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Creative Writing

The David

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Walking into the Galleria Borghese in Rome, I found the setting sprawling with ornate decorations. These findings were ephemeral, however, as my gaze was quickly stolen away by the Baroque masterpiece positioned in the center: Gianlorenzo Bernini's "David." I had anticipated this moment since I first laid eyes on a blurred projection of the sculpture in my Vanderbilt art history class. Now, in its presence, the beauty and action of the piece cause the rest of the room to go dull in comparison.

I circled David in mid-action. His muscles contracted and stretched in orchestral harmony as he provides the torque to slay the giant beast, Goliath. Bernini had created the ideal human form. The body in motion and face full of expression signified a new beginning, one that departed from the stoic figures of centuries past. I contemplated how the human body is a truly magnificent work of art, yet no piece of stone could do it complete justice.

This weekend expedition in the heart of Italy marked the midpoint of my semester studying in Copenhagen. During the previous weeks, I had been learning about different physiologic systems and how to take an accurate patient history. For my midterm assessment, I was to be graded on a clinical evaluation performed on a Danish patient in a local hospital—a patient I knew nothing about other than his willingness to allow me to ask him questions. Our professor, a Danish physician, would be translating and observing.

In my preparations, I reflected on how my interest in medicine stems from my love of the sciences. Each field, independent on its own, is in some crucial way connected to the others. What was always most fascinating to me, however, was the human body, its complexities, and the nuances of biologic systems. "David" is representative of the amazing capabilities the human body can accomplish. This ideal marble form would prove to be a sharp juxtaposition to the body in flesh I would observe for my clinical assessment.

Other than the language barrier, the midterm task seemed surmountable. I had rehearsed and was prepared to ask the questions needed. I was comfortable speaking with patients from my days as a hospital volunteer. Even so, I had yet to be in a situation where I was playing the role of

doctor. I entered the space to find a small and infirm man sitting in a wheelchair, ultimately hidden in the corner of his room. His body bore no resemblance to the physique of “David.” He could barely hold his head up. As I approached, he remained fixed on the nothingness in front of him.

My nerves slowly began to creep forth. I introduced myself. His eyes never leaving the wall, he answered that his name was Kristian. I then rattled off what I thought was the perfect script. It was as though I was using all the oxygen in the room. He never looked at me once. All his responses were singular and definitive. I began to observe him more carefully, watching as he struggled to keep his clubbed feet hidden beneath his chair and out of sight. I wondered if this man was as nervous as I was. I pulled a chair up next to him and sat down. We were now at eye level.

This simple act was enough for Kristian to turn toward me. I could now see the pain in his eyes. I began asking him about his interests and life. Suddenly, he became animated—so much so that my professor was having a hard time keeping up with translating. I learned how he was estranged from his family and friends at a young age. He sequentially turned to alcohol years before as a source of comfort. This was the basis of his numerous health problems. As a result of years of bodily neglect, Kristian was now struggling with kidney disease and depression. Although he was finally willing to share his past with me, he was also eager to tell me how he was desperately trying, and failing, to get better for his future. Kristian made me realize that there is always more than what meets the eye, and people cannot

be judged solely by their outward presentation.

My meeting with Kristian showed me how valuable it is, as a future physician, to express genuine compassion and interest in the lives of all patients in order to make a personal connection. Evaluation and treatment need to be tailored to each and every patient. Like a work of art, everyone has his or her own story. I believe that it is the physician who must make that connection with each individual and that doctors have the task of applying what they have studied to each unique clinical situation and keeping their work patient-centered.

While "David" exemplifies a marble version of the greatness of a human body in its peak form, Kristian embodies one of the many ways that the physical and mental body may deteriorate. Just as Bernini was able to connect with his audience through sculptures, as a physician, I will do so with each patient through my practice of medicine. I am confident that a career in medicine will allow me this: to approach science as an art, something that is both viscerally and tangibly charged—viscerally as a vocation and tangibly as a contribution to the welfare of those around me.