

# The Gift of a Quieted Breath

By Hannah Vaca, SPT

*For James*

Anxiety pumps through my veins  
as I snap on gloves  
and peer down.

The subclavius muscle should be located here.

The brachial artery could be palpated there.

The heart's apex should be in the fifth intercostal space.

I notch the blade into place.

My *own* heart beating a mad rhythm.

Every cut, every pull, every bit  
of force brings the hidden recesses  
to light.

The gallbladder is colored a sickly green,

nerves weave in and out of muscles, and  
arteries that once nourished calloused hands.

Deeper dissection unearths dark nodes—  
black bread-crumbs trailing through the body,  
terminating at the lungs. Deflated,  
my hand stills.

A life,  
quieted by death yet  
opened before me,  
generously telling his story  
despite his pain, his weary bones,  
and the cancer that riddled his body.

Death may separate our touch  
but his gift will forever enlighten my life.  
Though the formaldehyde may linger  
long after I've said goodbye—

I will never forget my first patient  
and the gift of his quieted breath.

### *About the Author*



Hannah Vaca is a Doctor of Physical Therapy student at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. Originally from South Dakota, she completed her Bachelor of Arts at Augustana University in Sioux Falls. She not only enjoys learning about the human body and how it functions, but how we as humans process the world around us, express ourselves, and relate to others. This perhaps explains her undergraduate degrees as a Biology major with an English minor. This poem, specifically, was penned to capture the dichotomy of these two fields of study while representing how they unite in order to understand the human body while simultaneously empathizing with the life the donor lived. This piece captures the unique experience of working in an anatomy lab that healthcare students have and how it ultimately kickstarts their professional journey.