



# Creative Arts Contest

**W**hile most medical students spend countless hours studying the minute aspects of the human body or dissecting cadavers, some use their spare time to explore more right-brained activities. The finalists in our 15th Annual Creative Arts Contest present an inventive take on the world of medicine and other aspects of life, and an escape from those anatomy textbooks.

Our short-story winner, Mehr-Afarin Hosseini, tells the tale of a woman's journey to Cuba, meeting colorful but broken characters while contemplating her own struggles. In Dr. Scott Nass' winning poem "Westwood and Wilshire," the reader is reminded that a stroke of fate might be the only difference between two people and whether they live in privilege or poverty. The winning photograph, by Sam Li, presents a dynamic view of permanence, and our winning painting, by Kristen Ettensohn, offers a skillful depiction of the vivid colors of a neighborhood street in Mexico.

We know you'll enjoy these pieces as much as we did, and as you do, consider it a way to inspire your own creativity.

—Steve Woo

## { poetry }

## “Westwood and Wilshire”

by Scott Nass, M.D.

*PGY-1, Ventura County Medical Center*

In your three hats and four coats  
 You sit hunched inside your makeshift shelter  
 As though waiting for a magic bus  
 To take you somewhere better  
 Somewhere I can't stare at you  
 Every workday for the 15 seconds  
 I'm stalled by the awful red light  
 That stares at me  
 angrily  
 Telling me to look left  
 to look at you  
 to think for those 15 seconds:

That could have been...

Not me  
 I work for a living  
     come from a good family  
     earned my station in life  
 But you didn't?  
 You didn't wind up where you are without good reason...

Did you?  
 Elude a fractured mental health system  
 Stay under the radar  
 Somehow avoid taking center stage  
 In a public conscious  
 That like me would rather  
 Look the other way  
 Foot on the gas pedal  
 Squinting just enough to  
 Avoid the guilt I might  
 Otherwise have to feel if  
 My light never turned green

Many look away when they see the homeless, uncomfortable with what they see. The main character, a medical student, feels unease when he sees the same homeless man each day on his way to school. His realization is how easily life could have turned out so differently for both of them. Nass graduated in June from UCLA School of Medicine and has begun his family medicine residency in Ventura, California. For more of Nass' work, read his short poem "Inside Maria" at [www.amsa.org/tnp](http://www.amsa.org/tnp).



## { art }

## “Code”

by Vinay Dewan

*Third-year, Washington University in St. Louis School of Medicine*

The arrival of a medical transport helicopter represents the reality of patients with cardiac emergencies. For Dewan, the heart and hospital are closely connected. Inspired by a song about being driven to a medical center, Dewan shows the helicopter approaching the hospital landing pad, signaling the patient will find the help that is so urgently needed.



{ photography }

### “High Contrast Austrian Perspective”

by Sam Li

*Third-year, University of Texas Medical School at Houston*

In this picture taken at the Hapsburg Estates in Vienna, Austria, the photographer aimed to capture the motion of the water falling on the stones and portray it from the perspective of a neighboring statue. Li leaned his camera as far out over the ledge and as low as possible to achieve this particular angle.



{ photography }

### “Bottled Earth”

by Boris Rozenfeld

*Third-year, Drexel University College of Medicine*

We are admonished to recycle our ubiquitous plastic water bottles. This photograph taken at the Philadelphia Flower Show illustrates not only a forest and its trees, but also the reuse of these containers—as a place to sustain life.



creativity



{ art }

### “The Medical Gaze”

by Nkiru Azikiwe

*Second-year, School of Medicine at Stony Brook University Medical Center*

For this artist, the inspiration is the human body and its unfortunate objectification in Western medicine. “Patients are reduced to body parts, anatomical and molecular dysfunctions, rather than the whole person,” she says. “From the patients’ standpoint, they are utterly exposed and vulnerable to the doctor.” Often, the power dynamic renders patients subordinate—the expression of which is depicted here.



## { poetry }

## “Windmills”

by Dianna Ng

*Third-year, New York University School of Medicine*

Asking him why he's here today, he pauses for a moment to stare at the obviousness of my question and directs my line of sight to the dialysis machine with its spinning pumps.

He looks arboreal as if he were some weak allegory for genealogy, his face heavy and swollen.

He imagines that he can escape by closing his eyes so the insides turn white, deracinate himself for once.

Together we stare at the windmills as they chum the burden of their arms, rigid and brisk. He sways in smooth pursuit of each blade forgetting each moment as it arrives.

Between breaths, he emerges softly into reality and just as suddenly submerges into the diaphanous; catching answers feels like catching clouds.

One moment he is in Bellevue; in another he lies naked with his Freiya on the beaches of an alternate oblivion where it is tropical; in another he extends his weighty wings of flesh and acrid feathers to fly idly over the Sonoran dunes.

The machine's exhalations and his apneic wheezing create a fugue of sighs and sorrows, his consciousness rising and setting with each whirring cycle. Tenuous.

My questions crawl over sands and arch over landscapes only to find him missing.

He is kissing his Freiya.

---

Physicians can understand the body, but the human spirit will ever remain a mystery. Even when a man is in the hospital, on the inside he can be far away—enjoying moments that even the frailty of his body cannot take away from him.



## { art }

## “Oaxaca, Mexico”

by Kristen Etensohn

*Third-year, University of Massachusetts Medical School*

The empty streets at dawn in a Mexican city and the vibrant colors of the buildings inspired this piece, Etensohn says. The painting is a marriage of her love of traveling and painting. She often finds places to visit that provide inspiration for her artwork.

## { poetry }

## “Ignorant”

by Vedika Nehra

*Fourth-year, New York Medical College*

Physicians often are frustrated by patients not complying with treatment. Nehra asks us to pause and look at the other side—that of the patient. It is not ignorance, she says, preventing many from taking care of themselves, but rather life's difficult choices. Many patients must make ends meet on minimum wage, raise a family in the inner city, and find ways to cope with the heartache and loneliness that illness often brings. Nehra's poem can be found at [www.amsa.org/tnp](http://www.amsa.org/tnp).



{ poetry }

“My Baby’s Daddy”

by Benjamin Lemelman

Second-year, University of Miami School of Medicine

Lying in a bed  
Sea of baby green blue

Gowns  
Curtains  
Wristbands

I saw her hunched

Practice the patient history  
Just like practice  
Except real life

What brings you in today

Pains  
Stomach

Have you had trouble eating

My father died three months ago  
Haven’t had an appetite

Oh, OK.

Any illness in your family  
Mother  
Sister  
Grandmother

Yes  
My baby’s daddy  
Has sickle cell

Oh, OK.

Just like practice  
We drilled her  
And got her good

We left  
Her tears behind us

For her daddy  
And her baby’s green blue daddy

Inspired by a first-year experience witnessing a classmate’s unintended insensitivity to a patient, Lemelman shows the disturbing consequences of losing empathy and forgoing a doctor’s ultimate mission: to care about the patient.



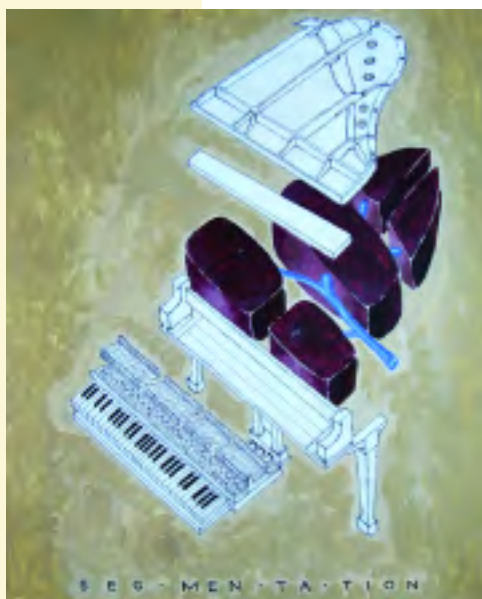
{ photography }

“Once You See a Slender Filefish”

by Derek Covington

Third-year, University of Nevada School of Medicine

Taken on a night scuba diving trip in the Bahamas, this piece surprised the artist when it came out so well, considering this particular species of fish. “Those guys like to hide and look like the reefs,” Covington says. He used a simple point-and-shoot digital camera with an underwater housing for protection. While his fellow photographers used expensive camera gear, Covington shows that a “poor med student” can still take good pictures.



{ art }

“Segmentation”

by Victor Wong, M.D.

Research fellow at Stanford University School of Medicine

Wong tries to communicate here the wondrous sights that he saw during residency to his nonmedical friends. Wong resumed his hobby of painting, which took a sabbatical from high school to his surgical intern year. From a discovered blueprint of a grand piano, broken into segments, the dark broad body reminded him of the curved outline of a liver.



poem

## { short story }

## "Baile de Agua"

by Mehr-Afarin Hosseini

Fourth-year, SUNY Upstate Medical University  
College of Medicine

*In roman mythology, "Cuba" is the goddess of infants and is there to protect them.*

He hesitated for a second, stopping and looking back to make sure that we were following him. Sweat was dripping from his forehead, and he was breathing hard. His round, blue eyes, with that strange contrast to his tanned skin, jumped around on his face. A thin mustache, stretched with a smile, sat above his lips, with a golden tooth shining from the corner of his mouth. Swinging his arm through the air, Vladimir signaled us to keep following, then turned back to walk again. We limped after him with slippers that dragged on the concrete from fatigue and heat and could not keep up with his fast pace.

Since the day we set foot here, the sun shone without hesitation, penetrating our eyes and burning our skulls. Regardless, we had wandered the streets all day every day, so now our sunburned shoulders could not bear the touch of our shirts anymore, and the blisters between our toes had blistered again. Siavash had lost the map with all the attractions the very first day, but we soon figured out that we did not need a map. We found the attractions anyway in the first couple of days, from Revolución Museum to Revolución Square and Revolución Avenue and the "well of miracle" of the Hotel Nacional. It was enough to just wander by the hotel for a while, and it would not be long before one of the locals approached to sell us cigars or black market ballet tickets for Alicia Alonso or just a glass of mojito and dragged us into valleys and alleys that were not even on the map.

Vladimir turned into an alley covered with cracked cobblestones and then a building, pink-colored with glassless rectangular windows. Clothes hung in the small balconies, untouched by the windless air. The scalloped moldings around the windows and balconies were remains of the Spanish architecture of the colonial times, and from their chewed teeth it was clear that since then they had not been restored, like the deep scars carved on the walls by the whip of the storms of the tropical climate. I sighed, and Siavash turned to me in silence.

As we got to the door, a strong smell of urine mixed with rotten trash caught me halfway and made me grab Siavash's arm and pause for a second. His gaze moved

from me to the door undecided. "Come on in! Come on in!" Vladimir was yelling from somewhere. A small boy with dark, skinny legs was sitting on the front steps, staring at me and my futile attempt to scatter the flies with one hand. I shook my head, accepting defeat and entered the dark place, pulling Siavash in behind. Seeing our shadows, Vladimir started to run up the stairs again; we after him.

"Come, come. Tourists, locals, everyone here tonight," he said, out of breath, with a thick Spanish accent. "Eh, drinks—eh—beer, mojito. Mojito, ha? Good, good."

Splash of our slippers. The metal handrails were hot, the steps all pink-colored and broken. Then we started to hear the noise of a fan and the laughter of a man whose shadow appeared at the door frame on top of the stairs. Vladimir said something to him in Spanish. The man instantly turned to us, shook our hands with a wide smile and introduced himself as Ernesto. He was a short, young man in a red shirt with beamy black eyes, constantly blinking. And every now and then, he wiped the sweat off the back of his neck with a piece of cloth that dangled in his hand.

"Señorita, eh, from where?"

"Canada."

Vladimir raised both arms to the air: "Oh, Canada, Canada—eh, Toronto, Quebec. But...." He touched his face with his hand as he stared at mine and continued undecidedly: "but Cubana! Cubana!"

"No, no, born in Iran," said Siavash, recognizing the gesture and smiling.

"Ah, Irani. Irani in Canada," Vladimir's face shone with a wider smile.

He then turned to Ernesto, who seemed lost, and said something in Spanish. They both shook their heads and laughed. Vladimir patted Siavash on the back and said: "Me Irani friend, good man,

good," and raised his arm as if he was referring to someone from the distant past. He was probably one of their annual customers, though. Vladimir then came closer.

"Me, eh, want to go Canada," he whispered. "Amigo, me, small child? Sick—eh, he to go Canada, ha? But amigo, listen to me, Cuba...."

He paused and looked around. Siavash and I had bent forward unconsciously to better hear his quiet whisper. He came even closer this time, moving his finger in front of our eyes to emphasize.

"Cuba a big prison," he said, and moved away holding his breath. His eyes had expanded, and their whites were showing. But before he moved far, he put his arm around Siavash's shoulders and dragged him to the other side of the room. I did not follow them. ➔

**Ernesto, who had remained silent until then, grabbed my wrist and drew me toward the bar and the clean mojito glasses that were sitting in a perfect straight line on the counter.**



{ photography }

“Memory”

by Miaoyuan Wang

*Premed*



This self-portrait conveys a quiet emotion, and Wang likes to leave the meaning of her pictures, including this one, for the viewer’s interpretation. “I think a lot of my work has some emotion to it, and I don’t necessarily have anything in mind.” Wang graduated from the University of Florida in 2008 with a bachelor’s in fine arts.

photo { art }

“Janet”

by Emma Lo

*Premed*



In this painting, the artist presents Janet, “one of the strongest women I know.” The subject lived behind a bus station in Pittsburgh and was on the streets for nearly a year. She refused to move indoors, since the outdoors gave her a sense of freedom, Lo says. “I will always respect her perseverance and insistence on being treated with dignity,” Lo says. “Some would call her ‘homeless.’ She was not homeless. Rather, she made her home on the streets.” Lo is a 2008 graduate of Haverford College with a bachelor’s in fine arts. She spent the past year working in Pittsburgh for AmeriCorps.



Before I had a chance to look around the dark entrance, Ernesto, who had remained silent until then, grabbed my wrist and drew me toward the bar and the clean mojito glasses that were sitting in a perfect straight line on the counter. He pointed to the skinny-legged metal tables and the stools around them.

“Señorita, this is cafe, good?” he said.

I didn’t reply. I was immersed in the colorful paintings on the walls; black women in red flowery dresses that hardly framed their immense bosoms and buttocks. From the few glassless windows, a pale light entered the bar, making the empty place look emptier. My blisters were now burning, and my thirst was coming back. Ernesto stood in front of me and, swinging his arms in the air, tried to tell me again about the night life of the cafe that the tourists and Cubans, everyone; that mojito

and beer and....

I interrupted him. “Señor, agua? Agua?” I said, pointing to my lips.

He paused, gathered his arms and bent forward. “Sorry, but no water,” he said apologetically. “But, eh, beer? Beer, mojito....” His arms started to swing again, but he didn’t seem to know what else to say. “Ramba, salsa....”

Then he snapped his fingers and took one step toward me.

To continue reading Hosseini’s short story, “Baile de Agua,” visit [www.amsa.org/tnp](http://www.amsa.org/tnp).

The details of Hosseini’s unusual characters are so real that you can almost feel the heat in her humid Cuban tavern. While the impoverished people the main character meets are tortured souls, we find that the main character is too. For more of Hosseini’s work, read “The Birth of Venus,” also on our Web site.

## { short story }

## “Intimacy”

by Katherine Lewis

*Fourth-year, University of New England College of Osteopathic Medicine*

I pull a notecard from my pocket and scratch a few words as I climb the dry hospital stairs. I’ve been doing this often the past few months, in breakrooms, bathrooms, hallways—a desperate hope to hold onto something ephemeral in a year busy with practicalities.

*Mr. Jim tells me I look like his niece before we discuss genital ulcers. Kim came in for knee pain but really wants to talk about urinary incontinence. Do they care that I’m 26?*

I find myself wondering at the funny privileges of medicine: the “singular intimacies” writer Dr. Danielle Ofri described. We get to do and discuss so many things that are, in any other setting, entirely inappropriate. But new constructs exist that make them appropriate. So although a patient doesn’t know me from Eve, when I sit on the rolling stool and she on the exam table, when I don a stethoscope and she a jonny, the mysterious social rules we so innately follow dissipate. It’s not only appropriate, but also expected, that I ask for every detail of bowel movements and palpate all the sacred parts.

*Dennis chuckles at my awe. I make up extra questions to ask about his sternectomy because I want to keep my hand on his chest wall a moment longer, to remember the feeling of beating chambers.*

I love this privilege. I want to participate thoroughly in people’s lives; I feel honored to share the delightful and the terrifying, the proud and the shameful, and to be near even in the intensely solitary process of death. But what a strange profession! A personhood, really. Already I see the fast-moving waters of medicine smoothing my edges—what about when I step back out into the sunlight, cement, living room carpet that is life apart from this? How will my evolving shape fit?

*Baby Haley may not survive the night; her father slammed her skull against the ceiling. While Logan, a blind and autistic well-child, has a grandmother who can’t stop beaming about his musical talent.*

“Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless.”  
—Ecclesiastes

I lost my uncle last year—my dad’s eldest brother, my favorite cousin’s father. I skipped hematology lectures to show up at the hospital armed with hugs and cookies after Uncle Bob had his seizure. But also, to my surprise, armed with this scary new part of me: When I looked at the MRI, the physician’s “we just need to do more tests” became hollow. Irregular borders, bigger than a grapefruit, crossing the midline, growing toward the frontal lobe. Uncle Bob’s tight grip on the bed rail became spasm, not nervousness; instead of listening to his stories, I listened for abnormal speech patterns. But f---, lying there trying to smile, he looked so much like my dad.

It’s a precious thing to participate in the process of dying. I don’t regret a single visit or long drive or late phone call over the ensuing months. But it’s a funny thing to learn with one foot in each of these worlds: Family is who I am and where I come from, and who I “get to share with like-it-or-not” (Mom would point out)—and this beautiful, sharp, art of medicine is somehow also where I belong. I haven’t yet learned to straddle the gulf; in losing Uncle Bob, I mostly dove and skidded from one side to another—child one moment, scientific interpreter the next.

*Charlotte had eight fertility treatments and a failed marriage prior to the pregnancy she’s laboring now. All the hopes, fears, most severe pain and most utter delight of Charlotte’s whole family are somehow bound up behind this green curtain, and they tighten around me as the head crowns over my gloved fingers.*

Now, more than any time since I’ve started medical school, I feel like this is where I’m supposed to be. I’m 26 and transient, so whole wheat or rye is about as much commitment as I can handle these days—yet somehow, my desire to be a doctor lives in a different realm: It is certain and steady. Vocation, perhaps, chooses you more than you choose it.

In spite of this rare certainty, I am really scared. I feel this thing has gotten hold of me, this river cutting away the edges, and I don’t know what will come out the other side. It moves very fast, taking away my space for contemplation and evaluation. So when I do pause for a gulp of nonmedical air, I find myself wondering: When all’s said and done, will I like who I’ve become?

Lewis’ inspiration came from thinking about the wide variety of patients she would treat as a doctor.

“I have always loved people more than I love medicine,” she says. “I am increasingly discovering the profound privilege that this vocation grants to know people deeply, to understand their stories, and to participate with them in life.” ➔

**It’s a precious thing to participate in the process of dying.**

{ short story }

**“The Art of Letter Writing”**

by Eva Mathews

*Fourth-year, Tulane University School of Medicine*

Ten years ago my father died in a car accident. My sister and I did not expect it, but he did.

It was November, and it was the night of the first frost that winter. I was cold, and I remember it made my stomach tighten the same way it does when I'm nervous. On that day, I wrote the last letter I have written in 10 years; it was a simple pen-pal letter to my cousin in Arizona. It was an excessively ordinary day. I had laundry piling up and didn't feel like washing it. I had a research paper due in a week and didn't feel like starting it. All I did feel like doing was thinking of this cute guy in my Spanish class, Dean. He had the sexiest accent of anyone in the class.

My sister, Gina, got the call. I was on the screened-in porch with homework spread around me; Gina was in the living room. I saw her answer the phone through the sliding glass doors that separated us. I noticed smudges on the glass, and I didn't remember ever having cleaned them myself. I could see Gina say hello. She waited a moment and then turned her back to me, quickly. I squinted, looking at her. Something seemed odd, but I figured she was talking to her new boyfriend, saying things she didn't want me to know about. She hung up the phone and slouched to the ground.

I knew I needed to go inside.

I opened the sliding door and walked in reluctantly. She looked up at me.

“Margaret, we're going to the hospital right now.” I grabbed the keys and handed them to her. I had a learner's permit, but this didn't seem to be a good time for learning.

“Daddy got hit by a drunk driver,” she said. “The nurse said he doesn't look very good.”

My thoughts were racing, but I couldn't think of anything to say. What the hell would we do without Dad?

The hospital was less than 10 miles away, but when we got there, he had already died. He was our only parent; Mom died when I was 2 years old. A doctor and a grief counselor sat us down and told us. They tried to make everything seem OK, but my world had become chaos. All these men and women hurried from one room to another in white coats, trying to put everything in order again, but they did nothing for Dad.

My body felt stiff, tight, broken. Gina held my hand as tightly as one would hold a life raft. I wanted to scream. I wanted to wake up. I wanted him back.

Our aunt came and picked us up. She cried with us. She brought us to her house. It was best not to see his empty slippers, his empty chair and his silent office right

away. I remember being relieved that Gina was 18. I was glad that no one was going to ship me off to some strange family now that I was an orphan.

The next morning, Gina and I went for a short walk outside. It was even colder than the night before. The wind whipped at my cheeks, and the weather felt cruel, but I preferred cold and clouds to the sun. I don't think I could have dealt with sunny blue skies and girls in pink dresses selling lemonade. It seemed the sky was mourning with us.

“Margaret,” Gina said, “Dad told me once, a year or two ago, that he wrote a will.”

“Oh...he never told me that.”

“Well, he wanted me to know that he had a few letters for us when he died, so that we wouldn't be so alone. We'll go home today, Margie, and read them together, all right?”

It was the best news I could have heard.

Gina drove us home that afternoon. The house was large and silent, and I didn't want to stay there. Gina didn't know where the will would be. Dad had a big cherrywood desk in his office that we searched through first. We found photos of us when we were little, dressed as Ninja Turtles one Halloween, and birthday cards we had made for him out of old science magazines.

We looked through his boxes and boxes of puzzles. Dad loved organization and fitting things together. He dusted every day, and he loved file drawers. In a Thanksgiving argument, my aunt once said he was obsessive-compulsive. I didn't really know what that meant then; I thought she was just being mean. However, Dad was known as an eccentric to most of the neighbors. He didn't buy rugs with fringe because the little pieces would go every which way. He always ironed his shirts and pants, and I had a suspicion he ironed his socks and underwear, too, although I never saw him do it. Dad put all of his shoes in individual boxes with a Polaroid of the shoes on the front of the box. That way, they didn't get dusty or scratched, and each pair was always in the right box.

Gina and I weren't surprised when we found a neat little shoe box in the back of his office closet with blue block letters that read, “Final Will.” We looked at it for a moment without breathing. I didn't want to open the box; it seemed so final. Gina looked at me and saw that it was up to her. The lid was taped on. She used her long, coral-colored fingernails to break the tape. She lifted the lid to reveal three envelopes. In the same blue pen and the same clean block letters, they read, “Week One,” “Week Two” and “Week Three.” ♦

To continue reading Mathews' “The Art of Letter Writing,” visit [www.amsa.org/tnp](http://www.amsa.org/tnp). The departed often leave little for families to remember them by. In this case, a father keeps in touch with his two daughters, and his missives ensure that he will always be in their hearts. But there's something to be said for just letting go.