

## **If the Body Is: Words of Gratitude for our Body Donors**

By **Carissa Holland**

*The following piece is a speech delivered at an annual Thanksgiving Service, to acknowledge and honour the gift body donors have bestowed upon medical and allied health students and researchers.*

Your loved ones have pledged the ultimate sacrifice. They receive no reward. Their act is one of pure, selfless service: to their community, to us as students, to humanity. Regardless of which faith or religion or belief system you honour, a universal commandment is the call to serve humanity and to humble yourself in the process of doing so, this idea of service as the ultimate act of love. For me, your family members and your friends, have taught me how to humble myself in order to one day be of service to my community. We talk about studying anatomy, but ultimately I think we study humanity.

As students, we hold the sacred position of standing at the interface of our knowledge and your grief.

I've spent seven years detailing the functions of the dove-grey mountains and valleys of the brain – the same brain which stores the voice and laughter of your loved ones.

I've spent seven years memorising the names of the spider webs of nerves, forming sheets of lace throughout the body – the same nerves that make your hands tremble when you think of your loved one.

I've spent seven years studying the arches and architecture of the heart – the same heart that feels like it is missing a piece now that your loved one has passed.

However, in and amongst all of this memorising and reciting and learning I haven't gotten lost in the details. The body is a masterpiece, and I haven't let myself be fooled that humans are simply the sum of their parts. Often to understand concepts in medicine and in anatomy, we use metaphors. When it comes to the body, it is so wondrous that multiple metaphors are needed because a single metaphor alone can't convey its magnificence.

If the body is a temple, I have learned to stand in communion with its wisdom. I meditate on its beauty and worship its power to heal.

If the body is a machine, I have learned how its parts are soldered together and are dependent on one another. I see its levers and pulleys, its joints and its pipes.

If the body is a vehicle, I have learned to look inside its windows and see what lies within. I don't let its paint or its polish distract me from its passenger.

If the body is an instrument, I have learned to watch how it is played. I see the soloist, the conductor, the maestro, the orchestra. I hear the lowest hum to the highest pitch. I hear the silence between the notes.

If the body is a work of art, I have learned to see its curves and undulations, its geometry and angles. I see what is sculpted, and what has been carved away.

If the body tells a story, I have learned to piece together its fragments of words and phrases to create a narrative, to find the poetry within the person.

If the body is an ecosystem, I have learned how light, air and water are alchemised into sight, breath and blood.

If the body is a reservoir of energy, we must remember that energy cannot be created or destroyed, it can only be changed from one form to another. Your loved ones not only live on in your hearts and minds, but their energy has been transformed into our ability to heal. They have been immortalised within us. They will live on.

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*Carissa Holland is a third-year medical student at Griffith University on the Gold Coast in Australia. Prior to medicine, she completed an undergraduate degree in Biomedical Science at the Queensland University of Technology. Holland believes that the patient's narrative is a rich, layered text that allows her to better understand and learn to serve humanity. Poetry and literature have always comforted and nourished her. She hopes to weave narrative medicine into her career as a doctor.*