

TOC June 4, 2026

William jay smith

holub

hicok

sexton

appleman

plumly

warren

Lawrence

McDougall

Lux

William Jay Smith

A Picture of Her Bones

I saw her pelvic bones one April day  
After her fall –  
Without their leap, without their surge or sway –  
I saw her pelvic bones in cold x-ray  
After her fall.  
She lay in bed; the night before she'd lain  
On a mat of leaves, black boulders shining  
Between the trees, trees that in rain pitched every which way  
Below the crumbling wall,  
Making shadows where no shadows were,  
Writing black on white, white on black,  
As in X-ray,  
While rain came slowly down, and gray  
Mist rolled up from the valley.  
How still, how far away  
That scene is now: the car door  
Swinging open above her in the night,  
A black tongue hanging over  
That abyss, saying nothing into the night,  
Saying only that white is black and black is white,  
Saying only that there was nothing to say.  
No blood, no sound,  
No sign of hurt nor harm, nothing in disarray,  
Slow rain like tears (the tears have dried away).  
I held her bare bones in my hands  
While swathed in hospital white she lay;  
And hold them still, and still they move  
As, tall and proud, she strides today,  
The sweet grass brushing her thighs,  
A whole wet orchard mirrored in her eyes; --  
Or move against me here –  
With all their lilt, their spring and surge and sway –  
As once they did that other April day  
Before her fall.

from Poetry in Medicine: An Anthology of Poems About Doctors, Patients, Illness, and Healing. Michael Salcman, ed. New York: Persea Books, 2015.

Miroslav Holub (1923 – 1998)

Casualty

They bring us crushed fingers,  
*mend it, doctor.*  
They bring burnt-out eyes,  
hounded owls of hearts,  
they bring a hundred white bodies,  
a hundred red bodies,  
a hundred black bodies,  
*mend it, doctor,*  
on the dishes of ambulances they bring  
the madness of blood,  
the scream of flesh,  
the silence of charring,  
*mend it, doctor.*

And while we are suturing  
inch after inch,  
night after night,  
nerve to nerve,  
muscle to muscle,  
eyes to sight,  
they bring in  
even longer daggers,  
even more dangerous bombs,  
even more glorious victories,

idiots.

from Poetry in Medicine: An Anthology of Poems About Doctors, Patients, Illness, and Healing. Michael Salcman, ed. New York: Persea Books, 2015.

Bob Hicok

Surgery

Masked, they cut you, peel back  
your skin for the legend of light  
to enter your body. In this moment  
they love you. You'll know this  
years from now, when beating a rug  
you feel their hands inside you,  
a shock of warmth, invasion of concern,  
as if you were back on the table  
but awake and aware of the fear  
dilating their eyes. How else can it be  
for the strangers who, take your breath,  
contain it in a machine and give it back,  
its meter undisturbed? They cut to flaw,  
down to a blue tumor the size of an olive.  
As they do they think of time, how little  
it takes for the riotously dividing cells  
to reach blood, to enter the cosmos  
of a body and travel to another organ,  
another world, advancing cancer's  
parasitical flowering. Finally they try  
to erase any sign they were there,  
stitch and staple where they've cut.  
If done well it's like walking backward  
across a newly mopped floor. There  
are only a few clues, in this case  
a scar and the fact on any trivial day  
you're still alive.

from Poetry in Medicine: An Anthology of Poems About Doctors, Patients, Illness, and Healing. Michael Salcman,  
ed. New York: Persea Books, 2015.

Anne Sexton

Doctors

They work with herbs  
and penicillin.  
They work with gentleness  
and the scalpel.  
They dig out the cancer,  
close an incision  
and say a prayer  
to the poverty of the skin.  
They are not Gods  
though they would like to be;  
they are only a human  
trying to fix up a human.  
Many humans die.  
They die like the tender,  
palpitating berries  
in November.  
But all along the doctors remember:  
First do no harm.  
They would kiss if it would heal.  
It would not heal.

If the doctors cure  
then the sun sees it.  
If the doctors kill  
then the earth hides it.  
The doctors should fear arrogance  
more than cardiac arrest.  
If they are too proud,  
and some are,  
then they leave home on horseback  
but God returns them on foot.

from Poetry in Medicine: An Anthology of Poems About Doctors, Patients, Illness, and Healing. Michael Salzman,  
ed. New York: Persea Books, 2015.

Philip Appleman

Eulogy

That swain in Shakespeare, penning ballads  
to his lady's eyebrow: if just once  
he could have seen my sweetheart's breasts,  
he would have written epics. Oh,  
they are so springtime sweet and summer-lilting,  
those twin blossoms, I should have found  
a painter intimate with tender shades  
of pink and cream  
to immortalize their harmony.

Because  
up there on the seventh floor  
they are cutting one of them away,  
the one we touched last week and felt  
the poisoned pearl.  
Now the knives are working, working,  
I feel them stabbing through my flesh.  
She will come back gray, remembering  
to smile, the bandages weeping blood,  
her beauty scarred,  
her life saved.

I will love her more  
than yesterday.

from Poetry in Medicine: An Anthology of Poems About Doctors, Patients, Illness, and Healing. Michael Salcman,  
ed. New York: Persea Books, 2015.

Stanley Plumly

Cancer

Mine, I know, started at a distance  
five hundred and twenty light-years away  
and fell as stardust into my sleeping mouth,  
yesterday, at birth, or that time when I was ten  
lying on my back looking up at the cluster  
called the Beehive or by its other name  
in the constellation Cancer,  
the Crab, able to move its nebulae projections  
backward and forward, side to side,  
in the tumor Hippocrates describes as carcinoma,  
from *karkinos*, the analogue, in order to show  
what being cancer looks like.  
Star, therefore, to start,  
like waking on the best day of your life  
to feel this living and immortal thing inside you.  
You were in love, you were a saint,  
you were going to walk the sunlight blessing water,  
you were almost word for word forever.  
The crown, the throne, the thorn —  
now to see the smoke shining in the mirror,  
the long half-dark of dark down the hallway inside it.  
Now to see what wasn't seen before:  
the old loved landscape fading from the window,  
the druid soul within the dying tree,  
the depth of blue coloring the cornflower,  
the birthday-ribbon river of a road,  
and the young man who resembles you  
opening a door in the half-built house  
you helped your father build,  
saying, in your voice, come forth.

from *Poetry in Medicine: An Anthology of Poems About Doctors, Patients, Illness, and Healing*. Michael Salzman,  
ed. New York: Persea Books, 2015.

Rosanna Warren

Aftermath

*"Dawn. The moment it was  
it was over."* — Deborah Tall

It was that last, euphoric summer, between  
one chemo and another, when you looked out  
your kitchen window and saw the doe standing  
at the edge of your lawn where the thicket gathers—  
autumn olive, buckthorn, forsythia, dogwood.  
And when you stepped outside, the doe stayed still  
and looked in your eyes, you thought, with a companionable  
complicit question, and didn't run. You were  
light-headed. The doe lowered her nose  
to shove at the small bundle at her feet  
folded up like an awkward deck chair  
till then invisible in its hollow of grass.  
She had just given birth. The fawn couldn't stand  
but raised its too-large head to gaze at you.  
You were, as you said, already more or less  
posthumous. You took each other in.  
One of you before, the other beyond fear.  
Two creatures, side effects on one another,  
headed in opposite directions.

from *Poetry in Medicine: An Anthology of Poems About Doctors, Patients, Illness, and Healing*. Michael Salcman,  
ed. New York: Persea Books, 2015.

D H Lawrence (1885 – 1930)

## Healing

I am not a mechanism, an assembly of various sections.  
And it is not because the mechanism is working wrongly that I am ill.  
I am ill because of wounds to the soul, to the deep emotional self  
and wounds to the soul take a long, long time, only time can help  
and patience, and a certain difficult repentance,  
long, difficult repentance, realization of life's mistake, and the freeing oneself  
from the endless repetition of the mistake  
which mankind at large has chosen to sanctify.

from *Poetry in Medicine: An Anthology of Poems About Doctors, Patients, Illness, and Healing*. Michael Salcman, ed. New York: Persea Books, 2015.

Jo McDougall

Mammogram

“They’re benign,” the radiologist says,  
pointing to specks on the x ray  
that look like dust motes  
stopped cold in their dance.  
His words take my spine like flame.  
I suddenly love  
the radiologist, the nurse, my paper gown,  
the vapid print on the dressing room wall.  
I pull on my radiant clothes.  
I step out into the Hanging Gardens, the Taj Mahal,  
the Niagara Falls of the parking lot.

from Poetry in Medicine: An Anthology of Poems About Doctors, Patients, Illness, and Healing. Michael Salcman,  
ed. New York: Persea Books, 2015.

Thomas Lux

Upon Seeing an Ultrasound Photo of an Unborn Child

Tadpole, it's not time yet to nag you  
about college (though I have some thoughts  
on that), baseball (ditto), or abstract  
principles. Enjoy your delicious,  
soupy womb-warmth, do some rolls and saults  
(it'll be too crowded soon), delight in your early  
dreams — which no one will attempt to analyze.  
For now: may your toes blossom, your fingers  
lengthen, your sexual organs grow (too soon  
to tell which yet) sensitive, your teeth  
form their buds in their forming jawbone, your already  
booming heart expand (literally  
now, metaphorically later); O your spine,  
eyebrows, nape, knees, fibulae,  
lungs, lips . . . But your soul,  
dear child: I don't see it here, when  
does that come in, whence? Perhaps God,  
and your mother, and even I — we'll all contribute  
and you'll learn yourself to coax it  
from wherever: your soul, which holds your bones  
together and lets you live  
on earth. — Fingerling, sidecar, nubbin,  
I'm waiting, it's me, Dad,  
I'm out here. You already know  
where Mom is. I'll see you more directly  
upon arrival. You'll recognize  
me — I'll be the tall-seeming, delighted  
blond guy, and I'll have  
your nose.

from *Poetry in Medicine: An Anthology of Poems About Doctors, Patients, Illness, and Healing*. Michael Salcman,  
ed. New York: Persea Books, 2015.