

VIEWS & REVIEWS

BETWEEN THE LINES

The Hippocrates Prize

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The Hippocrates Prize is an annual prize for poetry, awarded since 2010 and open to anyone who works, or has worked, in the NHS. There is also a category for poetry about a medical subject, open to anyone in the world writing in English. Altogether there are thousands of entries and the winning poems, the two runners up, and all the commended poems, are published in a slim but elegant volume. It is rather difficult to imagine a poetry prize open to people who have worked in accountancy, or to anyone who has filled out an income tax form, attracting quite so many entries as this one.

The pleasures of the poems are various, as you would expect. Valerie Laws, for example, raises a purely intellectual problem in her witty poem, *A Question for Neuroscientists*:

Where does a memory sit, when it's at leisure?
Where does it cool its heels, await our pleasure?

There are several poems about anatomy, suggesting that the former discipline—or was it a ritual?—of dissection of a corpse in the education of medical students was of deep cultural and emotional significance. In *Anatomy*, for example, Jane Kirwan describes, perhaps laments, the decline of dissection:

Professor Cave bustles up to the raised dais,
skullcap, snuff, spotted bow-tie, twiddles his cuffs.
Nothing to be thrown away. "The rules" he tells us
"are plain. No skipping with intestines,
no jokes." Just formalin . . .

On each table is a yellowed leathered corpse. But things have changed:

Thirty years later,
Sue can't give away a dead body.
Her step-father had said—when the time
comes—donate.
At the tenth teaching hospital she's less subtle:
"do you want it or not?"

No one digs out Gray's for him,
No Cunningham's Anatomy, no battered zinc pail.

Sometimes images in the poems are very striking; this, for example, in a poem by Andrew Thomas Martin called *Rorschach*, about doctors' interpretation of MRI scans:

They observe the emergence and
dissolving of all the bats, angels and butterflies
that fill your body...

And in *Intensive Care, Friday Afternoon*, Kev O'Donnell describes each of the sixteen beds in two lapidary lines:

Bed 15
a foreign student who hung herself, found with a
stopped heart, now
doing her best to die again.
Bed 4
empty, cleaned by a nurse aid
low winter sun through blinds.
Bed 2
dying, curtains pulled
cold air falls.

The power of poetry to concentrate and compress emotion is illustrated in a poem by Frances-Anne King about the wig of a child treated for leukaemia with chemotherapy. The wig is discarded as the child lies dying:

Her scalp shone smooth then,
translucent as the linings of an oyster shell,
her freckles, pale tracings on a fading sea of face.

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