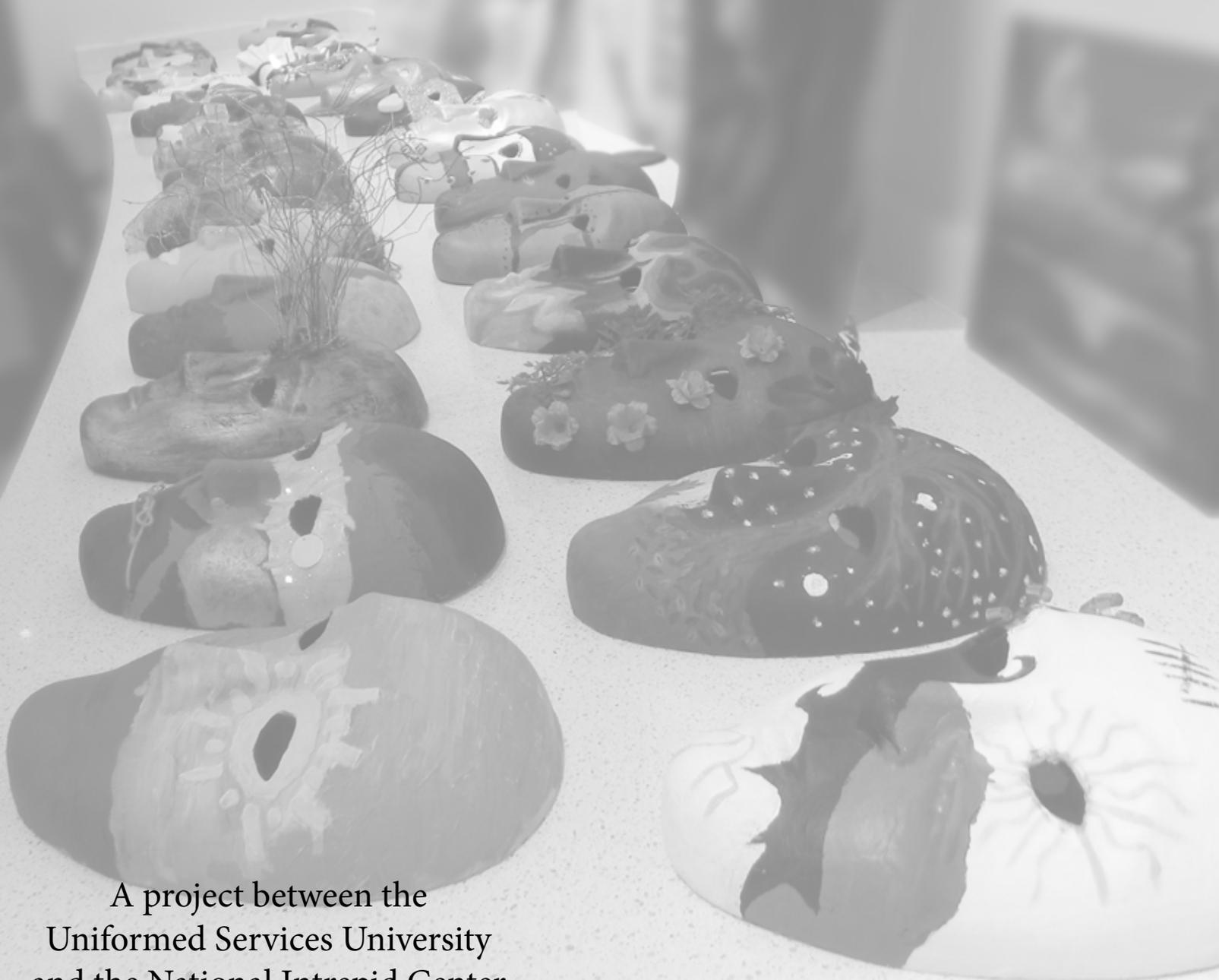


Unmasking Burnout

Art as therapy and self-expression



A project between the
Uniformed Services University
and the National Intrepid Center
of Excellence

Summer 2016



Building upon successful sessions from 2014 and 2015, once again third year medical students from the Uniformed Services University took time from their schedules to attend the Unmasking Burnout Sessions at the National Intrepid Center of Excellence. Thirty-two students from the Class of 2017 elected to share their masks in print this year, with several including written narratives describing the imagery and significance of their work.

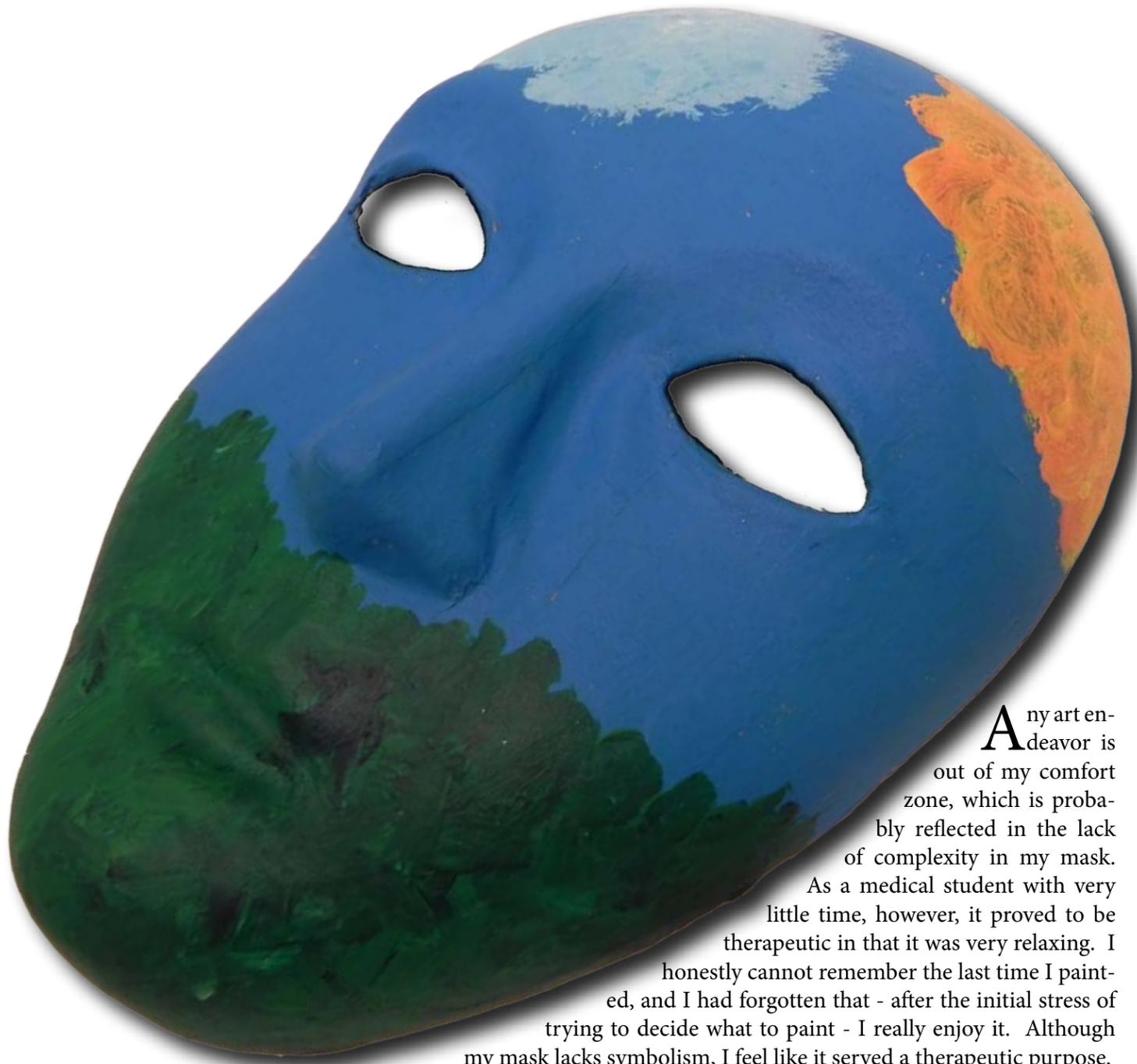
The studio is different—yet the same—as previous years. It is still filled with scattered art supplies and multitudinous projects from patients, though now with new masks and other creative works adorning the walls.

One this remains constant: it continues to be a place of creativity and peace for both patients looking to recover and busy medical students seeking sanctuary from clinical and academic rigors.



I didn't know what to paint my mask with until I started looking at the materials and found the ferns, flowers, and leaves. I was drawn to make a nature scene with the objects cascading over the face. As I was painting the face, layered with blues and greens, I was reminded of camouflage and face painting one would use in battle.

But my main [unsure of word] in making the mask was remembering how peaceful and calming it is for me to take hikes. Getting outdoors in nature has been one of the best things for me during school. Making the mask was extremely relaxing and peaceful.



Any art endeavor is out of my comfort zone, which is probably reflected in the lack of complexity in my mask. As a medical student with very little time, however, it proved to be therapeutic in that it was very relaxing. I honestly cannot remember the last time I painted, and I had forgotten that - after the initial stress of trying to decide what to paint - I really enjoy it. Although my mask lacks symbolism, I feel like it served a therapeutic purpose.







In the midst of choosing a specialty and a future career, I wanted to reflect on the things that make me happy and the things that give my life meaning. A blue ribbon divides the mask into bottom and top.

The lower portion of the mask represent things that make me happy. The blue ribbon is a river and represents canoeing, kayaking and rafting. The grey portion is the Grand Teton mountain range and represents the Jackson Hole/ Yellowstone area, which I consider a second home; this is also an important part of my life when I was able to dedicate time to exploring the outdoors without other distractions. The billowy white of the lower aspect of the mask are the snowy mountains of Salt Lake City; the orange symbol over the chin is a depiction of making lines down the mountain.

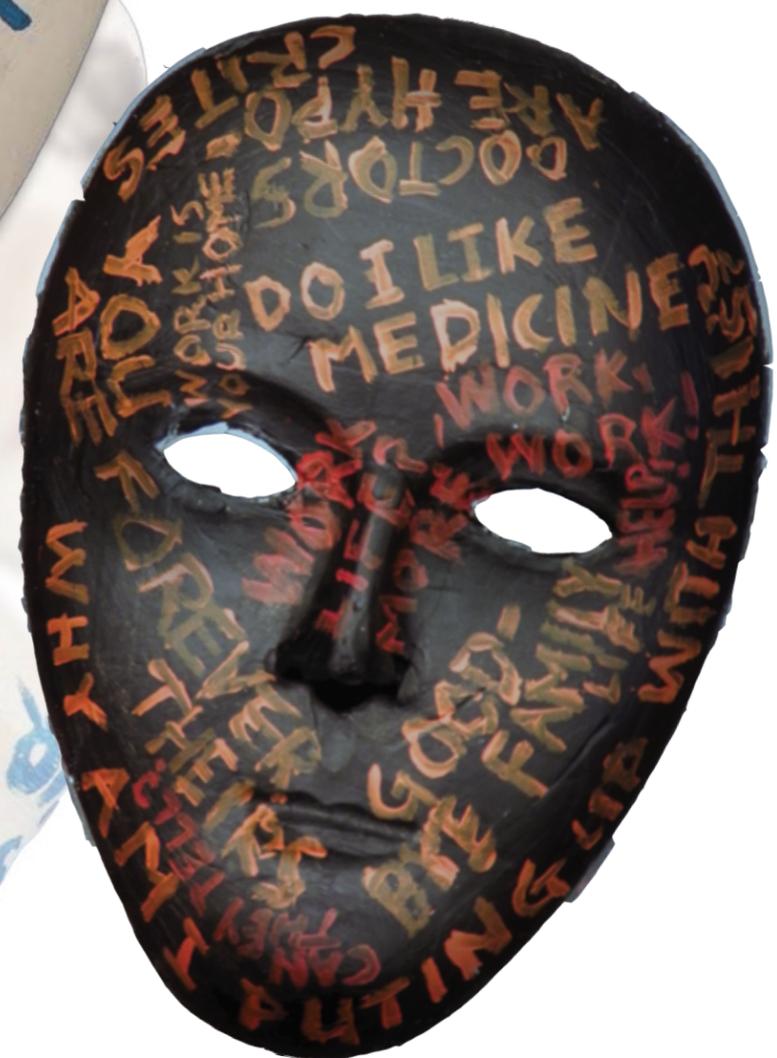
The top portion contains colors and symbols for things that give my life meaning. The Solid white with a cross-weave grain represents the white coat and my future as a physician. The rays coming from the left eye was meant to mimic the sun found on the Argentina flag; I served a mission for my church in Argentina and I used this to symbolize my faith. The copper cascading down the right aspect of the mask is meant to mimic copper piping and represents my love of building and working with my hands. The six tallies on the forehead represents my family.





I made a mask that represents the conflict between needing to be super positive at interviews and my real hesitation about surgery and medicine as a career. My inner thoughts populate a black background that represents my private shame about my thoughts. The red represents my intensity.

The white front represents the "cleanliness" of me as a public candidate for residencies that has been marred by an injury and black eye from clerkship and medicine in general. The blue text is my introduction for an interview. Coming from a silver tongue to represent trying to speak my best and hide my inner thoughts.





For my mask I created a self-portrait. I have always thought of myself as very literal, instead of creative, and therefore a reflection of how I viewed myself seemed to make the most sense. I created the image of myself to incorporate a few parts. I started with the base layer, the essential part of me. I am a woman, and while I would not say that I am a particularly feminine, when I entered into the military, I felt that I had to try to compensate for the identity that was stripped away from me when I put on this uniform. Instead of completely conforming in uniform (represented by the army camouflage scrub cap), I try to maintain a sense of identity by styling my hair a certain way and by wearing (an acceptable amount of) make-up.

The scrub cap over my head represents the field I currently wish to pursue: general surgery. I feel like I am fighting an uphill battle in my pursuit of this specialty, as I feel like there is an undertone of bias against women in this field. For example, when rotating through general surgery, I was often advised to "find something else" and told about the statistics for women switching out of this residency. Further, the conversation always seemed to focus on the difficulties of juggling surgery and family (while my male colleagues did not get the same response).

The surgical face mask serves a dual purpose: one as a literal representation of a surgeon, and the other to hide my face. In my everyday life I try to remain hidden; I act a certain way and hold my head up high because a confident, strong persona is what people typically envision when they think of (not only a surgeon, but) an Army surgeon. I feel like I should be someone tougher than I am; I feel like I

should hide whatever fears or insecurities I have, and in the OR, I feel most safe behind the mask.

Lastly, I portrayed part of the mask to have my lips sewn shut with sutures. I do not typically talk to people about the different masks that I wear, nor do I share my daily struggles and emotions. I do not want to give off the appearance that I am weak, and I cannot allow myself to show vulnerability, in fear of losing the safety and protection that these masks provide.







The process of making the mask was very relaxing in the midst of the hustle and bustle of daily life. I let my mind take me to a “happy place” and that was the start of my mask. It was nice to get back to my inner child and work with paint and vibrant colors for a bit.



In painting my mask, I started with the inside of my head, where I often find myself. Whenever my husband uses the computer after I do, he comments on how many programs and web browsing tabs I have open. I do close them when I’m finished with the task, but I always seem to be in the middle of a number of tasks. Similarly, I often feel my brain has a lot of tabs open. Things I’m thinking about, things I need to remember to do, unfinished business. Is my baby eating enough, don’t forget to pay the electric bill, how did I do on that last exam, I hope my husband stays safe travelling, I should run more, I should eat better, I called that Master Chief a Senior Chief, I forgot an assignment, I should call my mother in-law... Wait a minute, I’m getting lost on the inside again. Let’s talk about the outside.

On the outside of my mask I put my face and what I feel is displayed outwardly. I thought about drawing a line down the middle to divide the two ways that I display myself, but then realized the 2 sides really aren’t that separate and often blend together. On my right side is the clean and polished look, military hair and make-up. This is the side I feel displayed when people tell me that I’ve got it all figured out, or how calm and collected I seem. On my left side is some crazy hair and deep bags under my eyes. This is a little bit truer to how I actually feel – tired and messy. Again, there is no dividing line down the middle because sometimes the messy hair comes to the uniform and sometimes the makeup covers the tiredness.





My mask has a metallic gold covering over most of the face. It is solid and lustrous with a single peacock feather on the side. I wanted this to show both confidence and a sense being “calm, cool, and collected.” The top of my mask shows the external layer peeled back, revealing a gray layer with the word “ENOUGH” in silver glitter. I wanted this to indicate something that was on my mind, “hiding,” in a way, underneath. I chose the word “enough” because I felt that it summarized a lot of what I was thinking about in many different contexts. It could be both a positive or negative word, a command or a question. For example: “Am I good enough? Did I do enough for that patient? Is this score enough to get into my residency of choice? I’ve had enough of Step 1! Am I a good enough friend? Wife?”



My time here has been such a period of change. It feels like so many thoughts and feelings colliding and erupting amongst new and old. Yet, who I am has yet to solidify.



As I settle into the most unsettling stage of my life so much uncertainty lurks in my mind. However, the fire and tenacity I have to achieve my career goal to become an Army surgeon persists. I perform a lot of reflection on a daily basis about where I came from and how grateful I am to be where I am today - that is, a medical student at USUHS. Recognizing I have the power to make my destination continues to drive me forward. When some individuals think of General Surgeons they often associate their personalities with aggressive and mean physicians. The colors of my surgical mask symbolize the happiness and positive energy I will bring to the operating table in the future.

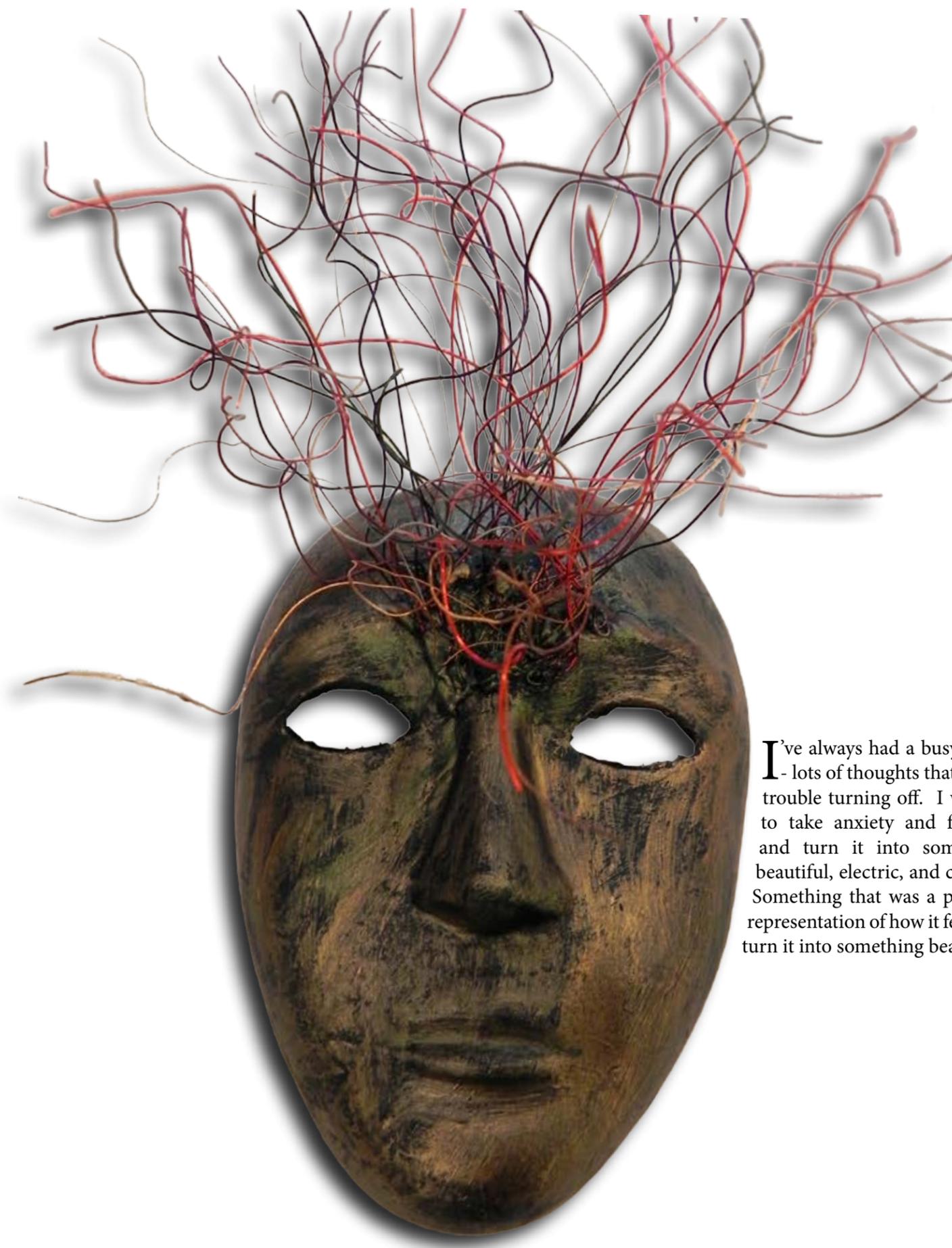
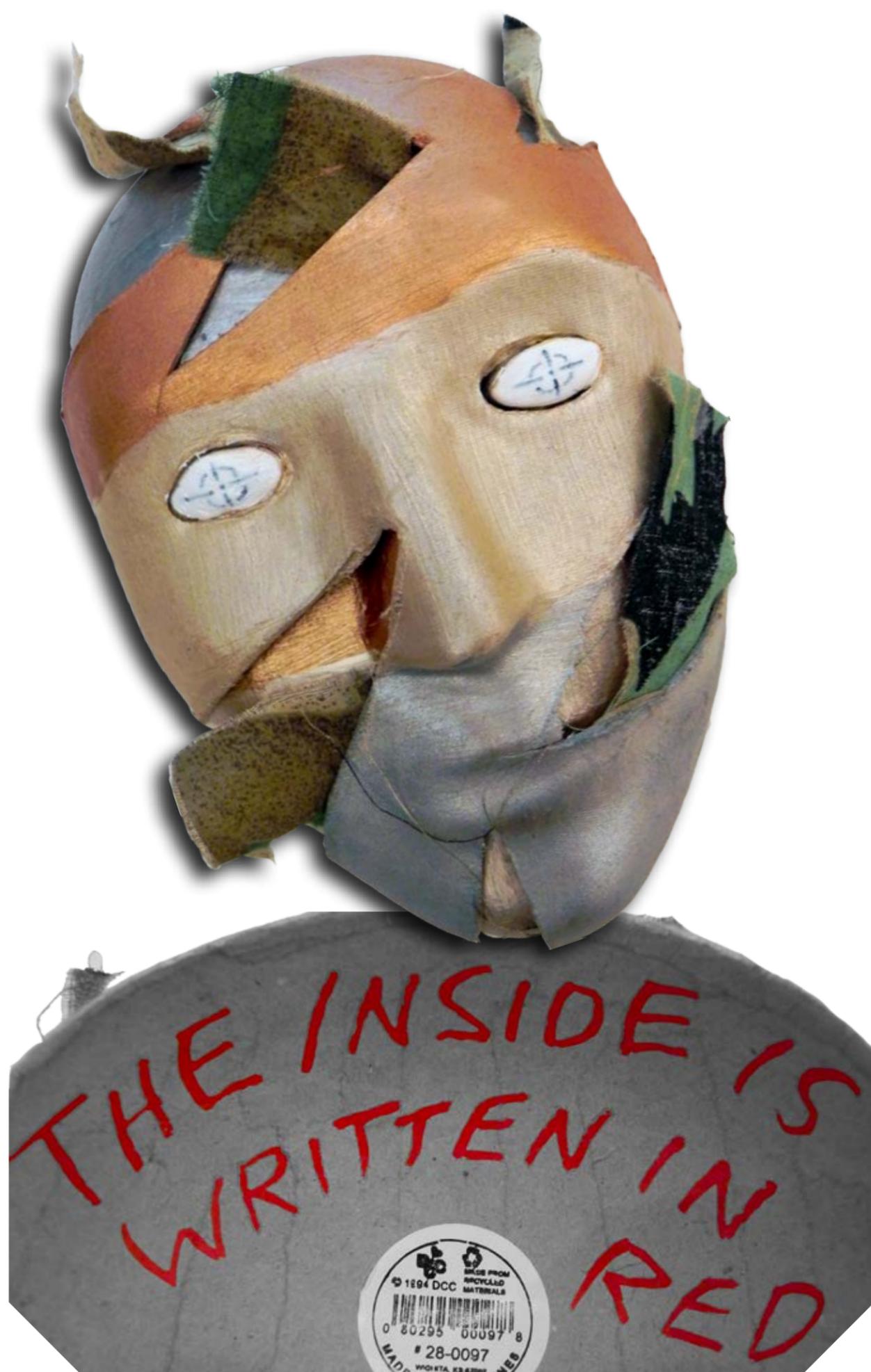




As a physician-in-training and a military officer, I struggle with which part of my "former" self I should or can allow to shine through. As I formulate my new identity, I often feel as if a veil is over me, buttoned, or screwed on. Off this veil, I feel like part of the "real" me dangle off and other parts of me are banded off. I'm not sure if I want to integrate all of me into my professional identity and yet I'm not sure how much of my previous identity

I want to keep or let go.

While the military and training to be a doctor has been an exhilarating experience, it has been both a grieving process and discovery of who I am capable of becoming.



I've always had a busy mind - lots of thoughts that I have trouble turning off. I wanted to take anxiety and fullness and turn it into something beautiful, electric, and chaotic. Something that was a physical representation of how it feels but turn it into something beautiful.

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