

A Reminiscence

Martin Kohn¹

The founding of the William Carlos Williams poetry competition for medical students is recounted. A few highlights from its nearly twenty-five years of operation are offered. Gleanings from the hearts and souls of some of the winning poets are shared.

KEY WORDS: medical students; poetry; history.

I have just finished reading the winning entries of the 2005 William Carlos Williams Poetry Competition, sighing a “wow” once or twice, suffering the symptoms of reading well-wrought poetry, and touched as usual by the words of these young, talented doctors-to-be.

Could I have imagined in the fall of 1982 that medical student poetry would still be flowing into the WCW competition twenty-three years later? If the first year’s entries foreshadowed anything, then it should come as no surprise, for as we learned by the end of 1982, we had tapped a rich vein of pent-up creative energy in medical students.

THE BIRTH OF THE COMPETITION

I began my work at NEOUCOM in August 1981, a few months after the first class of students had matriculated. Part of the graduation requirement was participation in a senior year course, “Human Values in Medicine” (HVM). The committee that oversaw HVM’s development was headed by Glenn Saltzman who also headed the Behavioral Sciences Department. I was hired as coordinator of the HVM program in that department.

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By the spring of 1982, I had found my footing in a teaching environment I had landed in quite serendipitously. One of the highlights of our spring offerings was a visit by two leading physician-writers, John Stone and Richard Selzer, who came to teach, in large part, at the urging of Janice Katz, Class of 1982.

After their very well-received workshop, Glenn and I, steeped in hometown hospitality, drove John and Richard back to Cleveland Hopkins Airport. On the way home, we talked about our talented visitors and began musing about ways to encourage our medical students towards pursuits similar to those of our guests. That's when the proverbial light bulb materialized in the proverbial cartoon bubble above our heads—the moment of conception of the competition: “Why not reward them for artistic effort just as they are rewarded for scientific achievement?” Then, Glenn suggested that each year students focus on an organ system as inspiration for their submissions. “The year of the kidney?” I thought to myself. I quickly told him that I'd be happy to solo on the project from this point on.

ORGANIZING THE FIRST COMPETITION

Using the Osler Essay Competition for medical students and a creative writing competition from Kent State University as models, I designed the first call for submissions for a poetry competition in the summer of 1982. A smart poster was created by our in-house medical illustrator and multiple copies were sent to each US medical school. In the 1982–83 academic year, Delese Wear, former editor of this journal, became a faculty member of the Behavioral Sciences Department and HVM program, so it was now the two of us who waited anxiously for the poems to roll in. The first trickle came in September and October. By Thanksgiving, we happily counted about fifty poems from a few dozen student-poets. “Not bad,” we thought. And as the December 31 deadline approached, the numbers increased. By year's end, a mailbag full of poems landed at our office door. When we returned from the New Year's holiday, there were a few more bags. We learned our first lesson—medical students, like most other poets, wait until the final moment to submit their work.

THE FIRST TALLY

Two hundred twenty-four students from over two-thirds of US medical schools submitted five hundred sixty poems. The judging system we created included an English Department faculty member from each of NEOUCOM's three consortium universities (University of Akron, Kent State University and Youngstown State University) as the first tier judges, with John Stone serving as the final judge. The first tier judges chose a set of about seventy-five poems that they thought merited consideration by the final judge. The winners were Julie Deane Fishbein, University of Maryland School of Medicine; Diane M. Roston,

the University of Wisconsin Medical School, and Philip Bowman, Virginia Commonwealth University, Medical College of Virginia School of Medicine. They were invited to NEOUCOM to receive their awards and to participate in a reading of their poetry with John Stone. After the reading, a group of twenty NEOUCOM students (in partial fulfillment of their HVM requirement) joined the winning poets, John Stone, Delese and me for a poetry retreat at a mountain lodge in Cook Forest State Park in western Pennsylvania. We were almost literally, but definitely figuratively, in heaven.

THE INTERVENING YEARS

During the two-plus decades since the inaugural competition, the retreats continued for a few years, annual readings at Hiram College began and still continue, and appearances by our winning poets brought attention to our efforts. We received the approval of William Eric Williams to name the competition after his father, "I'm sure Dad would be happy, not to say proud, to think that there are 224 embryo medicos out there sufficiently interested in poetry to submit their work to this competition." (William Eric Williams, MD, personal correspondence). And from the efforts of Therese Southgate and Roxanne Young, the winning poets were published annually in the *Journal of American Medical Association (JAMA)*. In response to student requests, we expanded the competition to include Canadian students and those pursuing the Doctor of Osteopathy degree.

Each year, we invited leading poets, usually but not exclusively physicians, to read with our prize-winning students. Among others, we have welcomed Michael Blumenthal, Jack Coulehan, Elissa Ely and Andrei Codrescu, who insisted on visiting the Rubber Hall of Fame in Akron. I took great pride in directing a medical school program that was bringing poets to area liberal arts colleges.

From 1983–1996, the HVM program published five chapbooks, the first featuring the poems that our consortium university judges regarded worthy of review by John Stone for our inaugural competition. Four subsequent books featured the work of the top three winning poets and several of those which had earned honorable mention status. Also included in later chapbooks were statements by the artists themselves. Below are some examples that illustrate why we looked forward with glee for the next visit from student-poets:

The cadence and sounds of my work have changed slightly as I've moved from California to Wisconsin, to Pennsylvania, and now to Ohio. My search for a home and a voice lurches along after my geography; I mostly write about where I've been in the language of place. (Tom Strouse, Case Western Reserve University, School of Medicine, Class of 1987)

Strictly as a physician, I have little to say. In essence, I am not sure what can be said with communication grounded in terminology, now constructed to defend against litigation. A physician has a difficult time these days. If a physician mentions Beauty in the course of a day, there are suspicions of seduction; and if a physician brings up Truth, he or she is not asked to return to the ethics committee for fear of moralizing. And to mention history which extends beyond the childhood immunizations of a patient, well, that's irrelevant. But

as a poet, even a lousy poet, I am *ipso facto* a philosopher questioning the mysteries of humanity by observing the beauty of a blood smear or lightly touching the map of a rash. (Mark Mosley, University of Oklahoma College of Medicine, Class of 1990)

I have been writing since I was in the third grade. You could say that writing is my religion, where I pay homage to the forces of nature, history and the only way I know how to tie my soul into the power that runs before and beyond time. When I am writing, I am at peace with the world and my place in it. So, yes, this sounds like kooky mumble-jumble that might belong to some self-indulgent venture, but it's how I feel. And this is what the power of words means to me. (Melinda Fan, Harvard Medical School, Class of 1997)

After four years of basic science and clinical study, I decided after much soul-searching to devote my career to the field of psychiatry—a career I find entertaining, ever-challenging and never boring. To me, patients are like novels unto themselves—their medical histories, life stories and emotional reactions to their illness fill pages of books to which only doctors are given privileged access. (Gemma Guillermo, Cornell University Medical College, Class of 1995)

Four generations of Mississippi physicians in my family precede me, all talented healers, big souls and voracious readers. This medical tradition no doubt led me into medicine despite intellectual inclinations more literary and historical than scientific. Such was not a bad thing for me, and I agree with the late Walker Percy, M.D., who told me that smelly hospital wards were more instructive training grounds for writers than ivy-coated centers of academia. It is not because I am a physician that I write. It is something before that. Were I a postman I would be a postman poet. But it is the subject matter which differentiates, the different clay which shapes different results. Certainly, the metaphors of the postman would revolve around post office monotony, walks through neighborhoods not your own, rabid barking dogs pulling their chains full length, and lonely housewives, the object or our yearning and imagination. The terrain of the physician is more what a good writer needs: humanity's sufferings, ills and pathologies. I have persistently written in many forms, for whatever reasons of vanity or passion, and I have found it much easier to write bad poetry than bad fiction. (Lucius Lampton, University of Mississippi School of Medicine, Class of 1993)

Enjoy the works below, and give thanks to those who made the William Carlos Williams Competition possible: the consortium university judges; John Stone who has been with it since the beginning; Nancy MacDonald, Tess Jones, and especially Mona Adorni of the HVM program who always kept the ship afloat; Delese Wear who captained the ship after its launching; and, of course, to the many hundreds of medical students who have submitted and who continue to share their work with us. As Therese Southgate so aptly stated in a review of our first chapbook:

As all medical students must learn, the human body is bones and brains, sinews, muscles and nerves, and connections and articulations. But search out the poem and the form becomes a person, one who may be ill or dying, but one nevertheless who laughs, feels, hurts, hopes, believes, and loves. It is evident from these poems that although these students have learned their science from the text, they have found their poem in the person.²

²T. Southgate, "Medical Student as Poet," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, **251**(19), 2565.