schools destroyed. Families gone.

This was no disaster. This was an apocalypse.

But in the apocalypse, humanity rises. People used their bare hands to dig. Strangers carried strangers. The labels of caste, religion, and age—all dissolved.

I sat up slowly despite the pain. The doctor in me awakened instinctively. I began helping, checking pulses, tying makeshift bandages, whispering calm into the ears of children.

In the chaos, I heard a voice.

“Move aside—careful with that beam!”

Ahaan.

Alive. Covered in mud but alive. He was helping rescue others, lifting debris, shouting directions.

I don’t know what came over me—I ran toward him and hugged him tightly, as if my soul had recognized its anchor.

He held my shoulders, searching my face.

“You’re okay?” he asked.

I nodded, tears spilling.

We barely had a moment before a group brought in a child, a little girl from our resort. The naughty one who had danced around the campfire.

She wasn’t breathing.

I threw myself beside her. Pressed my hands to her chest. Gave her breaths. Counted compressions. Whispered prayers.

After a minute that felt like eternity, she gasped.

She cried for her mother.

I held her close, heart shattering. Because I had already seen her mother's lifeless body.

There were more. So many more.

Couples lying hand in hand. Children crying for their parents. Villagers digging with bleeding fingers. And through it all, Ahaan kept helping—lifting, shouting, guiding.

Hours passed before official rescue teams arrived. We were taken to the hospital. I searched for him everywhere.

He never arrived.

Three days later, back home, my parents guarding me like a fragile relic, I saw the newspaper.

Photos of those who died in the landslide.

And there—third row, leftmost—was Ahaan.

My vision blurred. The world tilted. I sank to the floor, choking on sobs I didn't know I still had inside me.

He had been dying the entire time he was helping others; they later told me. A heavy object had struck his head. Internal bleeding had begun immediately. But he never stopped.

Not until his body refused to move.

His parents said he saved at least ten lives that night, including that of the little girl. Including mine.

"And even after death," his mother said, voice breaking, "he donated his organs. He wanted to live helping people."

I didn't speak. I couldn't. My heart felt split open, raw and burning.

Why had he come into my life only to leave so soon?

I didn't know then.

I know now.

Two years later.

I stood in the same Wayanad camp, speaking to a new group of youngsters, the hills still bearing scars but growing green again.

I moved here.

I worked as a doctor and social worker, helping rebuild the villages destroyed that night. We planted trees, rebuilt homes, started trauma-care groups, trained villagers in first aid, and revived schools. I traveled often—just like he once did—seeking beauty and bringing back stories.

Beside me, holding my hand, stood Anu, the little girl who survived that night because of him. No relatives had come forward. She had no one.

So I adopted her.

She now calls me “Mama.”

And every time she smiles, I see life stubbornly choosing to bloom again.

I looked at the young faces in front of me and took a deep breath.

“Two years ago,” I began, “I came here with no will to live. I had lost my love, my career, my child, my purpose. I thought my story had ended. But then someone crossed my path—someone who lived joyfully, fully, even though life had tried to take everything from him. He taught me one simple truth...”

I paused.

Fireflies glowed faintly in the trees nearby.

“...that happiness is not something we find in big victories. It comes quietly when we least expect it—in a stranger’s kindness, in a child’s laugh, in the chance to help someone who needs us. And when we discover our purpose—our true purpose—joy follows us everywhere.”

I smiled at the group, at the mountains, at the memory of him.

“I stand here today because someone saved me twice—once with his hands, and once with his purpose. So I’m asking you... seek joy in the little things. In helping. In healing. In living. You never know whose life you might change—even your own.”

Anu squeezed my hand.

I looked at the sky, silver with monsoon clouds, with gratitude to help me seek my bliss.

And for the first time in years, the joy inside me didn’t feel borrowed.

It felt like mine.

Alternate Names for Light

Keertana Terala

Student, Sidney Kimmel Medical College

The smell of smoke streaming off the tips of blown out birthday candles

Morning of Christmas and the sound of ripping wrapping paper

A pinch of sea salt garnished on a freshly baked chocolate chip cookie

A display of stacked cans, toppled by the kid riding a grocery store cart

The scent of mud dampened by the first few trickles of rainfall

Dandelion dust flowing in circular spirals of wind gusts,
swimming through the air

Cars swerving aside, a path for the sirens to run ablaze

A trickle of water droplets on the petals of a lotus

Iridescence reflected in refractions from the window glass like a prism

History of artwork in torn paper shred remnants on a school bulletin board

Dripping chocolate oozing from molten lava cake

Cotton white lazy Sunday morning and breakfast in bed

A temple's wall holding whispers of selfless prayers

A soft glow returning from a memory you didn't know was still alive.



Maggie Stearns
Reflections of Self,
Acrylic on Canvas
18" x 24"

In These Moments

Nahiya Ellis

Patient

I thought it would come loudly—like applause, or laughter spilling over a crowded table. I thought it would look like recovery, or answers, or a day without pain. Instead, joy came softly, almost apologetically, on a morning when the hospital room smelled like disinfectant, and the sky outside the window was the pale gray of unfinished thoughts.

I was tired then. Not the kind of tired sleep could cure, but the deeper fatigue that settles into the bones after too many appointments, too many explanations, too many nights listening to machines breathe when you are afraid to. Time had become something measured in doses and results, in waiting rooms and parking tickets. Life felt narrowed, reduced to survival.

And yet—there it was.

A nurse paused while adjusting the IV and asked about the book on the bedside table. We talked for less than a minute, but she smiled like she meant it, like I was more than a chart or a room number. Later, the sun shifted just enough to warm my hands through the window. Later, someone I loved sent a message that said nothing important at all—just a memory, just a joke we'd shared before illness became the loudest thing in the room.

None of these moments changed the facts of my situation. But they changed me.

I used to think joy was something you earned after suffering ended. I believed it was the reward at the finish line, waiting patiently for me to catch up. Illness taught me otherwise. Joy, I learned, does not wait. It insists on being found right where you are, even when where you are is hard, even when it feels unfair.

As a patient—or as a caregiver—you become fluent in loss. You lose predictability. You lose privacy. Sometimes you lose the version of yourself who didn't know how fragile everything could be. But what surprised me most was that alongside those losses, something else grew: attention.

I began to notice things. The way coffee tastes when you don't rush it. The relief of a deep breath that doesn't hurt. The strange intimacy of shared silence with someone who understands without asking. These moments didn't erase the pain, but they made room around it. They reminded me that life was still happening, still offering itself in small, luminous pieces.

Joy, I discovered, is not denial. It does not pretend everything is okay. It sits beside grief and fear without trying to fix them. It is the decision to remain open—to beauty, to connection, to meaning—even when closing yourself off would feel safer.

There were days I couldn't find it. Days when joy felt like a word meant for other people, people with lighter stories and fewer scars. On those days, joy found me anyway—in the steady presence of someone who stayed, in the grace of being cared for, in the quiet strength of getting through another hour.

Illness shrinks the future, but joy expands the present. It reminds us that even now—even here—there is something worth noticing, something worth loving.

I no longer wait for joy to announce itself. I listen for it instead, in the ordinary and the overlooked. I find it in resilience, in tenderness, in the courage it takes to hope without guarantees.

Joy did not come as a miracle.

It came as a practice.

And that, I've learned, is enough.

Holding You

Liz Jones

Dermatologist

The calm, the peace that settles in
The sweet newness of your skin
The softness in your little breaths
Quiets a mother's restlessness

The smile flashes across your face
Then disappears as if in a race
Against the time we have together
I can't imagine a change in weather

When I blink
There's one...then two
Then after all,
God gave me you

Time stands still
Then runs right past
Your two big brothers
growing fast

Questioning eyes, all big and blue
Asking why and what to do
Reminding me to be here and now
To learn with you, to figure out how

Quiet blankets us in this chair
Gives me a chance to stop, to stare
My little girl, don't outgrow us
Or let me forget this peacefulness

"The days are long'
The years are short"
The distractions call- the list of chores
The next best thing, the keeping scores

These tiny hands resting on your chin
Draw me back to a place within
Such content and joy I've never known
In the stillness that's our own

Life may not allow forever and ever
But love endures and remembers
Of the things that I might do
I'll always remember holding you

Purnima Sondhay, or A Full Moon Evening

Rishob Dasgupta

Student, Sidney Kimmel Medical College

December in Philly is cold and dark as I speed-walk home. Leaving the hospital at five, I'm never sure if it's late afternoon or midnight. I'm usually humming a tune, and I'm thinking about how good a hot dinner is going to taste. During this usually banal daily ritual, I see a full moon. The moon, as always, watches me. And when I notice it, despite the cold, I feel warm and cozy in my core.

The first full moon I remember this year was at Didu's, my grandmother's, funeral, toward the end of March. In the backyard, we had set up a large candle and let it burn through the day and into the night, until it burned out. My mother, my brother, and I sat in front of it, and dozens of white bouquets. Beside me and behind me, I could feel an endless stream of people coming through, staying for a bit, and then leaving.

One week before that, I had taken STEP 1. One week before that, she had unexpectedly died. In the whirlwind of those two weeks, the details blended, as if I were in a fever dream.

I recall remarking on the weather when we went to sit in front of the candle—slightly overcast, with pockets of sunshine peeking through, as if the blanket of clouds was frayed. I remember the plants in the garden beginning to come alive: zinnias and sunflowers and gardenias starting to bloom, spinach and green onions a verdant green in the background. These were her prized plants, ones she delighted in tending.

When we were all there—my mother, my brother, and I—we sang with our aunts. Everybody knew Didu loved to sing.

I remember the priest and his rituals in the backyard, centered on the candle's flame. After everybody left and the sun went down, the flame cast a flickering light onto the backyard flora. I looked up and saw a bright, pure full moon, an eyewitness to the vagaries of the humans below.

When I was young, Didu would teach me Bengali by translating lines from songs for me:

Purnima sondhyay tomar rajonigandhay

Rupsagorer paarer paane udaashi mon dhaay.

In the full moon's evening, your gardenias drag my dejected mind toward the ocean of beauty.

This was the verse in the first song she ever taught me. It felt as if she knew that one day I would be remembering her, hoping for her, on a moonlit night surrounded by fragrant white flowers—growing in the garden and brought by guests. Teaching me Bengali this way was a gift: she planted the first seed of my love for music.

As I remembered this, I saw Didu's flame and the full moon illuminating the gardenias she had tended in the yard. The gardenias were blooming, alive in the way she loved.

The full moon in October was the first time since the funeral that I got to see my family. In a stroke of luck, my Bengali community's largest cultural event and my first break during my third year of school aligned. In fact, it was the first time since starting school that I could be with my family during Durga Pujo. It was also the first time I had been to a pujo without Didu.

The best part, every year, was when—after the celebrations at 11 p.m.—five other families I'd grown up with would descend on our house, still dressed up, to recap what had happened over the previous two days.

That night, with all twenty-four of us sitting in the living room, my Didu joined us through a new picture of her put up on the mantle. One of the aunties pointed out to me that Didu was a *shawkin* person and that she loved gatherings like this. I asked her what *shawkin* meant.

She explained, "*Shawkin* means passionate. Actually, it doesn't translate well. It's not just passionate—it's loving to do things the right way. It means loving to give more than is needed. These people have a bit of a dramatic flair." And Didu was like that, for sure.

She always put forth a little more excitement than a task demanded, a little more attention to cooking than a dish needed. She was a little more meticulous about her outfits than an occasion warranted, and she labored over her flowers a little more than necessary.

“And it’s hereditary—you’re like that too!” she said. I laughed.

That night, lying in bed, I thought about that. I do want my food to taste good—better than it needs to. Didu taught me to add a little sugar to savory stews, even if it’s not good for you and even if it will barely be noticed, to balance the flavor. I notice when things are slightly off: if a piece of art isn’t hanging perfectly horizontal, or if my writing starts to bend on the page as I move toward the bottom. Noticing these small moments and approaching them with a bit of joyous flair and zest feels like a behavior I inherited and learned from Didu.

When I do these things now, it’s as if her spirit is reaching through me and finding joy in being *shawkin*.

The penultimate time I noticed the full moon, in November, I was on FaceTime, still in my scrubs after coming back from the hospital. The windows in my room overlook a plaza and frame a beautiful vignette of the sky. My mother and grandfather were calling me from India, after they had made the journey to dissolve Didu’s ashes in a sacred river, completing the rituals surrounding her death. It was a somber moment, heavy with peace, and finality.

In that moment, I finally expressed to Didu my gratitude for the gifts she gave me—gifts I didn’t have the understanding or the words for at her funeral.

“For music. You were the first person to be delighted that I wanted to sing. You were the first person to teach me how to sing. For food. Nobody else at home likes to cook. You and I were the two who cooked in elaborate, meticulous ways. For teaching me to be *shawkin* in all my life. People know me as larger-than-life, animated, gregarious. What they don’t know is that through me, the people I meet get to experience you.”

When I look up at the sky and see the full moon—the *purnima*—watching me, I’m reminded of the gifts my grandmother gave me. The gifts she nurtured in me are still at work. It’s why I’m humming, thinking about what

dinner is going to be when I get back to the apartment. It's why I talk loudly and laugh at my own jokes.

It is why, on a dark and cold December night, I look up at that moon, remember my Didu, and feel warm, blessed, and joyous.

The closing lines of that first song she taught me are:

Tomar chander aloy

Milay amar dukkho-sukher sakol abosan.

In your moonlit embrace

All my sorrows and joys unite.

(Song excerpts are from *Fagun Haway Haway* by Rabindranath Tagore, published 1931)

DRS. THERESA & CHARLES YEO WRITING PRIZE
HONORABLE MENTION

A Reflection on Joy: An Ode to Mother

Mary Bouchaud

Retired Employee, Director of the ABSN+1 Program
in the College of Nursing

Can joy exist amid personal sadness or loss? For a long time, I wasn't sure of the answer. Today, I can say with certainty that for me, the answer is a resounding yes. Reaching this understanding was neither easy nor immediate. It took time, reflection, and lived experiences for me to recognize that joy does not disappear in the presence of pain—it changes. Even though it often seemed I was destined to become a nurse, the deeper lesson I learned along the way was not simply about my profession, but about how joy can be found and sustained even in the most difficult moments. I did not arrive at nursing by accident. Caring for others felt natural long before it became my lifelong profession. As the first of six children, responsibility entered my life early, and with it came the quiet understanding that caring for others is both a duty and a privilege. Nursing offered a way to transform that instinct into meaningful work; work that demands lifelong learning, presence, and compassion, often in situations where life and death exist side by side. In such an environment, joy rarely announces itself loudly; it must be recognized in smaller, quieter ways.

Until recently, I had never been asked (or even considered) what brings me joy. Neither my family nor my professional life had ever made space for that question. That changed in February of 2025, when I attended a general faculty meeting. I was instructed to take an empty jar, a pack of Post-it notes, and a marker before sitting down. We were asked to reflect on a simple but unfamiliar prompt: *What brings you joy—not what makes you happy, but what brings you joy?* Each response was to be written on a Post-it note and placed into a “joy jar” for our office, something to return to during difficult moments.

I admit that my initial reaction was skepticism. I questioned whether reflecting on joy belonged in a workplace meeting, especially in a profession defined by urgency, accountability, and responsibility. I was raised to believe that work and personal life should remain separate—that when you go to work, you

perform the job you are paid to do. For nearly five decades in nursing, I had never paused to consider joy as part of my professional life. There never seemed to be time, nor did it feel appropriate, amid the pressures of healthcare and the weight of caring for others. That resistance to the idea of joy was not accidental. It was shaped, in part, by loss.

My mother died at the age of sixty-eight from ALS, and it was not only her death that altered me, but the manner in which she was cared for during her illness. Witnessing negligent and, at times, abusive treatment and care that came not only from a strained system but from fellow nurses, deeply fractured my sense of purpose. The pride, the joy I once felt in caregiving, in being a nurse, was replaced by doubt, anger, shame, and profound disappointment. For a time, nursing no longer felt like a calling, but a source of pain and regret. Yet it was through the memories of my mother that joy slowly returned. Even in suffering, she embodied dignity, grace, and kindness. Remembering who she was—and the values she lived by—allowed me to reconnect with what first brought me to nursing: the human connection, the responsibility to care with compassion and kindness, and the privilege of being present for others. Joy, I realized, had not disappeared; it had been buried beneath grief and disillusionment.

Guided by the values I was taught, both personally and professionally, I found renewed joy in nursing through the education and preparation of new nurses. Whenever I work one-on-one with students who are struggling or who initially appear disengaged, I am uplifted by their growth and transformation. Moments like these reaffirm my hope for the profession and remind me that joy is not just a fleeting feeling; it is something we can nurture and share, even in the most demanding and challenging environments.

Spiritual joy, for me, is quiet but powerful. Although I am a practicing Catholic, my faith has not always felt steady, and there have been times when I felt lost rather than assured. Yet joy often finds me in unexpected moments of stillness. Sitting in Mass, listening to music that speaks directly to my life, or hearing a sermon that resonates deeply, I feel something shift within me. I experience joy watching children volunteer as altar servers, especially as they struggle to get the rhythm and rituals just right. Those moments bring back joyful memories of my own daughters—first as altar servers, then playing instruments in the church band, and eventually becoming Gospel readers. In these moments, my heart feels full and at peace. They remind me that the joy from growth,

service, and belonging is imperfect and ongoing. Even when my faith feels uncertain, these experiences ground me. They remind me that joy does not require certainty; it requires presence. Like caregiving and nursing, faith offers moments where meaning reveals itself quietly, reaffirming that I am not alone and that connection endures.

Reflecting on that “joy jar” exercise, I now understand that joy in my profession does not come from ease or absence of hardship. It comes from meaning. It comes from honoring those who shaped me, from moments of genuine connection, from family, friends, and colleagues, and from choosing to preserve humanity and dignity in a profession that can too easily strip it away. Joy can coexist with sorrow—not by ignoring pain, but by moving through it with purpose.

The endpoint of this journey is not the absence of grief, nor is it a return to a time when joy was not a consideration. My experiences taught me that joy is not naïve optimism, nor is it incompatible with sorrow. Rather, joy is an act of resistance against systems and circumstances that threaten to erase dignity, compassion, and humanity. What makes this testimony worth sharing is not the experience of loss itself, but the perspective I gained by living it simultaneously as a nurse and as a daughter. I saw firsthand how easily humanity can be lost in the name of efficiency, and how deeply that loss wounds not only patients and families, but caregivers themselves. Standing in that space changed how I understand joy, care, and responsibility. It taught me that joy is not something that disappears in the presence of suffering, but something that must be deliberately protected and practiced, especially in professions built on caregiving. That knowledge reshaped how I show up in my work, how I teach, how I advocate, and how I lead.

Today, joy informs how I change the world in quiet but meaningful ways. It guides how I speak up for vulnerable patients, how I mentor future nurses, and how I challenge practices that prioritize systems over people. Joy reminds me that caregiving is not simply a task to be completed, but a relationship to be honored. By choosing joy—especially in environments where it feels least appropriate—I help create spaces where compassion and kindness can survive. In the end, joy is not something I found by chance. It is something I reclaimed through loss, carried forward through purpose, and now extend to others. If there is anything universal in my experience, it is this: even when joy is buried beneath grief, it remains possible—and choosing it has the power to positively change not only our own lives, but the lives we touch.

What Brings Me Joy

Rita Allen

Patient

My joy are my children.

It starts with my son,
28 years of becoming a man
I once held with shaking hands,
Learning strength, by watching
Him learn his own.

Then come my 4 daughters,
Each one pulling me forward
In a different way.

My 23-year-old teaches me grace,
How softness can still stand tall.

My 21-year-old challenges me,
Reminds me that truth deserves a voice,
Even when it shakes the room.

My 18-year-old stands at the edge of becoming,
Half courage, half fear
Showing me how brave hope really is.

My 15-year-old, my baby, still learning who she is,
Still trusting this cold world,
Still reminding me that wonder is worth protecting.

They bring me joy not because they made life simple
They made it honest
They forced me to grow
When I would have chosen to stay small.

I no longer wait for joy, I built it
In listening instead of fixing,
In staying present when I'm tired,
In loving them louder than my past.

Joy is important
Because 5 sets of eyes
Learn what love looks like
By watching me survive with tenderness.

When my body aches,
My mind feels full,
My spirit thinned by time
They ground me.
They remind me who I am
Outside of struggle.

My children are not just my joy
They are my proof.
That I endured.
That I grew.
That light can come
From everything I lived through.



Pamela Walter
Pumpkin Patch 1 & 2
Digital Photo

My Daughters

Terryann Henry

Patient

Motherhood altered my understanding of joy more profoundly than any philosophy ever could. When my daughters entered my life, they did not arrive as guarantees of happiness or solutions to complexity. They arrived as responsibility, vulnerability, and love in its most demanding form. Each daughter carried her own temperament, her own questions, her own way of engaging the world. And through them, joy became something lived rather than theorized.

My eldest daughter, Nathalia, carries strength quietly. She observes before she speaks, absorbs before she reacts. Through her, I learned that joy does not always announce itself. Sometimes it settles gently, rooted in stability and thoughtfulness. Watching her grow taught me that joy can exist in restraint, in discernment, in the calm confidence of knowing oneself without needing external affirmation.

My younger daughter, Ja’Niya, embodies movement and expression. Her joy is expansive, unfiltered, immediate. She laughs without reservation and recovers quickly from disappointment. Through her, I was reminded that joy does not wait for permission. It exists fully in the present moment, unconcerned with past missteps or future uncertainty. She taught me that joy is not naïve—it is courageous.

Together, my daughters reshaped my inner landscape. They reminded me that joy does not require ideal conditions. Children do not wait for perfection to experience delight. They find wonder in simplicity. They inhabit the moment fully, without rehearsing loss or anticipating failure. In watching them, I remembered how to be present again.

There were days when exhaustion pressed heavily on me—days when responsibility felt relentless, and my own needs fell to the margins. And yet, the sound of their laughter, the rhythm of their conversations, pulled me back into the now. In those moments, joy was not abstract. It was audible. Tangible. Real.

Raising daughters also forced me to confront my own relationship with joy. I became acutely aware that how I live teaches them how to live. My boundaries, my self-respect, my willingness to rest—all of it communicates lessons, whether spoken or silent. I realized that if I wanted my daughters to grow into women who honored themselves, I had to embody that truth first. Choosing joy became more than a personal act; it became a generational responsibility.

For a long time, I waited for joy. I waited for stability, for certainty, for life to feel less demanding. I believed joy would follow once everything else fell into place. But waiting did not slow life down. Responsibilities continued. Time moved forward. And joy, I learned, does not arrive through postponement.

Joy requires participation.

I learned to make joy intentionally, especially in seasons when it felt least accessible. I made joy by setting boundaries and honoring them without apology. I made joy by choosing rest in a culture that glorifies exhaustion. I made joy by releasing relationships and patterns that demanded my depletion as proof of loyalty. This process required honesty—often uncomfortable honesty—about what no longer served me.

Forgiveness became essential. Not because others always deserved absolution, but because my spirit required freedom. Resentment is heavy. It consumes emotional energy and clouds perception. Letting go was not weakness; it was self-preservation. In releasing bitterness, I made space for joy to return to places it had been crowded out of.

Faith further reframed my understanding of joy. Scripture does not promise ease, but it consistently affirms meaning. Faith taught me that joy is not dependent on outcomes; it is sustained by trust. Trust that life holds purpose beyond immediate circumstances. Trust that pain does not negate worth. Trust that endurance itself carries dignity.

There were moments when faith was the only place where joy could exist. When external reality offered little reassurance, joy became quiet assurance rather than emotional elevation. It was not excitement or celebration; it was steadiness. A deep knowing that I was not alone, not forgotten, and not defined solely by struggle. Spiritually, joy grounded me. It reminded me that life is not random, even when it feels uncertain.

Joy, I have learned, is essential. Without it, life becomes transactional. We reduce ourselves to obligations and survival. Joy restores humanity. It reconnects us to curiosity, creativity, and compassion. It allows us to engage with life without being consumed by it.

Joy is also resistance. In a world that profits from dissatisfaction and burnout, choosing joy is a radical act. It rejects the belief that worth must be proven through exhaustion. Joy insists that rest is not laziness, peace is not complacency, and fulfillment is not selfish.

For my daughters, joy matters because it teaches them that life is not merely something to endure. It shows them that they are allowed to experience delight without earning it through suffering. It teaches them that peace is not something to postpone and that self-respect is non-negotiable.

The effects of joy are both subtle and profound. Physically, joy relaxes the body. It softens breath and releases tension unconsciously held. In moments of joy, the nervous system remembers safety. Mentally, joy clears space. It interrupts rumination and restores perspective. Emotionally, joy builds resilience, allowing grief and gratitude to coexist. Spiritually, joy reconnects us to meaning and gratitude. It becomes a quiet form of worship.

Discovering joy is not about constant happiness. It is about awareness. It is about learning to recognize light without demanding that darkness disappear first. Joy lives in choosing yourself when familiarity would keep you stuck. It lives in starting over when necessary. It lives in loving deeply without guarantee.

Joy is not fragile. It is resilient. It adapts. It survives. And when nurtured intentionally, it transforms not only the individual, but the generations watching.

If my daughters learn anything from my life, I hope it is this: joy is not something you postpone until life becomes easier. Joy is something you practice. And even in a complicated world, joy is always worth discovering.

Nathalia J – 14

Ja’Niya W – 4

By Love of Unseen Things That Do Not Die

Trinh Nguyen

Pharmacy student

Hi Grandma,

It's been a while since I wrote to you.

The last time I saw you, a nurse was holding an iPad over your hospital bed on the other side of the world. The screen froze every few seconds, catching your face in strange angles, but I could still see the familiar curve of your cheekbones, the way your hair had been smoothed back. The room behind you was all metal rails and pale walls. Somewhere, out of frame, I imagined the tiny bottle of herbal oil you used to dab behind your ears when we went to temple.

I remember trying to smile so you wouldn't worry, even though my throat was burning. You couldn't answer; the machine was breathing for you. I said "Con chào Ngoại" anyway, as if the words might find some side door into your awareness. When the call ended, I stared at my own reflection in the black screen and realized how much of my life you would never get to see.

So, I'm writing to tell you about it.

You always asked the same question when I called from school: "Con có vui không?" *Are you happy?* Back then I answered the way busy students do, with a jumble of grades and obligations, as if satisfaction could be measured by how much I was managing to carry.

If I could answer you now, I would tell you something different. I think I'd do it by simply telling you what my days have become.

My first dorm was an old building that used to be a hotel. They kept the thick carpet in the hallways, so my footsteps were always a little muffled, like I was sneaking through someone else's memory. Behind it stretched a long, open field—technically a golf course, but to me it was just grass and sky.

On nights when classes and homesickness pressed too hard on my chest, I walked out there and lay on my back until the damp seeped through my jeans. The stars were so bright they made my eyes water. Cars roared by on a distant road, and every few minutes, bells from a stone tower rang over the treetops. I didn't know the melody, but it felt like the whole campus was breathing in time with it.

Those nights didn't erase the problem sets waiting on my desk or the emails from home about your blood pressure, your hospital visits, the way your legs were getting weaker. But for an hour at a time, I could feel my own smallness without being crushed by it. My body unclenched. My mind stopped rehearsing worst-case scenarios. It was just me, the cold air, and the stubborn light pouring down from places I'd never touch.

You used to tell me stories about your childhood during the war—how you would sit under the one tree that hadn't been cut down in your village, the way the leaves sounded when the wind moved through them. “Mệt quá thì con ngồi xuống,” you'd say. *When you're tired, sit down.* You didn't mean for me to lie on an American golf course under a foreign sky, but I think of you every time I do.

There was a boy who lived across the hall from me. You would have liked him: gentle hands, quick to wash the dishes, a love for children and animals. We met by accident, passing each other in the hallway with armfuls of laundry, then again in the common room, then again in the dining hall. Sitting side by side, we learned we didn't have to fill every pause; his calm personality made room for my fast, tumbling words and spur-of-the-moment ideas. For the first time, I felt as if I were standing on solid ground, in love with my best friend, safe enough to be exactly who I was.

We studied at the same table until two in the morning, notebooks overlapping. We shared snacks and stories. On rainy days we walked to class under one umbrella. I started to notice small things: how he tilted the handle so the water sheeted off his side instead of mine, how he slowed his stride when my backpack dragged me down. You used to say you could judge a person by how they carried a bag of groceries for an elder. I think you could judge them by who ends up with the wet shoulder, too.

We didn't stay together after graduation. Life pulled us to different cities, different futures. The last time we said goodbye, it was on a quiet street, our hands empty. For a long time afterward, even opening an umbrella hurt. Then the sting thinned out, and what remained was the memory of being nineteen and feeling completely safe napping on someone else's floor while a pot of instant noodles boiled over.

You taught me that love is not only the staying; it is also the way we treat each other while we're there. Whatever we were to each other, it left a softness I carry forward. When I look for people now, I look for that same instinct to tip the umbrella toward someone else.

The summer my classmates put on blazers and went to work at big-name companies, I got on a plane to teach in Vietnam.

My classroom had windows that stuck halfway when you pushed them up, a fan that clicked like it was keeping time for us, and a whiteboard that never quite erased completely. The kids arrived in bursts—shoes scuffing, voices bouncing, hands waving. We practiced simple sentences: My name is... I like... I want to be...

At first, they were shy, eyes on the floor, English caught in their throats. I remembered how you used to nudge me forward at family gatherings, whispering, "*Chào đi con.*" *Go say hello.* So, I greeted them first, over and over, exaggerating my own mistakes, turning my tongue into a clown to make them laugh.

Slowly, they loosened. A girl in the front row started raising her hand for every question, whether she knew the answer or not. A boy in the back stayed after class to ask how to say "engineer" because he wanted to build bridges. On the last day, they lined up to hug me one by one. Little arms wrapped around my waist, small heads pressed into my shoulder. They slipped folded papers into my hands: shaky hearts, stick figures, "Thank you teacher" spelled three different ways.

I didn't have a salary that summer, or a fancy photo ID. I went home smelling like sweat and street food instead of office air-conditioning. But my body felt light in a way it rarely did during the school year. You, who stitched clothes late into the night for other people's children, would have

understood that feeling: the quiet satisfaction of using your hands, your voice, your patience to make something that didn't exist before—a well-fitted shirt, a child's new word.

Not everything came easily. I failed a chemistry class once—badly enough that it felt less like a misstep and more like a verdict. When the grade posted, my stomach dropped as if I'd stepped off a curb I hadn't seen. For weeks I walked around campus feeling like an imposter in my own life. Every time I passed the science building, I heard a little voice saying, "Maybe this world isn't for you."

When I called home, I didn't tell my parents right away. I told you. I braced for disappointment, but you just sighed softly and said, "*Thì học lại.*" *Then you learn it again.* As if it were the simplest thing in the world. As if the story wasn't over unless I decided to stop turning the pages.

So, I signed up for the class again later. In between, I took a course about how the brain moves the body—how a thought turns into a signal, into a muscle twitch, into a step. I stayed up late, tracing circuits in my notebook until the lines blurred. By the end of the semester, I had the highest grade I'd ever earned in anything.

When I saw that number on the screen, I thought of your voice: calm, matter-of-fact, holding the door open to a future I couldn't see yet. My shoulders dropped. My jaw unclenched. Something inside me, tight for years, loosened.

Maybe that's what your question—"Con có vui không?"—was really about. Not whether everything was easy, but whether I still felt like my life could move, change, surprise me.

Now I spend my days in a hospital, the kind with automatic doors and air that smells like antiseptic and warm plastic. My badge has a new logo, but it still says "student." You would fuss over how pale I look under the fluorescent lights and then immediately start asking what I've eaten.

Patients arrive in all kinds of weather. Some come in angry, some quiet, some crumbling the moment they sit down. On paper, they are diagnoses and lab values. In person, they are whole novels.

There is an older woman who leans in to tell me, “I have been married three times, but only one of them really counts.” She laughs, a bright, startled sound that makes the wrinkles around her eyes fold into each other like pleats. There is a man whose prognosis is written in numbers I don’t say out loud. He doesn’t ask for explanations; he just asks if I can stay a minute and hold his hand. His palm is dry and warm. The monitor ticks steadily beside us like a metronome.

There is a mother whose chart lists more relapses than birthdays I can remember. Her voice is rough, but when she talks about her children, it goes soft at the edges. “I messed up,” she says. “I know that. But I want them to see me try again.” There is a woman who has buried her sons because sadness swallowed them whole. She sits very straight in the exam room and answers our questions one by one. At the end, she says, “If this helps someone else’s child stay a little longer, then I’ll keep talking.”

These conversations do something to my insides that I don’t have a neat name for. My heart aches, but it also feels strangely steadier. My breath slows down. The world, for a moment, narrows to the space between two chairs.

You used to hold my hand when we crossed the street, your fingers small but somehow unshakeable. I didn’t realize, then, that you were sharing your balance with me. Now, when I sit beside a patient, I think of that. How much can pass through skin to skin: reassurance, grief, permission to keep going.

You asked me once, half-joking, if all this studying and working meant I was “chasing money” like people you saw on TV. I stumbled through an answer about wanting to help people, to understand the body, to serve my community. All of that is true. But there’s another part I hadn’t learned how to say yet.

What keeps me here—in classrooms, in clinics, in long meetings about systems that feel too slow to change—is not some abstract idea of success. It’s the way my chest loosens when a friend texts me a photo of the soup she made from your recipe. It’s the way my shoulders drop when I walk home and feel the evening air on my face instead of checking the weather on my phone. It’s the way my mind clears when I laugh so hard with people I love that I forget, for a moment, what I was worried about all day.

These things are small, but they do real work. My pulse quiets. My back hurts less. The part of me that wants to shut down, to turn away from the news, to stop asking hard questions about who gets care and who doesn't—that part melts just enough to stay open one more day.

I think about people who fight for safer neighborhoods, fairer hospitals, and for better futures for kids who look like me. Their days are full of frustration and slow-moving change. If all they ever felt was outrage, they would burn out. Maybe that's why you insisted on cutting fruit for us just so, on saving the ripest mango for whoever had the hardest week. You knew something I am only now learning; that simple pleasures are not a distraction from pain; they're the fuel we need to face it.

So, when I bake with friends in a slanted little kitchen, when I walk the long way home to pass under the maple trees, when I stay on the phone with my parents long enough to hear the same story twice—I am not just indulging myself. I am stocking up on the strength it takes to keep listening, to keep caring, and to keep saying yes when someone asks for help.

If you were still here, you would probably tell me I am overthinking it. You would press a bowl of rice into my hands and say, “Ăn đi, rồi tính.” *Eat first, decide later.*

I carry you with me—the smell of your herbal oil, the sound of your slippers on tile, the way you patted my shoulder when words weren't enough. I carry the girl on the golf course, the teacher in the hot classroom, the student staring at a failed exam, the volunteer holding a stranger's hand.

I honor all of them. But I am trying, as you taught me, to keep my eyes on the street in front of me, not just the one behind. To keep noticing the sweetness that still shows up: in a patient's unexpected joke, in a friend's late-night message, in a sky that keeps turning dark and then bright again no matter what kind of day I've had.

You once told me that some things don't disappear, even when the people who taught them to us do. Kindness. Curiosity. The way a hand reaches out for another hand in the dark.

Just maybe

Jennifer Rauscher

Nurse Practitioner

It is living your life authentically for you.

It is drowning out *you should be this way, behave like them, do it like this.*

It is living how you are, not how you want the world to view you.

It is finding the one flower amongst the weeds, knowing the sun is there even on the cloudiest of days.

It is finding your now wife, the love of your life, after decades of hiding, bad dates and heartbreak.

It is wanting to call your mom to say hi, wondering if heaven has a landline.

It is seeing the smiles and cheers, while celebrating remission and supporting others at relapse.

It is learning the fragility of this life. It is losing loved ones and also being blown away by the spirit and power of humans.

It is rallying together to pick each other up.

It is realizing life has no opposite, it is life. Birth has death, happy has sad, love has heartbreak, win and lose.

But life is life, and just maybe we need to try and be grateful for the small things; the cards sent for no reason, people holding the door with a smile, nature and animals, fresh sheets and warm hugs.

Maybe joy is to ride the wave of life, the unpredictability of it, together with friends, family, and even strangers. Knowing that sorrow and sadness will be present, but joy will surface and if we are lucky it will nourish us.



Annalee Capuano

Floral

8.5" x11"

Monoprint on Paper

Sugar and Salt

Julia Sorkin

Student, Sidney Kimmel Medical College

I was 4. I sat on the windowsill of the American dream: a yellow cookie-cutter house, built in the post-World War II era, a perfectly tailored lawn with magnolias blooming in the spring, and a friendly neighbor who always shoveled our snow before we got a chance. Beyond this facade were two people that gave up everything they had in the USSR in hopes for a better future. A new life with no bells and whistles. Just one suitcase each, economic instability, and a foreign tongue. However, they carried the one most important thing with them to America: the will to find joy in every difficult moment. That joy crystallized when America offered my father immigration just months before he was set to complete his PhD. Five years of hard work to be given an impossible choice: a PhD or a chance for the American dream. He chose the latter, with nothing but a smile left on his face. To this day, he still says it was the best decision of his life.

Perched on that windowsill, I waited each evening around 6pm for the sound of the key fumbling in the doorknob. Dad was home! That meant it was time to watch *House* together, curled into our crème-colored plush recliner in the living room. It was just wide enough to make it a comfortable seat for two. I climbed into his lap, eager to see which patients would appear on the screen that evening. Sometimes we rejoiced, other times we grieved, and I asked far too many questions. Through the glow of the monitor, the complexity of medicine began to seep through. I wanted more.

I was 10. I learned my dad had once held a dream of his own: to become a neurosurgeon. It would have been the perfect career for him. However, being Jewish in the USSR meant that becoming a physician was effectively impossible, constrained by systemic discrimination. So, he folded that dream away. Still, I watched the joy in his eyes through our years watching *House* together. What stayed with me was not the loss of his dream, but the way he never mourned it. By the time we reached the final season with eight years of guessing diagnoses together behind us, I understood that joy does not require fulfillment of all your ambitions. Instead, he carried the same curiosity into a different life – engineering aircraft systems and sending rockets into space.

I was 13. The phone rang. My sister and I hid behind the sofa as my parents spoke in hushed voices in the kitchen. My dad had cancer. I thought this was the end. All the episodes of *House*, and neither of us knew how to fix him. One thing I did know was that my dad would want one thing from me in these difficult moments: find the joy. And so, I did. I turned to cakes.

Three small tools, one package of fondant, and an endless supply of YouTube videos later, and I was on the way to making my first wedding cake, with some disastrous creations in between. I sat in the kitchen for hours, molding every piece of sugary dough into an array of peonies or roses. Each creation had its own story. It was magical. It was the best escape.

One kidney and a full recovery later, my father was cancer-free. In the months that followed, what had started as a new hobby and distraction slowly became something steadier. My kitchen turned into a workspace, and much to my mother's dismay, a small bake shop emerged from our home. By 15, I had cake orders coming in every weekend. Baking was no longer just an escape; it was how I learned to create joy deliberately, even when parts of life felt uncertain.

I was 16. I held my breath as I prepared to slice into the flesh before me. As my pulse quickened, the knife in my hand pierced the skin. I exhaled with relief as the pear's nectar ran down the blade and the thin slices of fruit fell neatly onto the cutting board. I arranged them into my most intricate design yet: multicolored pears trimmed in gold, resembling Marc Chagall's stained-glass pieces. In that moment, I realized this was what joy looked like for me: creation in the face of fear. Medicine and cake decorating no longer felt like parallel lives, but reflections of the same instinct – to steady my hands, to make something beautiful, to bring comfort where there is vulnerability. In choosing to create, even in moments of uncertainty, I learned how to choose joy.

One day, I hope to be sitting on a windowsill in my own cookie-cutter home, watching my children run across a carefully tailored lawn, with two letters after my name that signify far more than "M" and "D." They will represent resilience, choice, and the privilege of caring for others. For my father, thank you for showing me that joy is not something life gives freely, but something we decide to cultivate for ourselves. Most importantly, thank you for teaching me one of life's greatest gifts: that joy is not the absence of hardship, but the choice to create meaning and beauty within it.

Discovering Joy

Marianita L. Santiago

Home Health Aide and Family Caregiver

I thought joy would feel like arrival
a finish line after endurance,
a reward for surviving well.

I was wrong.

Joy didn't erase what hurt me.
It didn't rewrite the past
or make sense of every loss.

Instead, it met me where I stood
older, softer, clearer
and asked me to stay.

Joy lived in small truths
in choosing to rest without guilt,
in loving without abandoning myself,
in speaking honestly and letting the answer be what it is.

It wasn't loud happiness.
It was peace that didn't flinch.

Joy grew the moment I realized
that understanding others
doesn't require betraying myself,
that compassion and boundaries
can exist in the same breath.

I discovered joy
not by chasing it,
but by allowing myself to be whole
grief included, hope intact.

Joy is not the absence of pain.
It is the courage to remain open anyway.

And today, that is enough.

Building a House

Natalie Snyder

Resident physician, Sidney Kimmel Medical College Alumni

No acute events overnight. Patient states he enjoyed breakfast this AM, was happy after daughter's visit. Denies chest pain, nausea, shortness of breath—

Buzz! My phone screen lights up with a text from an old friend. “Thought you might enjoy this. You should submit!” A link follows, which I click.

Consider all the ways you have and feel joy in your life.

I stare back at the screen.

At this moment, I do not feel joy. I feel my pager buzzing, the dead weight of my desk phone cradled into my shoulder as I call back a nurse for a tongue-lashing—where are the PRNs?! I watch the oil of my fingertips smudge letters on my keyboard as I type familiar strokes for yet another order, racing through the labyrinth of the CPRS menu.

I take a deep breath, puffing out my chest like a proud peacock as my lungs fill. As an intern at the VA, the world feels like it's on fire—a never-ending torrent of pages and calls and emails and scolding and notes, notes, notes, notes. I leave every day to a bleak, black sky and winter winds whipping my face. I've made a ritual of taking an exaggerated breath as I exit the hospital, that familiar ache in my lungs reminding me I'm alive.

I turn back to my phone.

Joy is one way to nourish ourselves in life. May diving into this writing practice bring you deep waves of joy!

Diving into my bed would bring me deep waves of joy. I love-react to my friend's text message, tell her it's good to hear from her, and save the link to my to-do list—a list of taunting, out-of-reach pleasures. Books to read. Piano pieces to play. Writing prompts I swear I'll get to after this rotation is done. The phrase has lost all meaning.

When did you become so cynical and bitter? I think to myself. *Where was that idealism you had when you applied to medicine?* I make a mental note to find my medical school application essay. Idealism and joy can wait. So can patience. I have patients.

I return to my note on Mr. Helinski, whom my co-intern and I affectionately call Helsinki. If anyone could use a prompt on finding joy, it is him. He is a crusty old man – literally, with flakes of eczema and peeling chapped lips and figuratively, with a brusque, unfriendly demeanor. Every morning, he shoos me out of the room. He huffs as I listen to his lungs to monitor resolution of his pleural effusion, berating me about why he still can't go home. He has eight children, each with a different version of what should happen next, each calling the nursing station to page me, each insisting—urgently—that I not speak to the others.

My Life My Story. I notice it on his chart. I begin reading.

He's one of twelve children. He grew up in a family with minimal means and learned carpentry at a young age. "I developed a lifelong love of working with my hands," he writes.

I look at my hands fluttering over the keyboard and think of my love of classical piano, inspired by my late grandmother. Playing Chopin, losing myself in music, the satisfaction of mastering a difficult passage. I feel my father's pride, the intergenerational thread connecting his mother to me.

I continue to read that Mr. Helinski grew up a town over from me. I picture the courthouse in the town square where he would walk to pick up lumber to help his father build furniture at home. I used to wait for the school bus there.

He joined the Air Force and served in the Korean War. "I learned to fly the same planes as my brother," he writes. "In fact, we were discharged from the Air Force at the same time. My mother opened her door to find both of us had returned to her doorstep at the same time!"

I think about my siblings, a patchwork of blood-relation and marriage and chosen family. How my parents dressed my younger sister and me in matching outfits, like two dolls in a set. Even now, we laugh when we arrive

at dinner dressed alike. I feel my mother's arms around all of us, her gratitude for all her children back under one roof.

"My wife and I had eight beautiful children," Helinski continues. I snort softly—I know these eight well. He writes about their names, their personalities, how the older children care for a son with a disability. This messy knot of familial squabbles begins to untangle. He built his family's home with his two bare hands; it is his proudest accomplishment.

"I have had an amazing life," he continues. "I've traveled the world. I married the woman of my dreams. I love my children, my 28 grandchildren, and my 13 great grandchildren."

I think about my great grandmother—*Baba*—a Holocaust survivor from the Soviet Union. She never learned English; our conversations were hugs, kisses, and my broken Russian. Love came in hot blintzes and bowls of borscht. I've thought of her at every sentinel moment in my life. The trajectory of our family lineage from her generation to mine is astounding. I am living a life so beautiful and so good, she could not have possibly dreamed it.

"These last few years, I've been quite sick," Mr. Helinski writes. "I don't travel much anymore. I just fall asleep in different hospital rooms."

I pause. Of course. Even after endless days of pages and notes, I leave to stars in an inky sky and fresh air kissing my cheeks and reminding me I'm alive. And his monotonous days are punctuated only by falling asleep in another unfamiliar hospital bed.

I go to his room and sit beside him. He looks at me skeptically.

"Weren't you already here? Do you need to listen to my lungs again?"

"No," I say. "Your lungs are okay. I just wanted to tell you I read your *My Life My Story*."

He smiles—something I have never seen him do.

We talk about our shared neighborhood, his children and grandchildren. I tell him about my baba and how lucky his great grandchildren are to have him.

Consider all the ways you have and feel joy in your life.

Joy is the satisfaction of working with your hands, of making music and art. It's growing up and growing old with the ones you love. It's exploring the world on a new adventure and finding a purpose and arriving home on your mother's doorstep to be wrapped in her arms, you and all your siblings together again under the same roof. It's family, connection, and building a home—literal and figurative. It's standing on the shoulders of giants who came before you. It's telling your story. It's having your story heard. It's gratitude for your education and your health and your life. It's gratitude for a deep breath and a gust of wind on your face and diving into your own bed.

On afternoon rounds, I tell my attending that Mr. Helinski's oxygen saturation has remained stable and that he tolerated lunch without aspirating.

And I tell him how Mr. Helinski built his house from scratch.

DRS. THERESA & CHARLES YEO WRITING PRIZE
HONORABLE MENTION

Vanilla Cones

Kazi Habib

Student, Sidney Kimmel Medical College

Joy arrived early in my life dressed as something small and pale. Perfectly unremarkable. A McDonald's vanilla cone. Not the kind you take photos of. Not the kind a food critic would ever defend. Just soft serve spiraling into a wafer that crumbles if you hold it wrong. Somehow, it became the quiet center of some of my favorite memories.

My brother and I used to walk eight blocks to get them after school. Other kids ran toward the ice cream truck with its blinking decals and carnival jingle, but our joy came from something quieter. McDonald's didn't sing. It didn't need to. The cones were cheap, which mattered more than I understood then. My brother saved what he could from tutoring so my dad wouldn't have to stretch his cab earnings even thinner. He held those cones like they meant something. Maybe they did. The train roared above us, and the sidewalk shook with footsteps, yet the moment we tasted that cold vanilla, the world softened.

Years later, after my brother left for college, the cones became a way of keeping him close. A familiar taste tugging at old memories. The long walk home, the cracked sidewalk, his careful way of shielding both cones from the hot sun as if they were trophies, the way we walked slowly so we wouldn't lose a single drip. Strange how something mass-produced could hold something so personal.

Then came the summer after Hurricane Sandy, when my father and I rebuilt our garage. The storm had twisted beams and peeled back panels. My father, who had once been a civil engineer in Bangladesh, moved through the debris like a man remembering a language he hadn't spoken in years. His hands knew things his daily life had no room for. Working beside him felt like learning a story he had been waiting years to tell. We patched walls, replaced beams, and sweated until the sun felt like it was resting on our shoulders. At

the end of each day, my father would sigh, the type of sigh that holds both exhaustion and pride.

Some afternoons, I would suggest a break, and he would nod without looking up. We wandered toward the golden arches. We stood there, two tired bodies under fluorescent lights, holding cones like a reward we had earned together. That first cold bite after hours of heat almost felt unreal. My father would close his eyes for a moment. Not dramatically. Just enough for me to see that he was somewhere calmer. As if the taste lifted something heavy off him. Those cones became our punctuation mark, our shared breath, our unspoken agreement that we could rest right now.

The dollar cone itself was nothing fancy. The taste stayed the same every single time. That sameness meant something to me. As I got older, I realized joy isn't frivolous. It's fuel. For families like mine, pushed to the margins and stretched thin, joy becomes a rebellion against exhaustion. A small, steady resource that keeps you going. It taught me that joy doesn't need sparkle

It just needs a moment that feels honest.

Every cone I've had since carries a different layer of memory. My brother's laughter echoing in the sticky heat. My father's tired hands resting on his knees. The way the world can be hard, then suddenly softened by something tiny enough to melt before you finish it.

My own silent discovery that something little and plain can carry so much. And sometimes the ice cream machine is broken, and sometimes it isn't. But the joy—the kind that hides in the simplest things—always finds its way back.



Allison Walter
Learning to Eat Ice Cream
Digital Photo

DRS. THERESA & CHARLES YEO WRITING PRIZE
HONORABLE MENTION

Retracing My Steps

Allison Chang

Student, Sidney Kimmel Medical College '27

In the early morning, the parking lot is empty. Our dusty silver Toyota pulls into the corner spot and I swing open the door, eager to hit the trail as soon as possible. The breathless, dewy air rushes in to greet me. Smoothing across my forehead, its tendrils kiss my skin and tangle my hair. My nose fills with the scent of crisp new beginnings, lifting away the sleepiness from my eyes and expanding the depths of my breath in the renewing way my grandmother's Tiger Balm clears my sinuses when I have a stuffy nose.

The small glass bottle of oil was her cure for any of my childhood complaints: itchy mosquito bites, clogged nasal passages, aching limbs, you name it. Wai Po would simply place the pad of her index finger over the narrow opening of the bottle and flip it upside down with the flick of her wrist. With the dab of Tiger Balm, she would apply its sharp coldness to the problematic area. Sometimes, for fun, she would swipe a bit left over on her finger underneath my nose. Her skin, tough from caring for our extensive backyard garden, would rub across my Cupid's bow, leaving behind a trail of mintiness so potent my eyes would water as I laughed in shock.

As my parents and brother step out of the car, we take in our first views of Capitol Reef National Park. The trailhead is enclosed by walls of ochre Navajo sandstone, dappled with darker browns of weathering and creased with age. Looking up, the sky is framed by the canyon, a sliver of bright blue winding off into the far distance. Lazy white cumulus clouds overhead creep along the gentle curve of the Earth. It is almost as if the true canyon lies above us, cutting through the vast expanse of air and shaping the sky into meandering streams. Here, everything bends to the whims of the sandstone, rising, falling, curling and unfurling.

"It's so quiet," my brother says, and everyone grows still.

In the absence of the sound of my mom pouring water into her CamelBak and my dad unzipping his sweatshirt, I finally place a finger on the source of the enrapturing aura that surrounds us.

How to describe that stillness?

Not a single bird chirps. Not a single leaf rustles.

It is as if the Earth is holding her breath—a semicolon in the sentence of sandstone. A pause in conversation, carved out by glacial ice over the past fifty million years. It is like the space between words, between lines and paragraphs; their own small peaks and plunging valleys tracing, chasing, the stretching skyline across the wrinkled page.

It is a longing glance cast off the face of the rocky cliffs, shining, immortalized in the peachy glow of the newborn sun. Or like the unspoken syllables that linger on the tongue, hesitating amongst the crags and caves. Then dissolving, its remains echoing through the indigo shadows.

Within the cradle of the gorge, I am flooded with the steadfast, unshakable solidness of the sandstone. Boots planted firmly against the earth, face tilted into the sky. My thoughts loosen and dissipate.

Inhale...

Exhale...

And then, those few seconds pass. My mom's sneakers crunch into the gravel as she walks back to the open trunk.

"Ready to go?" she asks, pushing the lid closed. The harsh and familiar clack is startlingly out of place.

As we enter the trail, the gravel parking lot gives way to soft amber sand. The earth absorbs our footsteps, muffling the crunch of our boots into soft thuds. Running my fingers along the rock, I can feel the fine grains of sand loosen from their walls, now free to coat the leaves of the brush and simmer in the breeze. I, too, am now claimed by this place, as the dust paints my boots and settles into the grooves of my palms.

Nature always has a way of leaving its mark. It is July and I am eight. Peak zucchini season, the cicadas chorus in full force and the air presses down upon you, thick and syrupy. Every morning, Wai Po dons her armor against the relentless sun: a faded, long-sleeved collared shirt, loose pants, a wide brimmed hat, and lilac rain boots. With the hose in hand, she marches out into the yard, ready to conquer the most stubborn weeds and sly groundhogs. Because it is also deer tick season, I am never allowed to join Wai Po in the garden. From the safety of our air-conditioned home, I watch her carefully unlatch the elaborate system of fencing and then step into the lush greenery. When she crouches down to inspect the growth of her precious zucchinis, she entirely disappears amongst the leaves, swallowed whole. Sometimes she goes for a couple minutes to check on the groundhog trap; sometimes she stays out for hours. The most exciting trips are when she returns with a few plump, emerald prizes from the day's harvest, calling, "Allison, come look, freshly picked."

There is always a bit of dirt under her fingernails. And despite her best efforts to prevent tanning, her hands are wrinkled copper in the summers. We always eat well when Wai Po is cooking, but in the summers, we feast. Fresh cherry tomatoes in the salad, zucchini stir fried with chicken, chive and pork dumplings galore.

As I make my way along the river of low-growing, coarse brush, my eyes are constantly drawn upward. Along the monumental walls of sandstone into the starkness of the blue above.

For as long as I can remember, I have been drawn to the view of the sky. It is so refreshing, so relieving to revel in something greater than oneself, to feel my own smallness in its vast expanse. From that trip to Capitol Reef, the sliver of sky is the image that remains tucked away in the recesses of my mind. It is so easy to recall, so quick to find within a couple scrolls through photos on my phone. Yet when I attempt to summon the sound of the gorge, I struggle to remember.

The feeling is similar to when I think of Wai Po and the garden. When she moved out of our house after I graduated from high school, the garden slowly morphed into a dormant state. Overgrown with weeds and unprotected from groundhogs, the once organized rows of vegetables surrendered to the chaos

of wilderness. When I was away at college, my mom decided it was time to get rid of the fencing. Without these last monuments to trace the husk of the garden, all that remained was an imprint in the vast expanse of the yard, blurred into the sea of grass. It is like when I step into Wai Po's old room, now a storage space for clothes, and look for signs that she used to live there: piles of safety pins on the shelf from mending clothes, dark floral sheets, DVD collections of Chinese soap operas. I try to grasp onto these few edges, casting my net out into the river of time, hoping to draw up the sharp clarity of the remaining details: the whirl of the sewing machine, the rasp of the pillowcase against my cheek, the blue glow of the television diffusing across our faces late into the night. Again and again, I search in the depths, hoping to collect enough to piece together the fullness of the memory.

It is as if I am reaching for a destination just out of sight beyond the cliff, fingertips slipping against air, feet dangling. It is like recalling a forgotten language, so rusty from disuse your tongue fumbles around and around the syllables, clumsily groping for the eloquence it once held. Like the sandstone of the gorge: at first sharp and distinct, freshly hewn by blue glaciers, now softened and smooth in the wind.

The work of remembering can be hard, frustrating. Were the flowers on the sheets daisies or peonies? Was the zucchini in my grandmother's stir fries buttery or tangy on my tongue? How did the breeze smell, light and rustling through the underbrush of the canyon? My mind turns over and over, treading and retreading the same beaten path. Yet there is also a certain joy in retracing my steps, a certain delight in flushing out my surroundings, recreating the light of a moment and discovering anew.

From “Natural High”

RW Delaney

Patient

WaWa

Here we are
Migrating each morning
For the cup of coffee and donut –
The corner store
With the Indian name
“Where the wild goose flies,”
Greeting Anna and Brenda like neighbors,
The great flocking instinct
Circling once around the cash register
And flapping out.

Marriage

It kills the thrill
And grants instead
Comfort,
Companionship
And gobs of good humor

Pocket Square

The hanky you saved,
Stenciled with a deer
For Deerfield
I made when so young.
The silhouette in India ink
With imprecise edges.
Now I save it
Not because I made it
But because you saved it
Like hands touching.

'Tis the Season

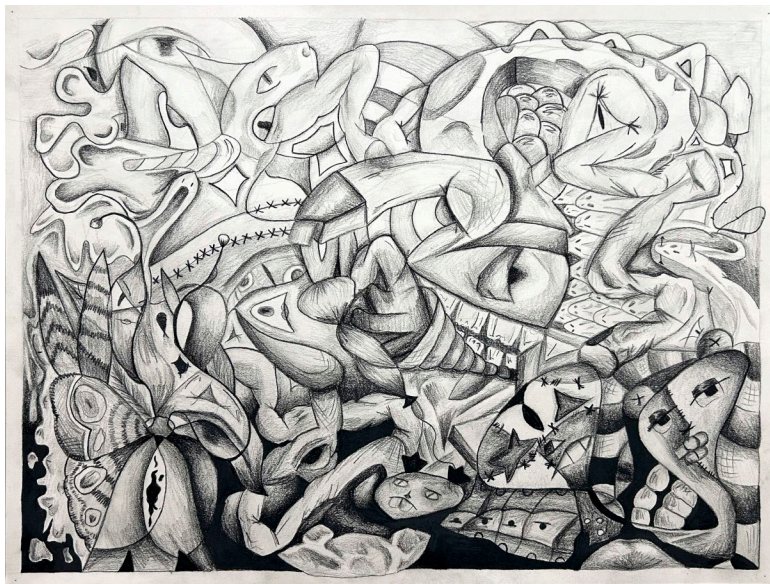
Simple-minded
I revel (again)
In the comeuppance of spring.
Boggled by blossoms,
Dazzled by display
Agog (again)
At resurgent April.

Voicing

Midsummer,
The unmistakable warble of the wren,
Mighty in its clarity,
Blown from the belly,
The fabulous pipe
Gutsy and ripe,
A fling of sing
From the winged flitty thing
Rarely seen
Yet heard in full,
An enthralling
Calling
Pull.

Blenko Glassworks

The blower breathes,
Teasing air in molten glass,
Seizing the bubbled kiss
In permanent passion,
Fusing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation
In perpetual bliss.



Eric Rodriguez

Nonlinear Thinking

Prismacolor Pencil on Paper

18" x 24"

Finding Joy in Breaking and Blooming

Sarah Gulish

Patient

Announcing my third pregnancy lacked the joy, wonder, and hope of the first two occasions. Not even seven months postpartum with my second child, I was suddenly, unexpectedly thrown back into morning sickness and utter exhaustion. The physical reality of my body's limitations, along with holding down a full-time teaching job while my husband traveled for work, felt impossible. When I shared the news with close friends and family with a quivering lip and tear-filled eyes, I received empathetic nods and shoulder squeezes. Everyone knew it was too much...except for Bob.

My father-in-law greeted my pregnancy announcement as if he had won the lottery and been cured of his pulmonary fibrosis on the same day. He laughed, a full-bodied, joyful laugh, during our phone call. This is what he had been praying for! A father of boys, Bob always wanted a little girl in the family. Once I had my daughter just a few months prior, his prodding was continuous: "Are you sure you don't want just one more?" "Wouldn't it be nice to have another baby daughter?"

"No, dad." I would roll my eyes and wave him off, "Do you want to raise all of these babies??" So when his prayer was answered through what felt like an immaculate conception, I made it very clear that this predicament was his doing. My attitude wouldn't deter his effervescence—he was going to have another grandbaby.

Four weeks later, an ultrasound confirmed what I knew in my gut—we were having another girl.

It took my entire pregnancy to come to terms with being a mother of three and what it would mean for our lives. Those months stretched and groaned with physical discomfort as I carried a toddler and infant up and down our three-story row home while their sister grew through the very important gestational fruit stages of peach, banana, and finally, watermelon. On the hardest days, when my body ached from teaching all day and growing a human, I would

rock my one-year-old to sleep and think of Bob. He was the one person in my life who knew chronic pain, much more than I did in my temporary state.

Bob had been diagnosed with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis nearly a decade earlier. Having trouble catching his breath at work spiraled into a diagnosis that would have him maxing out oxygen machines and hoping for a double lung transplant, the only chance at extending his life. At the time, it felt doubly cruel. My husband and I were newly married and always knew we wanted to have kids. I saw Bob with my niece and nephew and preemptively mourned the reality that Bob would most likely never know my kids, and they, in turn, would never get the chance to hear his full-bellied laugh or sing along to Johnny Cash.

In 2012, all of that changed when Bob received a 5 am call on a crisp morning in March: “We think we have a match.”

Bob’s grueling recovery from surgery caused him to question his decision at times—was the pain of recovery and compromised immune system worth it? What does it mean to extend one’s life when the quality was so incredibly poor at times? He wrestled with these questions openly, honestly. But there was no question for us—his children and children-in-law. We got to have Bob, dad, grandpap for more time. And as my husband, Brandon, and I started having children, we counted each infant cuddle and each toddler ride on his walker as a bonus. We lived on borrowed time, and in many ways, it felt like time would stretch on with no end.

Hattie Sweet, our third baby, came into the world in June of 2018. Weighing in at 9 lbs and 8 oz, she made herself *known* from her first minutes of life, and there was nothing but joy in that moment. Gone was the morning sickness, the questions of how we would fit three tiny humans into our lives. Gone was the doubt that this was infinitely, miraculously meant to be. We called all of our family members to announce her arrival. Bob called hours later and left me a voicemail, reminding me how proud he was of me...how I was strong, brave.

When we brought Hattie to meet her grandpap across the state just a few weeks later, it was clear that Bob wasn’t doing well. A combination of medications over the years had wrecked his kidneys, and he was enduring a steady schedule of dialysis.

He was so sick.

There were days when Bob couldn't get out of bed due to the nausea and chronic pain. Days when he needed the rooms to be pitch black and noise to be at a minimum—a challenge for our family of five with children squarely positioned in the “shrieking” stage of life. The one thing he could do? Rock his babies. He sat in the recliner for hours, holding Hattie bundled like a burrito and kissing her softly on the head. He hummed and sang hymns over her. She was his therapy. We called her “Bob's girl” and hadn't forgotten that he was the reason she was there at all.

When we got back to Philly and unpacked our cheerio-decorated minivan, I felt hopeful. Our neighborhood came to life in July, and I knew our days would be full of community parenting at the rec center, wearing bathing suits as clothes, and letting water ice drip down sticky faces and fingers. What we weren't expecting was to get a call from my mother-in-law just a few hours later: “You need to come back. Your father is stopping dialysis.”

Many people have experienced a phone call that changes everything. This was ours. Brandon and I moved in a blur. Between tears and choked conversation, we packed the newborn back in the car and dropped the other kids at my parents' house, rushing to Pittsburgh to convince Bob to keep going.

When we arrived at the hospital that night, it was clear that there was no convincing. He had endured so much for so long, and it was his decision to make. He wanted to be free from pain and suffering. He wanted to be free.

The four weeks that followed were some of the darkest days of our family's life. But there were bright spots. At first, stopping dialysis gave Bob a few days of sweet relief. And he *lived* in those days. He played water gun battles with my four-year-old, and ate and drank his favorite foods. He even asked me to teach him the guitar and fumbled his way through “Ring of Fire.” In true Bob fashion, he threw himself a goodbye party that turned into a full blown hootenany with his unhinged tambourine playing. He also made amends—saying hard things to his kids and wife.

And he rocked his baby girls. On the porch, every afternoon, he'd sing and rock Hattie till she fell asleep.

Once the sickness started and caring for him grew too hard for us to manage, he was moved to a hospice house nearby. Each day, we sat vigil as a family, vacillating between laughter and tears as Bob grew increasingly distant until he no longer seemed present at all. I often thought of the irony of our reality. While Bob was becoming less and less in this world, Hattie was coming alive. Her first smile, her first laugh—she hit milestones each day amongst a collection of grieving family. She was undoubtedly our light in the darkest days. When anyone was struggling, all they needed was a Hattie cuddle to be grounded back into the preciousness of life.

A few days before Bob passed, I spent hours in his room with Hattie. Crystal prisms hung in front of his window, casting rainbow light across his bedding. For days, I would plant myself in that light-drenched space with a guitar, singing and talking to him despite receiving no signs of life in return. It became increasingly clear that this was the time for us to speak our last words and for the kids to say goodbye.

I wrapped a sleeping Hattie in her swaddle and placed her on Bob's chest, and we were shocked when, suddenly, miraculously, he came to life. "Hi, sweetie," he said, and leaned to kiss her on the head. He hadn't spoken in days. But all it took was feeling the presence of his girl to come back to us, to remind us he was still with us. Tears streamed down our faces as we watched the sweet moment unfold, and he curled his body around her. It would be ok.

Hattie is now eight years old and is arguably the most joyful kid you've ever met. She's fully embraced her role in the family as "joy bringer" and stays true to her calling as a comedian in training. She has a whole list of impressions that send her brother and sister into hysterics and regularly puts on "shows" for us in the living room. I can't imagine life without her.

Once in a while, she creases her eyes in a way that reminds me of her grandpap. In those moments, it's as if he's still with us. I have to believe that those weeks on the porch and the months of prayer before she was even born have taken root in her so deeply that she will never question her value or purpose. That, as with all things in life, we feel the pain with the joy, the blooming with the breaking, and with every death springs forth new life.

My poem for Jefferson

Zakeena Williams

Patient

I used to think joy was something
you earned after surviving the storm
a prize at the end of endurance,
waiting patiently for the hurt to pass.

But joy found me tired,
hands empty
standing in the middle of an ordinary day.
It came as a memory that softened the ache,
a smile I didn't expect to return,
the sound of laughter reminding my heart
it still knew how to open.

Joy lived in moments I almost missed:
the way light lingered at the window,
the comfort of being understood without words,
the quiet strength of getting through one more day.
It did not ask me to be whole.
It did not demand celebration.
It simply asked me to stay
to feel, to notice, to breathe.

And in choosing to stay,
I realized joy was never gone.
It had been waiting gently
loving me through every version of becoming.

Learning Joy Through Sabr

Azzariah Hundley

Medical Assistant, Obstetrics/Gynecology

Joy did not arrive in my life loudly. It did not come with certainty or ease. For a long time, joy felt distant, not because I believed it was selfish, but because I could not fully believe it would ever stay. Happiness felt temporary, fragile, something other people reached more easily than I did. I wanted joy but trusting it felt harder than surviving without it.

What brings me joy now is often simple. A quiet morning before responsibility speaks. The feeling of my forehead touching the prayer rug in sujood. A quiet reassurance of believing I am exactly where I wanted to be a few years ago. These moments matter because I know what it feels like to move through life without softness, thinking things will never look up. Joy comes to me now because I am learning how to allow it.

Much of my life was shaped by endurance. I learned how to keep going even when I felt emotionally depleted. Struggle taught me discipline and responsibility, but it also taught me to guard myself. There were seasons where I did not trust happiness because I had learned how quickly things could change. Joy felt uncertain, almost unrealistic, something I hoped for but did not fully expect. Over time, I realized that protecting myself from disappointment also kept me from experiencing fullness.

I did not need to search for joy in other people or circumstances as much as I needed to reconnect with myself. There is joy in self-acceptance, in being present with who I am without constantly preparing for the next loss or setback. Finding joy within myself meant learning to believe that I deserved peace and that happiness was possible for me. That belief did not come overnight, but it came slowly, honestly, and with patience.

Islam has shaped my understanding of joy in a way that feels steady and grounding. My faith teaches me that joy is not constant excitement, but inner calm. The Quran reminds us that hearts find rest in the remembrance of Allah. That rest is where joy lives. Prayer reminds me that I am supported even when life feels heavy. Dua allows me to speak openly, without needing to hide uncertainty or fear. There is joy in being held by Allah's mercy while still healing.

During difficult times, faith became an anchor. I practiced Sabr not as silence, but as trust. I learned shukr not only for blessings, but for resilience and growth. Even moments of grief carried meaning when they brought me closer to Allah. Joy existed there quietly, creeping in my heart, teaching me that healing and hope can coexist.

Joy is important because it changes how the body and mind experience the world. I have lived in a state of tension, where my breath was shallow and my thoughts were constantly preparing for impact. Joy softens that. It allows my body to rest. It brings clarity to my thoughts and gentleness to my spirit. Spiritually, joy feels like alignment, like remembering who I am beyond fear and survival.

As I learned to trust my own joy, I noticed it naturally extended outward. When I feel at peace within myself, I am more present with others. I listen better. I speak more gently. I hold space without rushing. Joy becomes something shared, not forced, but reflected. It shows up in kindness, patience, and compassion.

Creativity has become one of the ways I practice joy with intentionality. Being in school is not always easy, but it brings me a sense of purpose. There is joy in committing to my education, in choosing growth even on days when motivation is low. Each step forward feels meaningful because it represents a future I once struggled to believe was possible. Learning has become a way of honoring how far I have grown and pulled myself up through challenges.

My vision for building a nonprofit rooted in education, care, and access brings me a deep sense of fulfillment. It allows me to turn lived experience into something that can serve others. Creativity, for me, is not limited to expression. It is about building, imagining, and creating space where there was once absence. Through Sabr, I have learned that slow, deliberate work can bring lasting impact, and joy lives in knowing that my experiences can help others find light too.

I am not free from sadness, and my life is not without difficulty. But I grew, gathering myself piece by piece. I learned that healing unfolds in its own time and that joy does not need to be loud to be real. I believe in the possibility of happiness now. It lives in self-acceptance, in intentional work, and in allowing what I carry to become something that helps others. It is quiet, deeply personal, and enough for me.

In Joy

Jennifer Quinn

Patient

I wake
In joy
Blinking in the soft dawn light
My little one stirs next to me
He does not wake
I hold this moment in my heart
As any day
Could be our last morning like this
The muscle strengthens
Working to store ever more
Growing my capacity to love

I sit
In joy
Focusing on my breath
My hands rest on my knees
Stillness and softness in body
Alertness and lightness in mind
My brain expands
Neuroplasticity
Increasing my desire to learn

I move
In joy
Flowing through postures
Remembering to breathe
Joining my body and mind
My limbs ground then fly
My core stabilizes
Perspective ever-changing
A reminder to stay open

I eat
In joy
First, a date
Gifted by my Muslim son
Next, a single egg
Pasture-raised
To ease my conscience
Simple preparation
Sublime taste
My stomach approves
I finish with fresh fruit

I clean
In joy
Relishing in repetition
Having learned to appreciate
The mental clarity
An orderly abode
Can generate
My senses rejoice
I can relax

I work
In joy
Creating and fostering connections
Managing and maintaining processes
Knowing my contributions
Will improve our quality of life
My soul cries out for creativity
I know this path is temporary

In joy
I live
Today
Knowing yesterday
I was too depressed
To get out of bed
My mind defeated
My body too large
Too heavy
My heart devoid of hope
Today
I live
In joy



Karen Kirchoff
Edison Building Arcade
Digital Photo
2013

Where Joy Finds Us

Lisa Capparella

Program Director, Oncology Infusion Center

The sound of laughter, innocent and contagious,
spilling freely and asking nothing in return.

The sight of snow clinging to branches
after the first snowfall,
untouched,
a hush settling in,
quiet made visible.

The weight of a warm mug between your hands
on a quiet morning,
steam rising like a small promise
before the day begins.

Christmas morning,
children waking wide-eyed,
sure that Santa came,
the room bright with surprise and delight.

A hug that lasts a second longer than expected,
wordless reassurance
settling gently in the chest.

The steady rhythm of the ocean,
offering safety and kindness,
sunlight pressing warmly into the soul,
peace arriving without effort.

The sound of pages turning,
a story opening,
time slowing as the world softens.

The smell of home-baked cookies,
shared with those you love,
sweetness filling the house
with memory and warmth.

And in these moments,
small and easily missed,
joy does not announce itself.
It waits quietly,
until we pause long enough
to feel it.

Discovering Joy in Pain

Natalie Rocchino

Patient; Former Employee

I walked quickly toward the ER door with the familiar RESTRICTED-NO ENTRY sign and swiped my ID badge on the security scanner, hearing the comforting sound of the double doors opening.

Knowing my penchant for pushing time to the limit, I ran to the time clock and again swiped my badge to clock in. 2:28pm. Made it with two minutes to spare. Another evening shift was here, and just like every other night, knowing to expect the unexpected was the only constant in this place. Repositioning my backpack, I walked to the break room door and swiped my badge for a third time to unlock it. No one was in there, and on the table, some leftover breakfast bagels were starting to look stale. I opened the refrigerator and a half-wrapped sandwich fell onto the floor. The refrigerator was packed with lunch containers. Remnants of food never having a chance to be enjoyed cluttered the space. This thought always made me a bit sad. But I reminded myself that we worked in an ER, where anything can happen at any time, and utilizing that time to help others quickly was the key to successful patient care. It just meant there was a lot of uneaten food in the refrigerator.

The ER felt like home from day one. But my work home, unlike where I lived outside of this place, was often filled with vulnerable, frightened, and ill patients. It had zero glamour.

It was the beauty of compassion that lived here. The nurses who endured endless hours following orders, answering call bells; these were my sisters and brothers. The attending doctors, who were brilliant beings, saved lives night after night. These men and women were my heroes. Their tenacity to heal in the most difficult situations was what inspired me to watch, to learn, and to be a part of what mattered in life.

I loved meeting families and patients and helping in small ways. Every kind word you gave, every cup of coffee you filled for a family member felt rewarding. As a medication reconciliation pharmacy technician, my job was to talk to patients, pharmacies, families, and skilled nursing facilities to find

out what medications patients were on. We'd let the pharmacists and doctors know in order to ensure accuracy and patient safety. My first managers were two female pharmacists. They really helped the program blossom in 2016 and soon we were busy completing medication histories and listing allergies for trauma patients primarily, and then as many patients as we could get to who were being admitted to the hospital.

One night as my shift was about to end, I received a call from a surgery resident. It was for a patient who was on warfarin, which is a blood thinner. The warfarin dosing would be important to talk to the family about. The patient was not able to speak at that time.

I knocked on the patient's door. "Who is it?" A woman's voice bellowed.

"I'm from the pharmacy," I said. "Okay if I come in?"

"Not really, but I'm guessing I don't have a choice," she growled.

"Great," I thought. "An angry family member."

I entered the room and the woman was on her cell phone.

"I gotta go," she said to the person on the other line. "Probably here to tell me there aren't any beds left upstairs and we'll be stuck in the ER all night."

Then she ended the call and looked at me. "Who are you?" she asked in a condescending tone.

"My name is Natalie. I'm from the pharmacy. The doctor who is putting in the orders for your husband asked me to make sure the medication list was 100% accurate."

"I told the nurse his prescriptions when we came in. I am too tired to go through this again. Don't you people communicate?"

I looked at her and suddenly remembered the 14 hours I sat in an emergency room at the University of Chicago with my son on Thanksgiving Day.

"I understand you're probably so tired of having to answer the same questions over and over, wait for results, and wait for a room upstairs. I had to wait 14

hours one night in an ER with my son, so I get it. How can I make your life easier right now?"

She looked at me. I was suddenly relatable.

"I am so tired. I don't want to leave my husband, but I have not eaten all day. And I'm just so cold. I don't understand why he's staying overnight. The doctors have explained it but I haven't seen anyone in two hours."

I said to the woman, "I'll be right back." I walked to the blanket warmer and took out two warm blankets. Then I went to the nutrition room and grabbed a sandwich and a ginger ale.

I returned to her room and put the blanket over her shoulders. Then I handed her the sandwich and the drink.

"Here you go," I said. I explained to her that the inpatient room was currently being cleaned for her husband to go up. I reiterated to her calmly why he was being admitted.

Then I pulled up a chair next to her while she ate her sandwich and warmed up, and we went over all of her husband's medications, most importantly the current dosing of the warfarin.

"Thank you so much." I said as I arose from the chair. "I wish you a safe stay and hope your husband feels better soon."

"Thank you," she said, "you're very kind."

The emotion we call joy comes in many varieties, but my very favorite is how it feels when we show kindness. In giving to others, we receive so much more joy than what we give. This is what I have discovered working in an emergency room.

Who would've thought when I started, I would discover joy in the midst of pain. Life sure is unpredictable.

At Red Lights

Courtney Bambrick

Faculty, College of Humanities and Sciences

At red lights, I pull out the stops and wail. I feel the adoration
of the crowd. I see a window cracked in the turning lane.
I trust the driver can hear me. I trust they want to—

One day, I'll be crossing an intersection with Stevie Wonder,
or Steve Perry or Ethel Merman and someone
will hear me, wave me down, and make me a star!

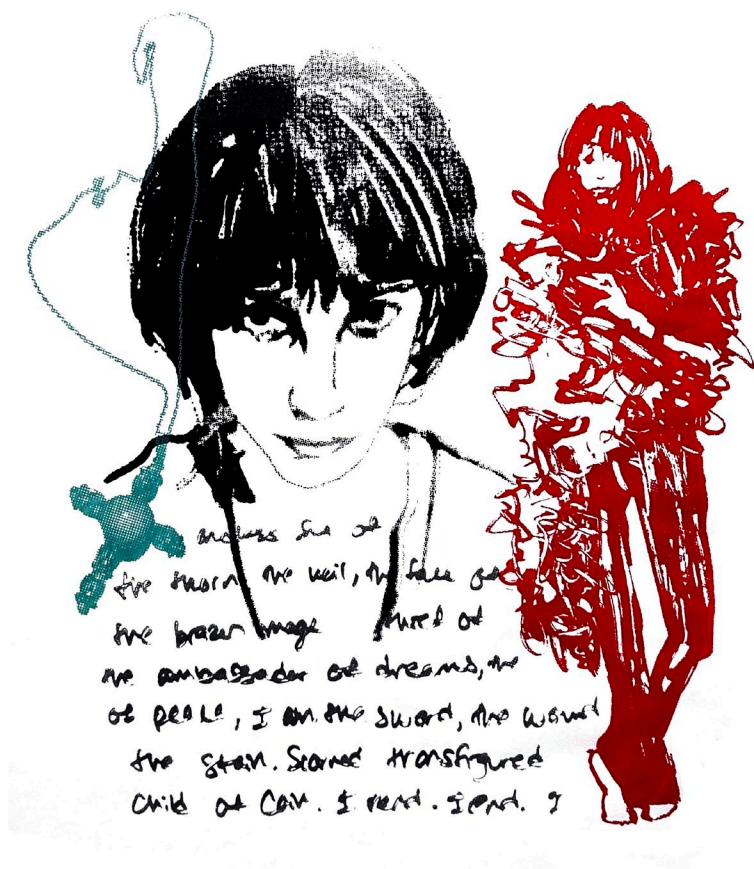
I imagine myself one hundred years ago, maybe mothering
my own brood—but maybe caked in greasepaint, a curly wig,
unnaturally red, feathers and glass beads to catch the light.

I'd wink and make them all hoot! I'd sing something
bawdy, something not for church. But when
the hollering settled, I'd put up a hand—

and step into their hungry silence, greedy
myself. I'd sing something old to make them think
about their mothers, sisters, the girls they told

they'd write to, but didn't.
I'd dissipate like dust mites
in the spotlight. I'd lodge

in the wettest corners of their eyes and they'd
sing along until they themselves were also dust
floating through an abandoned hall.



Annalee Capuano

Easter Sunday

Serigraphy Print on Paper

18" x 24"

Joy with the Window Cracked

Christian Joi Gleaves

Patient

Joy did not arrive loud.
It came quietly,
in the Burn ICU,
where love learned how to breathe through machines
and faith learned how to whisper.

I stood beside my brother's bed
during my first year of caregiving,
holding his hand as if holding the world together.
I spoke God's name into the space between us,
trusting love to travel where sound could not.
Joy lived there—
in eyelids lifting,
in fingers pressing back,
in the undeniable success of love
refusing to let go.

Love taught me this:
joy is boundless.
It succeeds even when outcomes are uncertain.
It wins simply by existing.

Then the fire came for me.
And joy became smaller,
or so I thought.
But I learned—
small does not mean weak.

Joy hid in my toes,
wiggling beneath hospital sheets,
a quiet declaration: I am still here.
It waited in the sun creeping through the blinds,
patient, persistent,
as if God Himself was reminding me
that light always returns.

I learned gratitude in fragments—
in breath,
in pain that proved survival,
in the courage to stay present
inside a wounded body.

Home became holy.
The smell of my house.
Fresh laundry folded warm.
Safety returning to my nervous system.
My daughter's laughter and need—
messy, demanding, beautiful—
teaching me that joy does not require perfection,
only presence.

There were days joy wept with me.
In the pain.
In the goodbye.
In the unbearable act of letting go
of a brother who had walked me
through girlhood and becoming,
through learning how to stand.

Yet even grief carried joy—
because to have loved so deeply
is proof of abundance,
not loss.

Motherhood stretches me.
Grief reshapes me.
My body remembers fire,
and my heart remembers love.
Still, I crack the window.

I let the breeze in.
Even when it aches.
Even when the air is heavy with memory.

Because joy is not the absence of pain—
it is coexistence.
It is gratitude in the middle.
It is choosing to notice.

And somewhere in all of this,
I learned my own name.

Joi.

Not as a feeling,
but as a calling.
As something I carry,
something I practice,
something I become.

I am learning myself
through fire and faith,
through love and loss,
through the miracle of staying grateful
when life has every reason to harden me.

Joy is boundless.
Love is successful
in every form it takes—
holding a hand,
speaking God's name,
cracking a window,
letting the light in.

And even with the pain still present,
I remain.

Joi.
Breathing.
Grateful.
Alive.

What the World Needs Now:

When open-heart surgery opens you up

Meg Waldron

Patient

The story begins as many serious things do, like a pin on the map of my life. My friend Barry suggested I get a chest scan because his quality of life was dramatically improved by one. My symptoms were negligible and easy to brush off: sporadic coughing fits; a peculiar breathiness while vacuuming. I assumed the problem was domestic, not medical. I just needed a housekeeper.

Then the results came back. I had a mass in my left atrium. Doctors sometimes assign such lumps a fruit size. Mine was a large grape. Doable. Removable. A week later, I was sent for a more detailed echocardiogram when everything accelerated. The large grape was actually bigger. A plum? It filled almost the entire chamber. I was immediately admitted to the ER and wasn't coming home. My friend Allison brought me fresh undies and a toothbrush in a paper bag.

The horizon collapsed. My past as a star runner and Penn Relays champion, one of the fastest high school distance runners in America, along with my future aging gracefully into my 60s, narrowed abruptly to a hospital room with a question mark.

Hospitals do strange things to time. For the next three days, I waited. There is no real sleep in a hospital, only a shallow drifting interrupted by the incessant beeps of monitors and techs checking my vitals hourly. I awaited surgery. I awaited answers. I waited, unsuccessfully, for sleep.

Writing my advanced directives felt like filling out a worksheet. I handed my sister Mary all of my passwords—banking, email, credit card—the mundane scaffolding that holds up a modern life. In doing so, I discovered something unexpected: I wasn't unmoored. Instead, I rolled up my sleeves and looked at what needed to be done like someone assembling Ikea furniture.

Most of us postpone solidifying our final wishes indefinitely. The end of life is assumed to be far in my future. But the act of preparing for the end clarified

something I had never quite articulated: the person who dies doesn't suffer. It's the people left behind who do. I thought about the light of my friendships and godchildren extinguished. The young people I had mentored and given wings who continued to reach out to me throughout their lives. *"Coach Meg, I just ran a marathon."* *"I got my dream job."* I thought about my family and future. No longer an aunt or sister. Poof. They would feel it, but not me. This realization did not diminish the weight of death, but it certainly shifted its center of gravity.

It also got me thinking about life as a continuum. We prefer to believe we can fully enjoy our lives, achievements, ambitions, and pleasures while keeping failure and death at a long spoon's distance. Joy doesn't operate that way. You cannot fully inhabit it without also accepting loss as part of the contract. Acceptance, it turns out, is not a surrender but a recalibration. When death loses its absolute authority, it becomes just a thing rather than a threat.

So, I focused on what I could control. I heard myself repeating, *"It is what it is. There's nothing I can do about it."* I said that to my family when they asked how I was doing. I'm one of nine kids, so I said it a lot.

What sharpened this particular heart event was its timing. My business had slowed for the holidays, severe back spasms had plagued my weekends, and my boyfriend's furnace was on the fritz at the same time he was getting a shed delivered hours away. Most of all, we had recently lost our beloved mother. Considered together, these events dulled what joy might otherwise have found its way in.

I was actively grieving my mom's absence when the tumor emerged. Still orienting myself to a world without her, which I did not yet know how to do. Dr. Chin explained that open heart surgery was the only option. *"How many of these have you done?"* I asked, *"Less than 100,"* she said. *"Hmmm,"* I thought, *"How many less?"* *"You are so lucky that we caught this before something worse happened."* Dr. Chin pointed her finger toward the dull tiled ceiling of my room, *"Somebody up there is looking out for you."* *"It's Mom,"* I said, and my sister, Mary, I nodded tearfully.

The hospital chaplain stopped by. She guided me to let go of the complications of the world and its people. *"You are on a journey of spiritual awakening,"*

she said. What struck me was not the phrase itself, but the way she framed the experience as both persistence and discovery. Not something being taken from me, but something being added and revealed. That reframing eased my mind. It gave the waiting a shape that I could embrace, -- a dog bed where the dueling wolves of fear and confusion could rest.

The three-to-four-hour surgery stretched to five. My sisters and boyfriend followed the patient scoreboard—a large flatscreen in the waiting room that tracks ongoing surgeries. They feared the worst. When the vast suite of doctors, nurses, and techs released me into the cardiac ICU, my shoulders were in severe spasm from how I had to be positioned on the OR table. In and out of consciousness, barely able to rasp out a request, I implored my sisters to call Erich, our friend with massage hands. Thirty minutes passed like a second, and his familiar voice was at my ear, his thumbs working the pain away.

All of this was on a Friday, which led to another kind of waiting—the return of the pathology team on Monday. The pre-op results of my transthoracic echo had described a *“large and invasive mass with a strong blood flow, suggesting sarcoma”*—a rare connective tissue cancer. I found myself rehearsing a sort of acceptance speech to Death. Then on the third day, bouncing in through the door like a cheerleader who had just made the squad, Dr. Chin threw her arms wide open. “It’s benign.” In that moment, I got how much they all thought it just might not be. I let out a big *whoop*, and she answered with a hug.

After eight days in the hospital, I was discharged. It was Christmas. I stayed home, not wanting to catch a cold from hugging, the loving dogpile that is my family. Sixty-odd Christmases I had spent with my clan. But for this one, my boyfriend and I filled gift bags for the nurses in the cardiac wing—Mary Frances, Eva, Nicole, Emma, and others—who seemed far too young to have such steady competence.

While I was at my weakest, with electrical wires running from inside me, monitors all over me, and fluids accidentally spilling out of drainage tubes from my pleural cavity, they cleaned me up—a nursing version of dutifully holding someone’s hair as they puke in a parking lot.

Some of the young women were spending their first Christmas away from their families to work the holiday shift. The gesture of gift bags was small

compared to their service, but it made my day. My boyfriend ran the gifts up to their unit, put the nurses on the phone, and I heard their happy voices pour out like carbonation bubbling up.

The next day at home, two sisters came bearing treats, food, and a thermometer. We sat together, talking about nothing in particular and listening to an old playlist I had made. *"What the world needs now is love, sweet love,"* crooned the singer. I had played and sung that Burt Bacharach chestnut for my dying neighbor to pull him out of his deepest sadness a few years back.

The opening lyrics filled the room, and something in me finally burst. I began to sob and smile and laugh and cry all at once, brushing off the weight of my mortality. It was deliciously unrestrained. A full-bodied release—the kind that arrives only after vigilance has been muscled up for too long. Helen rubbed my back while I let everything pour out: the terror, the relief, the grief for my mom, the shock of my own frailty, the worry for loved ones worrying about me.

In that moment, Burt Bacharach's song revealed itself—not as a diagnosis, but as a prescription. What the world needs now is not love as emoji or abstraction, but as active conviction. This is love that shows up when it's inconvenient. Love that gives without guarantees, that receives without armor. It is love that steeps, listens, waits, holds, allows, and stays. Love that accepts grief as the price of admission and pays it anyway. This kind of love is not passive, for it requires courage, presence, and choice. Here is the deepest secret that keeps the stars aligned: at any given moment, we are moving on one of two adjacent paths. Unless you accept that the path of death is right there, you can't truly let go of suffering and enjoy the life path.

Recovery, I am learning, is one part a return to who I have always been, and two parts powering up. Healing requires the same surrender of timelines, expectations, and the illusion that life is deserved. It felt like being invited into a greater access to joy, and one that asked for less worry and more faith.

When all of this happened in mid-December, the Earth herself was nodding into her darkest days. The light was receding almost imperceptibly, each afternoon dimmer than the last. Now I've crossed over. I can feel the stretch and pull of light returning, the slow-worn path of the planet as it begins to turn toward the sun again. I can feel my sternum knit back together, and the

chambers of a healing heart root deeply into my chest. Recovery for me feels like that—not sudden or triumphant, but inevitable once it starts. A quiet leveling up and gradual brightening.

We are heading into a new year. I'm fueled by inspiration. Not untouched, but open. There is joy here—not the flaky kind we find in Instagram reels or selfies, but the durable kind that stands in its truth and power. It is built from love practiced daily, imperfectly, and without illusion.

As I write this, I can tell the days are expanding, filling with joy. And so am I.

Show, Don't Tell

Chelsea Wittlich

Standardized Patient, Clinical Skills Center

here are the rules of a game called: show, don't tell.

you must guess the word on my mind but you cannot speak or spell.

here are the clues, so listen closely.

but first: your mission for the rest of your life is to forget every word
you've ever said.

some would call it intuition— instead, you will remember the truth
that beats in your chest.

without words, show me what your body says. allow magic to sway your
arms and legs;
energy in motion, dancing breath; the answer is what your movements
express.

she is an emotion that is universal, yet every man-made word and language
has failed to describe her.

(i must first say, how absurd it is to attempt to put into words something so
profound that doesn't exist only in the mouth).

you could waste time figuring it out but what you seek is what i've found.
you don't need to look around when we could simply feel it now —
i'll tell you how.

trust, surrender to the flow because whimsy is the way. that's exactly when
you'll know our only purpose is in play.

what adult embodiment communicates our forgotten childlike wonder
like a charade?

when you have the best day ever
when your breath just feels so clever
when your feet can't help but dance
when your alignment isn't chance
when your belly laughs manifest
when your body finally says yes
when you speak from gratitude
when you move like you love you

this emotion i want you to guess has roots in the beginning and the end.
that is when fear is just a guest and you see your grief as a close friend.

she often holds hands with grief— i've seen it— the ever-present duality.
it's difficult to see they coexist— some would say they're opposites,
but i've even seen them kiss!

she rhymes with coy, is short and sweet, a reminder of salty skin in
summer heat.

she isn't felt in the past or the future, she is always now, and loves a
sense of humor.

this holy instant is pure existence without resistance.

this isn't a riddle for thinking— it's just poetry.
so show me, don't tell me— we're in no hurry.

The Story of Everything

Catherine Lalman

Student, Sidney Kimmel Medical College

“This is the story of everything, and therefore the story of us.” My father told me, producing a prism and pressing it into my hand as thunder rolled over the neighborhood and sunlight pierced the storm clouds. He’d been cloud-gazing all afternoon and pointed to the tarnished silver streaks under the clouds, the rain that vanished before it reached the ground. “Look,” he called, gesturing to the sky, “that’s called virga.” He’d realized autumn’s last sun-shower was coming, the kind that precedes winter’s first frost—our best chance to find a rainbow.

When the first raindrops hit the windowpane, he grabbed me and my brother, yelling, “Quick—rain boots, no time to waste!” before dashing out the door. We bolted through the rain the way we might have beneath a bridge as a train goes by—fearlessly free—while he narrated the world around us, explaining that the sharp, earthy scent was called petrichor, which “loosely translates to the blood of stones, though really, it’s more like the blood of leaves!” Then, he abruptly stopped and proudly exclaimed, “Look! A rainbow—let’s chase it!” And so we kept running, admiring the jewel-tones in the air, hanging above us like a miracle, as he explained how white light bounced and bent within raindrops before splitting into color.

As we watched it fade, it felt like we were all trying not to exhale, to keep the moment aloft, to hold on to what felt like the first time we’d opened our eyes. On the way home, my father noticed our disappointment and chuckled, pulling two prisms out of his coat pockets. Raindrops weren’t the only thing that could make rainbows, he said. After all, what was color if not a story our eyes told themselves, a trick of light? “But I hope,” he smiled, “that whenever you find another rainbow, you’re brave enough to let yourself feel the same intense joy you did today, even if it doesn’t last. Keep looking up, let it steal your breath away, and savor every second.” Then he spun around, hands in his pockets, and added, “Sturmfrei, as they say in German. Storm-free.”

But transforming thunderstorms into rainbows was, for my father, second-nature; he could talk every bad day into a good one. My father was the kind

of person who cheered before jumping into piles of autumn leaves and climbed our backyard trees so that he could see the stars better. He also had an uncanny sense for unremarkable afternoons when I'd believed the world was ending. When I worried about anything—about everything, when I had to keep moving so my anxiety couldn't catch up, when I'd wandered between the kitchen and my room a hundred times, he'd appear in the hallway and say seriously, "I need your help. I'm looking for a specific kind of rock for my rock collection. Mind heading out?"

As we walked, he pointed out various interesting minerals we found along the way. The rocks by the dried creek bed, banded in raw sienna, goldenrod, and sepia, were sandstone: layers of old sand grains carried by currents and winds, which were later painted over by minerals carried through by groundwater. And that chunk the color of old glass was Iceland spar, a clear kind of calcite. Hold it up, he told me, and the world would split in two; turn it slowly, compare the twin images, and you could make a pretty good guess at where the sun was hiding.

Eventually we'd arrive at a little spring, one of his favorite places in the woodlot behind our neighborhood. On spring afternoons, it felt like falling headlong into a fairytale: new leaves the color of pennies, wildflowers in shades of twilight lavender and old lace, the water clear and bright over the stones. He'd laugh and challenge me to a stone-skipping contest, since "You still haven't beaten my record from last time!" Eventually, he'd explain that sometimes it was fun to do nothing much for no reason in particular besides to pass the time and see how far you can get. Sometimes it wasn't life or death. Sometimes it was just life. I thought he was magic, always able to make good days out of bad ones, loosening my anxiety's grip on my thoughts, but whenever I told him so, he'd only smile and say, "You know, the ordinary has a magic of its own. And besides, you don't need magic when you know enough stories. So, keep your eyes open and you'll never run out of wonder."

As I boxed up my things for college, I was doing just that. Shaking out the couch cushions, I found several dollars' worth of spare change hidden behind the pillows and in the seams. When I showed it to my father, he dusted off his hands and told me, "Well, that's probably the spiders' way of paying their rent." I stared at him, half incredulous and half bemused. He gave me a lopsided smile before asking, "You don't believe me?" He

shrugged, grinning, “Honestly, sometimes I think reality is stranger than any fairytale!” Looking back, I’m sure he’d forgotten the coins there. But he never wasted a chance to make the ordinary feel enchanted.

He waved me into the garage. A massive web was stretched between the handles of our snow shovels like a suspension bridge. “I know I should probably take it down,” he said, “but that’s a ballooning spider’s silk.” He nodded, almost proud. “She’s put so much work into it, and we’re not exactly using the snow shovels right now, are we? Who knows,” he added, “maybe she’ll need it when it’s time to fly away.”

By the time we’d finished packing, it was nearly midnight and we were both exhausted. Nevertheless, my father wanted to walk one more time through the woodlot behind our neighborhood—for old times’ sake, he insisted. We followed the familiar path between the trees, the air cooler and more humid than it’d been all day. Then he froze so suddenly I nearly walked into him. He pointed into the darkness and delightedly whispered, “Look— foxfire.” Along the base of a rotting log, a ghostly green glow flickered. He crouched down beside it and began to explain that no one knew for sure why some fungi bioluminesce— maybe to lure insects, or to send spores farther—but the chemistry begins with luciferin and luciferase. “Luciferase,” he repeated, grinning. “What a name.” He didn’t move for a moment, before he heaved himself back up and turned to me, blinking hard in the dark. “Just wanted to show you this before you left. You know, I’ve always thought growing up wasn’t the problem, forgetting was. But everyone forgets. So maybe the best we can do is keep our eyes peeled and choose the things worth remembering.” In that moment, I remember thinking he looked more fragile than he ever had, a little lonelier.

Living in a large city is beautiful—the City of Brotherly Love never lacks for light. And yet, some nights, it feels like I can’t see anything beyond myself, streetlamps and headlights bright enough to make the rest of the world seem distant. Nevertheless, every once in a while, when I’m not on my way home from a hospital, not trying to chase a deadline, and the sky has cleared, I pack my star charts and the small collapsible telescope my father bought me into my car and drive out to a forest’s unmarked turnout, where the city’s glow has receded from the horizon and the stars re-emerge. I pull the

telescope out of the trunk and, for a moment, the night skies of my childhood shimmer before me, like the bottom of a water-filled well, lacquered with gold, speckled with silver. I set up the telescope, pulling out each tripod leg, tightening each knob until it holds steady. I can almost feel the ghost of my father's hands over mine, guiding me as I tilt the barrel toward the sky. I find the big dipper the way he taught me to, assembling constellations out of stars—facing north, arm outstretched, fist counting out 20-ish degrees, until I spot Dubhe, the asterism's bright anchor. I lean against the side of my car and watch the winter full moon rise, staring at our sugar plum-colored overturned bowl of the heavens.

When the Geminids begin to arrive in earnest, I pick out the brightest one and make a wish—*not on a falling star*, my father would interject, *but on a meteor, a speck of ancient dust igniting in the atmosphere for the briefest moment before vanishing for good*. He'd always been wishing on everything: meteors, rainbows, pretty rocks, loose change lost and found. Driving home, I hear his voice murmur, *Ist es nicht schön?* And I whisper back, "Yes dad. It is."

After all, we are never far from wonders; from the stars above our heads to the rocks beneath our feet, the miracles do not cease. The only question that remains is whether we have the courage to recognize them: the bravery to choose to fall in love with the world all over again and hold on to it with all our might. That courage—to coax light out of the storm, to transmute it into joy, to refuse to stop wondering—was my father's magic. His joy was his way of loving this world and believing in it—believing in a love so great it could outlast any loss. And, despite the transience of it all, isn't it beautiful? So, one day, I hope I'll be brave enough to inherit that love: eyes on the sky, hands on the telescope, feet on the gravel, still telling the story of everything—the story of us.



Ellie Walter

Blooming Stones, 2024

Acrylic paint, stone, wood

16" x 7"

Joy Around the World

Demian Serruya

Physician-Scientist, Raphael Center for Neurorestoration,

Vickie & Jack Farber Institute for Neuroscience

We wish not
a minute's mirth to wail a week,
or momentary joy that breeds months of pain
the grasping dhukka's defiled stain
we wish the joy that delights in joy thus born
that little birds tune each morn
above the rest
ribboning songs to air like velvet zest
chipmunk scurry: acorn-bulged cheeks and eyes so bright
squirrels scamper'd round sugar maple trunk's delight
shy child's face blossoms through
a friendly game of "I see you"
cooled-ego warmth bright
silence then laughter
together we friend forward and dash forth
in raining light

Urakhu'yun ~ Sukacita ~ Nge Ayo ~ Bucurie ~ Ilo Shadi Niêm vui ~ Sipas Öröm ~ Injabulo ~ Urakhu'yu Qiu ~ Kegembiraan ~ Pora ~ Llawnnyidd ~ Furaha ~ Yorokohi ~ Kagalakam ~ Wamnyawwad hkyim ~ Kuai ~ Sipas ~ Hanikoa ~ Quviasungniq ~ Khuamsuk ~ Angyet ~ dand shindia ~ Ratist' ~ Glade ~ Joie ~ Alegria ~ Illu Xiyuè ~ Urakhu'yun

DRS. THERESA & CHARLES YEO WRITING PRIZE
HONORABLE MENTION

Sometimes Joy Hides in Basements

Jacelyn Biondo

Faculty, Doctor of Health Sciences

“Thank you for letting me stay...I know I have anger issues...”

I can still hear those words echoing in my mind. My joy was unexpected...
life changing...unparalleled...hidden behind fear...

It was my first day of work as a professional dance therapist at a psychiatric hospital where I had previously interned. In my interview, I had been told my professional schedule would mirror my intern schedule: dance therapy with adults voluntarily seeking support for depression and anxiety. But this was far from the truth; I was tricked. It was not until my first day that I learned I was hired to work on the committed unit...in the basement...where staff members rarely went...with people mostly diagnosed with schizophrenia. I was not told of this change because my boss said she did not think I would accept the position. She was correct. Not only was I inexperienced with this population, I was also fearful.

That morning, I sat in a group therapy room at the very end of the hall on an unfamiliar unit. I quietly welcomed patients as they joined the group, thinking to myself, “I can do this.” The faint sound of screaming was all I could hear. It was getting progressively louder, progressively more threatening. My heart was racing and I kept repeating to myself, “Please don’t come to dance therapy...please don’t come to dance therapy...” Until the door flew open and a woman was shouting incoherently at me and threatening everyone around her. She was accompanied by a one-to-one staff support as she was on watch for aggressive outbursts.

In an act of instinct, I abruptly shouted at the woman who was clearly in an episode of psychosis, “Ma’am, you cannot yell like that; you are scaring people.” Perhaps this was accurate; however, I was the one who was scared.

She responded by shouting back, "I'm staying in dance therapy whether you like it or not!" I asked her one-to-one staff to wait outside the group room, invited the woman to join us, and turned on some Motown music. I felt overwhelmed, insecure, and fearful. I again tried to convince myself, "I can do this." I stood up and gestured for the group members to join me in standing. Without words, I simply began to sway from side to side. Group members joined me. This woman, Ms. A, joined me.

I stayed in this swaying motion for quite some time. I needed it to regulate my nervous system. I hoped it would help regulate everyone else's nervous system as well. I was trying to trust the power of movement and the process of dance therapy. We eventually progressed from the sway into an exploration of movements inspired by each of the patients in the group. Ms. A stood closely next to me. She, at times, took a step back to be on the outskirts of the circle we were all standing in and dancing. I gently invited her to join our collective movements; infrequently she did.

Her movements seemed complicated, as if she was working hard. Her focus was internal. Her affect was vacillating between fear, pain, comfort, and joy. I asked Ms. A if we could join her in her movements and she agreed. There were two particular movements that Ms. A repeated with vigor. I can still feel them in my body nearly twenty years later. As the group members joined Ms. A's movement, I encouraged them to join with the same essence as Ms. A. I invited everyone to embody her strength...to tell her story with her "voice" through movement as best as they could. We moved together, wildly at times, following Ms. A's lead.

As her movements organically slowed, I guided the group towards movements that promote closure, grounding, and a return to self. We found our way back to the sway with which we began. Instinctually, group members began walking out of the room, not speaking any words, but knowing their process was complete. Eventually, Ms. A and I were the only two people left in the room. Together, we swayed.

Ms. A came to stillness, turned to me, looked me in the eyes, and said, "Thank you for letting me stay...I know I have anger issues. Everyone else kicks me out of the group. They make me get the needle [intramuscular sedative]. You let me express my anger and I feel so much better." Her symptoms of psychosis

seemed to have diminished. The yelling and threatening had transformed into graciousness. Ms. A's anger turned into a deeply therapeutic process of her childhood, her relationship with her mother, which she vulnerably shared with me. She expressed herself to me so clearly and articulately that she was able to understand the root of her anger through the movement and felt that she was able to release some of it.

That process with Ms. A introduced a sense of joy that I had not experienced prior to that interaction. At that moment, I knew that my life's work was with people diagnosed with schizophrenia, particularly those whom society had given up on because they were deemed "too sick for treatment."

Since that profound interaction with Ms. A, each dance that I have shared with individuals with schizophrenia has been a moment of pure joy for me. I have never known kinder souls, truer spirits, more honest stories, or more beautiful connections. I have learned more about relationships while dancing with people with schizophrenia than I have learned in any other relationship or classroom in my life. The feeling of someone so vulnerable inviting you into their world to share a dance, share their experience, is indescribable. It is the most authentic and unexpected joy I have had the privilege to know.

Fear attempted to conceal my deepest and purest joy. It was held in the depths of a basement locked tightly with forgotten patients. It was embodied by people society has told us cannot be saved. It was in the face of a terrified woman trapped in her own thoughts and experiences. It was in a shared connection that exposed and joined two souls. It was in an unexpected dance with the most joyful partner I never could have imagined.



Kendall Ross
Collage Interpretation
Acrylic on Paper
14" x 17"

Peaches En Regalia

Courtney Bambrick

Faculty, College of Humanities and Sciences

There is an elastic band in my heart
tangling and bouncing like mad
like gangbusters. I feel it twisting,

chewy and raw, around muscles
I use to pump blood through
this funky, antic body.

What are these sounds?
On what instruments can I
whim and *blep* and *fwomp*?

I sing without words,
run my nose
like it's a matador,

like roses blooming
3-2-1 Contact fast.
Suddenly aflower!

Noise! Noise! Noise! Noise!
Until the whole breath
of possibility fills

a balloon; its fullness
terrifies the long, sharp
verduguillo.

Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill!
I see the red cloak swirling
but I dance!

DRS. THERESA & CHARLES YEO WRITING PRIZE
SECOND PLACE WINNER

Typhoon Season

Sandra Yang

Student, Sidney Kimmel Medical College

The night before my grandfather dies, my grandmother sends a flurry of frantic voice messages, the rhythmic pings of my phone like the sharp sting of drizzling rain. They cause that same muted irritation, and, tired from a day of clinic, I almost don't bother checking my phone.

When I was a toddler, I spent a year and a half in Xiamen under the care of my grandparents. During typhoon season, the sky cracks open and the ocean pours out, the angry breath of heaven rattling the windows of our little apartment. I lost my favorite little wooden stool this way—watched it as the air gripped it in its hands and swung it in a clumsy tango over the rail of our balcony. It shook and stumbled with the unsteadiness of a newborn foal, hovering for a moment before being whipped away. We searched for the pieces after, nineteen floors down. I called out its name like a lost pet, as though it might crawl out shyly from behind a tree.

My favorite memory from these dreamy toddler years is not so much a memory but a story my grandparents love to tell. It goes like this: typhoons are more fact-of-life than natural disaster in Xiamen, and so even when the sky and land became one rumbling gray, preschool would stay in session, and with it my daily journey across the city. When rushing water streamed down the divots of the road, my grandfather would carry me in his arms across the street to ensure my sandals, then my feet, then my legs, then my tummy, and then the whole rest of me wouldn't get swept away. In Mandarin, children often call crosswalks *ban ma xian*, meaning zebra stripes. I used to imagine the patterns along the zebra's back were the rickety segments of a long bridge, ravenous slithering tentacles and massive crab claws snapping up between. I remember burying my face into the damp cotton of my grandfather's shirt, hearing his laugh as he leapt deftly onto each white mark until we arrived on the other side. In those moments, I would confuse the frightened pounding

of my heart for excitement as giggles bubbled over, spilling through the gaps in my teeth. I barely remember the rain.

My grandfather's health took a sharp turn in 2022. Unable to acquire antibiotics for a simple infection due to COVID-19 restrictions, he became septic and lived sedated in the ICU for a month. With college ending and medical school starting soon after, there was no opportunity for me to fly to China, and I watched my grandfather fade away in what felt almost like a corrupted film reel. Through a shaky camera, I saw him get intubated, saw the tube placed percutaneously in his cheek when his osteomyelitis was diagnosed. I saw my grandmother cry for the first time. He made what felt like a miraculous recovery, but his respiratory and cardiac health were never fully restored. His functional capacity significantly declined as his oxygen requirement rose.

When I visited my grandparents following my first year of medical school in 2023, my grandfather acquired a viral infection. I went alone, and the visit was consumed by attempts to decipher my grandfather's medical records and convince my grandmother to take him to the hospital. I learned how to say *heart failure*, *pneumonia*, *acidosis*, and *rales*—among other things—in Mandarin. In the days in between, I rolled my grandfather's wheelchair along the waterfront. We visited the park. I didn't know then that it wasn't appropriate for him to be away from his oxygen tank for so long. When my grandparents finally went to the hospital during my second week there, I wasn't allowed to accompany them. My grandmother told me: "You don't understand how the hospital is over here. It is a place you go to get sick." It is difficult to feel like I did a good thing, even with the antibiotics in her hand, even when my grandfather got better.

Life flashed by between shaky video calls. During my third-year clerkships, I felt like I couldn't stop watching people die. It feels trite to say I learned there is joy in the little things. That is to say—there *is* joy in the little things. There is joy in the time spent bringing my motherly oncology patient Vaseline for her dry lips and flaking back. There is joy in the stories about the bulldog my patient insisted she must go home to before she died. But with every small moment, I was reminded that the oncology patient had metastatic cancer and

the pathology report was “very blue, and very bad.” I was reminded that the bulldog my patient raised since it was a puppy would never see her again—that while I got to see the name disappear without ceremony off my list, there would be no such announcement for her companion waiting at home.

When my elderly Hong Kong-born patient clung to my hand and told me her wisdom, I smiled gingerly at her insistence that to be a woman is to always secure a way to leave the man you were attached to. To always have an escape plan. Until this moment, she had reminded me of my grandmother. Yet in my memory, my grandfather had always depended on my grandmother, and this only became more true as his health declined. When my mother bought him a bell so he wouldn’t have to keep shouting her name across their apartment, the ringing became a continuous monotone melody. My grandmother was my grandfather’s hands, his feet, and in these recent years, his breath. My grandfather was her purpose. There was no one without the other. Even with a precise escape plan mailed to her address and the door swinging wide open, she would be in the kitchen making his morning tea.

With each passing day, my patient spoke less. When she died five days later, transitioned to comfort care as she desired, I remember only relief. I thought about a casual lunchtime comment my grandfather had made to me during high school: “If my mind leaves me, just let me die. Don’t try to save me any longer.” At that time, I had tried to laugh it off and shove a large, leafy vegetable in my mouth. He had repeated it, his voice flat and serious, before he laughed too. It felt more like a commission than a joke. As my clinical year went on, I became consumed by a slow simmering urgency that could only be tempered with each death well-died, each patient whose wishes for how they wanted to live and to pass were heard and completed.

The night before my grandfather dies, he has just returned from a less than one week stay in the hospital. He has conducted what we might call a patient-directed discharge. He wants only to be home. The hospital food is bad and the nurses are incomparable to the constant, practiced servitude of my grandmother. I call my grandmother back and she tells me he is struggling to breathe and that she is terrified. She tells me she has fed him all his favorite foods, fresh fruit, small pieces of crab, a few bites of congee. For her it is early morning the next day—the future has arrived already, and the

future that hurtles towards us both is as expected as it is painful. I am tired. I tell her that he will always struggle to breathe—it is definitionally what my limited medical training tells me respiratory failure is—and that it will be okay. When I wake up, my grandmother has sent our family group chat a time of death.

The week after his passing, I dream of my grandfather in a windy field. His hair is still black and his shirt is tucked into a pair of pressed dress pants. He asks me where all of his belongings are, and I can only begin to tell him I don't know before I wake up. I wonder if, wherever he is, he'll find the jagged and wind-torn pieces of an old stool. It is a poor and selfish gift, and I am an incompetent Virgil, unable to answer even the simplest of afterlife questions. When the Mid-Autumn festival comes in the next few days, my grandmother tells me she cannot buy mooncakes: to allow herself even a simple joy does not feel appropriate after my grandfather's death. For the first time in my life, I do not buy mooncakes either. I think only about burning one for my grandfather's soul.

In our short calls between funeral arrangements, I tell my grandmother she has done every right thing. That she has not failed in her decision to bring him home from the hospital. This was the way my grandfather had wanted to die. His only request over and over—sometimes mean, sometimes pleading, always desperate and true—had been to be at home. I think of the taste of my grandmother's cooking on his last day, the familiar smell of the bed he laid on, the salt-sticky wind blowing in from Xiamen's shore that rushed through the balcony next to his bed. I think of the hands that undressed him for bed, the same gentle and wiry ones that he had known fifty-six years of his life. I think of the quiet. And beneath it all, if I close my eyes hard enough, there is a simmering but steady joy.

I hate it when it rains in Philly. I cannot pretend to be an eternal optimist, or even an optimist of any kind at all. I bought bright pink rain boots this year after fermenting in my socks one too many times. They are a size too big, and my feet slide around in them unbecomingly. I take big, stomping steps, and even then, my foot sometimes slips out. There is no one to carry me past the murky puddles in the road anymore. When the rain comes down heavy and demanding, the roads shift and shimmer like the muscles in a zebra's back.

When the light turns green, I leap one foot at a time onto the white lines until I reach the other side. I let myself giggle quietly, more girl than woman. I let myself buy a mooncake, a week late. I let myself enjoy the cracking of a crab's leg just the way my grandfather taught me. I do not let the slimy tentacles or snapping claws get me.

Joy, Practiced

Nilanjan Halder

Physician, Radiation Oncology

My search for joy began the way it does for so many young men my age: with heartbreak.

I still remember her, blue eyes, orange hair, blissfully unaware that hot cocoa had painted half her face brown as she spoke for thirty minutes straight without pausing for breath. When she finally did pause—tragically, because her voice was my favorite sound in the world—it was to tell me, in no uncertain terms, that she did not care for me in the slightest. She offered a few excellent sad song recommendations to soften the fall, hugged me goodbye, and promised I'd feel better in two weeks.

Suffice it to say, I did not feel better in two weeks.

Three months later, I was at St. Jude on my pediatric radiation oncology rotation, walking through bright hallways where courage and heartbreak live side by side. These were children and families facing the most devastating diagnoses I had ever seen: brain tumors, kidney lesions, illnesses that rewrote futures before they began. The families showed strength that humbled me, but what truly made something click was watching the children themselves.

When pain came, it was raw and unfiltered, and you could not help but feel some of it yourself. But when the disease was quiet, when the tumor or lesion receded into invisibility, they were serene, absorbed in video games, laughing at cartoons, living fully in the moment. They reminded me that joy is not the absence of suffering; it is the presence of life, fiercely claimed in the spaces where pain loosens its grip.

That realization changed me. It gave me a truth, a serious answer to what I now realized was an inane question: How could I live the rest of my life without the bubbly woman of my dreams towering over me? (She never said it, but I suspect the height difference factored into her decision.) By doing what those little ones were doing so heroically around me. My epiphany was the realization that to find joy, to find myself, I would do all the things I loved as a kid who feared cooties.

It began where my hours gathered: at work. I leaned into a privilege we often take for granted as physicians, the chance to truly listen, to glimpse a life in its most vulnerable chapters and serve it tenderly. I poured extra energy into presence, listened past words to breathing, posture, the tremor before a tear. I allowed my own heart to come forward in small reflections, a human to a human. It felt like childhood again, when people would bring me whatever weighed on them, regardless of how well they knew me, simply because I had a reputation for keeping secrets—mostly because I had a terrible memory. Still, I found a quiet joy as their faces lightened, their spirits lifted, a shared brightness made between us.

Then I asked myself: what else did I love?

What followed was an adventure: ups, downs, and plenty of sideways turns. I was tired of being the guy watching others on the dance floor, so I took classes and learned to dance like a complete fool, but courageously. I tried singing lessons, secretly hoping to one day serenade my lost sweetheart, and I quit after a month when my two brothers, my best friend, and even my mother begged me to stop (I am tone-deaf). I went horseback riding and rediscovered my easy, wordless connection with animals. I traveled to San Diego to surf; the sapphire sea reminded me of her eyes. Like her eyes, I nearly drowned in them, but joy does sometimes require a breath held and a letting go.

Now I'm in two book clubs. I box and do jiu-jitsu on and off because it reminds me of wrestling my little brothers, who are, unfortunately, much bigger than me now. I have backpacked through more than ten countries and visited twenty cities, not finding a next love but finding fast friends and unforgettable flashes of humanity: the clatter of dishes in a night market, a stranger's kindness with directions, laughter that needs no translation.

Somewhere along the way, I learned that fear, not hate, is the opposite of love. That joy lives in the moments when we allow ourselves to be carried: on roller coasters, into new conversations, beneath ocean waves with strangers who are about to become friends. Joy arrives when we wear our hearts on our sleeves and stop apologizing for being alive.

Joy is acceptance and practice. Joy is the choice to love the person God made you to be and to trust that design, a trust renewed in ordinary rituals: a deep

breath in a sunlit stairwell, the first sip of something warm, the soft slap of sandals on a hospital corridor, the courageous step onto a dance floor. Joy is not passive; it is a discipline, an art, a small rebellion against despair. It keeps us moving when the night is long; it puts fuel in the work; it turns obligation into offering.

I found joy in the only reality that allows us to truly live: the present. I keep practicing it, imperfectly, playfully, faithfully.

Now I just have to find a girlfriend.

On Allowing Joy

Maya Cox

Patient

She arrived without ceremony...

Without knocking, no announcement, just the sense that the room had changed its mind about me.

The cold lodged in my shoulders loosened first, then my hands, then the place behind my ribs I hadn't realized was clenched.

She didn't ask how long I'd been carrying it or what I planned to do next.

She sat close enough for warmth to travel, close enough that my body noticed before my thoughts did.

I stayed still, afraid that if I reached for her, she might disappear.

But she stayed. Not bright. Not loud. Just there...steady as heat finding its way back to skin.

Time behaved differently around her—unhooked from urgency, uninterested in productivity.

My breath lengthened on its own. My jaw released as if it had been waiting for permission.

I didn't feel fixed or improved. I felt held in a way that asked for nothing in return.

In her presence, stillness wasn't stagnation. It was a choice. It was attention. It was enough.

Stillness had never been neutral. I learned early that motion was protection, that usefulness kept the edges of things at bay.

Pausing too long invited questions. Silence could be mistaken for absence.

Even my body, which unreliable at times, learned to cooperate for the sake of others' comfort.

I smiled through fatigue, editing pain into palatable language, and kept my face arranged so that no one would worry or linger too long.

My shoulders lifted, my breath shortened, my attention stretched outward; constantly scanning for what needed tending.

Even alone, I stayed ready. Even when I was unwell, I performed “okay-ness” as a courtesy.

She never asked me to explain myself. There was no check-in, no assessment, no gentle concern disguised as care.

In her presence, my face softened without instruction.

The practiced brightness dimmed on its own.

I didn't have to translate what hurt or measure what I could carry.

She stayed when my energy waned, when the effort fell away. Nothing collapsed. Nothing was lost. The room did not empty.

I learned then that I could be still without disappearing...that I could stop performing wellness and remain intact.

I had been taught to look for joy in moments that announced themselves; loud, bright, undeniable.

But she never asked for recognition. She arrived as peace, as warmth, as the absence of urgency.

She was the place my body went when it no longer needed to prove it was fine.

I did not find her by chasing happiness or mastering resilience. I saw her by allowing stillness to be the okay. By staying. By letting myself be held without performance.

Only then did I understand: this was joy—not as reward or relief, but as intentional presence.

And she had been waiting, patiently, for me to stop running long enough to feel her.

AFTERWORD

Dear Readers,

Thank you for coming this far. As a final thought, we present a candid reflection, “The Joy of Paxton,” by our prize co-sponsor, Dr. Theresa Yeo. It leaves us with the hope that, despite everything, moments of joy—and healing—can find us when we least expect it.

The Joy of Paxton

Theresa Yeo

Nurse Practitioner, Surgery

Nearly five years ago my husband and I lost our transgender son. The joy one feels at the start of a child's life is immense. It is followed by the usual challenges of child rearing. This process was complicated in our child by severe ADHD, poor school performance, and behavioral and discipline issues. These concerns were partly mitigated by our child excelling in sports and discovering amazing musical talents—perfect pitch, performance excellence, and song writing. However, sexual identity confusion, gender dysphoria, depression, and anxiety underscored it all. Substance abuse and addiction ensued.

Grief for us has been a complicated and multifaceted emotional state. There comes a point—as acute grief and counseling gives way to the realization that you can choose to go on or remain miserable. We made the very conscious decision to seek joy in our lives despite the tragedy that befell and affected our family. In this pursuit, we continued our professional lives, reached out to friends and family to let them know that we were not “poison.” We were getting back in the game so to speak. We chose to focus on the positive memories and times with our child.

Having had four dogs in our married life, we developed new “dog envy” when we saw dogs of all types being walked in the neighborhood. After much discussion and recognizing the sacrifices involved when adopting a puppy at age 70, we said, “Let's do it! Let's find a pup!” We were on a waiting list for the next litter of Bichapoos (Bichon Frisé-mini Poodle mix) from a private breeder in Ephrata, PA. The much-anticipated addition arrived two years ago, with Paxton Caden (named after a basketball player who had similar tightly curled hair) waiting to go to his new home. At 2 pounds, he was soft, cuddly, cute, vulnerable and totally loveable. This is not to imply that a puppy, no matter how adorable, can ever replace a child. However, in the decision to seek joy in our lives after tragedy, Paxton Caden has indeed brought a measure of joy back to our lives.



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