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Thoughts from a Med Student

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Thoughts from a med student

Alicia Phillips

Slow soft orange light, emanating from the salt lamp in my bedroom, the same orange hue in the sky outside my window as the sun slowly sinks behind the fields. A bouquet of sunflowers to bring in some sunshine, the feel of fuzzy stems, light in my hands as I cut and put them in water, pouring the packet of flower food slowly.

Guilt suddenly racks throughout my body, my heart races. I need to get back to studying muscles and innervations.

Solitude, silence, the soft salt lamp glow brings me back to the moment. I place the fresh flowers on my bedside table and return to my desk.

Hour's pass.

I learn the connections of muscles, the curve of the deltoid as it sweeps across the shoulder, the functions of the supraspinatus and infraspinatus, the arteries that pierce and traverse across the upper limb, giving off little branches. I struggle trying to learn each of the branches. Occasionally my mind wanders to the curves of mountains and the way the streams tangle through the rocks and valleys to reach the river. I learn drug names and their mechanism of action, I review the lecture on nerve injuries, I study histology of muscle fibers and metabolic disorders.

Slowly, I stretch my own aching muscles, massaging my hands. The world is dark outside, wind whips past my window making a soft whistling noise. I feel another pang of guilt for wanting to step outside and look up at the stars.

I do it anyway.

Slow, deep breaths as the wind bites into my cheeks. I am lonely. Maybe a better word is hiraeth. I learned that word over the summer when I had more time to read. It means homesickness for a home you cannot return to, or that never was. I feel nostalgia, like I am missing myself somehow, but also feel like I am exactly where and who I am supposed to be. Although I feel the deep pang of solitude, it is beautiful and comforting and painful and happy and cosmic. Learning to enjoy the being I am at this moment because this version of me will never exist again. Melancholy. Soft clanging of metal moons and pale blue hues. Taking a slightly longer shower to quiet the chaos and palpitations and expectations.

The next morning, I pour myself coffee, watching the cream dance and swirl. Galaxies in my cup. I am almost out of creamer, but I don't have time to get to the grocery store this week. My eyes burn from exhaustion, and I listen to my favorite songs as I drive to campus to wake up. We have an exam on Friday, so everyone has a more intense energy today.

In lab we spend hours trying to gently peel away fascia to find the nerves and arteries of the arm. I am numb but in awe, painfully aware that this person had a long life before this moment. I wonder what it was like; if she was happy, if she traveled and had adventures, if she loved orange sunsets, how she made her coffee in the morning, what were her favorite songs and type of flowers. I wonder if she liked sunflowers. I think about how she donated her body so that we can learn. I notice the faded red nail polish on her delicate hands, and I feel my face getting hot and tears forming. It reminds me that we are ephemeral, it reminds me I am human, it reminds me I am incredibly fortunate to have this experience. The very next moment I dissociate so that I can do the dissection.

I look up at my classmates and wonder how they are doing. No. How they are really doing. Did they have a hard time falling asleep last night, or finding time to make dinner without feeling guilty for cutting into studying time? Did I study what I should have last night, or should I have focused more on innervations and muscle actions? They are all so smart, they must be smarter than me.

No. We are all here for a reason. I am here for a reason.

My stomach growls and we all laugh; formaldehyde has become my favorite appetizer.

We had a half day of class and lab, so in the afternoon I am in clinic seeing patients. I am only a first year, so I do not really know anything yet, but I go in and talk to the patients and report back to my preceptor.

I talk to a woman who found out on Monday that she has small cell lung cancer. In the next room, I watch my first pelvic exam on a girl my age. She told me she is in an abusive relationship and is worried about STIs. She tries not to cry when the pelvic exam begins. An hour later I have done my first neurology exam on a patient, and I find a foot ulcer on a patient with diabetic neuropathy. I talk to an elderly woman who is wearing sunflowers on her shirt with matching earrings. She is here with her husband. You can tell how much they love each other as he lightly makes fun of her and the wrinkles around his eyes turn up as he smiles when he looks at her. In the very next room, I see an elderly man who lost his wife a few months ago and is struggling with depression. I get to listen to the heart and lungs of a 5-year-old who asks me if he can listen to my heart. He asks how the stethoscope works, he tells me he wants to be a doctor, he asks if I like flowers.

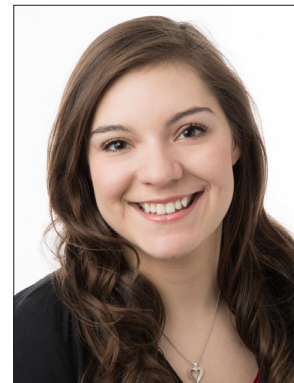
I get to see humanity, I get to hear stories, I get to smile and laugh, I get to offer empathy and share encouragement. I am in awe of the connections, the pain, the grief, the love.

When I get home, I watch the watercolor masterpiece of amber, blood orange, soft pink, gold, faint traces of lilac and violet through the window. The colors flow into each other and fill my room with a soft glow across the walls as the sun sinks. Only a minute of my time. The simple and soft moments are fleeting now. I feel like I have aged many years in only a few months. I miss the spirit I had. I miss art and hiking and other parts of myself that I must put away so I can study and learn. So that I can be better for the people I will take care of someday. I know those parts of me are in there somewhere, just dimmed like the embers of a campfire. I still find occasional times to pull them out. And I know the fire will burn brightly again someday. But I miss when I could look out the window until the sun slipped away and spend my night reading historical fiction or spend the evening looking out at pine trees and snow without guilt or stress.

Instead, I water my plants and study purine and pyrimidine synthesis. When I look out the window again, it is dark. The stars come out. I think about mountains and my grandfather and the reasons why I decided to do this. I think about the patients I saw today, and the light my new friends and classmates have brought into my life. I think about how hard I worked to get here. I think about how it is difficult to see the progress, difficult to see how far you have come on the trail without taking the time to look up occasionally. The feeling of your heartbeat, the bliss of wind touching your skin, the soreness in your legs, the chemicals mixing beautiful concoctions and lighting up neurons in your brain.

Enjoy the view and take it all in.

I am tired, but I am going to be ok. I smile. Take a deep breath. I start studying again.



Alicia Phillips is a second-year medical student at UNMC. She is from Colorado Springs, Colorado. She received her bachelors from Cornell College in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology with a minor in Psychology. She is currently a community outreach chair for the Student Alliance of Global Health, and the Vice President of the Pediatric Interest Group at UNMC. She is also a participant in the "Preventative Medicine" Enhanced Medical Education Track (EMET). Outside of studying and trying to figure out what specialty to pursue, she enjoys hiking/backpacking, volleyball, skiing, spending time with family and friends, and appreciating the outdoors. She also loves writing and painting; most of her inspiration stems from medicine and nature.