

# THE HUMAN CONDITION

*An Exploration of Art and Literature*



UCSD SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

VOLUME 14, 2009





*Mother and Children, Katherine Rice, MS II*



We proudly dedicate this year's edition of *The Human Condition* to the memory of fellow student and friend, Brian Webster. We celebrate his life and the lessons he continues to teach us.



Front Cover:  
*Inspired by My Hospice Patient*  
acrylic on canvas  
Kristen Kipps, MS III

# THE HUMAN CONDITION

VOLUME 14, 2009

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ANNALS OF ETYMOLOGY  
GROWING THE SNAKE

*A polyglot's journey.*

BY STEVEN NGAI, MS IV

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*Bay Bridge San Francisco, Niousha Moini, MS IV*

From time to time I have the opportunity to see Cantonese-speaking patients. These encounters are enjoyable for me because they allow me to practice my clinical Cantonese; I like to think they are also rather amusing to the patients who watch me attempt to sidestep the holes in my medical vocabulary.

And so, for my last patient that one particular Tuesday afternoon, I was anticipating some linguistic challenges. But scarcely did I anticipate having a linguistic revelation. And this came in the form of my patient's interesting veterinary complaint.

"Doc," he said in Cantonese, "I think I'm growing the snake."

This elderly male then described a few days' history of itching, burning

back pain, followed by a new blistering rash whose distribution might be best described as—you guessed it—*dermatomal*. He offered me his opinion of the natural history of his disease, with a bit of dramatic hyperbole.

"They call it the snake because it gradually creeps around you. And once it encircles you completely, you die!"

The patient left that day with acyclovir, precautionary instructions, and patient education, including assurances that he probably wasn't going to die just yet. I left with a good review of how to treat herpes zoster, carefully washed hands (just in case), and what I thought was just a curious look into Cantonese medical terminology.

It was not until the drive home that

the revelation came. Not only did herpes look like a snake, it actually *meant* snake! (That's why the study of snakes is called herpetology.) This was quite remarkable: when the ancient Greeks were giving this viral disease the name it would keep in modern times, they took a look at its characteristic rash and—wouldn't you know—named it the exact same thing the Chinese did.<sup>1</sup>

This similarity in thought process brought to mind something that happened in high school. Someone had asked me how an ancient language like Chinese had adapted to the novel concepts of the modern world. "Simple," I said, "we reuse and combine old concepts to produce new words." Telephone, for instance, was *dianhua* (Mandarin; Cantonese *diinwa*;



“They call it the snake because it gradually creeps around you. And once it encircles you completely, you die!”

Japanese *denwa*; Korean *jeonhwa*—the same two Chinese characters), which in its fundamental components meant ‘electric speech.’ Moreover, the use of *dian* for electricity was itself an innovative metonymic meaning for a character that originally meant lightning.

“‘Electric speech?’” scoffed the other, who then mocked the East Asian languages for being so backwards. Rather offended, I gleefully pointed out that the English *telephone* was just bastardized Greek for “far sound”—and that, compared to “electric speech,” it was a pretty shoddy description of the device. And, completing the parallel, the very word *electricity* had also been named after a natural phenomenon (from Greek *elektron*, meaning amber, which was prone to static electricity). Psh! At least our language didn’t run whining to another language every time it needed to borrow a big word.

Yet aside from the occasional triumphant zinger, it is an amazingly humbling experience to study comparative linguistics. When you become attuned to the connections between languages, you realize, among other things, that they respond to similar challenges in similar ways. It becomes hard to point out a perceived foible in another language without realizing that your own language demonstrates it several times over.

Comparative linguistics is a fulfilling discipline also because it allows languages to come alive and speak for themselves. What do I mean? Perhaps you’ve never heard of herpetology, so you don’t believe my claim about the



Untitled, Grant Hochstein, MS I

“Perhaps because of their gentle nature, the newly forming Greek language didn’t really know what to do with them.”

meaning of herpes. Very well—I’ll let the word speak for itself even more conclusively.

We are quite accustomed to the concept of words coming from Greek, yet we hardly consider where Greek itself came from. And neither did linguists, until in the seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries, they noticed striking similarities between Greek and Latin, and of all things, Sanskrit. As attention turned to this interesting phenomenon, new links emerged between these languages and the Germanic, Persian, Slavic, and Celtic language families. It soon became clear that each modern

language family, through the lens of language-specific sound change, was revealing the sounds of a single ancient mother tongue spoken on the Eurasian continent: *Proto-Indo-European*.

We know now that, like all modern languages, Proto-Indo-European had a group of consonants known as the spirants<sup>ii</sup>: W, Y, and S. In contradistinction to the sudden, explosive stops (or *plosives*), such as P, T, and K, these gentle consonants could be sounded continuously. And so, perhaps because of their gentle nature, the newly forming Greek

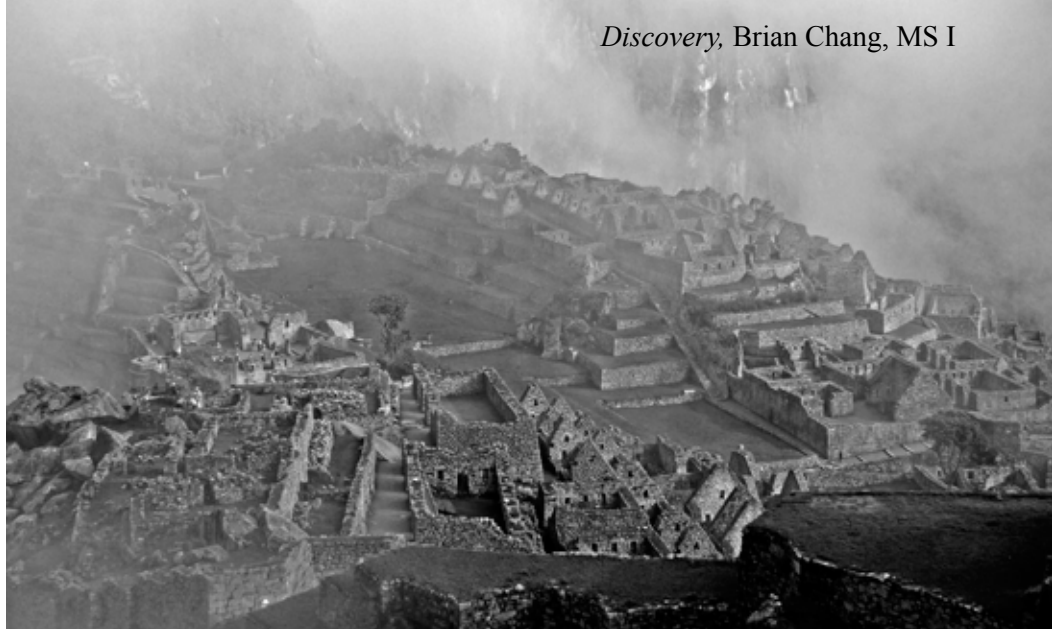
*Les Champs-Élysées*, Aaron Rutman, MS II





language didn't really know what to do with them. W, for instance, became an archaic Greek letter known as digamma, which eventually ceased to be written but still causes irregularities in the language today. Y diverged into a number of letters, including I, E, and, oddly enough, Z.

Upon encountering the S, Greek simply balked. Between vowels, this letter often just disappeared; at the beginning of a word, it was converted to H<sup>iii</sup>. The more open-minded Romans, in contrast, had less of a problem with the letter. Consequently, upon inheriting a



word from Proto-Indo-European that began with S, Latin often retained the S, whereas Greek replaced it with an H.

In grade school you may have wondered: is it hexagon or sexagon? Heptagon or septagon? Even now, you may puzzle over which is right to use: is it hyper or super<sup>iv</sup>? Hemi or semi? But now you realize that though

one is Greek and one is Latin, they're ultimately the same. And this brings us to the point in our story where I ask the languages to speak for themselves.

So what is the meaning of herpes? Change the first letter from H to S, and you will see that it corresponds to Latin *serpens*. The obvious English translation? A serpent.

See? It does mean snake.<sup>v</sup>



<sup>i</sup> We know the Greek verb *herpein* means “to creep,” and we know that Hippocrates used *herpes*, the name of a creeping animal, to describe shingles in his *Prorrhetikos*. The precise identity of this animal is technically uncertain, but has always been understood to mean a snake. A more common Greek word for snake, *ophis*, appears in other scientific derivatives.

<sup>ii</sup> Also known as continuant consonants or fricatives; however, over time and across different authors, the precise subcategories of sounds collected under these terms have differed slightly. Here I have specifically excluded liquid and nasal consonants. Note that there are a wealth of other spirants in modern languages, such as f and th; PIE, however, had only these three.

<sup>iii</sup> That is, a rough breathing. Those who read my previous article may recall that this eventually disappeared from Greek as well.

<sup>iv</sup> The Greek letter we transliterate as y is really the Greek u, or upsilon.

<sup>v</sup> For completeness: the PIE root is *\*serp-*; the Sanskrit is *sarpaH*.

## BRIAN'S GIFT

*A tribute to a fellow medical student.*

BY NIOUSHA MOINI, MS IV

How can I thank someone whom I never met and who has passed away? This is the quandary which I face. A young man by the name of Brian Webster saved my life. I never knew Brian, but his story changed everything.

I grew up an awkward young man: oval glasses, puffy cheeks, a sliver of a mustache, and frizzy hair. Daily I lived in fear of not being accepted by my peers. Until the end of high school I was an object of ridicule and the recipient of physical and verbal abuse. "Faggot" rang loudly in my ears on a daily basis. My heart raced each time I saw the shadows of the bullies who made my most impressionable years a living nightmare. The sadness that dwelled within was always hidden. As years went by and as I entered college I came to realize parts of me that I had neglected. I remember the afternoons as a young teenager watching Ricki Lake with my mother. Once she pointed to the television screen, on which the most stereotyped representation of a gay man performed. "Never become gay like these people," she said as she pointed to the television screen of the most stereotyped representations of a gay male. From this young age a fear inside grew and yet, as I realized who I was, I decided to finally be truthful about my sexuality. I was 19 and had sat down to tell my parents that I, their son, was gay. What followed were words that always hurt to remember. My mother feared that I had "chosen" the wrong path. "You will die of AIDS before you become a doctor," my mother said. My brother joined in with a barrage of damaging words. Six months I lived in that house and said not one word to my mother or brother. My life for the next couple years took me into a spiral of worsening depression. I recall the nights that I would scrawl on my wall how I hated myself. Life at this point had no meaning to me. I planned that I would choose the quickest way to end the pain: cyanide pills. Twice in my early 20s I found myself

wanting to leave. Both times a friend saved me.

As I entered medical school I hardly knew what a difficult road lay ahead. My daily routine came to comprise of low energy, hours of studying, and the continual lack of positive reinforcement. As I transitioned to third year, I had to grow stronger each day in order to help the very patients I held such a passion for.

As September brought on a new rotation, my best friend and classmate Caleb informed me about the death of Brian Webster. I never had the honor to meet Brian; how I wish



Brian and Abigail Alfajora, skating their short program at the National Championships in Salt Lake City, 2001. *Photograph courtesy of Don Webster.*

I had. Somehow as I learned more and more about Brian, I felt a connection to him, and as I learned more about his life it grew stronger. I felt that he would understand how I was feeling—perhaps in a way that no one else could. How I wished that I could say to him, "Brian, I understand, tell me of your pain." As I talked to Brian in my mind, I began to see that he was saving my life. During the summer and fall of 2007 I had once again become suicidal, thinking of ways to hurt myself. I recall seeing the razor on the bathroom counter. My thoughts racing, the tears flowing. But this time things were different. Usually my thoughts would entangle upon each other and set forth a landscape of thorny paths. In these fragile moments I thought of Brian. Quickly I

removed myself from the dangerous surrounding. I began to think more and more. Brian's story told me that others like myself suffered. I felt that through Brian I learned that I had someone who knew my experience. I thought to myself, Brian wouldn't want me to hurt myself. I feel I have learned a lesson from his life: that I do not have to feel as if I am suffering alone, that I do not have to feel that I am suffering in silence. I did not want Brian's struggles to go in vain. With the help of my close friends, Swati, Talayeh, Caleb, and Sara and the support from Dr Moutier, I came out of the web of suicidal thoughts. With each day, I felt more



“It was 8:27 in the morning of Labor Day when the phone rang and a man asked me if I was the father of Brian Webster... He quietly said, ‘Brian passed away last night.’”

positive. As time went by, my thoughts centered on the Webster family. Each month I would sit down in front of the computer in preparation of writing them an email to thank them and to tell them my story. Each time hesitation persisted. How would I approach parents who have recently lost a son? As my final year of medical school came to a close, I realized that through human connections we are able to heal. I set forth in writing them and was dumbfounded by their generosity in sharing such intimate and personal details of their life. They exemplify to us that we *can* discuss issues about suicide and honor Brian’s life by remembering it. Through discussion we allow ourselves to be vulnerable to the ways that his story affects us.

*The piece that follows is from Brian’s father in the days following Brian’s death. The words that follow were printed with the permission and approval of the Webster family. It is a testament to the lessons learned, the struggles endured, and the love and dedication of Brian’s family.*

On Labor Day, September 3, 2007 I received the very hard news from a medical examiner that our son, Brian, just starting his fourth year of medical school, had passed away. In just five days, we were planning to celebrate the wedding of our youngest son, Eric, to his fiancée, Irene Hung. Here is the story of our family journey through those ten days. It was 8:27 in the morning of Labor Day when the phone rang and a man asked me if I was the father of Brian Webster. I asked who he was and he said that he was David, from the Medical Examiner’s Office in San Francisco. I was trying

to understand who he really was, when he quietly said, “Brian passed away last night.” In a quiet voice that surprised me I asked, “What were the circumstances?” He said that Brian had been out with friends dancing in a club in San Francisco the previous night, September 2, 2007. He had said that he was hot and went outside the club. He was trying to get a hold of his sister, Carla, to pick him up. His friend, Lee, wanted to stay longer. Lee went out and checked on Brian several times, the last time around 11:00 PM. At 11:40 PM Brian left a concrete roof area on the 24th floor of the Hilton Hotel and died instantly on the street below. A policeman and taxi driver were standing nearby, the paramedics were on the scene in minutes, but nothing could be done.

My wife, Pat, had heard the conversation developing and she came rushing into my office. In a rising voice she cried out, “What happened?” David could hear her through the phone

and he said, “You’d better take care of the misses.” I said that I would call him back and took down his number. As Pat and I embraced, her emotions were instantly at the surface. “This can’t be happening, I can’t do this, what about Eric,” she cried. Perhaps from my pilot training, I was in full emergency mode, analyzing what had happened, trying to remember the events in Brian’s life leading up to this, quickly sorting through the ramifications that this would have on our youngest son, Eric’s, upcoming wedding to Irene scheduled just five days away on Saturday. For perhaps an hour we held one another and reflected on Brian and the events leading to this day.

Brian was in his last year at UC San Diego Medical School. He had spent one year doing rotations of approximately six weeks each in the various disciplines of medicine, and he had one more year to go before starting his residency. He had just moved from San Diego to San Francisco one week previously to do a one month rotation in pathology at UC San Francisco Medical Center before returning to San Diego. We knew that Brian was near the top of his class academically. Brian loved neurological research and he had already published findings while at Stanford, at Stanford’s Hopkins Marine Institute in Monterey, CA,

Brian, his sister Carla, his parents Pat and Don, and his brother Eric on Thanksgiving Day, 2003. *Photograph courtesy of Don Webster.*



and while in his first year of medical school. This led to his being awarded a Howard Hughes scholarship to spend a year researching at National Institute of Health in Bethesda, MD, between his second and third years of medical school. While at NIH he devised a methodology of evaluating learning ability using Magnetic Resonance Imaging. This might have application in evaluating onset of mental illness, such as Alzheimer's or Parkinson's disease. However, Pat and I were well aware that Brian had been suffering from depression since about his junior year at Stanford. He was under psychiatric care and took medications to help what was a developing self-esteem problem, anxiety and occasional panic attacks. Towards the end of his term at NIH, this seemed to get worse, and we frequently had to pump him up in phone conversations. He knew that his work was good, but he felt that he could not relate well to his peers and seniors. In May 2006, this reached a crisis, Brian was in extreme distress, and Pat directed Brian to get a co-worker to take him across the street to the hospital. Brian did this and he was hospitalized for over a week. Without getting into the diagnosis, we knew then that he had a mental illness. He had pre-diagnosed himself prior to the breakdown by running experiments on his paranoia, and when the psychiatrist gave him his diagnosis he said, "Yes, I

knew that."

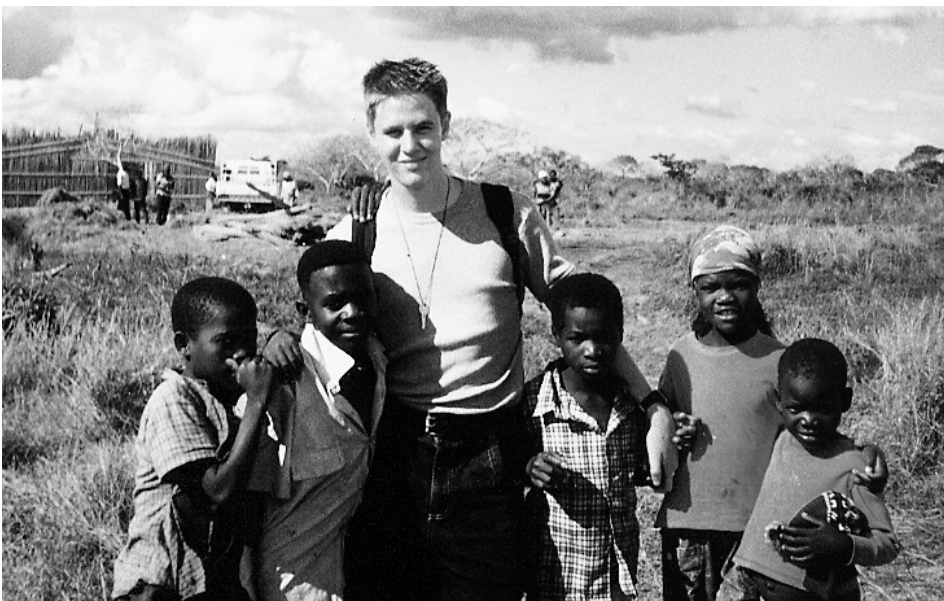
Brian's psychiatrist gave him some medications, which greatly helped to stabilize him and told him that if he was faithful with his meds that there was no reason that he could not finish medical school and have a successful career. Brian only had one month left at NIH, which involved writing and publishing the findings on his project. It was agreed that he could do this from our home in a less stressful setting. Not only did he complete that work, but he later went to Milan, Italy to present his work at a Neuro-Pathology conference. In his first two years at UCSD Medical School, Brian completed the academic phase of his medical training. In July 2006, he returned to UCSD to start the practical rotations in a hospital setting. By chance, he received as his first rotation, surgery, which is difficult and most students would much prefer to get that last. During his first week in the hospital, Brian didn't know anything about how a hospital functions, how a pager works, how to relate to nurses and he was so overwhelmed that he called almost every day and thought that he probably needed to quit medical school. I remember telling him that he was at a point where his learning curve was probably the very highest it would ever be, and that things could only get better. They did, and as he was able to worry less about administrative details and focus more on his surgery

*“Brian wouldn't want me to hurt myself... I did not want his struggles to go in vain.”*

experience he seemed to really like it. Brian had no intention of going into surgery, but he received a very strong evaluation for that phase. He continued through various rotations, and his meds seemed to be working well. There were periods of self-doubt, but they were short lived. However, in November 2006 we sensed that his anxiety was heightening and we found that he had run out of his prescriptions. He felt that he had no time to get them filled. Pat worked closely with him to get him to the doctor, and by the time he had a new set of prescriptions he was not sounding good at all. We soon got a call that Brian had become confused and disoriented while on rounds and that he was in the hospital. It turned out that Brian had taken a double dose of his medications, trying to get back on schedule. He was hospitalized for about ten days, and he skipped his next rotation to come home with us to Anacortes and recuperate.

Brian returned to school after Christmas. He continued to perform well, but his self-esteem ebbed downward. He strongly guarded his privacy about his mental illness, but having had an episode at work in front of peers and faculty, he felt that the cat was out of the bag and that the administration was going to find a way to flunk him out of school. Pat and I were seeing strong summaries of his work and we were not convinced that this was the case, but we also protected Brian's right to his privacy. Brian did fail to pass a class in which he was videotaped in his patient interactions.

Brian with his mentees from Iris Orphanage in Mozambique. Photograph courtesy of Don Webster.





Brian was so unaccustomed to failure in his life that he was certain that this was the beginning of the end. The school gave him remedial training in patient relations and scheduled a retake. In hindsight, they were giving him critique that they felt he needed to make him a better doctor, however, Brian viewed it in the most negative light possible. Once again, in the summer of 2007, Brian was hospitalized, but only for one night. Again, he had taken too much of his medication. Brian had decided that his field of medicine would be neuropathology, a research based field, which deals with the chemical functioning of the brain and diagnosis of related disease. In August 2007, while home on vacation, Brian wrote his personal statement, which would accompany his applications for residency programs. He was also waiting for his letter of reference, which would be written by the dean. Brian was in agony that this letter would be negative and would undermine his future in medicine. A few weeks later, back at school, Brian sent us that letter and it could not have been more positive, strongly presenting Brian's formidable research accomplishments. At the same time, Brian was told that he could do a pathology rotation at UC San Francisco Medical Center, something he was very excited about. This would last a month and he would return to San Diego to continue his final year in medical school.

The last week in August, Brian traveled to San Francisco and settled in a temporary apartment just a couple of miles from his sister, Carla. He and Carla are very close, and he spent every evening with her, often doing things in the city. I talked to Brian on Saturday and he sounded good. He had done a week of autopsies and he had been permitted to do a complete write-up on one of them. The next week he was going to start diagnostic pathology, which is the field that he was really interested in as a career. Carla, remembers him as being a bit spacey that week, which was usually an effect that the medications



*Devil's Postpile, Nicholas Kanaan, MS IV*

had on him. On Sunday, Sept 2, Brian and a long-term friend, Lee, took the ferry to Sausalito to an art fair. When they found that the tickets were \$20, they opted out and caught a return ferry home. Lee took some pictures of Brian on that trip, which show a heavy look, which Brian sometimes had when he was depressed. Lee too remembers that Brian was spacey that day. After dinner at Jack In the Box, they went to a dance club. Brian loved to dance, perhaps a carry over from his ice skating days. Brian did not drink alcohol that night. He carried around a water bottle. He knew from experience that alcohol and his meds did not mix well. As mentioned before, Lee last saw Brian around 11:00 PM. Another witness said that when Brian walked away he seemed agitated and he pushed several of the people standing outside in his desire to get away. There were no further witnesses. On the roof he had to climb a four-foot rail. There was only one set of footprints on the ledge, which matched Brian's shoes. There does not seem to have been foul play.

As Pat and I held one another, we reviewed these events together. Brian had a very difficult summer with his depression and low self-esteem. But the events of recent weeks had been positive and we thought that he was through the worst of it. He had said that his last year of medical school

would be the easiest because he would be focusing mostly on pathology and fields in which he was really interested

We called our son, Eric, who lives in Pasadena, and he was very broken up at the news. Brian had been Eric's best friend growing up, as they were only two years apart. Eric did not even mention his wedding, which was only five days away, as he sought to grasp what had happened. We knew that Eric had Irene to comfort him, and so we turned to the task on notifying Carla, the oldest of our three children. Carla, too, was very close to Brian, and she took the news with a great deal of sadness. We made sure that she had friends that could come over to her house in San Francisco.

I was alternating between occasional crying and a surreal numbness. The mind cannot grasp such a situation all at once. On Wednesday, we flew from Seattle to San Diego through San Francisco. Night was the hardest. One could not help but try to imagine what might have gone wrong in that last hour. Did Brian have no meds in his system or too many? Was his rational mind at play, or had he experienced another psychotic breakdown?

On Sunday morning I got up early to make sure that things were ready for the memorial service. Everything was in order. Despite the early 8:00 AM hour, I was amazed by the number

of medical students and faculty who started arriving. Jerry Bryant opened with scripture and prayer, and then my brother, Sam, gave a wonderful Eulogy, trying to view the memorial as Brian would want it to be. He told some family stories and closed with a beautiful letter from Pat to her son. Dr. Carolyn Kelly, the Associate Dean of Student Affairs, UCSD School of Medicine spoke next. She traced Brian's medical school career, starting with the eagerness with which the school had accepted him and following his research and exemplary academic performance. It became clear that the school viewed Brian as the rising star in neuro-pathology. His class advisor had been working with Harvard, UC San Francisco and numerous other prestigious medical schools to place this unusual talent in a neuro-pathology residency. Jerry Bryant told a warm summary of Brian's life, often using stories he had heard two days before from us. The formal service closed with a photo slide show of Brian, accompanied by music, which brought many to tears.

After a coffee break, we opened with a video of Brian and Abigail doing their short and long skating programs at the U.S. National Championships in 2001. We then invited guests to speak at an open microphone. Several of Brian's mentors in research spoke of Brian's brilliance and his quiet, determined approach in the lab. Many of his fellow students described that Brian was brilliant but not arrogant. He had helped several pass courses when they were having difficult periods in medical school, even going to work on cadavers in the late hours to help them understand a difficult point of physiology. They spoke often of his dry sense of humor. It became very clear that Brian was a legend on the dance floor. Other friends spoke of a Brian who was giving, generous and funny.

Thursday morning was spent at the funeral home with Brian. Despite his fall, he had landed on his back, and he was presentable and very much the Brian we knew. The viewing of a body may seem like a strange custom, but it has

*Les Arches de l'Abbaye du Mont Saint-Michel, Aaron Rutman, MS II*





the effect of immediately bringing all emotions to the surface. Such was the case with Brian. We talked to Brian, repeatedly pulled out sheets of tissue, and we talked some more. We voiced our questions, asked why, and told him that we loved him. Other family came and many took the opportunity to say goodbye. Three hours simply flew by. Soon we were placing flowers on Brian's casket and he was lowered. We were warmed by the many friends and relatives who came to be with us as we said our goodbye.

It's quiet now. Carla, Pat and I talk about Brian as thoughts come to our mind. That is good. I don't want us to bottle things up.



“He was a remarkable young man, and if his story can be of help to someone else, that is something we would want. I know Brian would approve of that.”

*After 19 months since his death, Pat and Don Webster reflect on their journey through the following conversations I had with them recently.*

**Don:** “Pat and I, as well as our daughter, Carla, and son Eric, have gone through the various stages of mourning over the last year and a half. It took us about four months to get past the point of reviewing every last day, even second, of Brian's life to try to understand what happened and how we might have changed things. Each of us probably reached a slightly different conclusion as to what happened, but the important thing is that increasingly we remember Brian's life, and not just why he died. Increasingly, those memories are positive and even make us laugh. Yes, he was a remarkable young man, and if his story can be of help to someone else that is something we would want. I know Brian would approve of that.”

**Pat:** “My husband and I were moved to tears by your email last week. I know that Don has already responded but I did not want to miss the opportunity to let you know that your empathy, skill, and insight is profoundly and deeply appreciated. We are happy that you are doing well and we also feel that this tragedy, as well as the wonderful life and opportunities that Brian experienced have given all of us a new appreciation for the preciousness of life. We are all still engaged in some type of support group and the group we are in now is one for the loss of a child through hospice. We have also done Suicide Loss support groups but have to drive about 1.5 hours for that one. We have read many books. We find that we need this though it has been

nineteen months. For me, it has been like peeling an onion layer by layer and it takes a very long time as we adjust to a life with a major piece of the puzzle missing. This is very healing for us to talk about not only his life but also his abrupt exit. We had two great weeks with Brian just two weeks before his death. Brian was the happiest I had seen him in a long time and we enjoyed every minute of this time with us. He was fully engaged in all our activities. He has a loving family and I know that he would have never chosen to leave us. His meds were working well until he began to have some side effects. He voluntarily took his meds, attended support groups (NAMI) and saw psychiatrist as well as psychologist both in San Diego and here in Anacortes if he was here for more than two weeks. Brian was a great and loving guy. We have a digital photo frame that has about 100 shots of Brian, and he was a happy child. We keep it on a lot. I feel that Brian is always with me in spirit and every time I see a beautiful sunset or rainbow-there is Brian!”

On a final note, I would like to thank the continued support of our medical school faculty and staff. Without individuals like Dr. Kelly, Dr. Moutier, Dean Mandel, Sandra, and Ramón, we would be quite lost. Their love and passion for students and their well-being is evident each and every day. I also thank them for their loving support they have given me in my own personal life.

◇ ◇ ◇

*National Suicide Prevention:  
1.800.273.TALK (8255)*

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MEMOIR

## BANKI

*A holistic Chinese-Soviet experience.*

BY VERA TROFIMENKO, MS I

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During a small group discussion on cross-cultural medicine, my classmate Shara turns around and asks me matter-of-factly, “Have you ever had *banki* done to you?” “Why, yes!” I reply, completely shocked. As she quickly turns back to face the front of the classroom, I am left completely speechless and wide-eyed, distracted from the ongoing discussion by a flood of memories unleashed. You see, *banki* is a word I have not heard for sixteen years of living in this country. In Russian, the word *banki* denotes two separate but related things: first, a group of objects, specifically “glass jars,” and secondly, a practice of vacuum-sticking these little jars onto the bare backs of the recumbent patients to ease all types of congestion by improving circulation. The origins are traced to ancient Chinese medicine, though you would never guess this when watching a Jewish grandmother perform this mystifying ritual.

The dramatic process of getting *banki* mounted onto one’s back—or “cupping” as it is known in English-speaking holistic medical circles—is one of the most vivid early memories shared by children who grew up in the former Soviet Union. First, coughing, congested, and feverish, you

are plopped down on your belly. Then, the warm skin on your back is treated to an irritatingly generous slathering of Vaseline. But just as you crane your neck back to offer a raspy objection, you are transfixed by a scene that you aren’t likely to forget: your mother, or your grandmother, whom you’ve considered reasonable and reliable up to now, wielding a flaming gauze attached to metal forceps. Not only is this *fire*, not only is it fire in your *bedroom*, it’s fire in your bedroom that is being *consciously* lit by Grandma, purportedly in the service of your well-being! All in all, it’s terrifying.

And so you freeze, holding your breath and your eyes shut. Personally, I focused on reassuring myself that Grandma was still Grandma and not in fact a newly minted Shaman who operates on the boundary between the supernatural and the human realms. Meanwhile, Grandma-Shaman, the unfazed wielder of the flaming gauze, briefly sticks the flame inside a tiny glass jar, yanks it out, and quickly affixes the jar onto the skin of your back. She repeats this again and again until your back is covered with a forest of a dozen or so symmetrically arranged little jars. The partial vacuum created by the flame is holding them in place, with a slight mound of muscle tissue being puckered up into the jar.

When at last you sense that the commotion has ceased and that you are alone, you cautiously open your eyes and resume breathing normally. The skin on your back is tight, as if somebody is physically pulling it away from you. One minute passes, two minutes pass... all is calm and you’re getting slightly antsy when you notice that your nose itches. You delicately move your arm to address the situation while trying to not upset the balance of the flock of jars perched



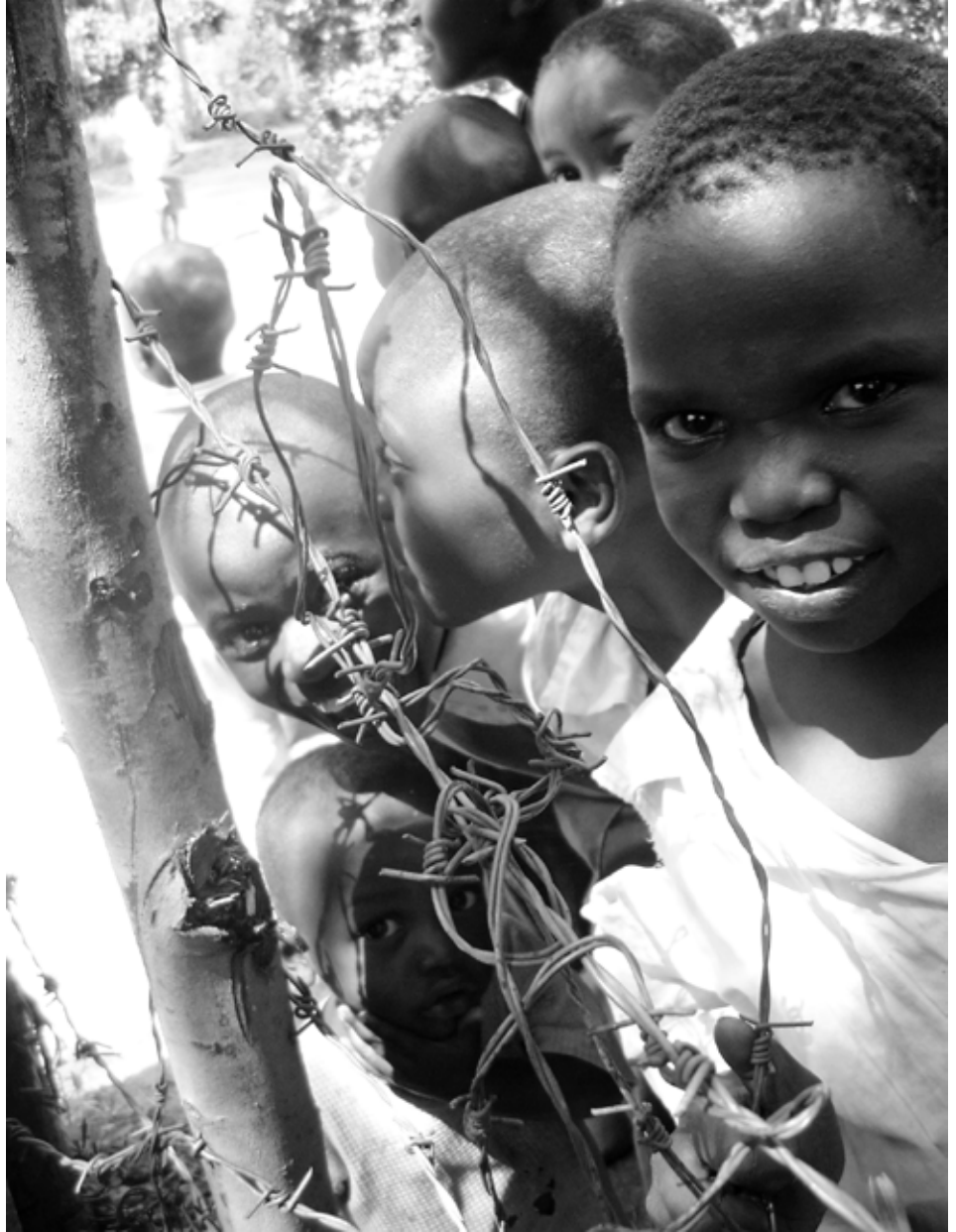
*Waiting for Dinner*, Aaron Rutman, MS II



upon your back, when... “Wow!” You discover something quite unexpected: the slightest of movements on your part is enough to make the many little jars meet each other with an undulating series of bright little *clinks*. What a delight! The soothing, unexpected clinking keeps you entertained for the remaining fifteen minutes of the *banki* session.

The furtive production of the lovely clinking melody is brought to an abrupt halt by the returning Grandma who proceeds to pluck the jars off your back. She places a finger on your skin close to the neck of a jar, pulls gently, and produces a quiet and happy sound: *chmok. Chmok, chmok, chmok...* Unbeknownst to you, your back is now covered in perfectly round red circles, mapping out the quickly fading memory of the little jars. You relax in relief until the order comes to put on your pajamas and get back under that mountain of blankets. You now realize that your back feels bruised, but the pain is mild and dull and you drift off to sleep. *Vizdaravlivay*, says Grandma, mandating you to feel better. And eventually, you do.

◇ ◇ ◇



*Captivated*, Erin Shively, MS I

## MY FLIGHT WITH BIRDS

On the wings of a bird my  
Mind takes off, giving me flight.  
Such freedom I feel watching; I  
Join the bird as I see this sight.

There is something so  
Smooth I feel;  
There in the air I go  
For a lift so real

That I fly only in this  
Place that my mind creates.  
It is for me sufficient bliss,  
Truly an experience great.

So each time that I am outdoors,  
I watch birds fly whenever I find I can.  
It's a grand feeling to with them soar  
Making me delay a long while when I'll land.

—Sandra Frank  
*Traumatic Brain Injury Survivor*

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ANNALS OF PHILOSOPHY

# NATURE OF THE MIND: MENTAL STATES ARE ELECTRICAL STATES

*A new defense of mind-body materialism.*

BY IAN NEEL, MS I

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*Afghanistan, Hadia Siddiqui, MS IV*

**R**ené Descartes proclaimed in his “Meditations on First Philosophy” “I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks” (Descartes 11). This spurred a question: if thinking is the essence of existence how does thought occur? The nature of the mind, this non-descript entity that enables us to think, has been debated ever since. Theories discussing the mind-body problem can fall into one of two categories: dualism or materialism. The dualist theorists argue that the mind and body are two distinct, separate substances. Descartes was a dualist, arguing that the mind existed in some parallel universe, and that communication between the body and mind occurred via the pineal gland, which he considered a natural choice for the window to the soul as the gland is singular, whereas “all the other parts

of our brain are double” (Descartes 22). This theory has since been debunked. After the downfall of most dualist theories, the field of materialism arose, claiming that the mind and body are one and the same substance. Materialism has since faced criticism in that within the field, each and every theory that has arisen has been countered. If materialism is to be maintained, a new theory therefore must be put forth that does not succumb to the criticisms to which the other materialist theories fell. I wish to propose and defend such a theory by identifying mental states as a specific property of brain states, i.e. *electrical states*. To do such a thing, one must first look at the other materialistic theories and why they are insufficient explanations of the mind.

The first major materialist theory to arise was known as Logical

Behaviorism, which claimed that mental states are behaviors. To have the mental state of ‘courage,’ for example, one must be predisposed to behave courageously. This theory was debunked by Hilary Putnam in his essay “Brains and Behaviour.” Putnam imagined beings that suppressed all pain behavior whom he called “super-super-Spartans.” These beings may feel pain when they are injured; however, they show no outward signs of pain nor do they talk of pain. Putnam used these hypothetical beings to show that the mental state of ‘pain’ can exist without the behaviors associated with pain, thus disproving Logical Behaviorism (Putnam 47–49).

A second materialist theory arose called the Causal Role Identity Theory, which claims that mental states can be identified as “brain states,” the



“The fact that the information we store on your is called “memory” illustrates that, on some level, we believe electricity has a connection to our own mental states.”

specific neuronal firing involved with a sensation (Smart 64). The Causal Role Identity Theory was also shown to be false, primarily due to David Lewis’s essay “Mad Pain and Martian Pain.” Lewis imagined a hypothetical Martian that feels pain and has mental states just as we humans do. However, unlike humans, Lewis’s Martian does not have *brain* states because it lacks a human brain and nervous system. Instead, this Martian processes external stimuli and interacts with its environment using an internal hydraulic system, composed of numerous fluid-filled cavities throughout its body that change in volume as the Martian is thinking (Lewis 123). Lewis’s Martian is as much a mental being as any human, but differs internally from humans greatly. Mental states, such as the sensation of pain, must thus exist despite two beings having very different internal structures, and so these mental states cannot be brain states, because one can reasonably imagine the existence of something that has a mind, but lacks neurons.

A third theory is Functionalism which arose after the Causal Role Identity Theory. Like Logical Behaviorism, Functionalism claims that mental states are characterized by their behavioral output. However, the theory differs from Logical Behaviorism in holding that behavioral output is not only dependent upon the initial external stimuli, but also upon previously held mental states.

Ned Block argued against Functionalism in his essay “Troubles With Functionalism.” Block imagines a situation where every individual citizen of China is made to emulate the sensory, motor, and interneurons of a

simulated “brain” of a robot (96). He imagines that each individual is given a radio that properly connects that person to a subset of others, just like a single neuron is connected to a subset of other neurons. Information from input signals received by the robot is manipulated as it is relayed between people until a final output signal is sent back to the robot, causing it to move or engage in some other ‘person-like’ activity. If every citizen plays his or her part properly, the robot will behave exactly like a human (Block 96). Even though the system is functionally equivalent to humans, Block argues the system lacks a single mind. The individual citizens of China engaged in the experiment have minds, but this system as a whole is so strange that it seems very unlikely that it can have a mind. Since functioning in the right way is not all that is necessary to have a mind, Block argues that Functionalism cannot adequately describe mental states (Block 96).

John Searle makes a similar argument to Block’s but tackles

whether artificial intelligence can exist. He argues that computers cannot think and will never be able to as they currently exist precisely because they lack the biochemistry of human brains. Searle states our ability to think is dependent on our biochemistry (Searle 517). Searle argues that no one would believe that a computer simulation of the chemical processes involved in lactation can actually produce milk—lactation requires actual chemical processes to occur. So why, he asks, do we think that mental states can be produced from running a computer simulation?

Searle may have come close to arriving at a correct conception of what mentality is, but I argue that he identified it with the wrong physical state. I wish to claim that mental states are neither biochemical nor brain states, but they are in fact a specific property of biochemical and brain states—namely, *electrical states*. I arrive at this branch of materialism based on the definition for “brain death,” which means a person no longer exhibits any electrical activity on an electroencephalogram, or EEG. A person is legally deemed alive as long as that person has at least some electrical activity recorded on an EEG. Furthermore, the ultimate goal of the biochemistry of our neurons is to generate this electrical action potential along the neuron, in order to transfer information. Since everything else for



Hookah, Katherine Rice, MS II

“It may well be possible to develop a type of mechanical “brain” that does not have any biological nerves but is still able to generate consciousness.”

which mentality has been mistaken—biochemistry and brain states—serves as the means for generating electricity, it would stand to reason that our mentality is rooted in electricity.

There is evidence to show that many people believe that electricity has at least some connection to mental states. Take for instance the analogies we make between computers and our mental states. Computer “memory” is accomplished via the principle of capacitance, where an electric field is generated between two metal plates, maintained by a power source, and released on command. The fact that the information we store on our computers is called “memory” illustrates that, on some level, we believe electricity has a connection to our own mental states. Though we lack metal plates to serve as capacitors in our brains, neurons act in a way similar to capacitors by storing electrical fields. This parallelism can counter Searle’s objection that computers are unable to have minds. Whereas we do not expect a computer simulation of lactation to actually produce real milk due to a computer’s non-biochemical structure, we can however reasonably expect a computer to hold mental states because they share a common electrical nature with human brains.

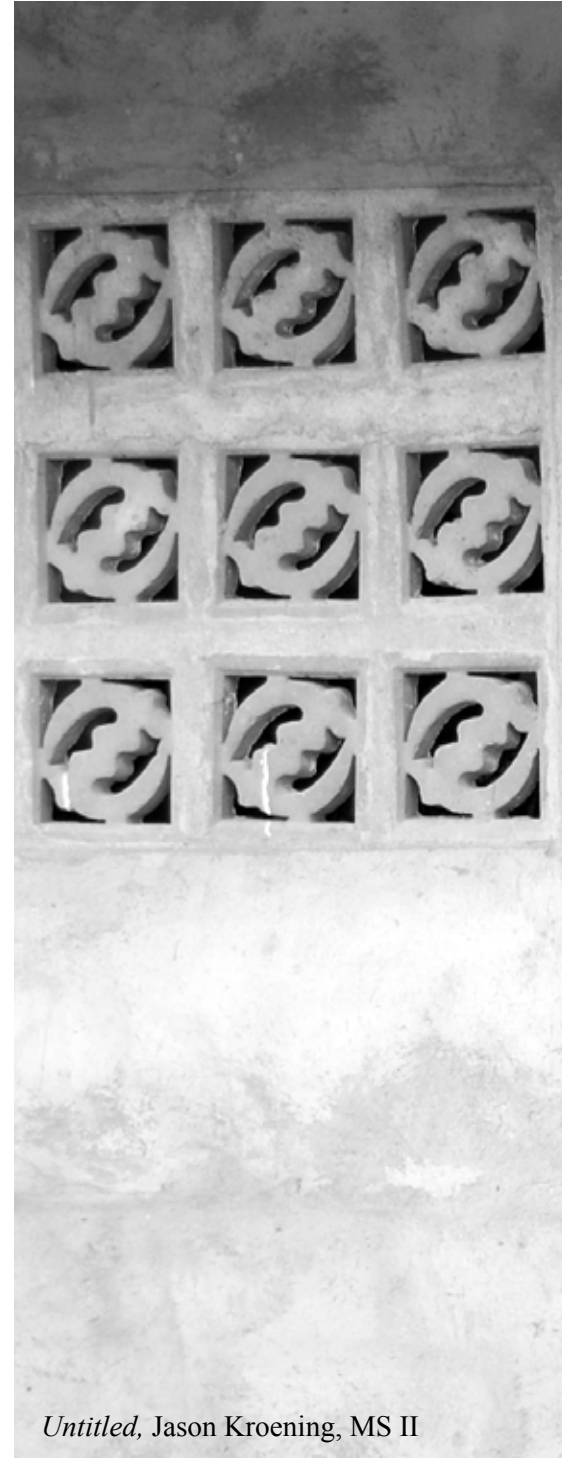
Let us consider how well the theory that mental states are electrical states stands to counter arguments raised against the materialistic theories we have previously discussed. First, does this theory account for Putnam’s “super-super-Spartan” objection—can someone have the pain sensation without any corresponding behavioral output? Unlike Logical Behaviorism, this is definitely not a problem for

Electrical State Materialism because my theory does not rely on behavioral output. As long as the “super-super-Spartans” have the proper electrical states associated with pain, they can be said to feel pain.

However, as Lewis’s Martian example shows, mental states must be “multiply realizable” and accounted for by a variety of internal states. We saw that the Martian does not have neurons but still has a mental perception of pain. If Electrical State Materialism is to hold, the electrical states underlying mental states must not be dependent on human anatomy and neurons. This is arguably correct. The ultimate function of neurons, as well as the corresponding neuronal biochemistry, is to generate electricity, but electricity can be produced by systems other than neurons. In the case of the Martian, hydraulic states replace neuronal states, but as long as the hydraulic states still serve the ultimate purpose of generating electricity, I would argue the Martian feels pain. Lewis did not address whether the Martian hydraulic states produced an electric field or not, but one would imagine they must.

A real life example showing that neuronal activity is not required for producing the electrical states can be seen in a recent development in prosthetics. Dr. Todd Kuiken published a new prosthetic limb technique in the journal *The Lancet* that allows amputees to move their prosthetic limb, as well as experience sensations including touch, pressure, and heat. This was accomplished by a complex re-innervation method, where nerves previously controlling the patient’s arm are moved to an area of the patient’s chest muscle. The

attached prosthetic arm utilizes sensors that detect electricity in muscles and transmits signals down electrical wires to move the arm (Kuiken, et. al 371–381; Hochberg and Taylor 345). Dr. Kuiken’s advances illustrate that it is ultimately electricity that is necessary for transmitting information associated with mental states and further implies that it may well be possible to develop a type of mechanical “brain” that does not have any biological nerves but is



Untitled, Jason Kroening, MS II



still able to generate consciousness.

Electrical State Materialism thus accounts for the multiple realizability of mental states by allowing these mental states to exist independent of the underlying system that produces electricity. This restriction of the physical state to electrical states also accounts for Ned Block's criticism of causal role Functionalism. Block's "Chinese Nation" example was dependent on the fact that the robot

acted sufficiently like a human, only with its brain being outside its body and its "neurons" being the citizens of China. Functionally, the robot may be sufficiently like us; however the method of information transfer is not sufficiently like us because although radio waves have an electric field component, the electrical activity is not complex enough. In the brain, one has electricity spreading in all directions with some areas of the brain

giving off more electrical discharge at a given moment than others; there are also over a trillion synapses connecting neurons to increase the area over which the electricity spreads. Some neurons in the cerebellum have as many as ten thousand synapses, for example. The complexity is dazzling, and radio waves alone would be insufficient to create as much electrical activity as the brain is capable of generating. One may counter this by arguing that the



radios can possibly be connected in a way that exactly simulates a human brain's complexity. If this is possible, I would respond that the nation of China has in fact generated qualitative mental states. However, this is not "too strange" an occurrence because the nation has effectively created a mechanical brain that is capable of generating mental states since it generates the corresponding electrical states. With this modified "Chinese Nation" example, the people of China and their radios are irrelevant to the nature of the mental states, because the mental states are precisely the electrical states that are generated.

To conclude, I have discussed past

materialist theories that have failed, and in an attempt to save materialism, I have proposed a new brand of materialism dubbed 'Electrical State Materialism' in which, mental states are the result of the neuronal property of electricity. I have also shown how this claim accounts for the problems discovered with the other materialistic theories. Contrary to the claims of the Identity Theory, mental states are not brain states. In fact, the brain states are not necessary for mentality, as long as whatever is present in the place of the brain can produce electricity for the purpose of information storage and transfer. Mental states, therefore, are electrical states.



*Haitian Sisters*, SunMin Kim, MS II



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INTERVIEW

# SLUMDOG IS ALL ABOUT HUMAN TRAFFICKING

*An insight into trafficking in America.*

BY PRITHA WORKMAN

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“Slumdog is all about human trafficking! Why is no one talking about how it is all about human trafficking?”

—Bradley Myles  
Deputy Director, Polaris Project

As the winner of the Best Picture of the Year, *Slumdog Millionaire* elicited a variety of responses from its global audience. From adoration among Western audiences to indignation among many Indians, few felt the outrage that Brad Myles felt when he viewed the movie. The horrors of modern day slavery are well-hidden from most of our eyes, but for Brad Myles, the issue of slavery and human trafficking are at the core of his life’s purpose.

When we think of human trafficking, we often recall stories of brothels, forced child labor, and slavery in *other* countries, not America, right? As the deputy director of Polaris Project, a non-profit organization dedicated to ending modern day slavery and serving as advocates for those with no voice, Brad is passionate about raising every American’s awareness about the prevalence of human trafficking within our own borders.

Right after the New Year, I sat down with Brad at a café in Washington, D.C. to learn about the scope of human trafficking in the United States and what each one of us can do about it.

**Pritha:** *Your website polarisproject.org states, “An estimated 200,000 American children are at high risk for trafficking*

*into the sex industry each year”. What does this mean?*

**Bradley:** First, you need an exact definition for human trafficking. In 2000, under President Clinton, Congress passed into law the bipartisan Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA). For the first time in American history, the law outlined a definition

coercion. The three components in defining human trafficking include an action, a means of control, and a purpose.

**P:** *Ok, so how does the “200,000” number fit in?*

**B:** The above explanation breaks down into eight specific categories in order to account for victims that are trafficked transnationally and to account for U.S. Citizens that are victimized within the United States, as well. In 2001, a University of Pennsylvania study estimated that 100,000–300,000 American youth are at risk, so we took the average to be 200,000. The study tried to incorporate many risk factors such as, sexual abuse as a child or running away from home as a teen, but in the end, no one knows for sure how many are actually at risk. For example, a study called NISMART provides an estimate that 1.8 million children run away from home each year, and within 48 hours, one-third of these children will face his or her first recruitment attempt from a street “pimp.”

**P:** *I know Polaris Project helps run both national and local hotlines for victims to call. Your local hotlines cover the New Jersey and Washington, D.C. regions. From your work in DC, how often do you actually get a call?*

**B:** In the last year, I would estimate we received around thirty calls reporting minors involved in the commercial sex industry. We get calls from a range of people including self-



*Belle, charcoal, Michele Lee, MS III*

of human trafficking that essentially breaks down into the following three categories: first, persons under the age of eighteen who engage in commercial sex acts; second, adult coerced into commercial sex act; and third, adults or children who are forced to perform labor or services through fraud or

“ De-humanizing is all about making the individual...no different from the pork bellies and precious metals we trade on the world's commodity markets. ”



A Friendly Border, Janice Kim, MS IV

reporting “Johns” (paying customers), schoolteachers, youth shelter program personnel, and local law enforcement. In D.C., trafficked children range from ages 11–17; however, our organization once helped a nine year-old.

**P:** *Isn't prostitution different from human trafficking?*

**B:** Yes, the law makes a distinction between what is prostitution and what is considered human trafficking. In the definition, human trafficking is distinguished from prostitution when minors are involved, or when any adult person eighteen or over is induced into a commercial sex act by force, fraud, or coercion. What many don't realize is that the behavior of many “pimps” actually fits the federal definition of trafficking, and these “pimps” would more appropriately be called “sex traffickers.” This question of what is prostitution and what is trafficking is a touchy one that generates many debates in the field.

**I**n order to illustrate his point, Brad showed me some undercover footage recorded in a section of D.C. that showed a group of pimps trying to break in a new female recruit. I instantly recognized the street—it was in a nice area of town—and in fact, the incident took place in front of several law offices. The expected norm is that women are not allowed to walk on the sidewalk. Only men can. The men used verbal humiliation, physical intimidation, and pack tactics to try to “break” the woman's self esteem and willpower.

**P:** *Wow, so the pimps control the woman's will and sense of self-worth. Do the women even keep the money?*

**B:** Here in D.C., the women have to make a quota of \$500 per night on average, and a woman can make about \$30–50 per act. Should a woman not meet her quota, she will face physical and verbal abuse. (I was shown another video filmed during the daytime in D.C. to illustrate this point). Sometimes,



“Johns” will try to exploit the woman by offering more money per sex act if they do not use a condom. Realize that the prostitution is sophisticated, and much of what is happening on the street has been moved to the Internet. Have you ever checked out Craigslist’s erotic section?

**P:** *No. Craigslist?*

**B:** Yes, you will see a repetitive pattern of varying phone numbers and women in hotel rooms being advertised as if the women are advertising of their own volition. However, we recognize those patterns, and it’s easy to tell if someone is controlling and marketing these women using something as common as Craigslist.

**P:** *So when you hear the 50 Cent song “P-I-M-P,” how do you feel?*

**B:** (After thinking) My reaction is reflective of how powerful the glamorization of the “pimp life” is in terms of recruiting all the players involved in it. When that song plays on every radio station and in every club in America, the notion of the pimp is “normalized.” However, the joke is on American society because “pimping” is as exploitative and violent as child abuse or domestic violence. By accepting songs like these, we perpetuate the victimization of so many vulnerable people, including children. Can you imagine if a song glamorizing child abuse were played on the airways?

**P:** *What do you think about adults who choose to engage in the commercial sex industry?*

**B:** In my own opinion, I feel that all aspects of the sex industry are linked in a powerful way. Once you objectify



Washington D.C. Operations Plot. Polaris Project tracks human trafficking tips from its national hotline. *Photograph courtesy of Bradley Myles.*

and commercialize the purchase of sex in any form (strippers, escort services, online pornography), a market is created, which then creates an underworld of services that feeds people’s more extreme wants. Those wants often involve children and force. At the core of human trafficking is the stripping of someone’s humanity from his or her being. De-humanizing is all about making the individual into a commodity—no different from the pork bellies and precious metals we trade on the world’s commodity markets.

**P:** *What can we do to help?*

**B:** Educate yourself and be aware that what happens in DC is happening in every community in America. I have done work in cities across the country including San Diego. Realize that the abuse is not confined to “bad” neighborhoods. For more information, I recommend:

Movies:

*Very Young Girls*, a documentary;  
*Human Trafficking*, available on DVD.

Books:

*A Crime So Monstrous* by Ben Skinner;  
*Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress* by Melissa Farley.

Websites:

[www.polarisproject.org](http://www.polarisproject.org),  
[www.freetheslaves.net](http://www.freetheslaves.net),  
[www.gem-girls.org](http://www.gem-girls.org).

National hotline:

1-888-373-7888 for more information or to report a tip.



Mr. Bradley Myles, Deputy Director of Polaris Project. *Photograph courtesy of Bradley Myles.*



“We perpetuate the victimization of so many vulnerable people, including children. Can you imagine if a song glamorizing child abuse were played on the airways?”

## THE HOSPITAL

This is for the hospital:  
For those who work within its walls,  
Who toil day and night.  
For those who work together  
Despite language and cultural barriers,  
All on behalf of our patients.

病めるあなたへ。  
死と無知を恐れるあなたへ。  
身も心も満身創痍のあなたたちへ。  
あらゆる苦痛に耐え回復を待ち望む、  
若しくはただ安らかな眠りを求めるあなたたちへ。  
命のはかなさを教えてくれて有難う。  
そして命の価値を教えてくれて有難う。

To the patients:  
To you who fear dying and the unknown,  
To those who are in mental and physical  
pain,  
To those who do their best to recover,  
or who just want to be at peace,  
Thank you for teaching me about the  
fragility of life  
And how much value it really has.

Para los pobres:  
Para los desconocidos,  
Que no tienen nada ni nadie en la vida,  
Para los que solo quieren un hombro en que llorar  
O un oído abierto que oye,  
Gracias por darme la oportunidad de  
escuchar y llorar con Uds.

To the underserved:  
To those who are misunderstood,  
Who have nothing and nobody in their lives,  
To you who just want a shoulder to cry on  
Or an open ear to listen,  
Thank you for letting me listen and cry with  
you.

Sa mga nars  
Ito'ng mga Pilipino'ng nag-aalab,  
magiliw at mahinhin,  
Walang-pagkapagod na mangagawa sa  
mga taong kanilang inaalaagan,  
Hangang ibigay ang lahat,  
Kahit na kung vital signs lang o mga  
pangyayaring magdamag ang itanong,  
Salamat sa tinuro ninyo'ng tunkol sa  
halaga ng kababaang-loob, at sa  
masarap na pansit!

To the nurses:  
These fiery, friendly, and unassuming  
Filipinos,  
Working tirelessly for those in their care,  
Willing to give you the shirt off their backs  
Even if you just asked for vital signs and  
overnight events,  
Thank you for teaching me the value of  
humility, and for the delicious pancit!

To the interns, residents and attendings:  
To the bleary-eyed docs who sacrifice  
precious hours of sleep,  
To replete those lytes or follow up on that  
head CT at 3am.  
To those who give of their time and energy,  
to teach us how to save a life.  
Thank you for your patience with me, as I  
missed that fem stick,  
and for letting me start those central lines and suture those head lacs.

And to the hospital:  
To the place where I spent many days and sleepless nights,  
To learn the essence of doctoring from those in my care,  
Thank you for the experience of a lifetime.

—Mark Schultzel, MS IV





Left to right from top:  
*Mother and Foal*, Aaron Rutman, MS II  
*Self-Portrait*, oil pastel, Jessica Lin, MS I  
*Sea Turtle*, acrylic, Dana Balitzer, MS I





Left to right, from top:  
*Beyond Mountains of Haiti*, SunMin Kim, MS II  
*Peace*, Katherine Rice, MS II  
*A Hole in the Wall*, Niousha Moini, MS IV  
*Papua New Guinea Wave*, Nicholas Kanaan, MS IV  
*Stop on Red*, Lakshmi Ganesan, MS II  
*Untitled*, Jason Kroening, MS II









Left to right from top:  
*Mahia Sunset*, Hayley Baines, MS II  
*Lotus*, Lakshmi Ganesan, MS II  
*Rolling Vines—Willamette Valley,*  
*Oregon*, David Rappaport, Ph.D



*Sigh*, Marc Rodriguez, MS I





FICTION

# TURNING THIRTY

*A story of growing up.*

BY GEORGE HELMS, MS I

*This one could only be for T, who heard it first.*

*This story was inspired by the following poem:*

My science-friend, my noblest woman-friend,  
 (Now buried in an English grave—and this a memory-leaf for her dear sake,)
 Ended our talk—"The sum, concluding all we know of old or modern learning,  
 intuitions deep,  
 "Of all Geologies—Histories—of all Astronomy—of Evolution, Metaphysics all,  
 "Is, that we all are onward, onward, speeding slowly, surely bettering,  
 "Life, life an endless march, an endless army, (no halt, but it is duly over,)  
 "The world, the race, the soul—in space and time the universes,  
 "All bound as is befitting each—all surely going somewhere."

—*Going Somewhere* by Walt Whitman



*Tree to Tree, SunMin Kim, MS II*

I wake up with the sun streaming in my eyes and my blood pooling down south, nearly poking Melly with it in the hip. When I shift in order to turn around, she opens her eyes sleepily. Her umbrageous eyes find mine—it is too late for embarrassment anyway.

"You want me to blow you?" she asks, as casually as if she was offering me half of her pastrami sandwich at lunch. She blinks once, her serious little face looking up at me calmly.

"Melly!" I say, shocked. Nothing is sacred with this woman. It doesn't help that she happens to be my physician, and thus is constantly poking and prodding me with those nimble hands. She approved the removal of every one of my organs, in the event of my untimely demise, always demanding me to donate blood, to be bled out in quarts in the name of the Red Cross. I anticipate that the next thing she would be after was to get my prostate checked.

I roll out of bed. I was going to take a cold shower to forget about her mermaid eyes and satin skin, and the way she was nestled between the sheets like a small bird.

Gently tracing the curve of my nose with one light finger, she mused, "You know, they taught us in med school not make patients out of friends. They theorized that the strong emotional attachment interferes with one's professional objectivity."

"Really?" I whispered, eyes bright. I kissed her on one fine eyebrow. "Now what a silly idea."

We were too old to be friends though. We were approaching middle age with all the speed and aplomb of a barreling freight train. We felt the perpetual mise en abyme of thirty looming down on us. It was the age when people began to see glimmers from the end of the tunnel, realizing that they ought to settle down and grasp their last chance at immortality. It was when they started thinking of down payments and square houses with white picket fences, 2.5 cherubic little ubermenschen, and a golden Lab. When a person looked around him at the next and said, *that's it, you're the one for me*, and got on with what the Romans aptly called "the whole catastrophe." Sometimes, I wondered if epic love really existed,





*Orbit*, Brian Chang, MS I

or if marriage was simply a social construct for people who only loved each other out of association or habitual tolerance. Sometimes, life could seem funnel-driven, awfully ordinary and predictable.

But Melly and I were decidedly unusual. We weren't married, least of all not to each other, and traipsed breezily through life in the manner of all singletons. Melly couldn't seem to hold a boyfriend for longer than a couple of months. I could never figure out if it was truly apathy, some form of ultra-feminism, or perhaps a deep-seated fear of commitment. Or perhaps it was a smattering of all three, and then some. She always had a pastiche of reasons for breaking it off, none of them particularly good. She blamed everything from boredom with the poor fellow to the weather. She once told a guy off because he wore ankle socks.

As for me, I hoped I wasn't as fickle. To be honest, I was a little jealous of

Melly, who had an enigmatic aura that was both fascinating and lovely. Men flocked to her obsessively, like well-trained rats, threatened to cut out their hearts. Me, I counted myself lucky to get a date and a call back. I felt like a monk sometimes, surrounded by a library of dusty books at the university, celibate for the past half decade. To my credit, the pickings were much slimmer. I was limited to homosexual men under the age of 40 within a 20-mile radius of Cambridge. If I were planning on getting married, I would have better luck moving to the Netherlands.

We lived on the fourth floor of an apartment complex we referred to jokingly as the Pisa, because it seemed to lean atrociously on its axis in much the same fashion as the ancient tower. When we first saw the building from the mall across the street, Melly stopped so suddenly that I nearly walked into her. "Fenn, that building is crooked," she said to me in astonishment. I had

barely noticed. That day, the harsh wind blew her hair a-twirl, the dark strands thrashing around wildly as if caught in a tornado. She was standing there against the angry gray sky, her back ramrod-straight and her sharp eyes narrowed, bullet-whittled, as she tried to puzzle out the perplexing tableau before her. With the groaning dark earth beneath her and the tumultuous clouds above her, she looked as if she were a Siren trapped by the rocky shores of a cast-away ocean, full of hellbroth and mettle. She was fiery and elemental, ablaze with saber-toothed wisdom, and all I could do was stand there, bushwhacked in her glory.

“**B**oyfriends cramp my style,” she once said (sacrilegiously) during evening vespers, after a date with Kyla’s latest attempt at matchmaking. She reached under her skirt and shucked off her pantyhose like a wad of caul.

Melly was impetuous and impossible, as dangerous as a shiv. She walked about the room in her blowsy way, all Brownian motion, putting down her keys and picking up a glass of Merlot. She only came up to my xiphisternum, but she had a way of taking up space so that I could even feel her wild presence seeping through the rebar shelves and wainscoting like radiation, somehow filtered gentler through the honey-hued light.

“Well, if only everyone was as fashionable as you,” I said, lamely. Sometimes, in certain filters of light, her beauty would pierce me anew, and I would see her as most warm-blooded males must have, with her delicate face, slim white thighs, and soft, wet mouth. It was then that I would feel oafish and immense, hopelessly out of my league,

“ *We were approaching middle age with all the speed and aplomb of a barreling freight train...It was the age when people began to see glimmers from the end of the tunnel, realizing that they ought to settle down and grasp their last chance at immortality.* ”

an adjunct for even being in the same room as her.

I first met Melly at a house party during orientation week of our college freshman year. I was a quiet, painfully neat boy from Maryland, an image I was trying desperately to shed, even while the energetic collectivism

of the week, with its “we’re all one big happy family” slogan, threw me off. Still, I had a desire to prove myself to be admired and desired early on, so I set out to create my reputation by attending the college kick-off party. The lounge had been painstakingly redecorated with strobe lights and streamers that no one could see, and the whole room was pulsating with bass music, as fervent as a heart beat. I was already slightly buzzed on the Jack Daniels my roommates had plied me with, and sloped through the room uneasily. The carpeted floor of the lounge was rolling like a ship, the lights flashing dizzily luminescent in a visual parody of beat frequency. I was beginning to feel ungrounded, oscillating like a propagating amoeba.

It was high time for a drink, if only to steady myself with something in my hands. When I walked to the back table in order to help myself to a Cosmo, I recognized a guy who was already there, standing in front of the table. He lived on the floor below me, and I remembered him because of his boyishly handsome face and golden hair, his slim hips and rosy, sun-kissed cheeks. Needless to say, I was terribly attracted to him, but had yet to work up the courage to speak to him. He had supple skin and his eyelashes were curled in perfect yellow semi-moons, which gave me the irrational hope that maybe, like me, he was interested in guys, too.



*Collabodoodle*, pen, Amirhossein Misaghi, MS II; Lakshmi Ganesan, MS II; and Niloufar Tehrani, MS II.

It wasn't until I got closer that I noticed Melly next to him, a petite girl he was trying valiantly to entertain. *Damn it*, I thought, *and he was such a winner too*. Why were all the hot guys straight? Melly sucked on her margarita through a pink plastic straw, looking bored. The strobe lights winked patterns over her pale cheeks, appearing like some techno-alien form of ephelides. She must have seen me lurking behind the golden boy, because she called "Hey there!" like she knew me, and flashed me a wide smile, as false as the Piltdown Man.

"Hi there," I said. My palms sweated from the proximity to the demi-beach god and I stammered through the perfunctory greetings. Surfer boy was actually Ryan from San Diego; Melly was from an unfamiliar town in Vermont. "You've come a long way," I said to Ryan, desperately trying to make conversation. I hoped he didn't notice my hands were sweaty and that I had trouble meeting those perfect sea-blue eyes.

"So, Sycamore, eh?" Ryan said, twisting his glass in his hands. A heavy silver class ring was embedded on his middle finger, and I imagined it being raised to my face in mockery. I couldn't get through names without failing to impress someone. "Your parents were naturalists?"

"No," I said, feeling more and more stupid, as foolish as a Pierrot. So much for building a reputation. "Actually, I think they just liked the name. My mom likes to garden, though. Please," I finished hastily, "call me by my last name, Fenn."

Melly stopped chewing on her straw, and for once seemed to be interested in the conversation. She arched one finely wrought eyebrow, looking irritated. "Why do guys always get to do that, call each other by their last names? You never see any girls ever get away with it." She bared her teeth as she spoke.

*Shit*, I thought, cantankerous. A Harvard party with the best and brightest of the class of 1993 and I'm stuck in a klatch with a pissy uber-feminist and a



*Too Late*, Daniel Sisti, MS III

## GABRIELLA

Gabriella doesn't eat much these days.  
But not because of the blonde models in the supermarket magazines;  
How could a girl that can't finish her tortilla for dinner  
Dream about glitz and glamour and Hollywood marquees?

Gabriella doesn't smile much these days.  
She's eight years old with a secret to keep.  
Her small brown eyes are as tired as her mother's,  
The glossy film hinting that she is about to cry.

But she never cries.  
She hardly makes a sound.

Gabriella's rash has returned  
Ever since her uncle moved back home.  
It covers her chest and her inner thighs;  
Strange how a rash can spread like that.

—Hyuma Leland, MS II





beautiful boy who will only remember my ridiculous name.

That day, we meet for lunch under the glaring fluorescent lights of the hospital cafeteria. She emerges from the crowded hall, Venus in her half-baked shell, parting the foaming masses. We gravitate towards each other, two magnets under the sun. Centripetal force dictates our selection: the corner table farthest outflung from the core. We luxuriate in our misfit status, our own private noosphere, slouching together heroically.

She brings out a Merriam-sized brown package, and slides it headlong across the particleboard tabletop. “For me?” I say, feigning surprise. “For you,” she says, her eyes lustering with unbridled mirth.

I’m thirty years old but still a child at heart, tearing off the wrapping with delight. It reveals Nick Bantock’s pop-up version of *Kubla Khan*. Inside the front cover, her easy script scrawls:

*For F,  
Happy 30<sup>th</sup>. Time to drink the  
milk of Paradise.*

—M

“Thank you,” I say, pleased. “Who am I then, Coleridge or Wordsworth?”

“Coleridge, of course,” she says, peeking up at me through her curvilinear eyelids, a rare wide smile on her face. She leans across the table, and pulls me towards her. Her hands are brushed with anodyne and grip the backs of my ears possessively. Her butterfly lips find mine, and press against them leisurely, firmly, a true grownup’s kiss.

“Only you would be addicted to something as heady as opium,” she mutters tenderly, breaking free.

Somehow, Melly and I become friends at the party. Later on in the night, I meandered through the haze of the makeshift dance floor, drunken on the spasmodic light, and bumped into her, valiantly trying to detach herself from a red-faced man

snuffling into her neck. He was pawing and grinding into her, as drunk as a sailor, while the beat of the music thrummed on, oblivious to his offense. She pushed and shoved, her eyes febrile with fight, but the man had latched himself onto her as firmly as a leech. She reminded me of a little bird struggling for flight and I suddenly felt immensely overprotective. I tapped the frowsy man on the back.

“Hey, what’s going on here?” I said loudly, hoping I sounded more macho than I felt. Sometimes I was glad I was such a tall drink of water. His eyes widened as he faced me. “Man, I ain’t doing nuttin’,” he slurred, slackening his grip and letting her go. He turned to face me, eyes bleary and confused. “You gonna call the cops or something?”

“Maybe,” I said, walking away from him and his ugly beer breath. Melly stomped after me, beads of sweat glistening on the skin above her heaving pectorals. Her eyes were pitchblende in the smoldering light, irascible.

“Look, thank you for butting into my life, but I don’t need you to rescue me like some white knight,” she said bluntly, her normally porcelain face rufescent in the sheening light. She tilted her head back and pinched the bridge of her nose, so hard that they left red apostrophes on the sides.

“God, I’m so wasted,” she complained. “I can’t even feel my nose.”

I snorted. “You just don’t want to admit that if I didn’t come in, he probably would have raped you.” Alcohol sure made my tongue looser.

Melly froze, staring at me, an odd look on her face. “No, I wouldn’t have let that happen,” she said softly, shaking her head, and I suddenly felt like I had treaded on a sacred gravesite, brought a ghost back from past trenches that she didn’t deserve to see. I was chilled, frozen with the quiet terror that the word she had left out at the end of her last sentence was “again.”

“Why did you choose to become a doctor, anyway?” I ask her that evening. She had taken off from work early for my birthday and still looked ragged. After our lunch, I had spent the afternoon giving lectures at the university and sifting through my email in a room full of musty books. Though we worked on the same campus and ate together, sometimes I still missed her there amongst the bright-eyed coeds and silent tomes. I would see a glimpse of a limpet eye, a snatch of a cupid bow mouth, and I would turn around expecting her there, missing her presence like a phantom limb.

I had asked her hundreds of times before, but her answer kept on changing, as mercurial as Melly herself. Deep down, I knew for all her scientific

hardheadedness Melly had a romantic streak that ran pretty deep. In college, her dog-eared Browning and Whitman sat companionably next to her organic chemistry and spectrometry texts on her bookshelf. Back then, she would sometimes wake up in the middle of the night in our cohabited room, as if a current of kinship with the universe had soared through her; and fumbling towards her desk as if in a trance, she would scribble down a mismatched phrase, a ghost of a long forgotten emotion that had finally found her. When we were college kids, I had envisioned our future anti-establishment lives, full of miching mallechos. Our bohemian selves would be in charge of a modern Deux Magots, where we would chain smoke with impunity amongst the latest literary circles, serving them hot

## CANDOMBLE

*For M.O.*

I left my mother’s faith. A faith she learned and passed down to me,  
A heritage that has its roots somewhere in slavery.

Ancestors bowed down to that cross, perhaps a way  
To find admittance to a house, open a door. This day,

There are no doors. Or perhaps each direction is a door.  
Perception cleansed, as Blake would say. He’d smile the more

At this wide gulf, the space I’m facing now,  
farther than Brazil, and waters opened by the prow

of slavers, chains now crumbled to rust. Still a dream remains.  
The hunter’s spear is broken now, his cup is spilled, the stains

of wine spread on the ground. We wade to sea. The water soaks  
our clothes. The east is wide. And piercing the cloud, the spokes

of sun, light radiant through the open spaces carved in gaps of cloud  
a world of light, above me still, its guardians allowed

to bear the names of Catholic saints. The water tugs my knee.

The blood that hums within my veins is answered by the sea.

—Matthew Brockwell, *MS IV*

“*It’s not my fault I turned out gay... You named me after a fucking tree.*”

black coffee on the side. We would live life with true love and high adventure, peering down the cusp of the rabbit hole together with puckish glee.

“Oh, I do it all for the money,” she says blithely. “You know how crazy I am about Sisley Paris bath oil.”

“And what about those Egyptian cotton sheets with extremely high thread counts?” I tease.

“And that,” she amends. “And pretending to be yuppies at the farmer’s market on Sundays, buying those Brazilian chocolates you like so much.” She looks at me and smiles, but it is a tired smile, and those gray eyes are still castaway. She has seen too many dying children.

“How is Melissa?” my mother asks obligatorily, when she calls to wish me many happy returns. My father never calls. In high school, he had once seen me kiss Davy Beckett on the lips after school one afternoon. He

walked in on us sitting at the kitchen table, exchanging a kiss as chaste as a girl’s first date. He then stalked out from the kitchen, slipping out just as abruptly from my life. The rest of senior year stretched out with miles of silence between us, while I swallowed his cold hard disappointment with guilt, my Adam’s apple twitching with mislaid love. My mother, though, still snatched at the last shiny silver thread of normalcy she was afforded, and simply deigned to treat Melly as my live-in girlfriend.

“She’s fine,” I reply. “Busy. You know how things are at the hospital.”

“Yes. Yes, of course.” My mother sighs, and I picture her fiddling with her earring nervously. I know she is imagining me garbed in a black tie and a gold ring, hoping to see mossy-eyed grandchildren before she died. *Break, my heart, for she must hold her tongue*, I think, adulterating Shakespeare. And she does.

“Happy birthday, Sycamore,” she says in resignation. “You take care now.”

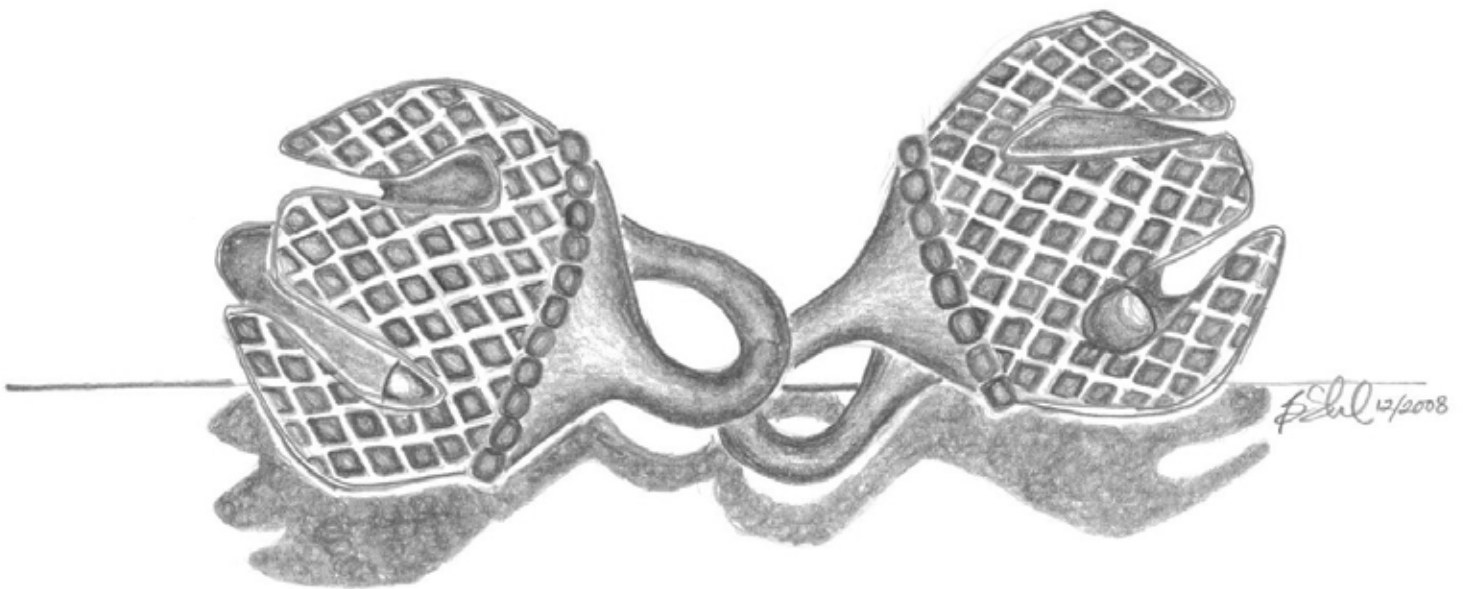
“You take care too, Mom.” I say.

*It’s not my fault I turned out gay*, I want to add, the hurt lodged in my chest as firmly as a beached whale. *You named me after a fucking tree.*

I hang the phone up gently.

The evening is nearing to an end, and Melly and I stand at the edge of the roving dance floor, slightly buzzed, feeling that we are at the cusp of something new. Later, over our college years, we will bond over coffee and thick textbooks, bad movies and cheap drinks. We will meet Kyla and Bryan and live with them in a 2-bedroom apartment off campus. Melly’s hairdryer will blow a fuse, the outlet lighting up like a storm. I will develop eczema during exams, Melly scratching her arms in sympathy. We will eat greasy pizza and argue about laundry, God and mislaid angora sweaters. We become tactical adversaries in Scrabble, in everything. I crowd into her space; she pushes into mine. Thrust and parry. We will learn the word *gallimaufry*.

She will concentrate in Chemistry, and I in English, but we will both discuss Nietzsche late into the night. We will both date men named Mark. We fall in and out of love, but never with each other. I will go to graduate school at Princeton, and she to California, but our homesickness will be unassuageable. When we are apart, she will cut her hair into short starburst spikes; I will grow a mountain-man beard in retaliation. The sails in our ship flap in the breeze limply, lost. When faced with our first real jobs, we will return back to our





alma mater and to each other, like sea turtles finding their way home.

But we do not know this yet. For now, we stand in the dimpling light, swaying like mallees in the bushland. We are caught at the circumference, surveying humankind through a microscope. The mob slews and churns like a psilocybin induced haze. God peers at us through a stick. We talk about nothing.

“Why do people acclimatize themselves to a culture so crass and boorish, one that aims to prove and not to seek?” she says, flicking her hair back pertly. Her pearl earring winks at me flirtatiously in the jazzy light as she scans the mob of cretins. “Can you believe that this is the best and brightest, Fenn?”

I feel a twinge of humiliation for my previously superficial wishes. “People are but animals,” I say, following her train of thought. “I imagine slam dancing and overindulgence are but a method of release from our trammled lives, with its societal dictates and rigid moral codes. After all, like Joseph Campbell said, all we ever seek in living is to feel alive. Maybe this is a method for achieving that.”

She squints at me, trying to decipher my obtuse angles, finding my limned surfaces. “Well, it’s not our method,” she concludes, satisfied.

“Yeah,” I say softly. “Not our method at all.”

That night, after my birthday dinner with Kyla and Bryan, we ascend to the depths of our apartment, exhausted by all the extraneous socializing. Kyla and Bryan have a white house, a well-trained golden retriever and a gurgling Pillsbury toddler. I feel like a terricolous creature that has been exposed to too much daylight; it makes me nervous, jittery. Melly looks tired too, but prettily so, her makeup smudged and the scattering of freckles across her elfin cheekbones clearly visible. I feel only slightly guilty for her fatigue, as it wasn’t unusual for one of us to have symptoms of the other’s problems. When Melly had



*Untitled, Jason Kroening, MS II*

her wisdom teeth pulled, I developed a toothache so severe that I had to share her limited diet of ice cream and oatmeal. We both got mono and a simultaneous addiction to B movies the summer after sophomore year, and wallowed in our misery together in flannel pajamas and shaved ice.

“Why do I get the feeling Kyla and Bryan are discussing us now that we’ve left?” she says, keys jangling as she opens the door. We slide into our musty cluttered apartment, and breathe a collective sigh of relief, glad to be back amongst the sobersided atmospherics and bad feng shui. We are cave dwellers, she and I.

“Must human behavior and our

propensity to blather about others dictate every aspect of our lives?” she wonders aloud.

I sink into our chenille couch, smirking inwardly. Bone weary, I think I may never get up. Sometimes Melly really does sound like she’s swallowed several textbooks and only reads Jane Austen for fun. She is a philosopher king peering out of a subfuscous cave, while the rest of us plebeians squint in the darkness, rubbernecking like meerkats.

I yawn, and she yawns back. Newton’s Third Law. The earth continues to tilt on its axis.

“Don’t be a square, Melly-O. You know it’s a time-honored American

## LESCH~NYHAN

There he sits,  
his wheelchair burning under the harsh fluorescent lights,  
which shine, unwavering,  
piercing truth  
on his little wolverine face.  
He peeks out  
from the garish orange of his helmet,  
his urchin eyes roving  
under crusty eyelashes,  
Peering beyond his trammled life, his bound butterfly hands,  
restrained only by the man next to him,  
as he dreams of lazy thickets and flycatchers on hot summer days.

There he stands,  
the adoptive father,  
gristly-hipped,  
an ectomorphic old bird.  
Rough hands flapping uselessly in the painful light,  
which strikes his eyes bare.  
His walnut face stares back at the world, hardened,  
crenellated skin steeped thick with tears.  
His voice becomes  
a splintery scream-sore ache  
as he challenges them to take his boy away.

There lies the son,  
bushwhacked with love.  
There lies the father,  
wondering why happiness hurts.

There they are,  
circling around each other  
in a perpetual orbital lemniscate  
of mislaid love.  
Bleeding together  
through the paper thin  
edges  
of life.

—Jessica Lin, MS I

tradition.” I say, my hand flung over my eyes but peeking at her through the blinders of my fingers. There she stands, my little Nefertiti with that aquiline nose and regal purse of the lips.

She looks at me sprawled on the sofa and perches with dignity on its arm. “Maybe we should get out more, have other friends,” she muses. She says it so quietly I have to strain my bat-ears to hear her, nearly missing it the first time. She looks away from me and picks at the chenille hesitantly, her fingertips arching like question marks.

“You breaking up with me, Melly?” I joke, not quite meeting her eyes. Even Wordsworth had his days.

“Don’t be silly, of course not,” she replies, eyes sharpening. I know she is thinking the same thing as I—she can no more contemplate this separation than imagine Earth without its gravity. We are caught between two worlds, two people in an orbital lemniscate, inhabiting neither edge. But flush between us, the space is warm.

I sit up. “We have friends,” I say. “We have Kyla and Bryan.”

“Kyla and Bryan are like siblings, Fenn. They don’t count,” she responds. Her small hands gesticulate wildly like skirmishing birds. “I mean friends at work, or at the gym, or something.” She means friends to go to Happy Hour with, friends you could invite to a bridal shower. I picture four girls in print dresses laughing together coquettishly, striding arm in arm past the boutique shops on Newbury Street, their sunflower faces outflung to capture the world’s light.

“I’d rather have one good friend than a lot of friends who don’t mean anything,” I say, standing up and heading to the kitchen. I pour myself a Glenlivet on the rocks and lean back against the ancient countertop’s bullnose edge. “You think we’re too dependent on each other, Melly, but you’re as independent as they come, a true fish without a bicycle.” I really mean it.

Her cheek curves as she hides a smile. She scans our cardboard box of schlock monster tapes on the floor. “Want to take in a flick?” she says, holding up *Nosferatu*. The TV’s in my bedroom, and we head there to slip into pajamas and lean back against the pillowed headboard. Only Melly would allow the focus of our living room to be dedicated to a Rothko rather than the epitome of modern technology.



The TV didn't fit in her room, with her ridiculous sleigh bed and her panzer armoire. Plus, I owned more porn, so the TV in my bedroom was a matter of convenience and good taste.

The gibbous moon peers in on us, questioningly. We are nestled, snuggled between pillows like frostbit Eskimos. Onscreen, we watch the vampire's bloody thirst with doe-eyes.

"Did you have a nice birthday?" she asks later, as the closing credits roll. I pop out the tape and look at her, at the light backscattering across her Athena-gray irises.

"Well, I'm thirty and the world has yet to end," I quip. We slip into crisp sheets, silent as doves.

Melly isn't a constant bedfellow, but sometimes, after we watch a movie or play Scrabble or talk late into the night, her surgeon's stone carapace melts and she becomes a warm bundle of lazy

female limbs, impossible to drag out of bed. I don't mind her there, even when she steals the sheets and breathes too loudly through her cushy mouth, when she leaves lost strands of ermine hair on the pillowcase. It breaks the isolation of our separate, safe alabaster bedchambers, and I feel her there like another part of my consciousness, our minds betrothed in an eternal mobius strip.

"We're just like an old married couple," she jokes, turning off the lamp. Though I can't see it, I know her lips are upturned in mirth. "No sex."

"Yeah," I say, feeling suddenly a little melancholy, hearing something break within me. "Just like a married couple."

I shift on the rumped mattress, feeling the odd words' thick weight on my tongue. I think of chantilly lace, Canon in D under grooved archways, of

things that could never be. Sometimes I wanted to lock her up in an ivory tower, be the only one to truly know her. I wanted to break down the last barrier between us, the only thing that ever separated us, and give her what she deserved. But I knew that to do this would be a selfish kind of sham, and we would be living the worst kind of lie.

I turn over and reach out to her little hand, holding it close to my heart, like a well-worn secret, an unexpected winning hand of cards.

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**Author's notes:**

This piece was written under a pen name. Please email the author at [george.s.helms@gmail.com](mailto:george.s.helms@gmail.com) if you have any comments or questions about his work.



*Bus Driver and Daughter—New Friends, charcoal, Rosalydia Tamayo, MS I*

## REMEMBERING JAN

*In memory and dedication to my patient Jan.*

Lonely old woman resting quietly in your bed,

Your name is Jan.

Here in a room at the San Diego Hospice you will meet the very last moments of your life.

I pull a chair forward and extend my hand, grasping your cold wrinkled hands.

Your body drowning in a sea of fibromas.

Let me lift you. Open those eyes my beautiful Jan. Let me lift the darkness.

“Sing me a pretty song. Comb the tangles of my hair. Soothe this dry throat of mine. Yes, lift the darkness, lift the darkness.”

Two daughters have you. Abandoned now. Do not worry; I am here for you.

As days pass you tell me of your pain.

“I am damaged.”

How my Jan?

“By father’s hand. His strong grip, pushing me down, my face against the pillow praying that it would stop. This is my pain. Yet it is also a gift. A box full of sadness wrapped with lessons. Lessons that I now have unwrapped for you. Learn from my pain. Seek and heal it in others. I tell you because, even with this thirst, I have lived.”

*—Niousha Moini, MS IV*



*The End, Niousha Moini, MS IV*



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MEMOIR

DEAR MAMANI

*A remembrance of my grandmother.*

BY NIOUSHA MOINI, MS IV

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*Girl, pencil, Niloufar Tehrani, MS II*

Two and a half years. It has been two and a half years since I last saw my own mother's face. I wait at the airport line, surrounded by strangers, all awaiting their loved ones. Who are these strangers? What are their names? What struggles have they had? Do any of them stand here as I do now, waiting for my mother, anticipating the familiar face, the known wrinkles, the comforting scent?

I see her from afar. It is funny how we as children are able to recognize the brief shapes and shadows of our parents. Her walk is tired, and her eyes hint that she has experienced something that we wish to know more about, though we are scared to ask. I

wave as she approaches the border of the international terminal path. Her eyes are filled with tears that speak of an ache in her heart. Our arms reach out for one another. The familiar embrace of my mother. How long it has been since I felt that reassuring embrace? Warmth, love, comfort. As I let go of my mother, I expect a second embrace from my grandmother, my Mamani *jaan*. Each time I visit the Los Angeles International Airport, I am reunited with Mamani. So many times do I recall the excitement at seeing her tall stature, the gray hair that echoed her struggles, the loving smile that spoke of how happy she was to see her family again. I look back again, expecting her to appear, but

instead I see strangers abound. A vacant feeling envelops me.

I regain slight composure, my eyes fill with tears, and I am saddened by the loss that is now apparent to me for the first time. Yet, at the same time I am quickly reminded of the comforting feeling of holding my mother's hand after two long years. Elation surrounds my family at my mother's arrival. Voices become loud as laughter and tears are all rolled into one uniting chorus. Like a shy three-year-old would to any stranger, I walk behind my mother not knowing what to say or ask. She occasionally pauses and smiles as she glances at me. "How grown up you look, *goorbinet beram*." *Goorbinet beram*, a term of endearment in our culture, signifies my love, my own. In these faint moments I wonder what she is thinking about.

We finally arrive to our home. My father has planned well ahead of her arrival. Flowers embrace the entrance of the doorway, floors are mopped and shined, tables are wiped down with lemon-scented Pledge, vases are filled with roses of all colors, and candles are lit near the picture of my late Mamani. My mother is elated at the newness of it all. As she enters, our beloved dog Baci runs to greet her, wagging his tail excitedly, jumping on his hind legs, welcoming her as if she had just been gone yesterday. A sense of pride appears in the form of a slight grin on my father's face. He knows that he has done well by my mother. Tradition speaks of the importance of keeping the home spotless and inviting, for Persian culture teaches that a guest could arrive at any moment. That day we were host to my mother for the first time in a long while.

As she stands there, tired and thin, I recall her many struggles. I imagine a strong voice singing the country's anthem each morning of her elementary school years. Years pass and a strong voice returns once again as she stands up to her Colonel grandfather refusing an arranged marriage. Living in Scotland working as a nurse's aide, cleaning the

“ Even if I was a master of every language known to man, I could not bring your essence into words. ”

excrement of ill patients. Surrounded by a country in upheaval, protests, bombs, fear all abound. Escaping to a land she knows nothing of, speaking only Farsi and owning only a high school certificate etched in the sweeps of the Persian alphabet. However hard these struggles were, she did it for my brother and me. “You will live in a country where freedom is a right and not a choice,” I remember her saying one time.

“Our home has become very beautiful. It was a faint memory to me, but I feel at home again. Thank you,” my mother replies as she came into the center of the living room. As the hours of that afternoon pass, my mother begins unpacking the many gifts she brought for us. She hands me a long stemmed plastic yellow rose in bloom. “This is for you, Niousha. Mamani wanted you to have it. It was one of her most favored possessions.” As I hold the flower, I rub the cloth of the petals, and the smell of my grandmother’s home in Iran returns to me as I bring it near my nose. I remember a time when I was ten, her warm hand enclosing mine as we walked through the streets on our way to our favorite store, Pic’N’Save. There our adventure began. With each activity, each minute spent together, she created a cherished memory that I selfishly keep to myself. How grateful I am now that as I hold this flower, this old memory draws itself out. “Now I want you to find me the prettiest plastic flowers. And if you find any plastic grapes gather them and bring them to me.” Now, each memory of her comes to me as waves upon the shore, desiring

to go back and return again and again. I remember her smiling as she says, “Do you remember when...”. I recall Mamani *jaan* sitting on the living room floor washing and separating the mint and parsley leaves to be finely chopped. I see her gathering them together in a bundle and slicing them with the knife. The smell of onions frying spreads amongst our home. I played the role of helper as she taught me to roll little meatballs for the yogurt stew, the taste of which I will never again experience.

I take a breath. I clench my lips. Tears develop in my eyes. Slowly I begin to realize that I will never again embrace my Mamani, I will never again hear her voice calling out to me, “Niousha *jaan*, do you remember... ”

Remember Mamani *jaan*, that day I put on the theme to Doctor Zhivago and asked you to dance to the melody. The video of you dancing is now my only record of you in live movement. Recalling you keeping the other half of a sliced lime to rub on your face.

It makes the skin finer, you told me. How I remember you sleeping with the entire covers over your head, a habit I now possess and perform. With every invitation and event you were the best dressed. People who met you did not believe you were a woman with great grandchildren. The many phone calls from Iran asking each time for me to get my Visa to come visit you; phone calls always telling me, “Ask for anything and I will send it to you.” Your last phone call to me you asked, “*Yadete*, do you remember?”

One lifetime of memories, put here now into a few lines. How impossible it is to describe your existence, your beauty, your love and life in a handful of gathered syllables. Even if I was a master of every language known to man, I could not bring your essence into words. Here I try to tell the world of the legacy you left for my family and me. Mamani *jaan*, since the moment that I was a young boy, you have been a second mother to me. Your flesh and blood was passed to me through my mother, so you are a part of me. That gentle, loving heart, that smile, that nailbiting habit, the love you possessed for the meaning of family all passed to me. How do I thank you for this? I wish I could have kissed your hands and feet before going.



My grandmother Mamani and I, Iran, 1983. Photograph courtesy of Niousha Moini, MS IV





*Kenyan Girls, Christopher Moriates, MS IV*

Your hands and my hands were once together. I wish to once again experience our days together. I want you to return to me. You raised and nurtured a young woman into a strong-willed mother named Leyla. You brought me life and no soul could ask for a better mother.

I felt so helpless when you had your heart attack and stroke. Here I was in medical school without any tool to help you, to save you and heal you. How hard it was for me, Mamani *jaan*, to feel this helpless. I recall the days working at the hospice when I would read poems to my patients, brush their hair, and bring a straw close to their mouth to make drinking water easier. How I wish I could have performed these honored tasks for you. How I wish that I had become a doctor sooner. Three days before your flight to America two years ago, a heart attack and stroke attacked your delicate body. My mother called from Iran telling me that Mamani is

paralyzed completely on her right side. Two months, my Mamani, you lay in a hospital room foreign and unfamiliar from home, each day trying to regain what you once knew. I hear the faint voice of the Mamani I grew up with. Trembled and poorly articulated words now became your vocabulary. As each month passed, your body grew weaker.

My mother further unpacks and brings the very last pictures taken of you. I am haunted each day now. As I look at the picture I ask my mother, where is Mamani? Her finger points to a woman whose face I did not recognize. Weak and thin, she sits in a wheelchair. I remember now calling my mother over the phone on *Shabeh Yalda*, the longest night of the year in our calendar. "How is Mamani?" I ask. A pause, a hesitation from my mother. "*Mamani raft*, Mamani is gone."

Call me once more, Mamani, so that I can feel your love again. Let me

once again hear your footsteps, let me once again taste the brilliance of your cooking, let me embrace you, let me tell you once again, I love you. My second mother, what remains of you now is your legacy, a handful of pictures, and a blooming yellow flower that sits next to my bed. I rise each morning now and see that flower. It remains blooming every day. This flower always reminds me of how you deserve to be remembered as the beautiful, the proud, the strong—my loving mother. My love, always, *Mamani yeh azizam*.

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## SENSE OF SENSITIVITY

My mother's brother died last night.  
All this studying is taking my sight;  
I lie here wondering what happened to me—  
How does one lose one's sense of sensitivity?

I breathed in the news without batting an eye,  
Not a choke or sob or the beginning of a cry.  
Here I am yearning to become a doctor,  
But look closer inside because I'm an imposter.

Caring for the sick and making them well  
Is a noble cause that's easy to sell,  
Yet I'm blinded by school and stuffing my brain  
With facts, drugs, and bugs that make me insane.

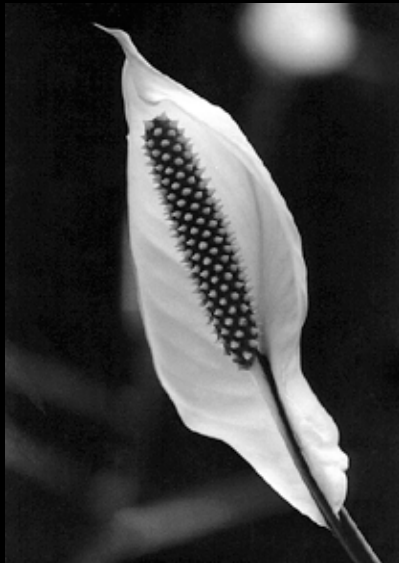
This path that we're on does something we hate,  
By draining the qualities we're trying to create.  
We're put in a world where the only things real  
Are the tests that we take, not the feelings we feel.

So I say to my sobbing mother, 'I love you too,  
But I cannot come home until my tests are through.'  
She understands and agrees, as she hangs up the phone,  
Sitting down, wishing to God she were not alone.

With my face in a pillow, I try squeezing out a tear  
For my mother, her brother, and my inner fear.  
I'm caught helpless, walking at the end of the line  
Between tests and grief battling each other for my time.

In denial I scratch my face and rub at my eye,  
Fruitlessly checking my pillow, but knowing it's dry.  
Anger sieges my thoughts, pointing fingers at me,  
And I wonder: How did I lose my sense of sensitivity?

—Anonymous



Flower, Michele Lee, MS III

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FROM THE WARDS

## AND THE SUN GREW ROUND

*An overnight call.*

BY JAMES HENRY, MS III

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“Now I will prove to each and every one of you that something can arise from nothing. As you can see with your very own eyes, this is an ordinary hat, empty as the day it was made.” He pulled the velvet cap inside out, exposing its black interior to the stage spotlights.

“Watch closely,” shouted the man, as he lifted his gloved hand.

For a moment the hand floated, high above his head, before diving down into the hat and pulling out a white handkerchief. This small piece of cloth was followed by a blue one, knotted to orange, and then green. Handkerchiefs streamed from the hat, faster and faster. After several minutes, the audience became restless: the trick had gone on too long. What began as miraculous started to appear grotesque. I tried to stand but found myself paralyzed. Looking up, I saw the sequence of the handkerchiefs change—red, after red, after red.

There is a loud series of beeps, and I fumble over several dark shapes on the nightstand before grabbing my pager. No message this time—only a string of numbers on the green screen. I dial it and a nurse picks up. “The stat Mag level came back; it’s three point four.” She hesitates, as if waiting for instructions. “Thanks. I’ll let the intern know.”

Magnesium has always been an enigma to me. Until starting the Obstetrics and Gynecology rotation, I was able to remain blissfully ignorant of its purpose and still get by during rounds. When reporting an abnormal Mag value, I would just shoot an emphatic glance at the resident, as if to say “we both know what *that* means.” When taking care of pregnant women, however, magnesium is a primary element, on par with sodium and potassium. It seems that almost half of laboring women receive it in the hours surrounding delivery because of its anti-seizure properties. When given intravenously, to ward off eclampsia, magnesium sometimes accumulates too quickly. The first sign of this excess is loss of deep tendon reflexes; shortly, other organ systems forget their function. Thus, the vigilant nurse’s wake-up call.

In the middle of the night, I am disoriented by the on-call sleeping quarters at Scripps Mercy hospital. The private room, equipped with a TV, exercise bike, and shower, has more amenities than my own apartment. My half-asleep mind guesses that I am in a hotel, on an exotic vacation. Through the window, a few blocks away, the UCSD Medical



“Humans, with the acquisition of language, forgot how to deliver babies on their own. The instructions are no longer hard-wired in the brain of every female. Such information is now stored by culture.”

Center tower glows. Many of its rooms are still filled with florescent yellow light, and they checker the hospital in no particular pattern. I gradually remember who I am. I remember who my patients are and why my sleep is troubled.

In one of those hospital beds lays Olive, with her husband Jake devotedly by her side. Earlier today she underwent a radical hysterectomy. Yesterday, Olive learned that she had cervical cancer based on biopsy results from earlier that morning. The day before, she came into the hospital because of vaginal bleeding, a non-specific symptom, maybe nothing more than a heavy period. A few years ago, without Olive realizing it, a cluster of her irritated cells started to grow differently than the rest. At fifteen she made love to Jake for the first time, and the human papilloma virus began tickling her cervix.

My associations with sex, drastically widened by the gynecology service, are becoming difficult to navigate. The psychological effect is an interesting one: while my libido has dropped, my romantic interest is rising. I fantasize about picnics with my intern and try to win her heart with concise progress notes. A part of me is denying the physical nature of my attraction to her, as if this might salvage her from disease. Without a body she can never get sick, never die. I cannot even imagine her naked. Exhausted by the mental effort, I lie down. My back feels stiff against the bed. I remember Olive, and my thoughts loosen. Her eyebrows arch upward, fixed in surprise, even under anesthesia. As I drift off, her husband Jake appears. Dressed as a knight,

he quotes my favorite book: “Making love with a woman and sleeping with a woman are two separate passions, not merely different but opposite.”

**T**IME TO PUSH COME TO L&D ROOM 3. The pager screen flashes—Juanita must be fully dilated. I am out of bed and slip on my white coat in a hurry knowing that she is a “multip.” Multiparous mothers have been through this before; their bodies remember the drill, and labor can be very quick. More than once I have arrived on the scene moments too late, just in time to deftly deliver the placenta. I have not yet caught a baby.

There are three people in the room: Juanita, her husband Carlos, and a nurse named Jeff. It is a pleasure to work with Jeff—he is outstandingly gay, and on the labor and delivery deck this seems to put families at ease. Jeff is yelling “tres, quatro, cinco,” working his way up to an emphatic “diez!” This means that Juanita is pushing her way

through a contraction. The tocometer strip next to her bed shows a series of arches, like rolling hills, and a stable fetal heart rate. Jeff looks up, and reassuringly tells me, “This one is going to be easy, despite the epidural.” The epidural is both a blessing and a curse—while greatly appreciated by the laboring woman, it is widely cursed by staff for lengthening the process. Pain, it seems, is a strong incentive to push the baby out.

“Tell her to focus all that power down here, like she is having a bowel movement.” At first I hesitate to translate such a coarse analogy into broken Spanish, telling myself that she can finish this without our coaching. Then I remember the punch-line of a recent lecture, spoken by a well renowned faculty member: “Humans, with the acquisition of language, forgot how to deliver babies on their own. The instructions are no longer hard-wired in the brain of every female. Such information is now stored by culture.” He taught that caring for a newborn is not automatic, like knowing to drink when thirsty, or to fight when threatened. Many new mothers even need to be shown how to breastfeed. What if there is no culture around to save the day in those corners of the earth where infant formula isn’t even sold? I suspect that old instincts rise up through the amnesiac fog.



Orange, Nicholas Kanaan, MS IV



my Nephew Niam



*Niam*, pencil and ink, Lakshmi Ganesan, MS II

It is not only the mother who needs instruction during a delivery. The attending physician, as soon as she enters the room, starts teaching. She begins by placing Carlos's hand behind Juanita's neck, literally pulling him to the bedside. After she gloves and gowns herself, the doctor turns to me. "Where is the baby's back?" she asks. I vaguely remember how to map this based on soft spots on the baby's scalp, so I put a few fingers on the crowning head and blindly point up to the right. "Sort of," she says, at the same time demonstrating the proper hand position for sliding the infant onto my forearm. When the time comes, I abandon her technique and grasp the baby how it feels most comfortable. It is a boy, heavy and warm. Someone says, "OK, now put him on the lap." I gently lower the baby to rest on my knees.

"No, *her* lap!" I cut the cord, hoping that I have not just imprinted this child into thinking that I am his mother. As the doctor sews up a small laceration, Juanita smiles broadly, cradling her new son. I start to congratulate Juanita, but in my excitement I have forgotten how to speak Spanish. I decide on a heartfelt "congratulations," hoping that genuine feeling will nudge it past the language barrier.

Before returning to the on-call room, I stop next door to help admit a new patient. The resident gives me a brief synopsis: "20 year old G4P2 at twenty four weeks gestation presenting with vaginal spotting. My guess is that it's another chlamydia infection—third time in two months, once for each boyfriend. At least it's not cancer." She runs the ultrasound wand over our patient's round belly. The placenta

is normally placed, and we can see the fetus' beating heart. Last week I watched the c-section delivery of a baby this young; they had to wrap his skinny body in clear plastic to prevent him from losing heat. He looked like an astronaut, or a sleeping bird.

**I**t is beautiful, no clouds. We are lying on a quilt, on the slope of a grassy hill. Far above our heads an airplane silently floats past.

"Think you will ever have kids?" Her voice is quiet and soft, like a nearby thought.

"I'm not sure. The world is crowded."

"There is plenty of space here." She props herself up on one elbow, casting a shadow over my face.

"If you had to choose, which instinct would you pass on to your children—



how to have sex or how to love?"

I reach into the wicker basket and remove a grape from its cluster. It feels smooth and cool, so I spin it in my hand. I toss the grape up, poised to catch it with my mouth. At the top of its arch the grape continues to rise, higher and higher, as if falling from the earth.

Before I can speak, she seals my lips with a kiss.

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# THE HUMAN CONDITION

VOLUME 14

2009

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## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Paths. Journeys. Struggles Made. Lessons Learned. Reflect back this past year. Do you remember the many new faces you have met? Can you recall the novel problems faced? Reflecting on my own past year, I remember the passing of my grandmother and the remembrance of a man named Brian Webster. My grandmother was a second mother, a woman who I embraced, a woman who I look up to and whose memory and blood live within me. Yet Brian Webster was a man who I had never met, however the profound impact he made on me will be a lesson that I will carry with me through each stage of my life. We dedicate this edition of *The Human Condition* to the memory of our fellow student, Brian Webster. I would like to thank Don and Pat Webster and their family for sharing their personal journey. May Brian's life allow us to reflect on our own and let us remember that behind each face may lie a life of struggles. I hope that each of us will reach out to one another and take time to learn about each other's sadness and joys. I thank the entire staff of *The Human Condition* whose time, energy and effort have not gone unnoticed. Many thanks and praises to SunMin (a.k.a. Supreme Overlord of Layout & Editing) whose countless hours on the layout and editing has made this magazine possible. Thank you, Ramón, for your continued support that makes our student life better each and every day. Finally, I thank you, the reader, for allowing us to take you on a journey filled with emotions that I hope you will carry with you from this day forth.

—Niousha Moini, MS IV  
Editor-in-Chief



**The Human Condition staff.** From left: Wesley Gifford, Jessica Lin, Benjamin Maslin, Khamphoucan Southisombath, Lakshmi Ganesan, Niloufar Tehrani, Vera Trofimenko, Csilla Felsen, Adnan Majid, Hyuma Leland, SunMin Kim, Niousha Moini.

## CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

**Adnan Majid** speaks a language of his own. **Benjamin Maslin** misses Philly Cheesesteaks (without the cheese). **Csilla Felsen** is addicted to Argentine tango. **Hyuma Leland** is a double agent. **Jennifer Wan** wants to sit in a massage chair, in the sun, eating sushi. **Jessica Lin** is pondering the possibilities. **Khamphoucanh Southisombath** is hoping one day medical school will be  $2 + 2 = 4$ . **Lakshmi Ganesan** loves mangoes. **Munveer Bhangoo** is just coming back down to earth. **Niloufar Tehrani** is always singing to a tune inside her head. **Niousha Moini** is grateful for his life. **Pritha Workman** is grooving to all the single ladies out there—now put your hands up! **Rishi Agarwal** wants to live on an abstract plain. **SunMin Kim** likes to yawn with operatic tone and melody **Vera Trofimenko** finds the New Yorker font extremely alluring. **Wesley Gifford** is going to miss his classmates next year.





*Skiff at Hopebay*, oil on board, Jeffery P. Harris, M.D., Ph.D.



*Feet in Paradise*, SunMin Kim, MS II



*Savta Razal—A Smile Worth a Million Words*, oil and charcoal on canvas, Benjamin Maslin, MS I  
“My late great grandmother, Razal, is remembered for her profound dedication to mitzvot (good deeds in Hebrew) and a uniquely comforting smile that reflected her deep love of humanity. I sought to capture her smile in this portrait.”

