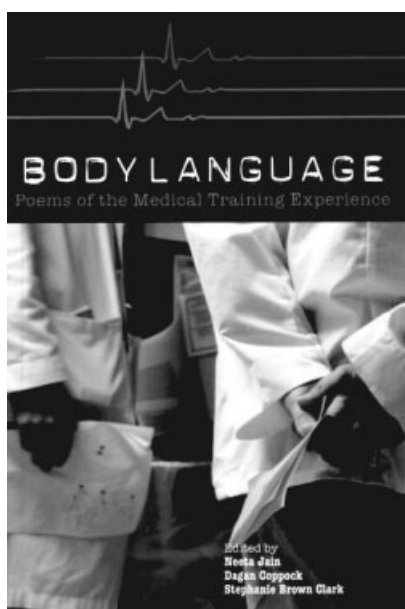


Body Language—Poems of the Medical Training Experience

Edited by Neeta Jain, Dagan Coppock, and Stephanie Brown Clark



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Stolen Kisses (by Emily Osborn)

The fresh-laundered smell
of a boy's shirt
startles me
leaning closer
with my stethoscope
I pretend to hear a murmur
soak in the odor
of a kiss
at sixteen.

Poetry, without question, is a tricky thing. For many Americans it is an unapproachable art form that resides in a fortress guarded by elite intellectuals. For the minority of Americans who read it, it is a personal thing—tough to define what works for some readers and tougher to understand for most. For the occasional reader of poetry, the favorite poem is usually something that sparks a familiar memory and puts it in perspective—a first love, the sight of the moon rising over a ridge in the mountains in the winter, or the memory of a summer night in youth. For those of us who don't read much poetry, it is the commonality of experience buried in the words speaking to something deep down inside our common existence as humans that tends to attract us to a poem—the "I've been there" or "I've felt that" experience.

Although the language in many of the poems in *Body Language* is striking, what draws in the physician-reader more than anything else is the commonality of experiences inherent in these works. There are many remarkable landscapes in these poems, from the struggle to understand the intricate detail of the human body in anatomy class to the indelible memories of the patients who are manic or hopelessly depressed during the psychiatry core clerkship. It is mostly all here, the things we have experienced, in the form of poetry, evoking those moments that most of us painfully internalized or stepped around or ignored for lack of time to pay any attention to. For some of us, both the subtle and more profound experiences have become shadows or scars and for many, things we just never understood very well to begin with and try not to think about any more. These are our stories almost as much as they are those of the physician and medical student poets who wrote them. This book brings our experiences back, whether

sadly, bluntly, humorously, or subtly, in a way that reminds us of all the things we've been blessed and cursed to see and be part of.

Body Language was the "brain child" of Neeta Jain, when she was still a medical student at the University of Rochester. She collaborated with another medical student from Yale University, Dagan Coppock, with the support of her University of Rochester faculty adviser, Stephanie Brown Clark. During the waning months of medical school, they solicited submissions from students, residents, and attending physicians from throughout the United States. Out of hundreds of submissions, they chose approximately 90 poems to create this anthology.

Perhaps I am cynical or perhaps I just don't really believe that given the frantic nature of modern medicine, there are many doctors who can devote the time to polishing their poetry in the tradition of William Carlos Williams, a New Jersey general practitioner who practiced before the era of information overload. Williams wrote on a typewriter between patients, during the time we reserve for looking up a question on Up-to-Date or answering a 1-week old e-mail.

But I was wrong. I came home from work exhausted one evening and picked up the book to discover another world, however familiar that world was. In that world are poems that occasionally jump off the page. Many of these poems were written by serious poets, poets published long before this book came along, and some are written by relative novices. But what unites these poems is the power—the raw emotion—of so many of the experiences described. We're reminded of overwhelming fatigue so harsh one envies the dead or the mundane call to pronounce a patient's death before fading back into the halls of the hospital. It is all here, our experiences in training and in the practice of medicine.

The anthology is divided into 6 sections: medical student, first year; medical student, second year; medical student, clinical years; intern; resident; and attending. It is almost impossible not to find a situation or emotion in a poem in each section that all physicians have experienced at some point in our lives. For example, life that occasionally interjects itself into the mind-numbing lecture

hall of our preclinical years of medical school (Richard M. Berlin):

Medical School Lovers

**One morning, while disease-slides flashed
and filled the lecture room with twilight blue,
the back door opened a sliver of light
and they entered holding hands.**

**A few of us turned, then the others,
four hundred eyes focused
on the couple at the door,
faces still flushed from making love,
their pleasure so certain.**

**The slides flashed on
and the lecturer persisted
but we were gone for the day,**

**Still dazed by the way love can enter
our lives in a flash of light,
spinning our heads as we struggle
with lessons everyone learns in the dark.**

And for residents, the "soft" admit in the night (Mindy Shah):

MAO

**It's what we call
a "soft" admit,
which means
your illness does not
impress us.**

**Here is your room,
the toilet, your bag
of personal belongings.
The toothbrush is
on us.**

**We'll round at seven,
but I can tell
by the smell of your breath
you're going to live.**

After reading this book cover to cover, I was not surprised to learn that Garrison Keillor had asked permission to read some of its contents on his radio show. It is great stuff that speaks about many of the things we've been through that we're too tired or too busy or too afraid to stop and ponder over our years of practicing medicine. This anthology is easily worth the \$15 it costs, if only because it repays us as a guide through the remarkable landscapes we have known.