

On Path Labs and Holding the Universe

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Cold and dull and reeking of acrid formaldehyde
Grey and white matter splayed on a cafeteria lunch tray
This is a brain with dementia.
Look at the cranial nerves, the brainstem
Isn't it *cool*?

So this is it, then, where
A grandmother's artery,
Under the stress of past and present and future, just
b u r s t s
Plunging her into velvet oblivion.

And you can see, here, the
widening of the sulci, the narrowing of the gyri
Torn apart by the drip-drip-dripping of blood
In the stepwise decline of vascular dementia.
That moth-eaten, time-shriveled frontal lobe
That takes a grandfather, steady and unwavering
In a freshly-pressed suit at the arrivals terminal, waiting for you,
To panicked outbursts and shuffled steps to staring, always just staring.
You think you see a flicker of recognition in his eyes,
A lip quivering, forever on the verge of something to say.

And so you study neurons, their connections, the electric currents.
An unlikely constellation of thought and command
Hippocampal atrophy. Synaptic plasticity. Learned helplessness.
As if the words can offer you reprieve
From the delicate, *delicate* balance of salt and electricity
A recipe for human life,
Made of as many neurons as there are stars in the sky.

In my gloved, shaking hands, I hold my grandparents and their parents and all that came before and all
that are to come.
In my hands, I hold the universe.

a b o u t • p o e t

S Y E D

Ayesha Syed is a third-year medical student at the UNC School of Medicine. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Neuroscience from Duke University in 2021. Ayesha has a deep interest in language as a means of human connection, having studied Spanish, Hindi/Urdu, and Arabic. She also enjoys playing the piano, appreciating how emotions can often be better communicated without any words at all. She is pursuing a career in neurology or obstetrics and gynecology, with a focus on culturally sensitive care.

This is her first poetry publication.

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