



## Poetry as cure

### Blood and bone: poems by physicians

Edited by Angela Belli and Jack Coulehan  
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What makes doctors write poetry? In significant ways, the physician's training resembles that of the poet: focused, incisive attention and observation are cultivated systematically in the face of much uncertainty. Stories

about loss, suffering and jubilation become transformed by acts of will. *Blood and Bone*, a new collection of poems by physicians, is most successful in showing us the inadequacy of medical language and technology

in describing the intensity of experience shared by healers and those they care for. This is one compelling reason that leads physicians to take up the pen. In John Wright's "Therapy," the speaker chastises his doctors for not considering that it is the blooming of the wisteria outside his window that has brought about his cure from depression, not just their drably named medications. The narrator laments in Marc J. Straus's "Scarlet Crown" that the terms he uses to describe illness lack the beauty of the names given to cacti. One of the many functions of poetry is to give us permission to feel deeply and to see what has become familiar in new ways. The speaker of Dannie Abse's "The Stethoscope" studies this instrument with awe and concludes that it is indeed holy. In Eric Dyer's "Painting the Nude" the narrator sees his surgical patient as an occupant of an unfolding canvas, although his wish would be to use colours other than "blood red and cyan blue."

Poetry, whether written or read, allows comfort and escape but also invokes rattling confrontation. Some of

the best entries in this collection show that the doctor experiences lust, rage, grief and doubt — not endless benevolence or professional detachment. In Kirsten Emmott's "Who Looks after Your Children," the narrator ponders subtle assumptions about her neglect of her children as a result of a "busy career." The small-town doctor in Dyer's "Round Killar" sees not the beautiful

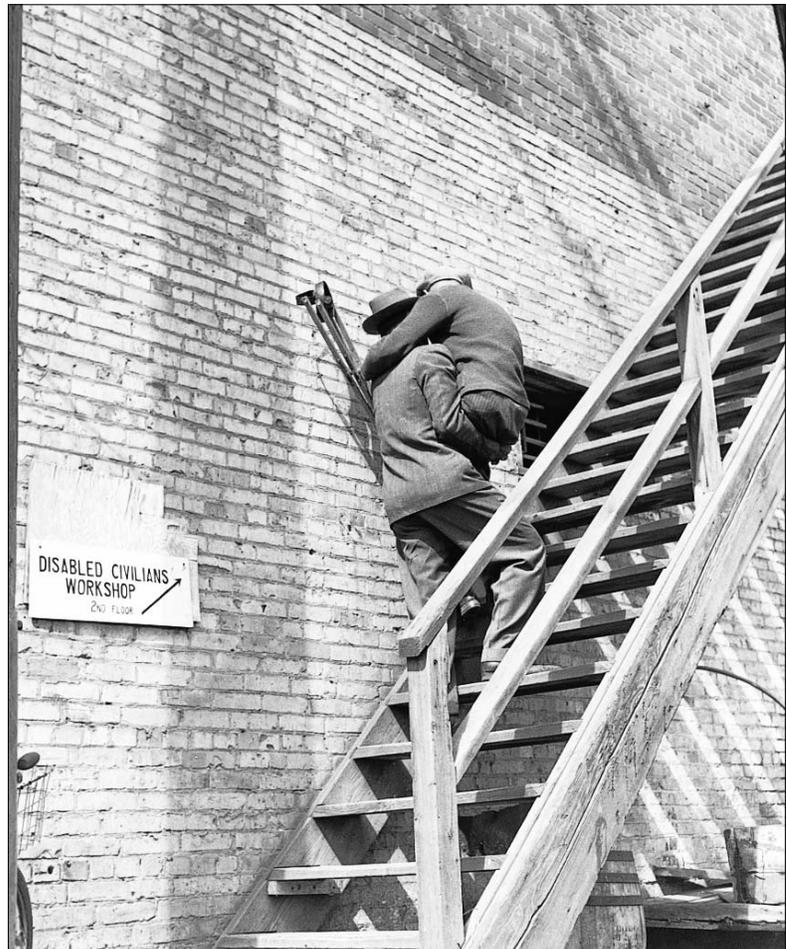
woman stripping for him in a bar but the sebaceous cyst on her neck and concludes that he is a "square." Even the least successful of these works from the point of view of craft, such as Vernon Rowe's enumerative "MRI of a Poet's Brain," reminds the reader that there is always more going on than the medical model allows. We as new-millennium doctors would do well to read, teach and write more poetry. Indeed, perhaps an unforeseen benefit of a fine book like *Blood and Bone* might be that educators consider how to attract more poets to medicine.

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## One thousand words



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