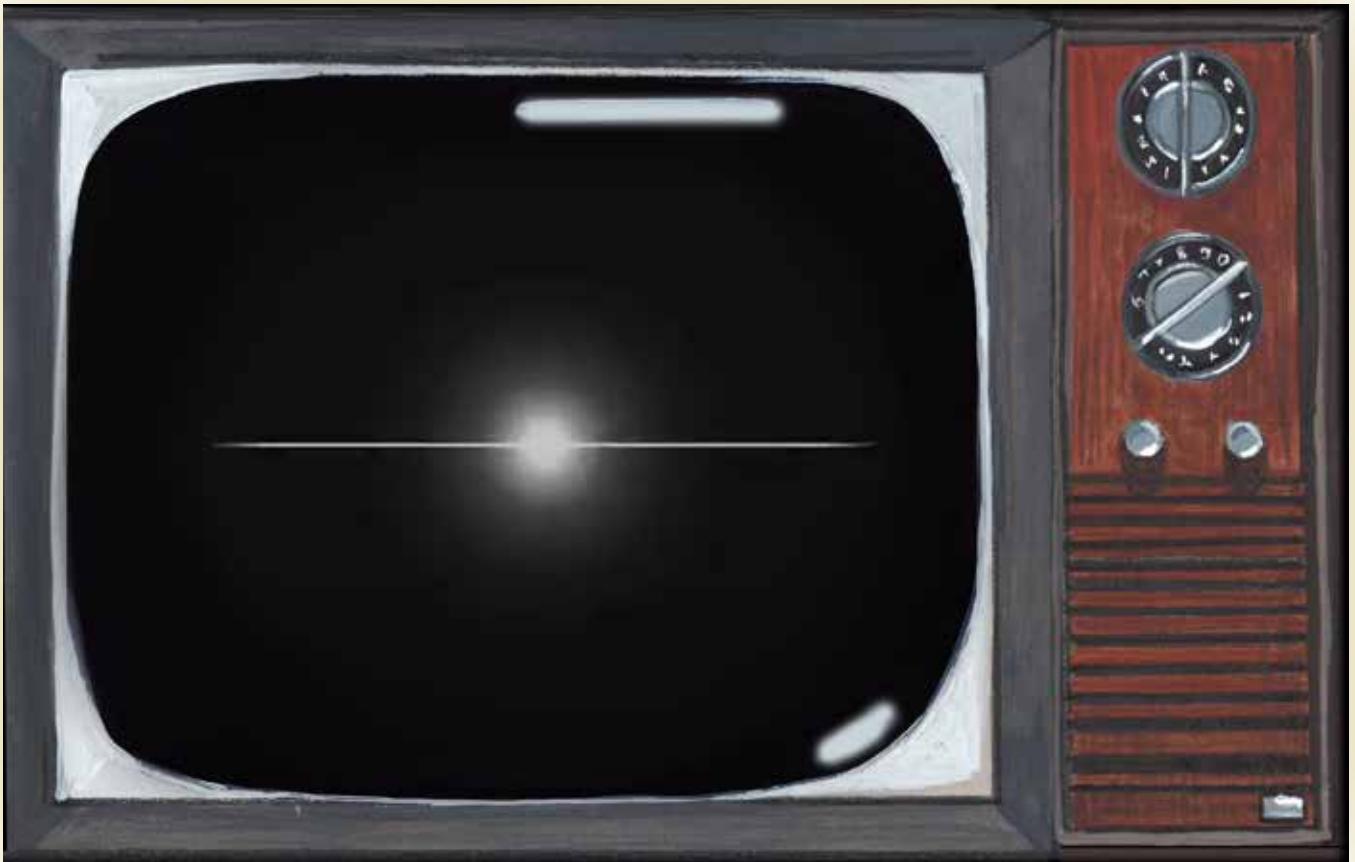


# *Will:* *A poem and preface*



*Illustration by Steve Derrick*

## **Nina Shevzov-Zebrun, MD**

Dr. Shevzov-Zebrun is a resident physician in pediatrics at Stanford, Palo Alto, CA.

**I** met Mr. S just hours before his death. He was a thin man—pasty, mottled, parched—hunched and motionless in bed. His hospital gown was wrinkled and frayed, stained an unidentifiable yellow. His socks were lopsided, his hair matted. His eyes, more grey than white, bobbed

open, shut, open, shut without reason as a TV, positioned inches from his face, blasted a blurry, staticky advertisement for Progressive insurance.

Quickly, impulsively, and without asking, I turned off the TV.

*Will* is a reflection on my instinct, even overwhelming need, to silence the television in that moment. Why did it feel so wrong to allow the device to keep playing? What

compelled me to choose silence for Mr. S then, and why do I remain confident in my decision?

This poem is for Mr. S and all patients who are waiting, or have ever waited, for death in hospitals and other settings understandably running on the realities of this world—electronics, finances, lunch hour, the evening news—but who have moved beyond such things. They are no longer in need of them, too weak to communicate but still human, experiencing inner worlds regardless of any vestigial engagement in ours, wrestling silently with the contents of their lives in ways we cannot appreciate until we, too, reach that inevitable stage.

Indeed, there is much written on the prevalence and critical importance of life review—seeing one’s life “as a whole in a [short] space of real time” in a whirlwind of remembering—in the leadup to death, however short or prolonged that leadup may be.<sup>1</sup> According to scholar Allan Kellehear, individuals who escape near-death consistently report some experience of life review; from the drawn-out suffering physician and concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl describes in his famed *Man’s Search for Meaning*, to the moments following an unexpected heart attack or gunshot wound before medical help arrives. Regardless of the time it spans or process it entails, life review appears common (if only anecdotally) among human beings close to death.<sup>1</sup>

Kellehear identifies a number of functions life review may play—regardless of religion, background, or belief system.

### **Weaving coherence**

Kellehear explains how, in line with Carl Jung’s notion that “human beings are an enigma to themselves,” individuals rarely step out of the moment-to-moment jaggedness of their lives.<sup>1</sup> We tend to live in picture frames, aware of who we are or recently were, but rarely pausing, stretching to integrate across more distant selves and realities. Rarely do we consider deeply how the countless moments and identities composing our existences braid into cohesive stories with meanings and resolutions. Life review offers time for such narrative- and coherence-building, tapping our storytelling natures to enhance self-understanding before reflection ceases to be possible.<sup>1</sup>

### **Resolving conflict**

While people may harbor various internally- and externally-defined identities—kind nurse, cruel criminal, smart professor—we are all volatile creatures, and do not reliably think or behave in line with those identities. Moreover,

our identities change in real time with our experiences, priorities, relationships, bodies. Our lives, therefore, contain discrepancies of all kinds. Reality versus hope; ethics versus action; desire versus reason; need vs. ability. Life review allows “reconciliation between conflicting elements” of one’s life so that “they are united once again” into some meaningful whole.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of what individuals believe (or do not believe) follows death, all deserve a chance to resolve internal conflict and prepare however they must for letting go.

### **Reliving content**

Everyone who can leverages memory for comfort and company. When it rains, we think back to sunny days; when lonely, we remember our best friend’s best jokes. Individuals facing death may rifle through memories more intentionally in “anticipatory grief,” cognizant that access to those memories may soon end.<sup>1</sup> Revisiting “important events, cherished relationships, [and] secret personal experiences,” Kellehear reminds us, is a natural, common and healthy way to “say goodbye.”<sup>1</sup>

These and other functions of life review center largely on memory. Memory defines “the sense of self and its continuity; it entertains us; it shames us; it pains us and [can] tell us our origins.”<sup>1</sup> It is thus only respectful and decent to allow individuals approaching death the inner peace, space, and silence to do work in memory, to make the unconscious conscious and relive and resolve according to their unique needs.

Maybe I should have asked. Maybe car insurance was what Mr. S really needed. Maybe the backdrop of noise was therapeutic to him.

But, if I had to guess, I think he appreciated it. I hope I honored Mr. S’s inner life as you would want yours honored.

### **References:**

1. Kellehear A. *The Inner Life of the Dying Person*. New York: Columbia University Press; 2014.

**Editor’s note:** This article was written by Dr. Shevzov-Zebrun during an internal medicine rotation as a third-year medical student at NYU Grossman School of Medicine, New York City, NY.

The author can be reached by E-mail at nshevzovzebrun@gmail.com.

## Will

when I am dying, remind me  
that deer leave tracks in snow,  
preschoolers are apple-picking,  
a puppy was born  
and the hopeful sound of a  
Picardy third dissipates over  
a Norwegian fjord

recount how I lied—  
the cat didn't escape, it died—  
and I let the phone ring,  
ignoring grandparents' calls  
for a math test, an essay, pinot noir

forget the calories  
keeping you living alive,  
how numbers mark time  
and time is a line,  
the physics of light,  
the speed of noise,  
how sleep and wake take turns

leave me alone in my inner life  
to caulk the cracks, understand gaps—  
a breathtaking sunrise  
the morning of a stroke,  
military honors,  
an extramarital affair

allow me my voice  
without pollution, intrusion,  
one note drummed  
from ten thousand,  
a mirror shattered to pearls

turn my head to the window,  
call an eagle, phone a friend—

and help me grow,  
one last time,  
from within.