



Linda Brodsky Memorial Journal

Iterations of Death

Kelley Zhao

“Please wait while the host will let you into the meeting.” I have seen this analog box innumerable times for online lectures, yet none prior had induced such a notion of dread. I sit rigid in unsettling anticipation. My bedroom, my place of rest, is illuminated by the warm and soothing hue of my lamp. Yet bathed in this light I am anything but relaxed. The text changes into a buffering sign, and in the moment it takes to draw a breath the screen changes once more. And there she is. I am at once glad my own camera is off. I start to cry. Michelle looks beautiful, immaculate in the white dress and sleek black hair. She looks peaceful, as though she had never known the burdens of the world, untouched by the stressors that plagued her. There is talking, and it takes me a moment to realize the lively voice is hers. She talks excitedly about children, diapers brands, and her passion for kids that drove her pursuit of

medicine to become a neonatologist. I stumble trying to associate her voice, infused with a vibrancy that reminds me of sunshine, with the woman lying there. For a moment, it is painfully tempting to wish death could lose its permanency.

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For days and weeks, my mind would relapse back to her. Michelle was gone. She: also a second generational Asian American medical student, graduate of Washington University in St. Louis, with the same friend group as I. She: also the youngest of daughters, who also struggled with depression.

She is dead. I am alive. This distinction suddenly seemed so precarious.

I had thought the pandemic simply exacerbated my depression. It was an external irritant. I saw its hues when mustering the energy to repeat the same day for months. As I saw daily counts of infections and deaths rise and watched protests grow in fervency, I imagined the pandemic darkening the colors of my preexisting mental health condition.

But when I thought about Michelle and listened to her family recount her life and the choices she made, I realized the inaccuracy of my imagery. The pandemic was not altering a monochromatic image but was another piece of a larger mosaic being assembled for years. It was crafted with the loneliness of living alone, the stress from school and her inability to talk to family about the taboo topic of mental health. It drew pieces from her thoughts, memories, and feelings she could not put words to. I spent weeks thinking about what factors arranged themselves to lead her to that moment, and whether the ones we shared had just left vastly different marks on me.

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“Another classmate of mine committed suicide,” Jean confided. A few of us college friends video chatted weekly to catch up, but we were silent now, letting our thoughts ebb and flow from the gravity of her words. It had not been long since we heard about Michelle.

“I don’t know how to think about this. Michelle’s death had felt so spontaneous, and I took comfort thinking it was a shakable decision,” she alluded to the fresh laundry found in Michelle’s dryer. The thought of death was easier to swallow when existed over it some semblance of control.

“My classmate’s death felt inevitable. In his letters, he admitted he had planned this for years. The date, time, and place had been set. I thought I made progress processing Michelle’s death, but I feel like I’m back at square one.”

I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes. A familiar sting surprised me. I did not know Jean’s classmate, so why was this so hard?

Through death we come to understand life. This was something I had thought about often as I made my way through medical school. Through cadavers we understand the anatomy of the human body. Through understanding the mechanisms underlying how a disease kills, we have built targeted therapies to promote life. Death is such an integral component of our curriculum, and yet we are so poorly equipped to look it in the eyes.

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I once had a chance to speak to a medical examiner after shadowing a morning of autopsies. I was struck by the blasting music that harmonized the sounds of saws cutting into flesh and bone. She moved with efficiency, and with bold and swift movements she completed one organ removal after another.

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“Doesn’t it bother you,” I gestured to the row of body bags. “having to handle dead people every day?”

“Of course, it does,” her eyes softened.

“When it stops bothering me, that’s when I know I’ll have to quit.”

In the wake of the pandemic, the medical examiner’s words resound relevantly. Death in the healthcare profession is common, more so in the past few months. But we should never treat them as such.

“Ah, not again,” holds truth. At surface level, it was another patient who had passed from COVID19 complications. It was another medical school friend who committed suicide during the pandemic. But “again” implies a parallel in circumstances and thus a parallel in processing each death, and that is where the line of thinking becomes detrimental. Jean’s trauma from Michelle’s death was different from her trauma by her classmate’s death. Each troubled her in different manners and for different reasons, and to effectively process each she had to parse through those nuances. She had not returned to square one – her journey simply became longer and more convoluted.

“Not again,” is something I have thought to myself many times in the past few months, and I am sure those words were thought

repeatedly in the hospitals. But the trauma physicians have accumulated from the innumerable COVID19-related deaths is not a monochromatic image, but a unique mosaic of varying colors as well as varying shades, and I hope those two words would not come to hinder the long journey of emotional and mental healing that our physicians will eventually embark on.

Biography



Kelley Zhao is a second year medical student at Renaissance School of Medicine at Stony Brook University. She enjoys writing creative nonfiction short stories and is grateful to be able to capture thoughts and experiences of medical school into words. Her quarantine hobbies include hiking, journaling, and re-budding succulents.