Undiminished Somewhere: Medical School and Philip Larkin

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When lecture classes ended about halfway through medical school and we got ready to begin our clinical rotations, my classmates and I were filled with a sense of excitement and possibility. In fact, so much seemed possible that I could hardly sleep. As I thought about the future it felt like time was rushing ceaselessly by me, and that to embark upon any one thing was to forgo countless others. In the middle of the night, when the hours passed most quickly, I picked up Phillip Larkin's collected poems and read over and over passages of regret and indignation at opportunities not taken, happiness withheld, and the infinite disappointments of a life measured against expectation, imagination, and desire. He sees the things we hope for as ships approaching in the distance and writes:

We think each one will heave to and unload
All good into our lives, all we are owed
For waiting so devoutly and so long.
But we are wrong.

In another passage, the same predawn moon that illuminated my bedroom beyond the need for lamplight was for him not the conventional source of wonder, but rather "a reminder of the strength and pain / Of being young; that it can't come again, / But is for others undiminished somewhere."

Larkin's outlook is bleak, no doubt, but there is a certain defeated satisfaction in his resignation and self-reproach. The poem "Wild Oats" presents a prolonged and ultimately failed engagement from which he wryly takes away "that I was too selfish, withdrawn, / And easily bored to love. / Well, useful to get that learnt." But the other part of the story is that perhaps he never really gave himself, or wanted to give himself a chance, ending the poem with a reference to a different girl who he met only twice: "In my wallet are still two snaps / Of bosomy rose with fur gloves on. / Unlucky charms, perhaps." What is tragically moving here is that Larkin knows what he is giving up by fixating on something essentially imaginary, and does it anyway.

To me, poetry and medicine, humanities and science, have always been distinct yet inseparable. Most of the time they complement and reinvigorate each other simultaneously, but I have also looked to one at moments when the other has seemed inadequate or incomplete. So, when the euphemisms and superficialities of daily life become particularly intoler-

able, I often seek an antidote in the nuance and understatement of art and poetry. And, conversely, when the inner world with all of its complexities and contradictions feels especially vertiginous I almost always find more solid ground outside of myself in medicine and science.

Every morning after I began my clinical rotations, as I walked from the garage to the main hospital building, I passed the entrance to the outpatient center. If it was early, things would still be quiet, and I would fall into step with doctors, nurses, and other hospital employees arriving for the day. If it was a little later in the morning, or if I left campus in the middle of the day, I would see patients arriving, walking out, or waiting by the benches just outside the large rotating glass door.

Most of them were older. Many used canes or walkers, and some of the more disabled patients needed to be helped along by family members, or friends, or others who were paid to do it. There would be kids coming and going as well. Sometimes I couldn't tell if they were patients or just along for the ride. Sometimes it was painfully obvious. I remember one adolescent boy in a wheelchair refusing to be pushed by his parents while his younger sister walked behind the three of them listening to her noise-cancelling headphones with a look of profound boredom.

A few years later, early in my residency, I came home after a day in the ICU during which one of our patients had died at the end of a long hospital course. I sat down on the couch in my apartment and absentmindedly picked up the book of Larkin's poems and flipped to "The Building," his poem about a hospital.

After finishing, I paused and read the last lines one more time: "nothing contravenes / The coming dark, though crowds each evening try / With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers." I thought of the purple hyacinths that had remained on the windowsill of our patient's room that afternoon after everything else had been removed. I felt a momentary pang of sadness for Larkin, and then I closed the book and haven't opened it since.