

Placebo Press

A literary press for poets in medicine



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Foreword

Poetry need not reflect dramatic emotional moments, yet the endeavor of working in healthcare entails constant engagement with emotionally potent experiences on both sides of the spectrum. Placebo Press was founded with the mission to provide healthcare professionals, employees, affiliates, and students with community and publication opportunities. We humbly thank these authors for allowing us to share their work.



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Table of Contents

4. *Dear London* – Amanda Jarosik

8. *Quiet Lessons* – Noa Klausner

10. *World Upside-Down* – Carolyn Blake

11. *Untitled* – Ross Thompson

13. *Because of You.* – Samantha Main

15. *Patient at Table #11* – Kathleen Segovia

16. *Mosaic* – Dyese Moody

18. *In Loving Memory:*

A Poem on Grief During Medical School – Natalee Sarintra

Dear London

Dear London,

I met you in the heat of summer.

36 hours, a blur of red—

Booths, buses, guards with red blazers

Like a history pop-up book

Barely recognizable.

I fell in love with you in the cold.

So green, even in January,

With soft blurry rain instead of bitter gray snow.

I came to you terrified.

A small girl in a big world

That allowed her to scribble a few words in a book

That had been written for centuries.

“I see you—”

“I have witnessed—”

“I was here—”

And so on.

Just a handful, really, in the great unfinished story

That had gone on long before and after she was here.

The Thames was my first friend there.

In crossing her calm waters one way Westminster bloomed

And the other, St. Paul’s always caught the sunset’s light.

“High tide today, love?”

I’d whisper to her waves,

And she would carry my words and so many others

To the sea.

Time seemed to trip in front of me

Inviting me to notice it, to discover what was inside.

Treasures so old they’d lost their sentiment

Winked out of shelves at passer-bys

Leaving them to wonder:

Is an unused cup still useful?

And does history repeat or crumble?

Is it really so bent as to be a circle or

Is it something squeezed in your fist and

Who decides what it is?

No matter—but I whisper these questions to the Thames all the same.

She sighs and to the sea they go,

Buried beneath the sand,

Just another lost treasure.

It was you, London,

That taught me that reaching for the stars

Sometimes means coming up short

And losing doesn't mean winning is better

And grief is step one of rebuilding.

I said goodbye to you outside of time.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," I whispered,

“The world is sick.”

The river sighed, she already knew.

She hears everything.

But flowing still, she pulled my gaze toward the sea.

“See St. Paul’s?” she whispered.

That was all—the building still glowed,

That had made it through death and blitz

Smoke and tears and songs

And still lived on.

A dare, perhaps,

That I could too.

Quiet Lessons

In middle school, they ask me what I want to be when I grow up.

“A teacher.”

I consider the role of the educator.

The responsibility of shaping the minds of tomorrow.

I learn what it means to be curious.

In high school, they ask me what I will study in college.

“Writing or Biology.”

The crafting of language bathed in White.

The secrets of the natural world cloaked in Black.

How does one make Gray?

I learn what it means to strike balance.

In the ICU, they ask me to rate my pain on a scale of one to ten.

“I feel nothing and everything all at once.”

Is that a ten or a one?

The permission to let go.

Whispers of a soft goodbye.

I learn what it means to be vulnerable.

In college, they ask me what I am going to do after graduation.

“I am going to be a physician.”

To Heal. To Protect. To Nurture.

I want to ensure that illness is never a person’s sole identifier.

I learn what it means to strive.

In the back of the ambulance, they ask me if I am alright.

“I’m fine.”

But I am not.

I feel I am made of glass.

Shattering in places the doctors cannot see.

I learn what it means to advocate for mental wellbeing.

In medical school, they ask me what specialty I want to enter.

“Wherever I am needed most.”

Possibility surges through my fingertips.

Genuine opportunity replacing wishful thinking.

I learn what it means to wear the white coat.

Today, I ask myself what it means to be a doctor.

I hear passion and enthusiasm in the voices of my educators.

I feel the magic of the human spirit pulse through my veins.

Health is Unpredictable. Fragile. Requires Safeguarding.

I learn what it means to hold another’s life in my hands.

I promise not to play recklessly.

Noa Klausner is a fourth-year medical student at the Kirk Kerkorian School of Medicine at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Following a significant personal health challenge, she has committed herself to prioritizing mental health in her life and medical practice. Noa utilizes writing, both prose and poetry, as a means to explore her experiences and emotions more deeply. Her ultimate career aspiration is to specialize in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

World Upside-Down

Impossible situation
Push and pull
All for death as outcome.
Wishful thinking
Turned false hope
For sufferer and suffering
This fought mortality.
For what is ideal in this circumstance
When cure is ailment
And the only option?
Fight and suffer
Or wait with quickening time?
First home is the world
Then a house
Then a room
Then one bed and not your own.
The world shrinks
But grows all the same.
One face of love
Turns to two
Turns to many.
Hope is not wasted
For lack of time
But rather grown
Cultivated in the way of quality
Like copper melted before oxidizing
Molded into beautiful form.
A world upside-down
Not bad nor good
Just different than imagined.

Carolyn Blake is a second-year medical student at Alabama College of Osteopathic Medicine. She completed her undergraduate degree in physiology with a minor in studio art at the University of Arizona, graduating with honors, and she completed her master's degree in medical sciences at Creighton University School of Medicine. She has a passion for all forms of art and hopes to continue to promote art's role in the medical field as she advances toward her career goals.

Untitled

It was a shock to me
What I was to discover
Naked flesh in a sterile room
Your body under covers
Crowded by my cohort
As if we were your lovers

Cold steel, wet blankets,
face covered in a towel
I gently lift it up
to find a stoic scowl
I pause to note a miniscule freckle
at the bottom of your jowl

Inside the table is your eulogy
“6’2 200lbs, smoker, choleystectomy,
Osteoarthritis, appendicitis, COPD”
“I want them to dissect me”
You chose to give us an opportunity
But doing this still wrecks me

We call you my first patient,
as a sign of our respect

I will never know your name,
that's a secret they protect
Thank you for your offering,
and all of its effect

I knew you inside and out,
by the time that I was done
All the honor goes to you
For the knowledge I have won

Because of You.

Loss before loss.

That's what Alzheimer's feels like.

A repeated cycle of attending a funeral of a loved one who is still on Earth. Every visit the memories replay.

All the good times.

All the laughs and shared tears.

All the lessons.

The blessing of so many healthy years.

I am me because of her.

Yet now it seems life's unfair....

She sometimes doesn't recognize me and asks me to repeat,

Yet, how beautiful to realize, her gratefulness with every heartbeat.

Upon her physical death, I know I will be distraught.

While she isn't herself now, her presence provides hope.

Hope that when I visit, I will get to see the Mama I've always known.

The cooker, the sewer, the funny ole lady... the leader who holds the family throne.

Upon arriving home for Thanksgiving break in 2023,

"ich liebe dich," I said one last time,

And to my surprise, 'ich liebe dich auch', she replied.

She closed her eyes and drifted away to the mural of her painted on top of the golden stairs, Just as my Poppy promised in a love letter before he left her here.

I know she watches now from above,

Rooting me on...

I'll be the first physician in the family,

Something she always dreamt of.

How lucky I am to have resemblance of her.

And to share a few years of the 98 she had on Earth.

May all that I do be done in love,

And my dear Mama, may I make you proud in the clouds of Heaven above.

Samantha Main is a first-year medical student at the Alabama College of Osteopathic Medicine. In addition to her rooted passion for how the human body functions, her journey to pursue medicine is fueled by her late grandmother who suffered Alzheimer's Dementia in her last years of life. Aside from school, Samantha loves anything and everything competitive, cooking, baking, art, the outdoors, and of course, her family.

Patient at Table #11

Burrowed beneath skin like a fastidious helminth,
Lies beauty as secret as blossomed flesh of quince.
Wearing a sour and pungent veil at first impression
Hides a duchess of raw human nature in accession.

Unsheathing my mighty blade to pierce through your coarse shield,
You let down your guard with many wounds unhealed.
There, I mistaken a tract for what was an optic chiasm.
I chuckle at my atlas for such marked enthusiasm.

Arteries: red blushing strings tugging at a heart.
Nerves: signal-carrying striations making you so smart.
Reading textbooks- nervous and puzzled and filled with ill doubt-
I am scared to make a mistake while I figure you out.

Nonetheless, I shall try my best and be patient for the practical,
And say my last-minute prayers to pass as if I am in sabbatical.
Because I learned the ins and outs of your organs are so fragile,
I fear of disappointing grades and hurting you with my scalpel.

Our time together is short as you and the semester start to dwindle.
Perhaps you will forget me and my smelly scrubs in periwinkle.
Although after autumn, we must say our goodbyes before all the myrrh,
Blessed was I to have at least met you as a cadaver.

Mosaic

If I hit you with a sledgehammer, you'd shatter into millions of pieces.

Your first word would be ouch.

Your second would be why.

My response would be because it's happened to you before.

We are not one solid entity, but many.

Tiny, colorful, imperfectly shaped pieces—

We go through life repeatedly getting broken.

And being put back together.

Why would medicine be any different?

For medicine is imbedded within life—

No lines of separation exist.

If I told you that your patient wielded this proverbial sledgehammer,

Your first word would be ouch.

Your second would be why.

My response would be because it's how they leave their mark.

It may be small, but the impact is not.

Your realization may be delayed or instantaneous,

But the gravity is not.

Each moment, experience, patient—

It leaves a unique element to your new design.

When another sledgehammer leaves you in fragments,

And there'll certainly be another—

Your first word can be ouch,

But let your second word be thank you.

And once you're whole,

Admire the vibrant explosion of the many pieces that make you.

In Loving Memory:

A Poem on Grief During Medical School

The news was exciting

Tears of joy from matriculation

A weight off the shoulders

Giving space for a mental vacation

From caterpillar to butterfly

You say, "It's time to spread your wings.

You are loved and you can do this.

Please don't forget these things."

Then summers and winters pass

And there's me being so busy

Time moving 'round and 'round

And from it I get so dizzy

Forgetting to give you a call

Too focused on trying to read

Trying to remember all I've learned

Thinking at the time it's all I need

I'm sorry for not reaching out more

*It's to this day my biggest regret
You instilled in me to work hard
But now it's your memory I'll never forget*

*I hope you applied them to yourself
The things you had said to me
That you are so loved and can do this
But I did not even check in to see*

*I've known you for forever
You've been with me my whole life
Thank you for supporting my dreams
Without even having to think twice*

*What I would do
To hear your voice in real time
But all I have are recordings
Like of you singing "You and I"*

*You're now one of the stars
A tiny speckle of light
Looking above us all
Guiding us through the dark of night*

What I would do

*To find some clarity
To search for honesty within myself
Hoping to regain my sincerity*

*There's so much uncertainty
In the world all around
Everything constantly evolving
Nothing staying bound*

*How should I free my mind
How do I let others near
How can I take time to relax
When I am living my biggest fear*

*I'm starting to forget who I am
I'm unsure what lies ahead
Embarking on a fun adventure
Or going somewhere I'll dread*

*"It's okay to not be okay,"
Said to me by a good friend
"Take things one step at a time.
This will allow your heart to mend."*

Accepting these changes

*There is still much to learn
To become more comfortable
And appreciate all I have earned*

*Looking at my reflection
All the experiences I've made
All the people in my life
All the love I have gained*

*I hope you are proud
Of everything I have done
I miss you so very much
And will always remember where I came from*