

“filter breathe dispose repeat”

Senior Project

Justine Thomas

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Introduction

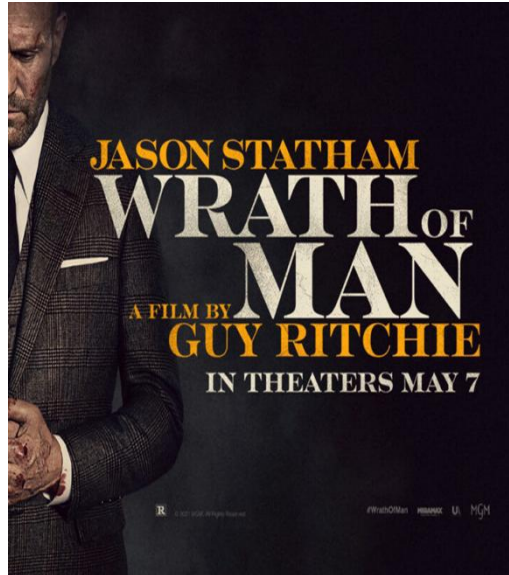
Hello, my name is Justine Thomas. I am a senior here at Hollins and a double major in Dance and English and creative writing. Coming from a family of dancers, it was in my blood that I would have a passion for dance. As my mother says, the reason I was breached during labor was because I couldn't wait to bust a move.



Though I have an interest in dance and writing, a lot of my spare time consists of consuming other media such as movies and video games. Specifically, the genres action and horror seem to have a heavy impact on me. It is not something I thought about until I started to focus on what I wanted topic I wanted to do for my senior project. Here is where it all started...

Inspiration for piece/ what is my question

In the movie, *Wrath of Man* (2021), the main character deals with the death of his son who was killed in a bank truck robbery gone wrong. When confronting the killer, the main character reads out his son's autopsy report in which the bullet entered the following organs: "liver lungs spleen heart"



The plot of the movie does not influence my piece at all, but this quote “liver lungs spleen heart” spoke to me. At the time, I was not sure why. Many questions arose as I thought about this. What is it about this quote that makes my brain twitch? How come it stuck with me after watching the movie?

Thinking of 4 organs

As I think about these four organs, I noticed that these are what many of my family members struggle with. They have some health problems related to the liver, lungs, spleen, and heart.

Specifically, I think of my mother.

All her life she has struggled with many health conditions ranging from Asthma to Chron’s Disease. Then, there is her heart. Throughout her life, her heartbeat was never steady, it was always irregular. Going back and forth with doctors even before I was born, they would just claim that she needed to exercise more. For context, my mother has been a dancer ever since she was little, so exercise was not abnormal for her. No amount of exercise would regulate her heart rate. Doctors would brush it off, claim it

to be connected to stress, and cycle all over again. The past few years, though, it has gotten worse. New symptoms sprouted in which her heart would start to beat fast when she's barely doing any physical activity. Sweat would appear on her skin as if she is standing in the blistering sun. She would become dizzy and breathless, having to rest for the remainder of the day.

After having spoken to her primary care physician or PCP, she was referred to a cardiologist. Many laborious and exhausting tests have been done. Even after all of this, there's still no complete definite answer. Doctors would say things like:

“It could be this, but it also could be that. We're not sure. We have to run more tests.”

I understand that it takes time to diagnose something. Yet, being that I am by her side on this journey, I feel frustrated. This is a form of frustration that I have never experienced with anything else. Though I am not the one who is discovering things about their own body, there is this debilitating feeling I get every time we go into the doctor's office. How could I watch her fight for answers and not be able to help?

That is where it suddenly clicked in my head why the *Wrath of Man* (2021) quote stuck with me. With the movie in context, it is about wanting to help your loved ones with something that you have no control over. Having to witness them hurt and not be able to stop that pain.

Having empathy: the feeling and understanding of someone's experience without having to experience them. I kept this in mind as I began researching. I came across a prose poem called *Memory Remains Blood Soluble* by Maya J. Sorini (2024).

From the corner of the operating room, I watch a training surgeon push an instrument through the wall of a patient's uterus. Nobody reacts; it will go to the incinerator anyway. A woman's spinal fluid spurts over her head and onto her husband. I bristle backwards while the anesthesiologist tries the epidural again, crunching through ligaments and assuring them everything is going to plan. The patient has a headache. There is no moon. The woman who gives her baby my name is still in pain. She asks the doctor why he is killing her. The newborn looks at me while he continues stitching. I meet so many women who have been raped they stop reminding me of myself. It is midnight. I am alone in the room where my patient's belly swells with blood. The surgeons are gone. The first girl I help labor is not showing yet. She delivers a fetus with fingernails but no heartbeat. She finds my eyes as the placenta runs from her body and asks if this means she should stop taking prenatal vitamins. Each evening on the highway I pass a curl of dead fox. I never stop.

This prose focuses on her experience of being a medical student and dealing with maternity patients and sexual assault victims. It is about how encountering such heavy situations has a deep effect on other people. Trauma is transferred via watching or listening. In a way, it is connected to empathy because it is a deeper understanding of something without having to experience it in the present moment.

Back to question

As I think of my original question, another pops up in my head: How can I deal with the inevitable that is pain, suffering, and eventually death? I started to search for explanations.

The movie *Iron Lung* (2026) helps me understand that sometimes to deal with the inevitable is to just go with it. This movie deals with fate, how our paths are already created from the start, and we have no power over changing that. No matter how hard you try, there are some things that you cannot change. Despite all that, you can fight for it; you can fight for the change. The main character in *Iron Lung* is quoted saying:

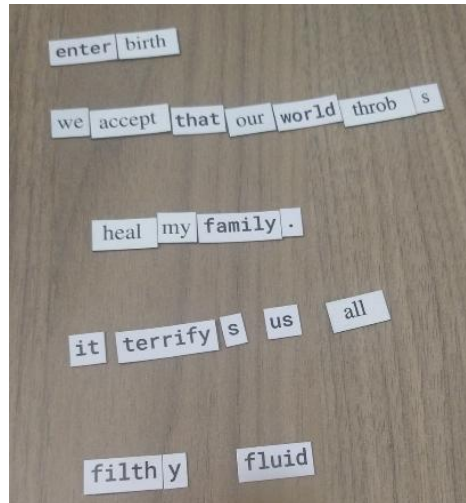
“I just want to live. Is that wrong? Why doesn't anybody else want that?”



I feel this is a great understanding of how I think my family feels when dealing with unanswered questions and not knowing what is going on with their body. This may seem like a pessimistic way to view your life, but when it comes to health conditions such as something that is congenital, there are moments where it feels like nobody wants to help. Like with my mother and the constant back and forth with doctors. There is a desperation in this quote.

Researching outside of Senior Seminar

Outside of the studio research time, I made discoveries in other courses. I had the opportunity to take a graduate level dance class called Thinking, Moving, and Crafting in which you think outside the box when it comes to creative ideas. There was a class assignment in which we created a poem related to the topic of our thesis/ senior project via poetry magnets.



Then, we were supposed to come up with another manifestation of said poem. For mine, I was inspired by an activity I did in elementary school. It is a jar that holds an amalgamation of miscellaneous items. Inside contains glitter, yarn, beads, foam balls, clay sculptures, water, and oil. It is then wrapped with yarn on the outside.

Out of this jar came inspiration for my costume. It is something about the layers in which it is hard to see what truly lies in the water and oil. The yarn acts as veins, carrying the liquid of life throughout the body. I am reminded of a fashion collection by Robert Wun called “Dichotomy of the Body” (2024).



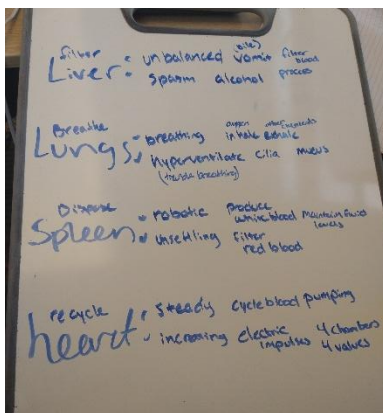
Wun created pieces that represented the layers of the body: skin, muscles, bones, and soul. The material used for the muscles was remarkably interesting, and I wanted to use similar material to what Robert Wun used. But since I am not a famous fashion

designer with access to expensive textiles, I had to use the next best thing which was mesh.

The mesh acts as the base layer similar to the water and oil in the jar. Then I meticulously pinned crocheted length to the mesh shirt. The next layer is a black T-shirt that is cut on along the hems and along the midsection in a particular pattern. This was inspired by my fellow senior, Bella, and cut out shirts that I did as a summer activity during my childhood.

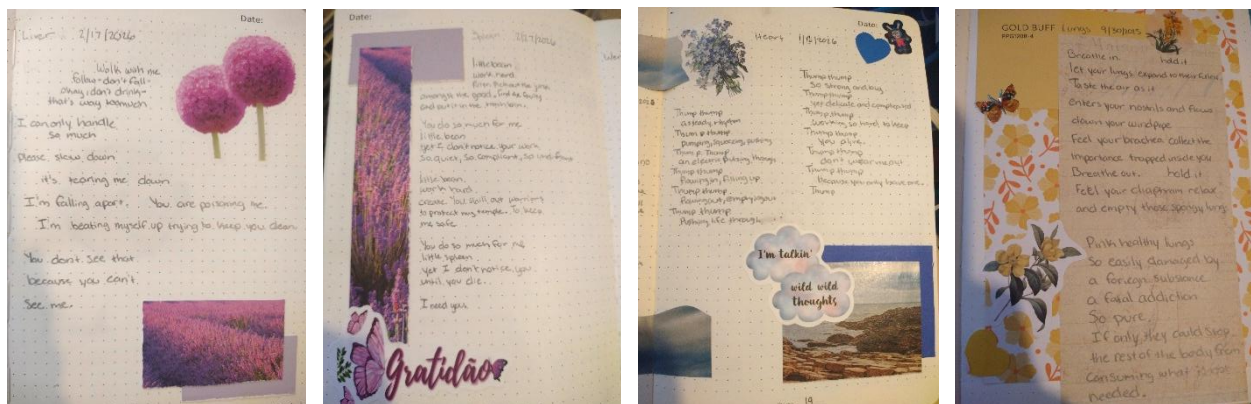
Speak on Piece

This senior project is eleven minutes. It explores my empathy and lack of being able to fix the medical problems for my family. It follows the four organs by having four sections in order of the *Wrath of Man* (2022) quote. Each section explores my familial history with each plus the significant symptoms they struggle with. By reading medical journals, I understand the main functions of each organ. As part of the research, I listed out characteristics for each organ and symptoms from the certain illnesses or dysfunctions that my family deals with. These characteristics are what dictate my movements in each section.



Each section has its own sound dedicated to it. Personifying how I view each organ musically was a difficult task. It took time to search for the tones I wanted each section to have. After having success finding what I wanted, I became a music producer, overlapping the sound scores at the beginning and end of each. A reminder of how the body is connected and if one system fails, the others are effected. This is why it was important for me to have this be a solo; it acknowledges that these organs are all a part of me. There are a lot of moments where I touch my body in places where the organs are. It is a reminder to not forget the body – that I am not just a sentient blob of energy with no physical attachment.

As stated in the beginning, I am also an English major. I have a personal poetry practice that is a part of my journaling, and overall creative practice. As I sat with this project, I wrote poems that included the characteristics of each organ. I feel this helped me build a direction in which each section headed. This is why I chose to include a haiku at the end of the piece. It is connected to my question of how to deal with the dilemmas and emotions I am experiencing.



Conclusion/ Bibliography

As I now bring myself to a close, I return to my questions. I understand now why the quote from *Wrath Of Man (2021)* plagues my mind. It was the realization from

witnessing my family members' pain at a distance without being able to help. But did I find answers to my enigma of feelings? I wouldn't say that I found a definite answer during this project, but I found a way to process these heavy feelings. It allowed me time and an outlet for the frustration, sorrow, and helplessness. Sometimes, you don't find definite answers, or the answers you hope to find. That's okay. It is a part of the cycle of being human. For now, I can only wish for my family to feel better.

THANK YOU

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