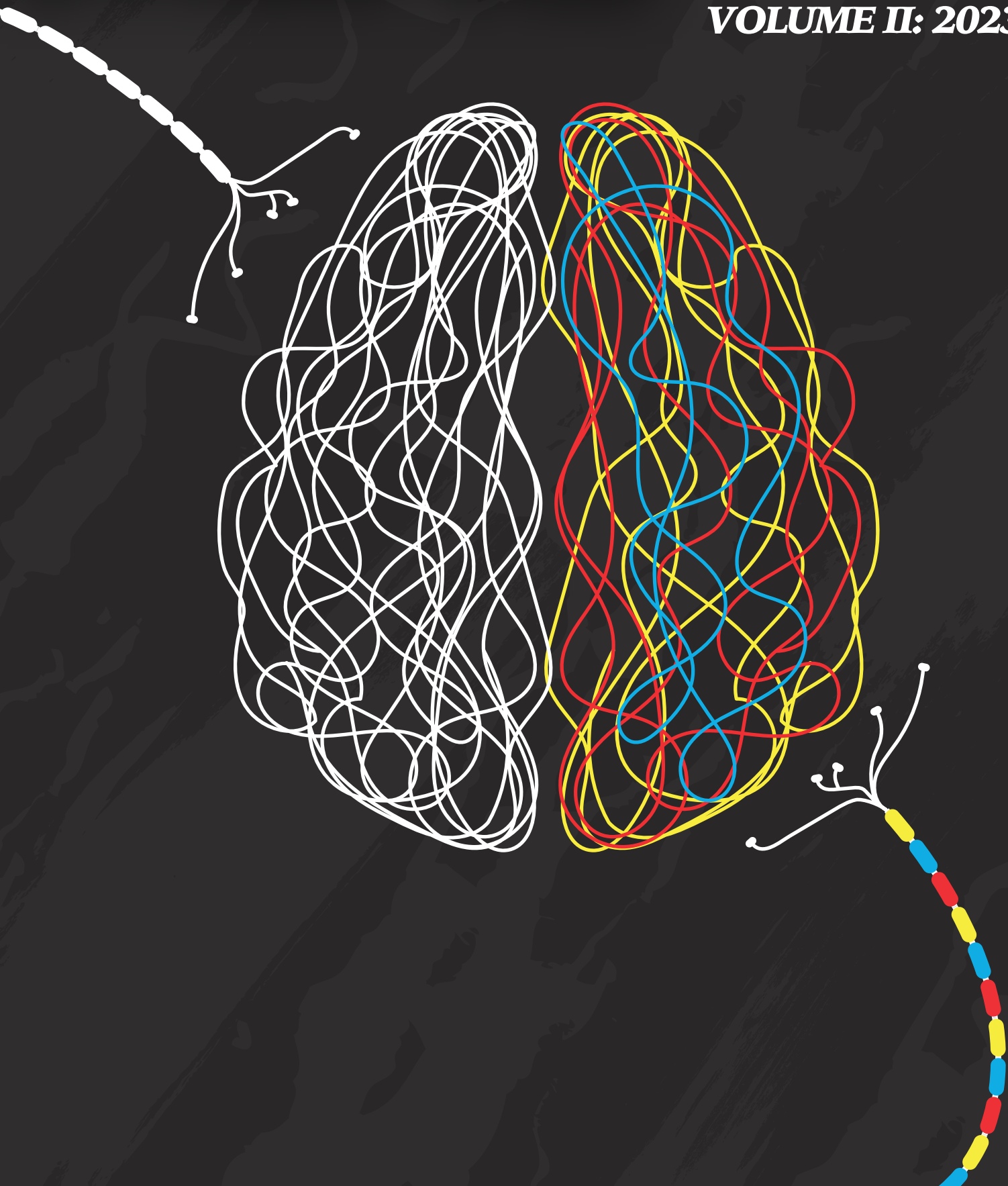


SYNAPSES

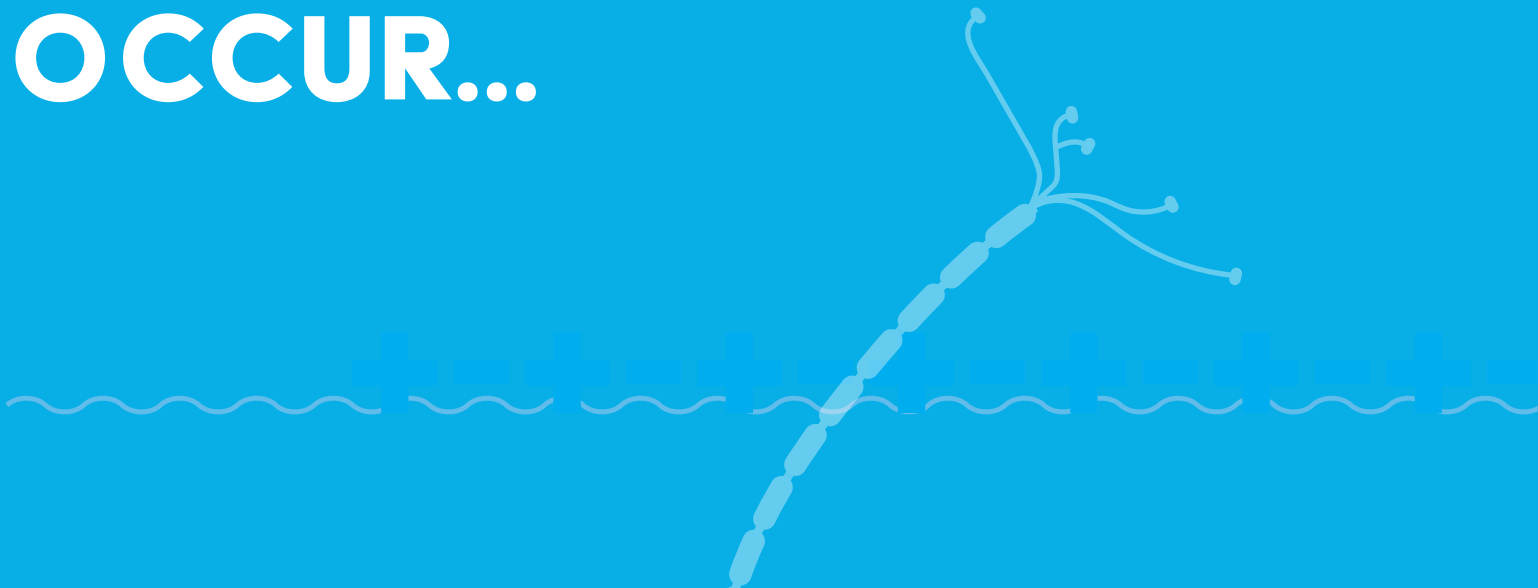
A NEUROLOGY ART
AND LITERARY MAGAZINE

VOLUME II: 2023



SYNAPSES

ARE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN TWO NERVE CELLS, ALLOWING NEUROTRANSMITTERS TO PASS FROM ONE CELL TO THE OTHER, ENABLING ELECTRICAL COMMUNICATION TO OCCUR...



INTRO & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE SYNAPSES ART AND LITERARY MAGAZINE IS A PROJECT THROUGH THE DEPARTMENT OF NEUROLOGY AT WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY. IT IS SUPPORTED BY THE BACK TO BEDSIDE INITIATIVE THROUGH THE ACCREDITATION COUNCIL FOR GRADUATE MEDICAL EDUCATION (ACGME). THE BACK TO BEDSIDE INITIATIVE ENCOURAGES THE DEVELOPMENT OF INNOVATIVE PROJECT IDEAS THAT WILL FOSTER A CONNECTION BETWEEN RESIDENTS AND THEIR PATIENTS. THE GOAL OF THE SYNAPSES MAGAZINE IS TO PROMOTE HUMANITIES AMONGST PATIENTS AND RESIDENTS THROUGH THE USE OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION. RESIDENTS DEAL WITH BURNOUT, STRESSFUL SITUATIONS, AND EMOTIONALLY DRAINING EXPERIENCES, OFTEN WITHOUT AN OUTLET TO EXPRESS THESE EXPERIENCES. LIKEWISE, THE PATIENT EXPERIENCE IN THE HOSPITAL CAN BE FRIGHTENING AND INTIMIDATING AND A VARIETY OF CHRONIC ILLNESSES CAN ALSO HAVE LONGSTANDING IMPACTS ON PATIENT QUALITY OF LIFE. THE GOAL OF THIS MAGAZINE IS TO SHOWCASE THE ARTISTIC EXPRESSION OF BOTH PATIENTS AND MEDICAL PROVIDERS, AND ULTIMATELY ALLOW FOR A MEANINGFUL WAY TO REFLECT ON THESE EXPERIENCES. JUST AS SYNAPSES PROMOTE CONNECTIONS IN THE NEUROLOGIC SYSTEM, WE HOPE THE SYNAPSES MAGAZINE WILL PROMOTE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN PATIENTS AND THEIR PROVIDERS.



WELCOME TO SYNAPSES

MEET THE FACULTY

WELCOME TO THE SECOND EDITION OF SYNAPSES! WE ARE HONORED TO BE THE FACULTY MENTORS FOR THIS INNOVATIVE AND FUN PROJECT. THE FOCUS OF THESE ARTISTIC PIECES IS TO BRING HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS CLOSER TO THEIR PATIENTS. WHILE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ITS ENDURING EFFECTS HAVE LIMITED OUR ABILITY TO SPEND MORE TIME AT THE BEDSIDE, WE CAN STILL SHARE CLOSE EXPERIENCES WITH OUR PATIENTS. THIS COLLECTION SHOWCASES THOSE CONNECTIONS AND BONDS, AND CELEBRATES HOW BOTH PATIENTS AND MEDICAL PROVIDERS CAN INSPIRE EACH OTHER. WE HOPE YOU ENJOY!

Sincerely,

JESSICA FREY, MD

ERIC SEACHRIST, MD

GAURI PAWAR, MD

MEET THE TEAM

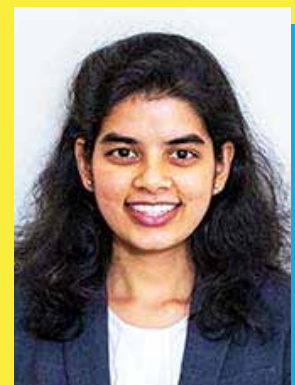
DANIELLE SBLENDORIO is a medical student at WVU School of Medicine and earned her bachelor's degree in Microbiology & Cell Science from the University of Florida. She served as president for the WVU Student Interest Group In Neurology (SIGN) chapter. She is also a Rural Track Program student and has a passion for teaching and expanding access to neurologic care in rural communities of West Virginia. Her interests include musical theater, piano, swimming, and learning about foods and music from different cultures with family and friends.

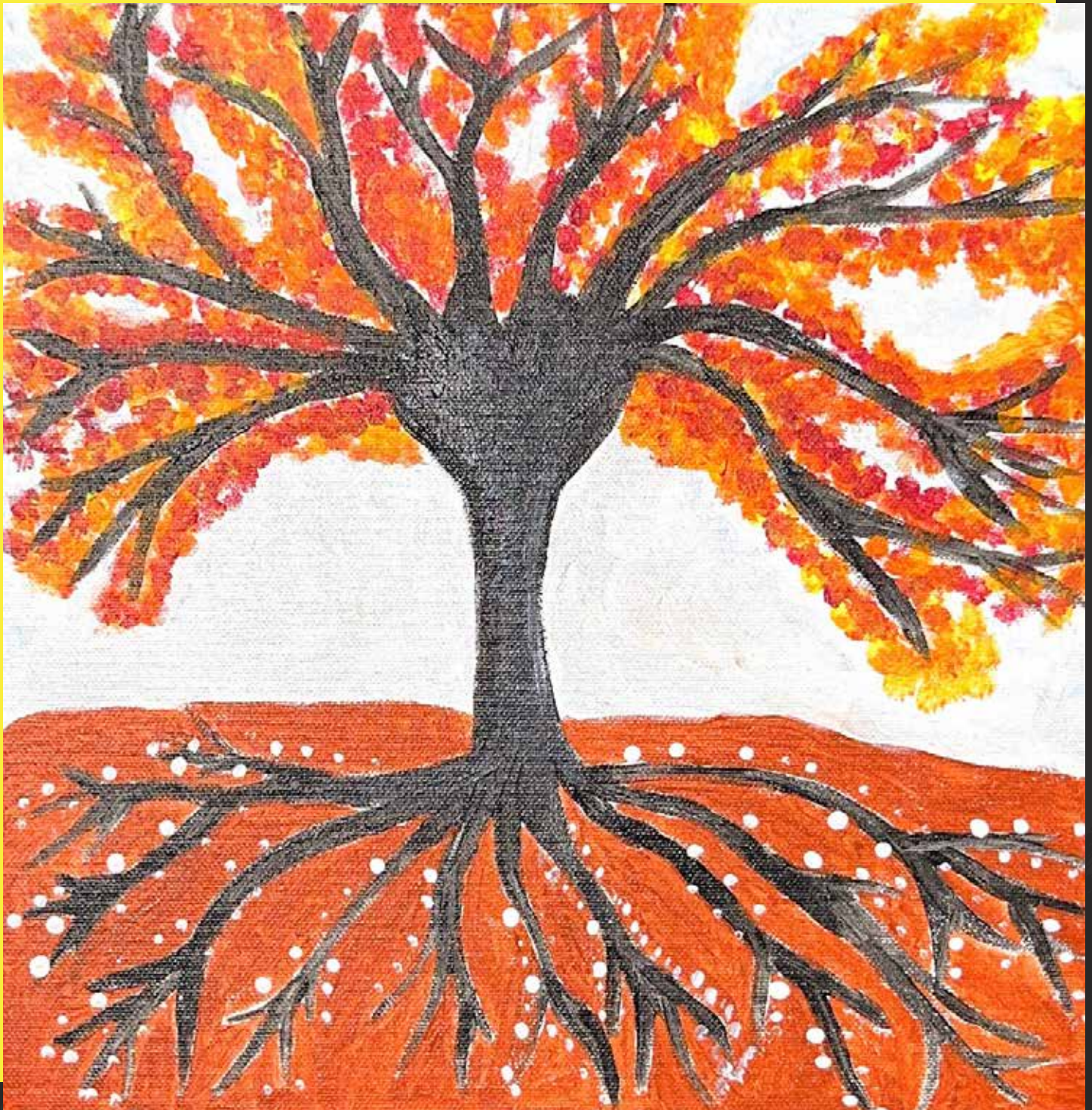


LINCEY ALEXIDA WILSON is a second-year neurology resident at West Virginia University. She conferred her Medical Degree from St. James School of Medicine, Anguilla. She received her Master of Science in Clinical Research Administration and Master of Business Administration at Walden University, Minnesota. In addition to her research experience, she also has a Bachelor of Science degree in mathematics and biology, from Northeastern University Boston, Massachusetts. Lincey is the Wellness Chief for her neurology residency program. She also serves as the Graphic Designer and editor for the WVU humanities Journal "Synapses". She is a House staff Emerging Academy of Leaders – USA Program graduate. She is a member of the American Academy of Neurology. She is planning on specializing in vascular neurology. Additionally, she is a PhD candidate in Clinical Translational Science.



KRITHIKA PESHWE is a fourth-year neurology resident and the current chief resident for the neurology residency program. She also serves as the Graduate Medical Education Neurology representative for this academic school year. She plans to specialize in vascular neurology.

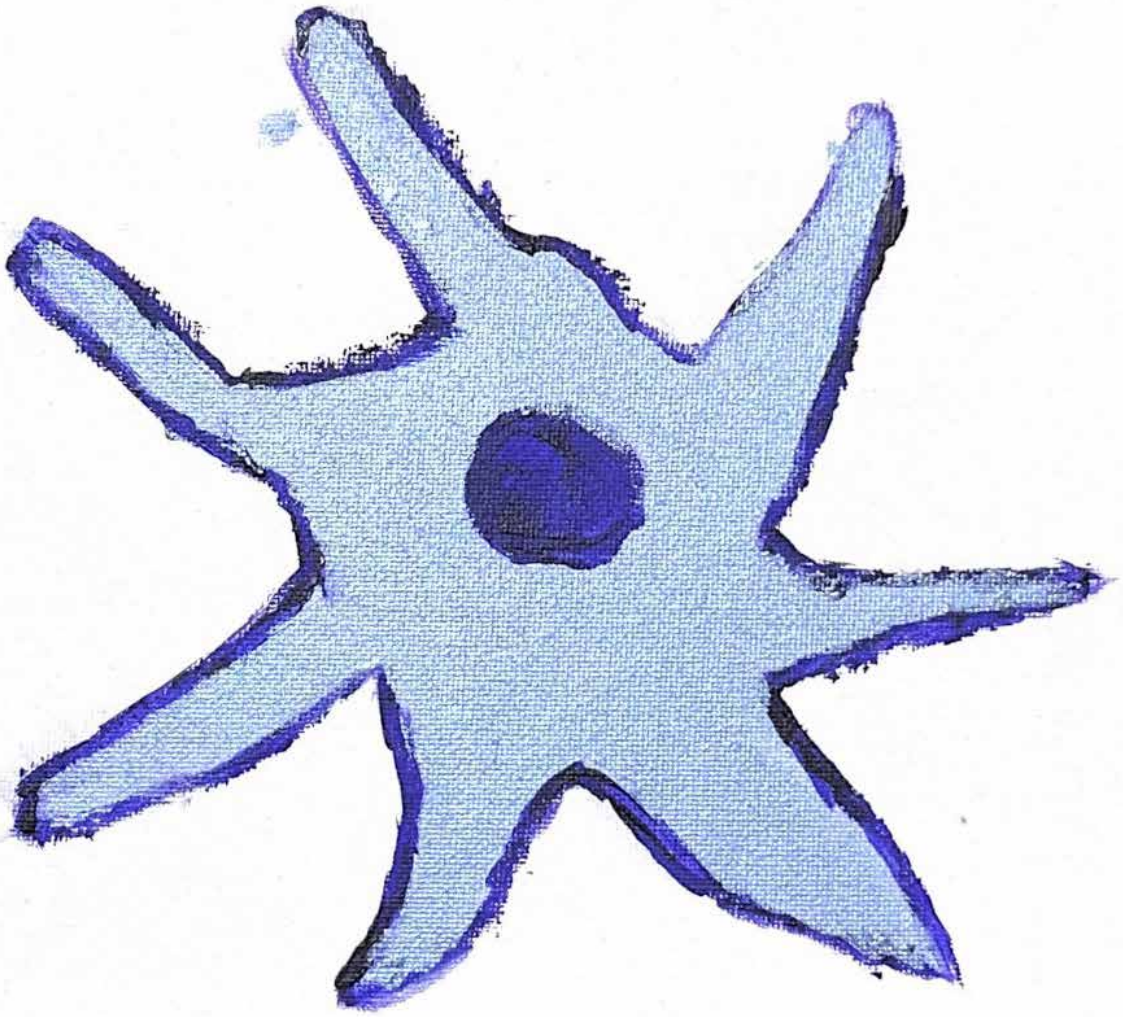




“ROOTS OF THE MIND”

Lynette Fisher
MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

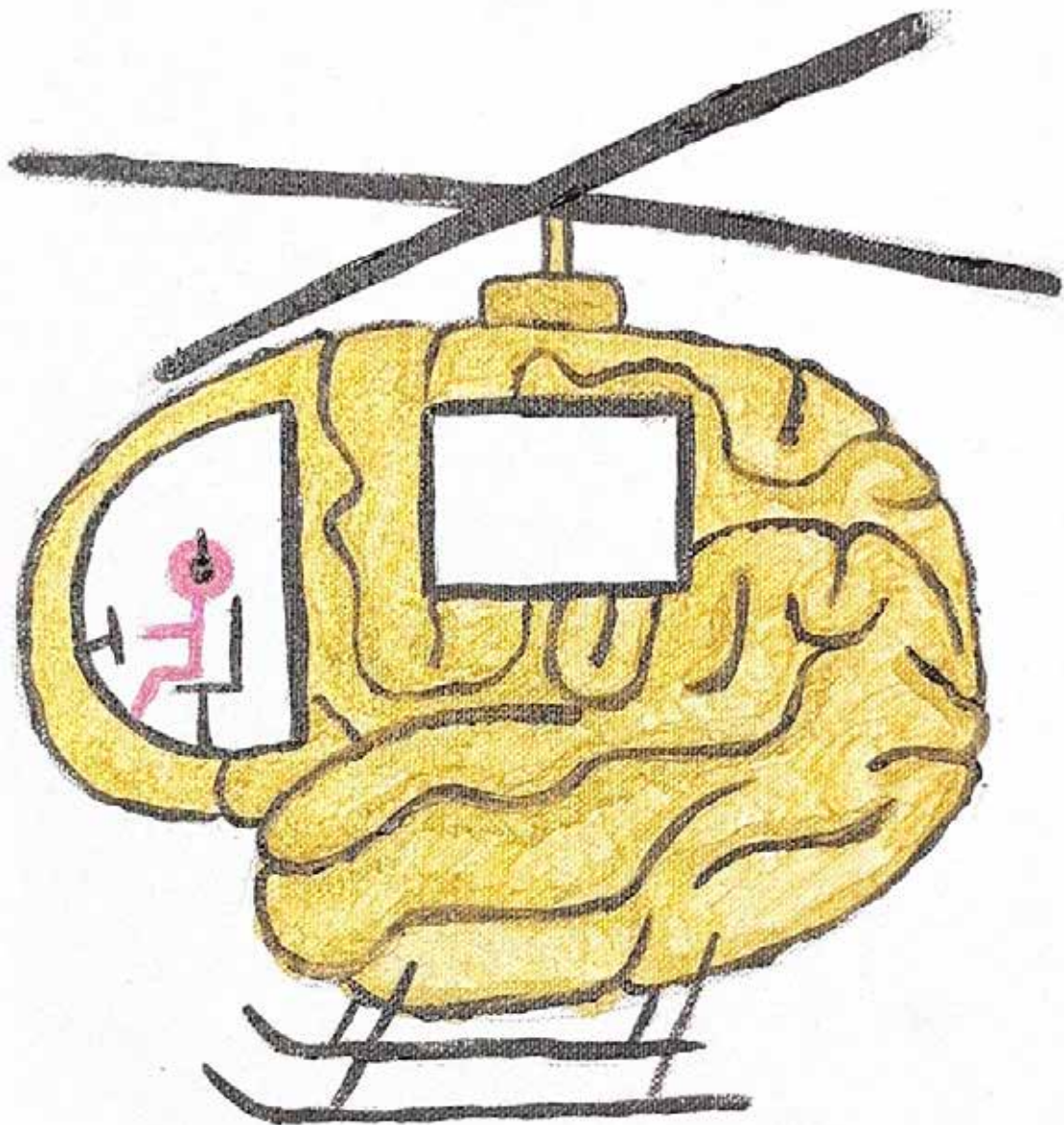
Inspiration: Trees are an interconnected system of roots just as our neurons are an interconnected network that make up the essence of who we are and how we function.



Katie Barnes
MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

“UNIPOLAR BLUE NEURON”

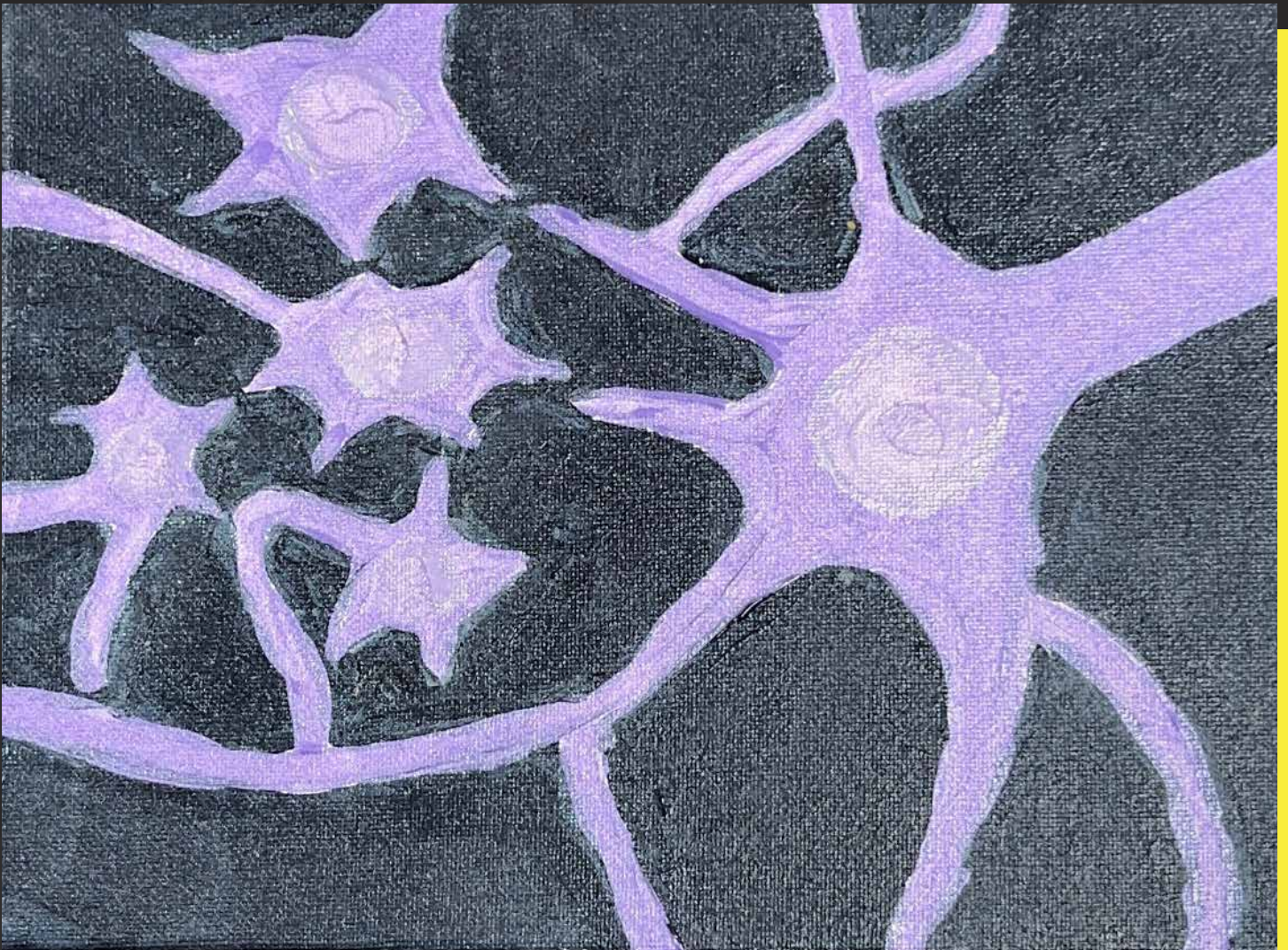
Inspiration: I find neurology to be a particularly exciting field because more people are investing in research in the hopes of finding new therapies for people who suffer from neurological diseases.



“AIR SUPPORT”

Caitlin Montgomery
MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

Inspiration: I was recently spending time with my nephews, who love to draw. They showed me some of their creations, which were all sorts of fanciful vehicles. They were designing fleets to defend against any foe, but they needed air support. That was the inspiration for my brain helicopter. What could be better than a collection of neurons for gathering intelligence from above?



Lia Farrell

**MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY**

“REACHING”

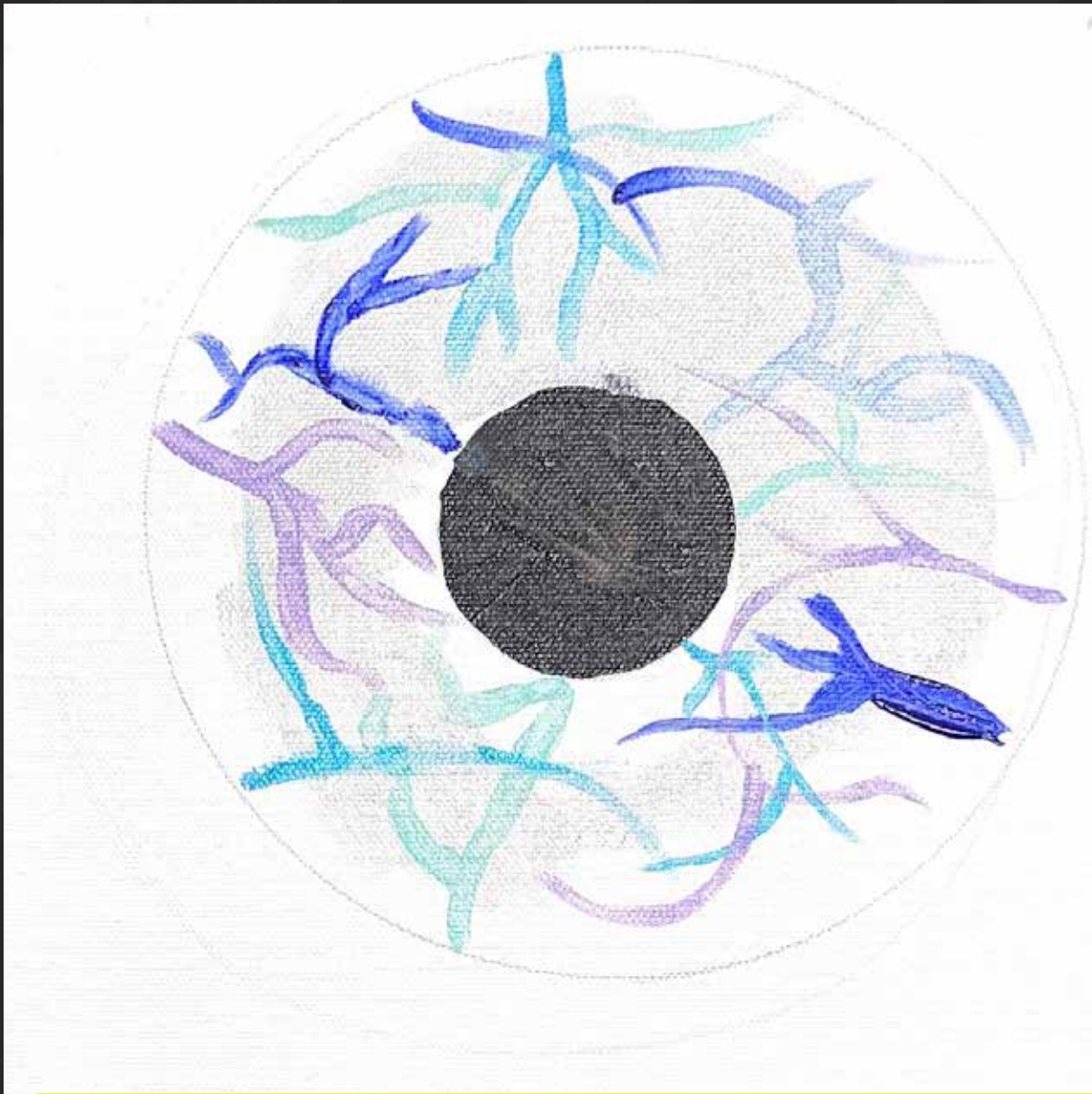
Inspiration: I love thinking about synapses and the organization of our brain. It's an incredible feat of evolution that these tiny connections make us who we are and enable us to do amazing things every day



“MOONLIT SENECA”

Inspiration: A painting of Seneca Rocks at night.

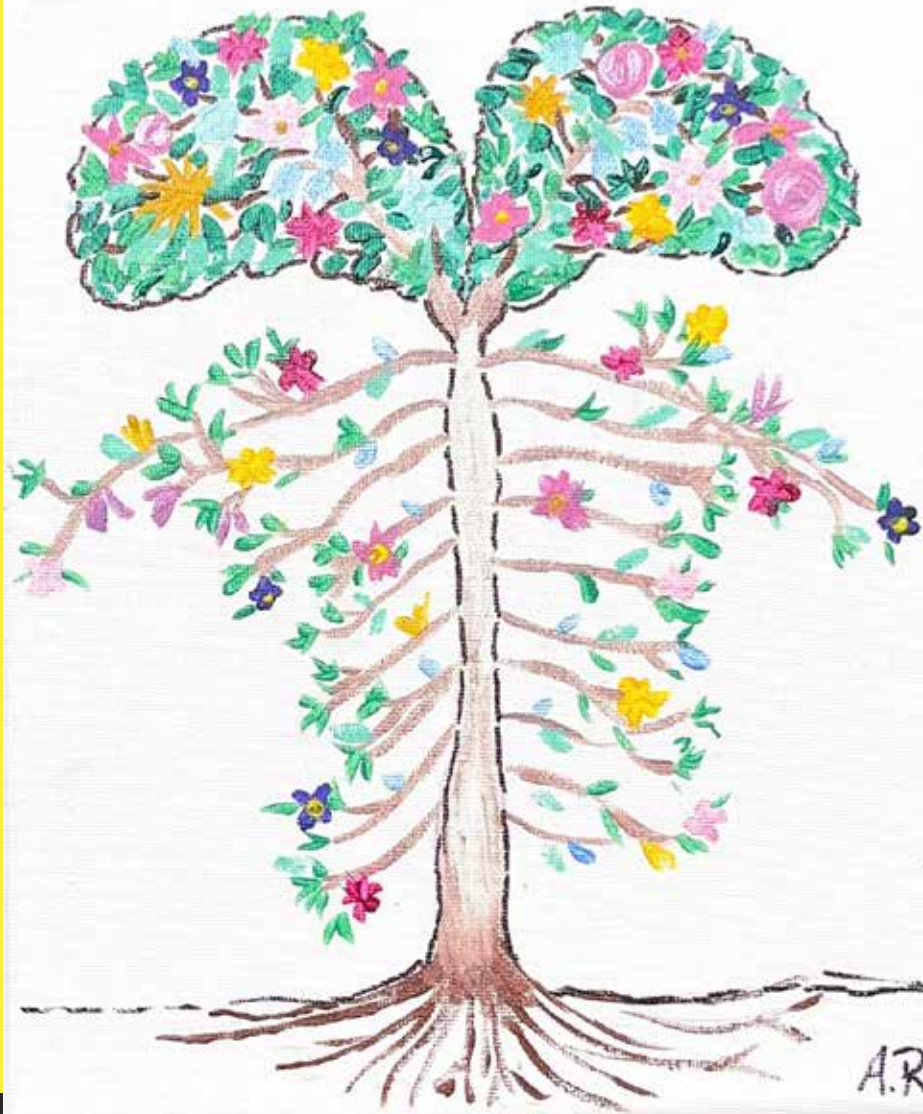
**Benjamin Shertzer
MEDICAL STUDENT AND RN
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY**



Madison Starcher
MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

“EYEBALL”

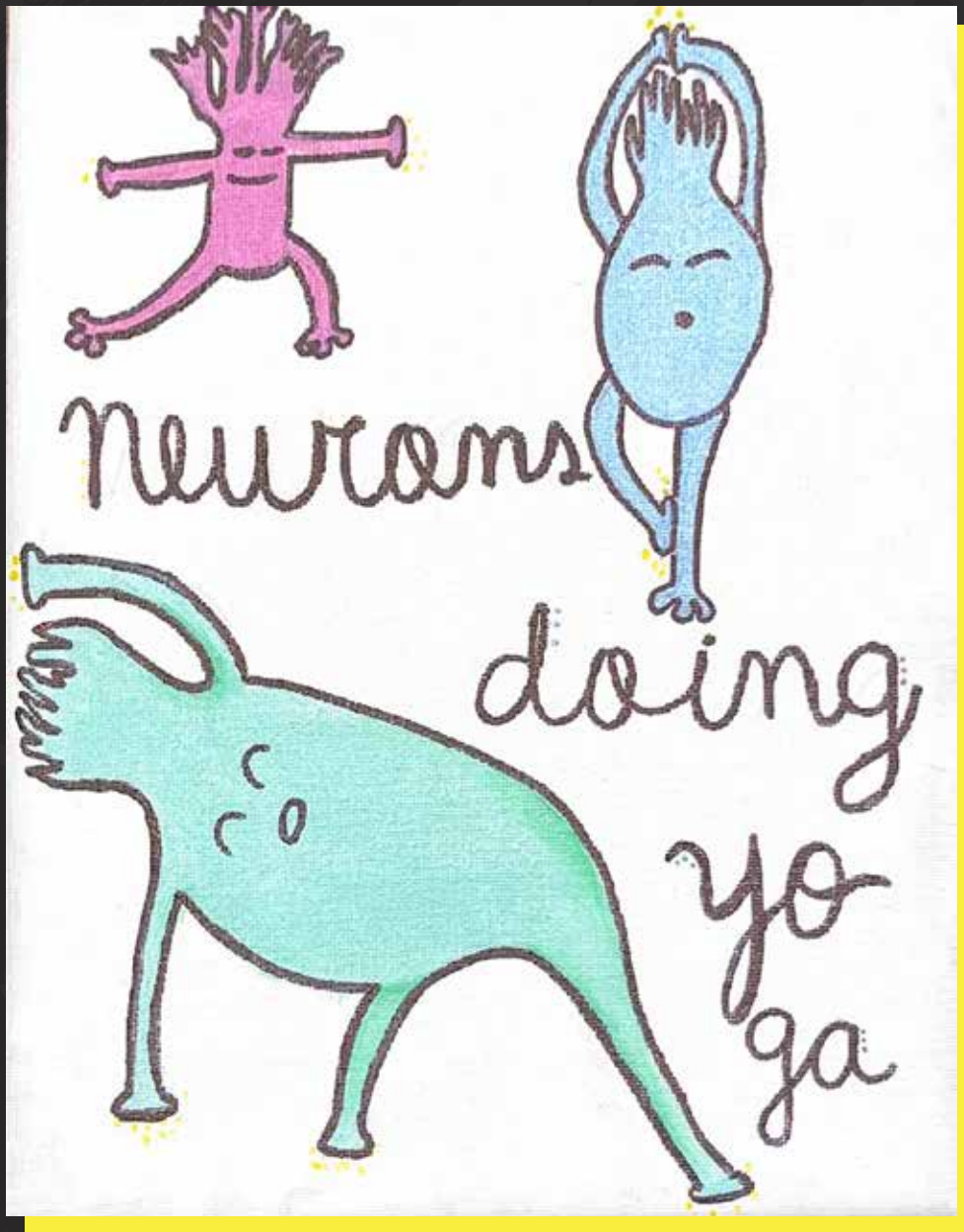
Inspiration: “Eyeball” signifies the ability to see one’s mind and passions through their eyes. These nerves light up and shine through the eyes to display one’s passions and character.



“BLOOM”

Abigail Roop
MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

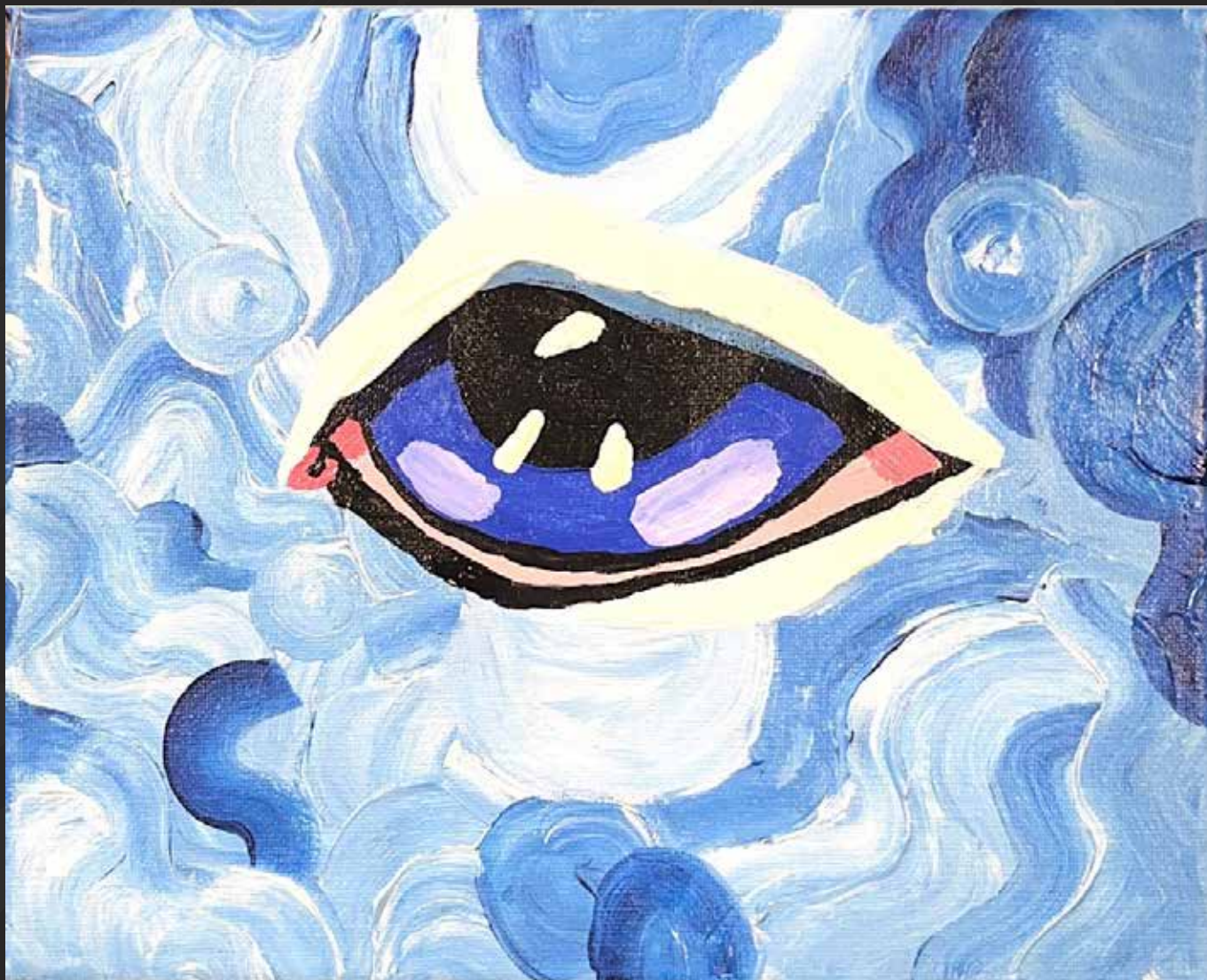
Inspiration: In this piece, I decided to depict the CNS as arborescent. The 2 brain hemispheres are separated into large bloom-laden treetops while the spinal cord serves as the trunk with its many peripheral branches. I chose to portray the CNS as such because this system grows and develops much like a tree. The spinal cord with its many branches originates earlier, embryologically speaking, and resembles the trunk, roots, and branches while the brain develops from the cord later, like the leaves and blooms found in a tree's crown. The brain is also ever-changing like the canopy, whose leaves and flowers wax and wane with the season, the brain too can change its neural pathways and signaling as needed.



Andrea Hincapie
Bendeck
MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

“NEURONS DOING YOGA”

Inspiration: I do yoga every morning. It is a good way to start my day and get my mind flowing, so I was thinking of my own neurons doing yoga in a comical style to reference the idea of relaxation and flow.



Minahal Naveed
MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

“BLUE”

Inspiration: Blue is my favorite color. I don't have a formal message to convey but just wanted to make a piece that was interesting to view and then allow the viewer to find their own meaning upon reflection.



“FROM SCRATCH”

Inspiration: My kids make the holiday season such a joy, and they especially love baking with their Nana and Mamaw. This picture tries to capture and relish in that love.

Michael Grimm
MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY



Tanvi Nadkarni
NEUROLOGY RESIDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

“UNRAVELING THE BEAUTY OF THE BRAIN”

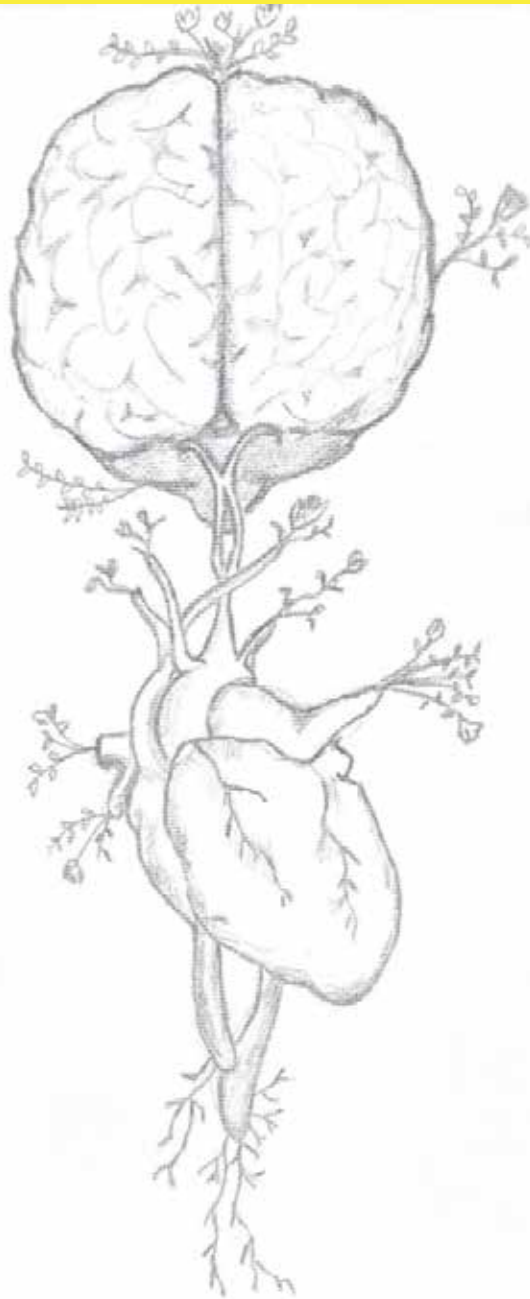
Inspiration: Although the brain remained to be a mystery for centuries, as we unravel these mysteries, the simple beauty of neuroscience is revealed.



Levi Helmick
MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

"THE WINDOW"

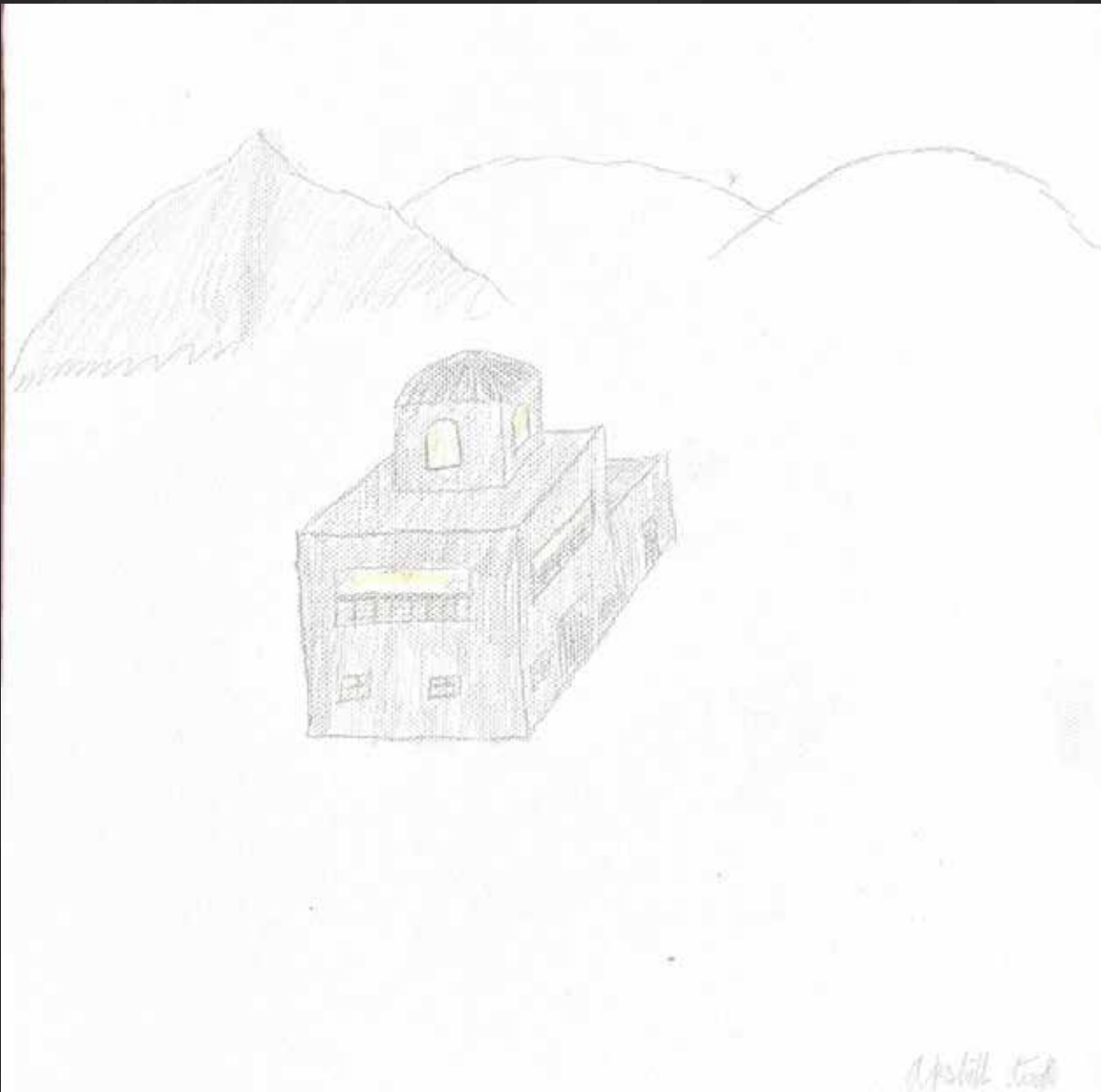
Inspiration: This painting represents sacrifice. There's a time in everyone's life where we feel like we're watching life go on as though we're on the other side of the glass.



“BRAIN LINKED HEART”

Curtis Amankwah
NEUROLOGY RESIDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

Inspiration: Our heart and brain are tightly linked. A healthy heart translates to a healthy brain. When it comes to the body, the brain is like a CPU. It holds the information and controls the performance of the body. But a computer cannot run without electricity. So you can think of the heart as the power source for the brain. Both the heart and the brain share vascular risk factors, so what’s good for your blood vessels are good for both the heart and the brain.



Doddi Akshith
INTERNAL MEDICINE RESIDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

“A STREAM IN THE MOUNTAINS”

Inspiration: It is the incredible and transcendent beauty of Appalachia, particularly the horizon of the mountains highlighted by a sunrise or a sunset.



“HOPE”

Inspiration: I drew this picture after we took care of a patient with CJD on our service. I wanted to represent the hope that his family had throughout his entire hospital admission.

Violina Melnic
NEUROLOGY RESIDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY



Joshua Kramer
NEUROLOGY RESIDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

“PARADOXICAL MOVEMENT”

Inspiration: Watching a Parkinson patient walk more freely with the aid of a visual stimulus is both mind boggling and awe inspiring.



“THE SLOW THINKER”

Inspiration: This painting is open for interpretation...Go ahead look at it...What are you thinking?

Sara L. Dobrzynski
NEUROVASCULAR NURSE
PRACTITIONER
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

"SO YOU WANT TO BE A DR?"

Family + friends ask this question
and my reasoning is never one word.
You cannot simplify healthcare's direction,
but instead summarize the 1st third.

Medical students are taught principles—
clinicals, ethics, sciences reflect three.
It is my passion for care—not simple
to make a difference is the path for me.

Nina D'Andrea

NINA D'ANDREA
MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

**"HEART OF
A HEALER"**

Inspiration: This poem was inspired by the advice I have received throughout my education about being a female interested in pursuing a career in medicine. Many have told me that it would be nearly impossible for me to one day have a family life and also a successful career. My family, however, has continuously encouraged me to pursue the path of healing and my passion to work in underserved communities. When challenges arise and you question whether or not you can move forward, it is essential to remember your values.



SANTA MONICA AT SUNSET

Benjamin Silverberg
**DEPARTMENT OF
EMERGENCY MEDICINE
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY**

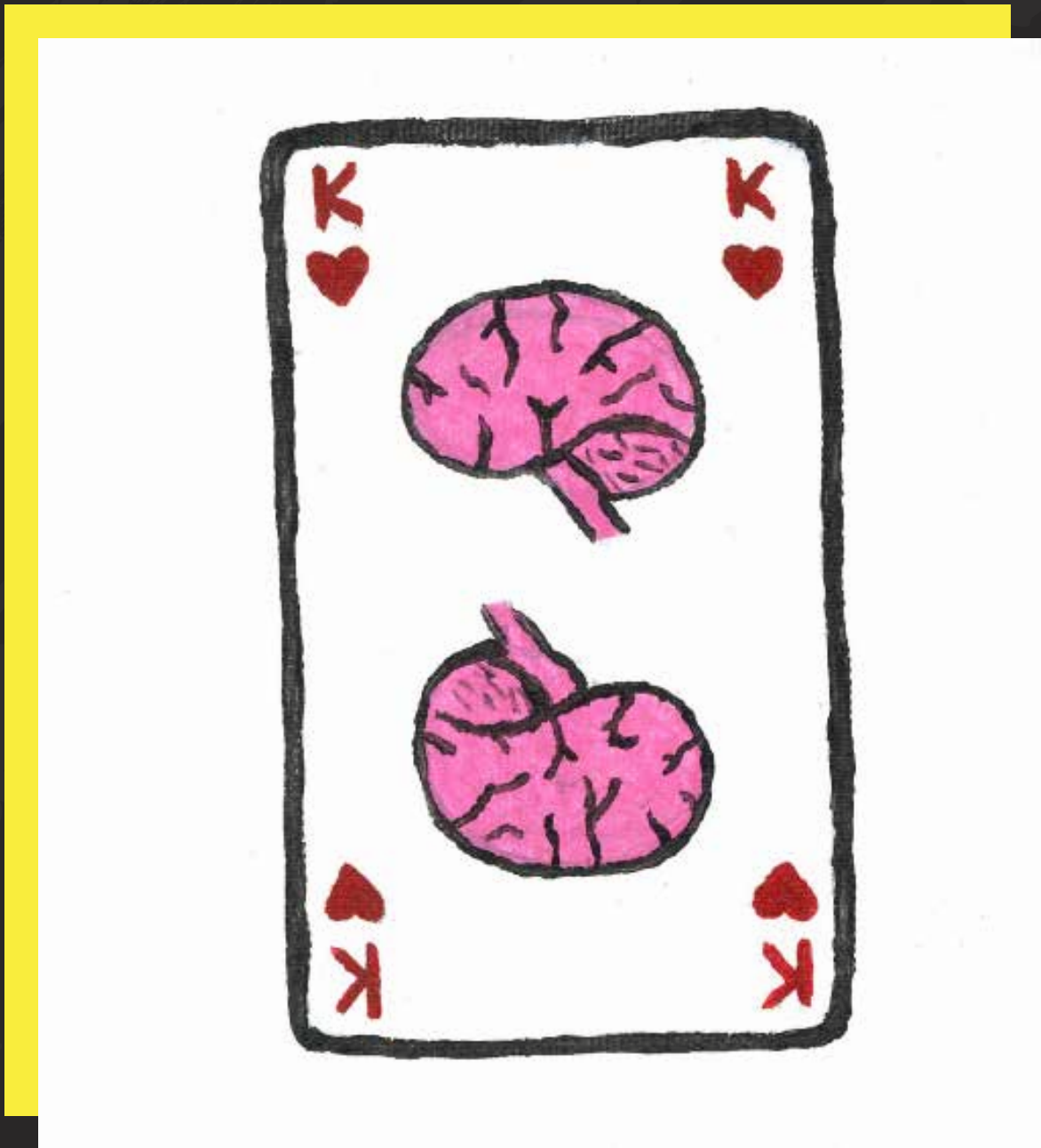
Inspiration: The striking gold, blue, pink, and purple colors of a sunset over the Pacific Ocean could not be ignored. The reflection in the wet sand - and silhouettes of others taking in the moment of beauty - remind the viewer of the sheer scale of things and encourage us to take a moment to pause and breathe in the salty air.



Meg Evans
MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

“THOUGHTS IN FLORAL”

Inspiration: A statement on seeking the flowers within your own brain



“COMMUNICATION BRIDGE”

Hannah Tenney
MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

Inspiration: I chose to do the painting as a way to honor a patient I had met prior to med school during volunteering that inspired me to be a doctor! He was a gentleman who had a stroke and was unable to fully communicate but I found he loved playing cards so after that we would spend the afternoons playing different card games and really connected over that and it just amazed me the way we were able to bond despite being unable to verbally communicate!



Nick Nestor
MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

“SENSORY BALANCE”

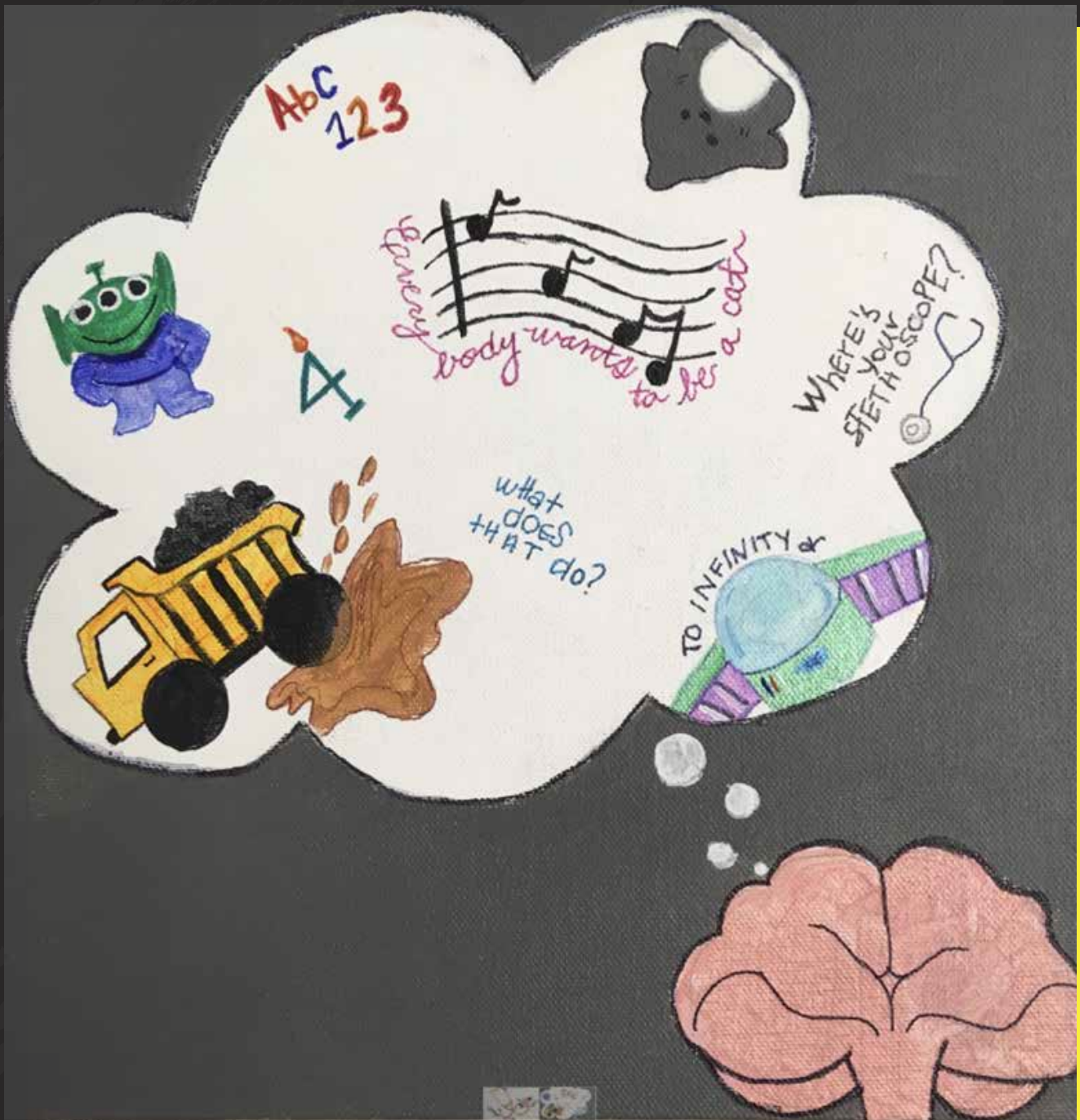
Inspiration: I drew this picture of a sensory neuron with warm colors on one side and cool colors on the other. It symbolizes the mixture of emotions and feelings we sense from ourselves and others in our every day lives.



“GROW AND BLOSSOM”

Roushini Manjunath
MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

Inspiration: When I started working my first job in healthcare, I began a little backyard garden to help me cope with the new forms of stress. I remember calling my mom on the phone because one morning my tomato flowers were gone and in their place were perfect, round, tiny green tomatoes. I couldn't believe that something I had watered and cared for days had suddenly undergone such a momentous change. When I started wrapping up as a medical assistant to enter med school, I realized that patients I had seen come into the clinic a year prior, exhausted, sick, tired, and needing empathy and encouragement, somewhere under my nose had transformed their health and activity. I'd like to think that the presence of consistent love and support is fertilizer for our wellness; it helps us grow and blossom into our next stages.



Emilea Warnick
MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

**“THROUGH THE
MIND OF A CHILD”**

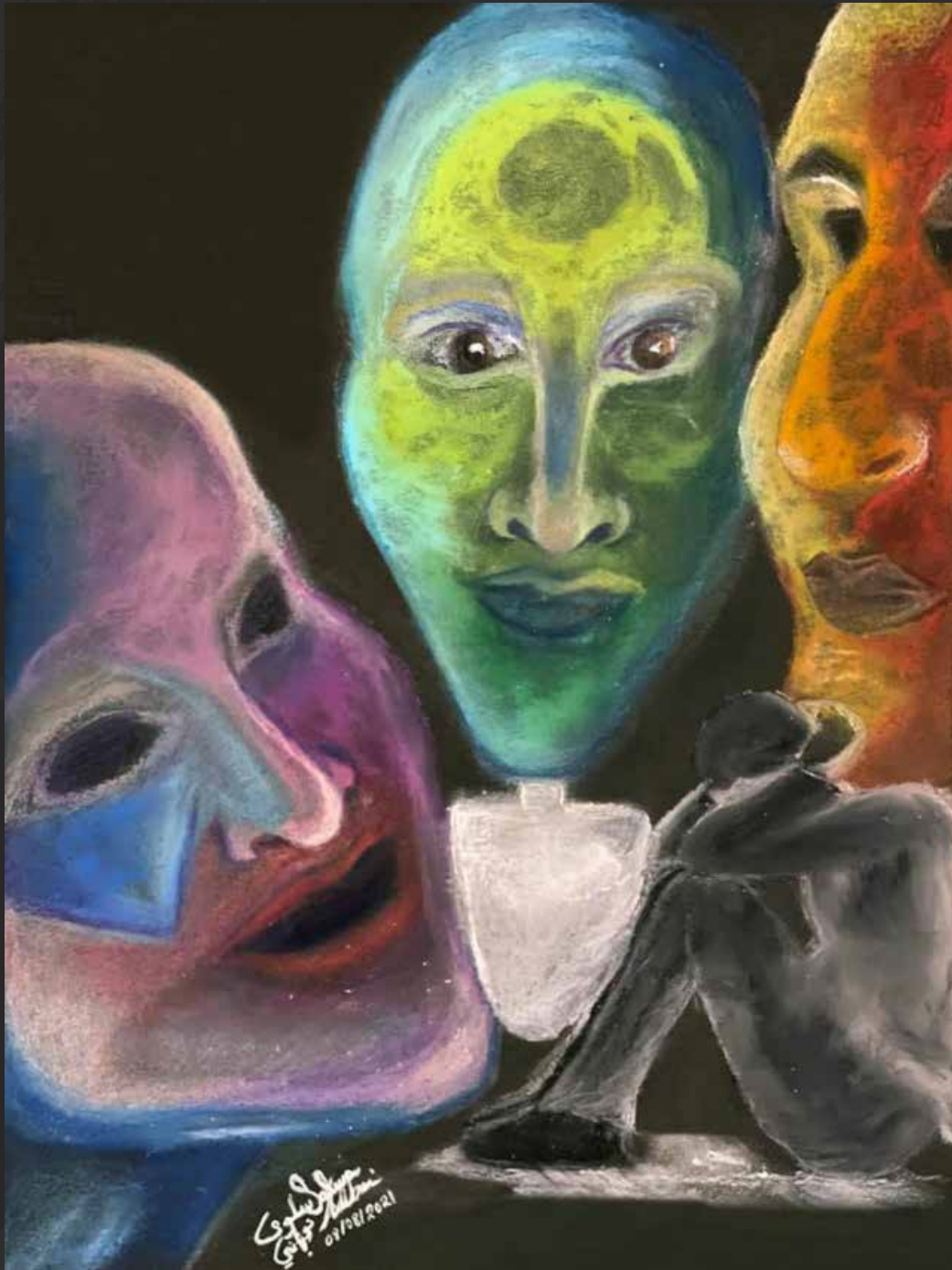
Inspiration: During my second year of medical school, I had a Pediatric Encounter that consisted of a 4-year-old Well Child Check. During the examination, the child was so inquisitive asking about anything he saw in the room, my stethoscope, and telling me about his favorite things. His excitement and curiosity brightened my evening! Over the next months during moments of stress, I thought of this interaction and reminded myself to find interest in small things and take time to enjoy my favorite things.



“PETS”

Sarah Mitchem
MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

Inspiration: Patients are often nervous regarding the many unknowns they face when coming to see a doctor. By asking about a patient's pet(s), we can learn more about our patients while also making them feel more comfortable.



Salwa Nubani
PSYCHIATRY RESIDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

“UNTITLED”

Inspiration: Our minds are perhaps our most familiar places to be and yet can be the most frightening of places to be. My favorite patient population to work with are those with thought disorders. In this drawing I am depicting a moment of psychosis and how overstimulating, overwhelming, isolating and frightening I would imagine it being for that person experiencing it.



"HOPE"

Lincey Wilson
NEUROLOGY RESIDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

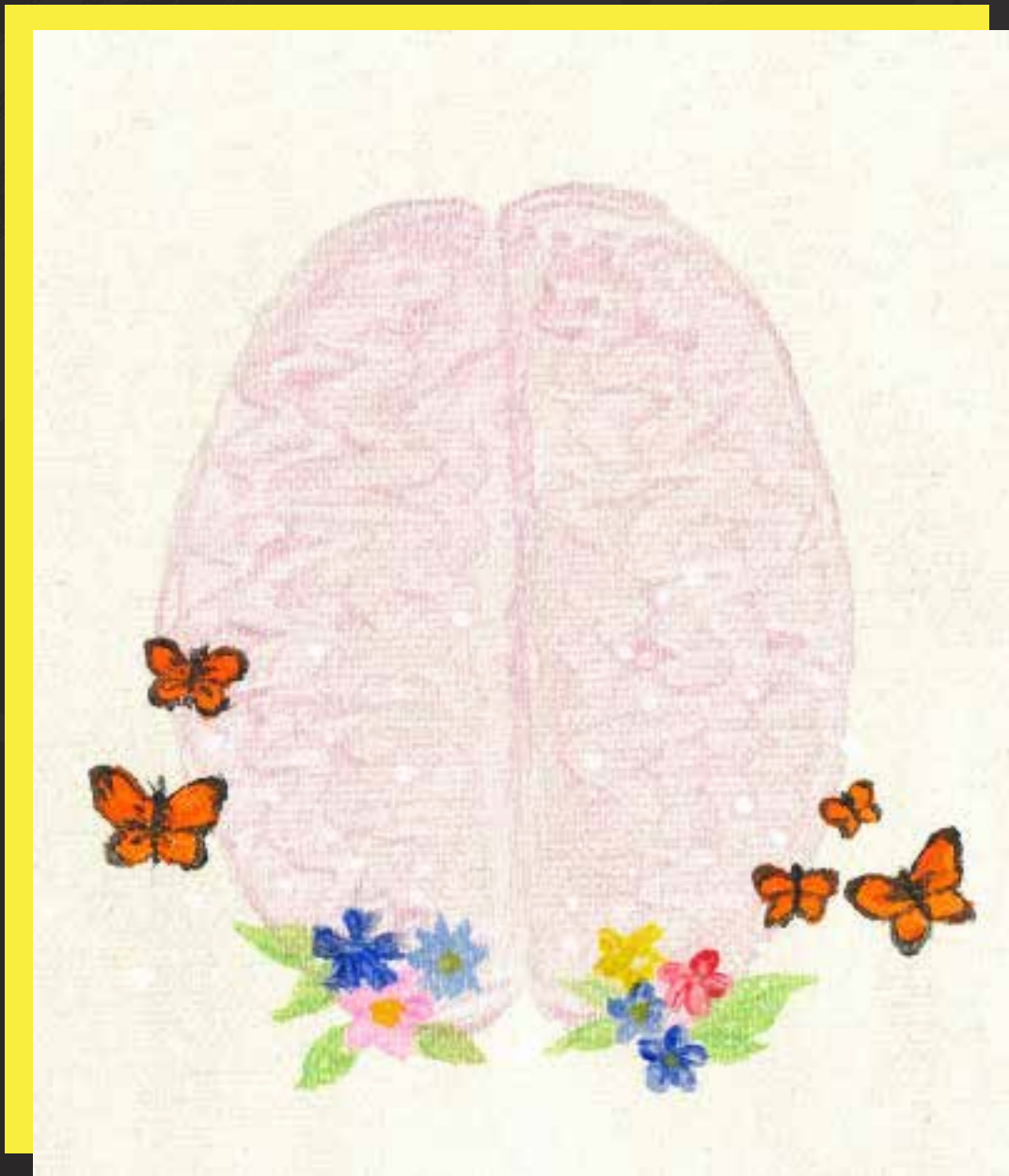
Inspiration: Flowers are nature's way of showing that there is always hope. Hope is a concept that is important to neurology patients as they often have a prolonged recovery journey ahead of them. I often tell patients to be resilient like the flowers we see around us. Regardless of the weather, the seasons and the many obstacles that a flower might face, it will bloom again when the time is right. Regardless of your medical, financial, physical and social obstacles, know that time heals all things if you have hope.



M. Camila
Moreno-Escobar
NEUROLOGY RESIDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

“SUNFLOWER”

Inspiration: I made this piece inspired by one of my friends from residency who suffered from an unpredictable illness during our training, sunflowers always remind me of her because of all the happiness and joy they inspire just like her! She also always is such a positive person, smiling and always looking at the sun.



“IN BLOOM”

Inspiration: The brain is a fascinating organ where so many divine and gracious thoughts are cultivated. In my piece, I wanted to showcase the contrast between the anatomic, practical brain with the brain that I imagine these beautiful thoughts are curated—a brain in full bloom, surrounded by butterflies, beauty, and mystic.

Mara Walters
MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY



Lynette Fisher
MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

“COSMIC SYNAPSE”

Inspiration: This work is inspired by the idea that the mind is a galaxy of synaptic connections. Every brain is a unique tiny universe.



“VISITING THUNDERSTORM”

Inspiration: a symbol of power, which I do not have right now

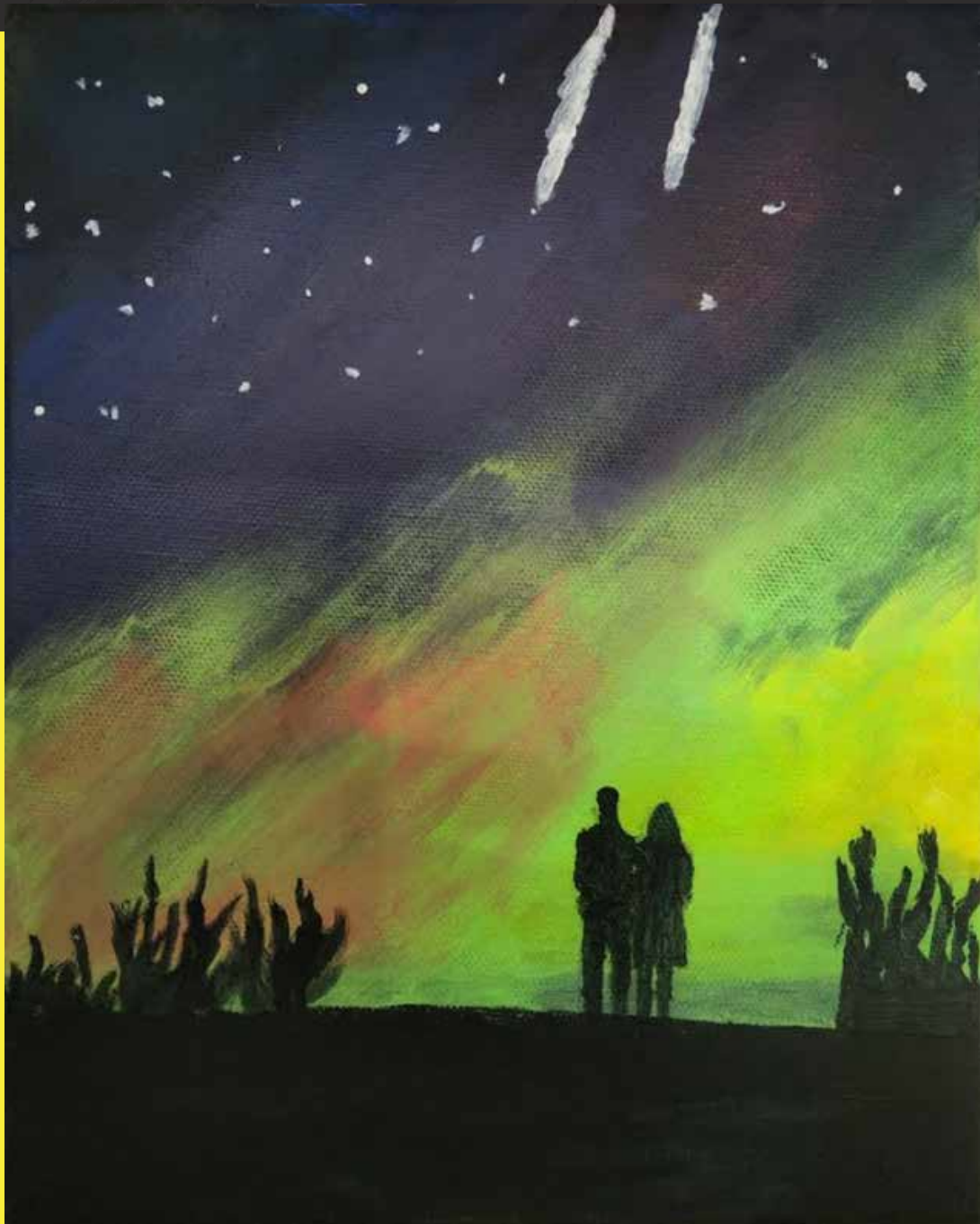
Robert Anderson
NEUROLOGY PATIENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY



Gauri Pawar
NEUROLOGY FACULTY
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

“MY BALLERINA”

Inspiration: Giving Botox injections to a 7 year old girl helped her follow her passion then – ballet. It was one of the most memorable patient interactions which helped me shape my practice as a brand new faculty.



“DREAM”

Prasuna Kamireddi

NEUROLOGY RESIDENT/PATIENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

Amid the beeping monitors,
Prodding day and night,
I lay there watching the seasons change,
Craving for the refreshing breeze,
And the warmth of mother nature.
My thoughts imprisoned,
My dominant side paralyzed,
The past me would say,
“Prognosis is Guarded”
But hey! I dream of the radiant colors,
Even in the darkest skies.

"LITTLE TRAVELER"

Abigail Cowher

**MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY**

Inspiration: the pediatric hematology/oncology patients I worked with during my undergraduate education

I wish I could take
this journey for you
One day I'll at least hold your hand,
Little Traveler

How many grown-ups
have disillusioned you?
Swearing by rainbow mirages,
Little Traveler

I can barely see
further down the path than you
but I'm still sorry,
Little Traveler

There are seething tendrils
of poison that
make you a phantom,
Little Traveler

Thistles and thorns overwhelm
your path
try to focus on the roses,
Little Traveler

Deadly plagues like to lurk
in places that were once safe
around people you love,
Little Traveler

I can still see your
rosy cheeks
kissed by the tender lips of optimism,
Little Traveler

I saw you on your way
You're smart; you'll learn the C-word, find the ending much sooner
than the grown-ups give you credit for,
Little Traveler

I can't see your path at all anymore
I fantasize futures that might not exist
One day I'll at least hold your hand,
Little Traveler

“SOMETIME SOON”

Ryan McCarthy
WVU INTERNAL MEDICINE
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

Inspiration: You know those once-in-a-lifetime patients? The patient in my poem, Les, was one of those folks. He had a larger-than-life personality and made a big impression on me. I became his primary care doctor in 2006 and we journeyed together through cancer, heart attack, and ultimately hospice care. I work in my hometown of Martinsburg, WV, and Les became a father figure to me after my father's death in 2010. His lust for life required one of my most creative discharge plans ever, one I am proud of to this day.

I know Les' heart will stop beating soon
And a piece of mine will then break
Les — decades of wear and tear
He did so well for so very long - exceeded expectations, really
But recently
More short of breath
Walking slow
So many trips to the hospital
Gasping for air, bent over a table
Struggling to accept
His eyes ask me: Is this “THE END”?
This hospitalization, I know, is the true start
Of his final chapter
Out of good options, I'm desperate
I pull out dobutamine.
His low BP rises
Les feels better
His smile returns
He stands and walks
Is there a path forward, to get out of this hospital?

A crazy plan percolates inside me.
PICC line? Check.
Deactivate the defibrillator? Check.
“Take this box of dobutamine - home. Take it home!”
Les is puzzled
Hear me out, I say.
“This is The Last Chance Saloon,” I say...
To have as much time as possible
This won't last forever.
But... ride this magic infusion
For a sweet while
To bring your adult kids home
Walk down your street. Talk and laugh
Say sweet farewells and hug tearful goodbyes
Eat spaghetti in the living room.
Watch a hockey game.
Drink a beer. Share a laugh.
Say the prayers. Praise the Lord.
Toast an epic life - one which exceeds all expectations.

Les texts me after he is home
“I almost feel guilty today was so good,” he says.
So good indeed.
His heart will stop sometime soon
But mine will go on

“YELLOW FLOWER”

Jessica Frey

NEUROLOGY FACULTY
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

Inspiration: **A reflection in response to a prompt: *describe a patient experience that was hard for you to understand.***

For this reflection, I chose to describe the overwhelming gratitude a patient expressed toward me and the rest of the team caring for her after we diagnosed and treated her brain tumor. It was a moment of great humility for me - that out of all the emotions to which this patient could respond to the devastating news regarding her brain tumor, she chose to be grateful.

**You gave me a yellow flower.
It was a thank you, I suppose.**

**A thank you for finding the brain tumor,
that beautiful butterfly-shaped tumor
sitting just below your left temporal lobe.**

**A thank you for the nausea,
the drowsiness and confusion,
the numbness in your fingers and toes,
all side effects from the medications that stopped your seizures.**

**A thank you for sitting at your bedside
and explaining the scans,
flashing the mouse across the screen
at that tiny landmine within your skull.**

**A thank you for calling your daughter
and explaining the diagnosis
because you couldn't find the words to say it to her yourself.**

**You gave me a yellow flower.
The joy that radiated from you as you handed it over
is something I will never understand.**

THE ESSENCE OF ESSENTIAL

It's called essential tremor. Why essential? I don't need it.
It sneaks up when I need it least; when steady hands are most essential.
The doctor tried: she has prescribed pill after pill.
My body will reject – eject – them all.
“Have you found anything that helps?” she asks.
“Tranquilizers, for an hour or two,” I tell her tranquilly.
“But wine works better.”

This is a teaching hospital; she has brought along a student.

She teaches both of us.

She seems so young to me, like my grandchild.

And so smart.

The student stands quietly; the doctor explains

How my brain's been misbehaving.

We could try surgery. SURGERY!!!?

“Here's how it works:

First, we drill a hole in your head.”

My mind wanders – wonders:

I have a lot of holes in my head. I count them;

Her words are running out of them.

I look at my hands: the tremor not so bad when they are folded.

I look at the student: will his hands shake

When he must make his first cut into warm flesh?

He's silent in his fresh white coat.

There will be a probe, guided carefully –

I probe my garden with a trowel, so not to injure hidden bulbs

As I plant – oh yes, there is an implant,

And as with any plant, a lot of maybes.

The doctor says to take my time, think it through before –

But I know what I will do: I think

It's much more fun to drink

A glass of wine,

If someone else will pour.

**“THE ESSENCE
OF ESSENTIAL”**

**Jaqueline J. Horvath
NEUROLOGY PATIENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY**

"THE DIAGNOSIS OF DOCTOR MILLER"

John-Michael Perez
PSYCHIATRY RESIDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

Inspiration: In psychiatry we are often confronted with the possibility of a tragic death in an otherwise physically healthy patient population. The idea for my story came years ago as a 2nd year medical student captured by a fascination with neuropsychiatric disorders. What would it feel like in those moments between life and death? With that idea in mind I wrote "The Diagnosis of Doctor Miller".

SYNOPSIS: Dr. Cara Miller is an overworked surgeon, taking a reprieve from work in her vacation home tucked in the forest of the Blue Ridge Mountains. While changing a lightbulb, she awakes to realize that she must have suffered a very serious fall. As the world around her comes into focus, she discovers that things are no longer as they seem. This new world is bizarre and sinister: physics have changed, and her senses have been altered - or perhaps she is losing her mind. She must race against time to piece together the mystery before her worst fears are confirmed. And if you think you know where her story is heading, think again.

Full text available by scanning the QR code

WRITTEN BY:

John-Michael Perez, MD
4th Year Psychiatry Resident
West Virginia University

EDITED BY:

Molly Robinson, DO
4th Year Psychiatry Resident
West Virginia University

LENGTH: 8,500 words.
Approximately a 30 minute read.



SCAN ME

“PLAYLIST”

Nistha Modi

INTERNAL MEDICINE RESIDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

The first song on my playlist ‘patients’ on spotify is In my Life by The Beatles. Every time this song plays I think about my J. J was a 68-year-old female patient on my first cardiology rotation, July of intern year. J was strong willed, kind, and gentle; she was in the cardiovascular intensive care unit (CVICU) because at certain point during her hospital stay she was intubated for respiratory failure in setting of pulmonary edema secondary to congestive heart failure, sepsis, and pericardial tamponade. Her hands had the classic ulnar deviation and swan-neck deformity that is seen in severe Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA). J was confused at one point and was not able to recognize her daughter, a spitting image of her in the sense of being kind, gentle, and caring. I had taken some time off after medical school to travel and figure out life so I was nervous about being a new resident doctor. As I walked into her room in the CVICU she smiled and welcomed me. I introduced myself as “Dr. Modi but you can call me Nishtha.” I asked her if she was having shortness of breath or any chest pain and few other subjective questions. I updated J and her daughter about the morning lab results and how I was going to discuss her case with my attending in an hour and then the cardiology service, including myself, will stop by before noon to discuss the plan. I was not sure if she understood everything I asked or said. I left to go see my other patients since I was still trying to see all my patients before morning rounds with my attending and this resident thing was still new for me. Few hours after my attending and I discussed the plan with J and her daughter I still was not sure if J understood how sick she was. J looked scared and confused. I came back in the afternoon to get to know her better and have a better idea of what she took from our two interactions this morning. When I got to her room, her high school friends were at bedside. I learnt that J had lived in a small town in West Virginia for 68 years; she became a daughter, sister, wife, mother, grandmother and soon to be great-grandmother in the same town. I am someone who has constantly been moving since age 15 so the idea of having all of yours friends and family in one place seemed heart warming but also foreign to me. J then started talking about music and how she LOVED The Beatles. I asked her about her favorite song by The Beatles and she said “In My Life.” I played that song on spotify for J and her highschool friends in a quiet room in the CVICU where the only sounds you heard were monitors beeping or people running because there was a code blue. I told J that I will come by every morning and she had to tell me the only song I always played for her on my phone. This was my way to assess her mental status and get some soul warming music in before morning rounds. This is how my favorite playlist on spotify called ‘patients’ got started. There is now a collection of songs on my ‘patients’ playlist including Ricky Nelson, Nahko, Bob Seager, Perry Como, Donovan, Van Morrison, Rush, Led Zeppelin, Waylon Jennings, Black Sabbath... the list goes on. During my 1 week with J, she taught me not only about medicine but also about what it means to be alive and choosing to die peacefully. As physicians we are wired to want more from life; we are always looking for the next opportunity and trying to keep up with medical advances. We sometimes forget to taken a moment and appreciate high school friends holding hands while saying their last goodbyes. We sometimes forget to appreciate how the hands with ulnar deviation are trying to knit a sweater for their unborn great-grandchild that they will never get to hold. While saving lives, we sometimes forget that the true meaning of life is being surrounded by people you love and adore... no matter where the meet up location is.

"MEMORY"

Jaqueline J. Horvath
NEUROLOGY PATIENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

"There's nothing wrong with your memory," I tell him, "You just forget how absent-minded you always were." "Your slippers are right there where you left them."

The doctor used to be his student.

"Count backwards from one hundred by sevens." she says.

I lie awake at night, count backwards.

"It's not easy," I tell myself. "No wonder he couldn't do it."

And then:

"You passed the test this month," the doctor says.

"Perhaps the medicine helped."

"Just subtract ten, add three." the teacher in him replies.

But then:

He loses his wallet and will not drive without his license. One problem solved.

I give the chain saw to our son and hide the tractor key. But he needs to keep busy.

Windows turn foggy when washed with a floor mop and insecticide.

We learn to laugh at our topsy-turvy life.

The world looks foggy through unshed tears.

"How many children do we have?"

"Four," I say, naming them.

He watches as I button his shirt.

"How do you do that?" he asks.

Horizons around us draw gradually inward.

We become closer than ever before.

We give up our walks, then the car, then the wheelchair.

Our world is a small room, two beds, one with side-rails.

Now food is a challenge.

I puree sweet cherries: a first taste of summer

To press between lips

That once gave sweet kisses.

He tries to speak: "Buh! Buh! Buh!" points at the wall.

"Bear?" I ask. "NO!" he says, frowning.

"No" said so clearly.

Are the first words we learn the last words to go?

"Buh! Buh! Buh!" pointing –

"Oh, birds!" I say, happily.

I long to lie next to him;

The bed is too narrow.

"I love you," I tell him, and to my surprise,

Although speech is garbled,

I know how he replies:

"I love you," he says, and closes his eyes.

I look back, see the future,

Look ahead, see the past.

Backward or forward, there's not much as yet

That's wrong with my memory;

I just can't select

What to remember,

What to forget.

And sometimes at night

When I can't sleep,

Count back from one hundred

Works better than sheep.

“INNOCENT AS CHARGED”

“Commander, the CO wants to see you in her office now.”

Reporting as ordered, “Ma’am, what do you need from me?”

“Doc, next drill weekend, I am convening an ADSEP board. You are to be the senior board member.”

“Aye-Aye, Skipper. What do I do?”

She handed me a copy of naval regulations governing ADSEP (administrative separation) boards explaining that this would clarify everything that I needed to know.

This reserve center population was small ... about 250 sailors and 150 marines. Although I had no idea what this ADSEP board was about, there are few tightly guarded secrets. Within 15 minutes, I learned the scuttlebutt. The reserve center commanding officer (CO) was attempting to discharge a senior chief petty officer with 19 years of service, one-year shy of qualifying for his pension. I also heard that the reason for seeking his discharge was alleged misconduct involving embezzlement.

I read the regulations regarding ADSEP boards. This was an administrative hearing, not a criminal proceeding. Hence, the burden of proof for the Navy required only guilt by a preponderance of the evidence, not guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. There would be a three-officer panel determining senior chief’s guilt. I would be the senior officer, and majority rule would determine guilt or innocence. I also learned that officers on the ADSEP board were free to ask questions of witnesses. If found guilty, the board would also determine whether the sailor should be separated from the service; and if so, the type of discharge (Honorable, General, or Other Than Honorable).

The hearing commenced Saturday morning on the next drill weekend. The Navy JAG officer representing the government presented the specific charges against Senior Chief ... there were only two. The first charge was uttering check number 211 to pay for a riverboat cruise for enlisted sailors. The second charge was embezzlement of more than 10,000 dollars from the Chief’s Coffee Mess Fund.

The first and only government witness was a Naval Investigative Service (NIS) agent. The NIS would later become the now more familiar NCIS (Naval Criminal Investigative Service). The agent explained how he had become involved. The riverboat cruise operator was upset when the check written by Senior Chief to pay for the cruise bounced and complained to the reserve center CO. The reserve center CO contacted the local NIS office, which opened an investigation. The NIS agent interviewed Senior Chief. During the course of that interview, Senior Chief acknowledged that when he wrote the check that bounced he was aware that there were insufficient funds in the checking account to cover the check. When asked why there were insufficient funds, Senior Chief had volunteered that he had a gambling addiction problem and was using this checking account to hide gambling expenses from his wife.

Based on that probable cause, the NIS obtained a federal warrant for all banking records and statements related to the Chief’s Coffee Mess Fund. Review of those records revealed that Senior Chief had written over 10,000 dollars in checks made out to “Cash”. Moreover, Senior Chief had endorsed all those checks.

While the agent explained in detail the results of his investigation, I thumbed through the banking records. I noticed that check number 211 was not in those records. However, I did find that check number 210, written for exactly the same amount as number 211, had been declined because of insufficient funds. As I tabulated the numbers in these banking statements, I began having serious doubts about whether this was an open and shut case against Senior Chief.

The prosecuting JAG officer dragged out the agent’s testimony for two hours. The defense JAG officer had no questions for the NIS agent, and neither did my two fellow board members. I only had one question.

“Agent, how did you come into possession of check number 211?”

“Senior Chief took it out of his wallet and handed it to me.”

The prosecution rested its case, and the board adjourned until the afternoon when the defense presented its case.

The afternoon did not go much better for Senior Chief. The defense case included a string of character witnesses, including several fellow sailors and even a local magistrate. All testified that Senior Chief was a dedicated sailor, devoted husband and father, and hard-working individual. The counselor that the Senior Chief was seeing for his gambling addiction even testified. Not a single piece of evidence suggesting innocence was introduced. If the defense JAG was trying to lose this case, he could not have done a better job. The prosecuting JAG did not ask any questions; neither did either of my two fellow board members.

I asked only two questions. They were the same question to two character witnesses who had previously run the Chief's Coffee Mess. I asked them to estimate the monthly profit from the Chief's Coffee Mess. They independently gave similar answers.

The next morning, Senior Chief's testimony went as expected. He verified the testimony of the NIS agent. Senior Chief begged the board for leniency. He pleaded that discharge after nineteen years would create a financial hardship. He assured us that he would overcome his gambling addiction and that he would never repeat his embarrassing behavior.

The prosecuting JAG and my fellow board members had no questions for Senior Chief. I had a few questions, after making an opening comment.

"Senior Chief, you are a terrible financial manager!"

The defense JAG objected immediately to my characterization of his client. The prosecution JAG remained silent.

"Senior Chief, did you ever present check number 211 for payment to anyone?"

"No, Sir."

Senior Chief explained that he had presented a different check to pay for the riverboat cruise and that it was check number 210 that bounced. The cruise operator had called him to complain. When he went to see the cruise operator, he wrote out check number 211 and said he would return and give that check to the cruise operator as soon as there were sufficient funds in the checking account to cover it. Dissatisfied, the cruise operator called the reserve center CO. Senior Chief also described how he gave the NIS agent check number 211 from his wallet.

I asked Senior Chief to explain the purpose and function of the Chief's Coffee Mess. The Senior Chief explained that the mess sold coffee, soda, and doughnuts to reservists on drill weekends and the profits were utilized to purchase plaques and support parties for enlisted sailors ... morale and welfare purposes.

I asked Senior Chief what were the average profits from the coffee mess. He responded that profits were 75 to 100 dollars each month. This was very similar to what the two witnesses had stated the previous day.

"Senior Chief, am I safe in assuming that the total profits for the Chief's Coffee Mess were no more than 2500 dollars during the two years that you managed that activity?"

"That sounds about right, Sir."

I then showed Senior Chief (as well as the defense and prosecuting JAG officers) copies of checks totaling about 4500 dollars from the Chief's Coffee Mess Fund written to vendors for Navy morale and welfare purposes.

"Senior Chief, if the coffee mess fund only produced at most 2500 dollars for these expenses, who provided the other 2000 dollars?"

"I guess I did, Sir."

At this point, the prosecuting JAG began to protest that my questioning was irregular, biased, and prejudicial. The defense JAG just smiled.

“Board members are allowed to ask questions of witnesses,” I reminded the prosecuting JAG

I then pointed out multiple large deposits into the Chief’s Coffee Mess Fund account that totaled about 14,000 dollars.

“Senior Chief, did you make those deposits and was that money yours?”

“Yes, Sir. I did and it was.”

I then pointed out that despite the checking account’s name, Chief’s Coffee Mess Fund, this account was actually a private and personal account opened up by Senior Chief.

At this point, the hearing concluded and my two fellow board officers and I retired to consider our decision.

I was dumbfounded when they immediately began debating whether Senior Chief should be given a General or Other Than Honorable discharge. Had they not been listening?

“Wait a second! Before we discuss punishment, we are going to discuss the charges. Uttering check number 211 was the specific charge against Senior Chief. Senior Chief never presented check number 211 for payment. The NIS agent’s testimony confirmed that!” Although I was the ranking officer, I was a medical officer standing up against two line officers. As a rule, line officers do not like to take direction from medical officers regardless of rank, unless the issue is medical. Nevertheless, I was not about to budge.

Not persuaded, my fellow board members argued, “Senior Chief did utter check number 210. His own testimony confirmed that he was aware that there were insufficient funds to cover that check.”

I quickly agreed with them, but reminded them that, “changing the charges is not an option for us. Our duty is to determine whether Senior Chief uttered check number 211. We are not obligated to deliver punishment based on sloppy instruction or direction from superiors. If the Navy wants to re-charge Senior Chief, then that is its prerogative.” I also cautioned them that someday, as line officers, they might find themselves ordered to deal out death and destruction at a time of war. I told them they needed to insist on carefully considered and lawful instruction, and not blindly deliver punishment based on obvious faulty information.

We finally agreed that Senior Chief was not guilty of uttering check number 211.

After the uttering discussion, I had an easier time convincing my fellow board members that Senior Chief had not actually embezzled any money. They recognized that Senior Chief had been so careless with this money that he had actually “donated” 2000 dollars of his own money for expenses supported by the Chief’s Coffee Mess Fund. My colleagues argued that Senior Chief’s gambling and deceit were not in keeping with the behavior expected of a senior enlisted sailor, but they did not need further convincing that “conduct unbecoming” had not been charged.

We found Senior Chief **innocent as charged**.

The reserve center CO was upset with me for several months, but eventually got over it. The Navy did not recharge Senior Chief, who retired from the Navy one year later. My two junior officer board members eventually felt better about their decision and accepted the concept that they had done their duty as specified and required by naval regulations.

This experience with military legal matters in the late 1980s helped me to later confidently deal with the multitude of complex legal and non-medical issues that I would confront as commanding officer of a forward-deployed combat support hospital during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Those issues often put me in seeming direct conflict of my superior line officers. I had learned how to effectively stand my ground using regulations.

So often in our exams, the classic question is asked
"What is the next best step?"
A slew of choices is provided to you, is it meds, imaging, surgery?
Is it simply observation and follow-up soon?
I thought I knew the answer after practice questions galore
But standing in front of the patient, I knew there's so much more
How could you possibly answer the question when they say, "The
cancer is back",
"It's spread to my spine, but I was feeling fine. How much time? I
need more time..."

My heart says how can I complain when a patient's happiness
depends on the words you say
They're already thinking of their next best steps
A son's prom, a friend's wedding lit by the full moon
We let her know she'll likely be discharged today
"They'll be so surprised to see me", she explains with a grin
A moment of light is seen in situations that are frequently grim

Still, my mind fogs up with the "what if's" and the "when?"
All these years of studying
Will it be worth it in the end?
But overtime I've seen the fog break
And those moments of light shine through
More than you thought it was ever possible to do

You see, patients are suddenly tasked to carry a weight
A weight that books, tablets, and exams will never measure up to
Their fate dictated by waiting for an answer
Every lab result is perused with care, every CT scan brings anxious
sighs
Why, as students, is our fate also dictated by waiting to see where
the next best step lies?
Don't we already have the answer? And if not, what was all this
studying for anyways?
After all, we've been trained to learn all these facts? An answer
should come naturally...

Well, it's taken me years
But I think I've finally seen
That the answer doesn't lie within achieving the goal
It's hidden in between
In between the cracks of the late nights studying
A glimpse of light is found

In the walls of the hospital I've found it in
A senior resident who showed me kindness
"I remember what it was like"
"This won't last forever, being a student in medicine is far from
what the rest of your life will look like"
And sometimes you must make the light, it's up to you
Bringing a patient his favorite chocolate milk, giving a child a
sticker (or two)
Discussing tv show characters to make the lumbar puncture more
bearable
Holding a new mother's hand as a baby is welcomed into the
world

So to those who are in the midst of your journeys
Whatever they may be
And engulfed by the stress, disappointments, and deadlines
that can feel like frigid waves crashing at sea.
With one hand hold tight to those who choose to stick around
Not just for your triumphs, but your trials too
And in the other hand let go of what involves losing sight of you

For it's you who saw your own potential in the first place
Self-awareness is often the best prep
For all that this world has for you. So be encouraged and release
yourself from fret
And in doing this I dare say
That is the next best step.

"THE NEXT BEST STEP"

Danielle Sblendorio
MEDICAL STUDENT
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

Inspiration: As a medical student at the end of my third year, this poem was inspired by patient interactions and the thoughts and feelings medical students often have throughout their training. My poem explains how both of these have impacted my outlook on life.



ART, MUSIC, AND POETRY HELP FORM

CONNECTIONS

BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE, ALLOWING THOUGHTS, HOPES, AND IDEAS TO PASS FROM ONE PERSON TO ANOTHER, ENABLING COMMUNICATION TO OCCUR.

Now Accepting Submissions for
the Spring 2024 edition of Synapses!

EMAIL: WVUSynapses@gmail.com

CONTRIBUTOR INDEX

A

ABIGAIL COWHER 39
ABIGAIL ROOP 12
ANDREA HINCAPIE BENDECK 13

B

BENJAMIN SHERTZER 10
BENJAMIN SILVERBERG 24

C

CAITLIN MONTGOMERY 8
CAMILA ESCOBAR 33
CURTIS AMANKWAH 18

D

DANIELLE SBLENDORIO 49
DODDI AKSHITH 19

E

EMILEA WARNICK 29

G

GAURI PAWAR 37

H

HANNAH TENNEY 26

J

JACK E. RIGGS 46
JAQUELINE J. HORVATH 42, 45
JESSICA FREY 41
JOHN-MICHAEL PEREZ 43
JOSHUA KRAMER 21

K

KATIE BARNES 7

L

LEVI HELMICK 17
LIA FARRELL 9
LINCEY WILSON 32
LYNETTE FISHER 6, 35

M

MADISON STARCHER 11
MARA WALTERS 34
MEG EVANS 25
MICHAEL GRIMM 15
MINAHAL NAVEED 14

N

NICK NESTOR 27
NINA D'ANDREA 23
NISTHA MODI 44

P

PRASUNA KAMIREDDI 38

R

ROBERT ANDERSON 36
ROUSHINI MANJUNATH 28
RYAN MCCARTHY 40

S

SALWA NUBANI 31
SARAH MITCHEM 30
SARA L. DOBRZYNSKI 22

T

TANVI NADKARNI 16

U

VIOLINA MELNIC 20



SYNAPSES

A NEUROLOGY ART
AND LITERARY MAGAZINE