

Poetry in Medicine

an exhibition of poems written by BSMS students and local poets

As medical students and doctors, we bear witness to some of the most morally and emotionally significant moments in people's lives: births and deaths; doubts and decisions; suffering and relief. Do our medical degrees ready us to take on these moments in their full complexity? If not, how might we better prepare students?

The answer is not merely to fill their heads with more 'facts'. Facts are vital, of course, but fetishising facts at the expense of 'softer' skills risks creating a cadre of doctors who are knowledgeable (if robotic) engineers of the body, but entirely lacking in the human skills that we all recognise at once when we finally encounter a truly excellent doctor.

I have taught here for some time now and every year I have been struck by the interest and talent students demonstrate for the arts, social sciences, and humanities. So, in 2019, I had the idea of harnessing this interest by offering a new 'Student Selected Component' module (or SSC) on 'The Poetry of Medicine'. What good are the humanities, and specifically poetry, to the budding doctor? In the words of physician-poet William Carlos Williams (1883-1963): 'It's hard to get the news from poems, but men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there'.

The aim was to explore the social, moral, and personal complexities of medicine through the lens of creative writing. A range of students took the course - some had written poetry before, but most were new to it. I was amazed by the maturity and sincerity with which the students applied themselves, pushing themselves far out of their comfort zones, trying to capture and express feelings and events related to medical practice in new ways.

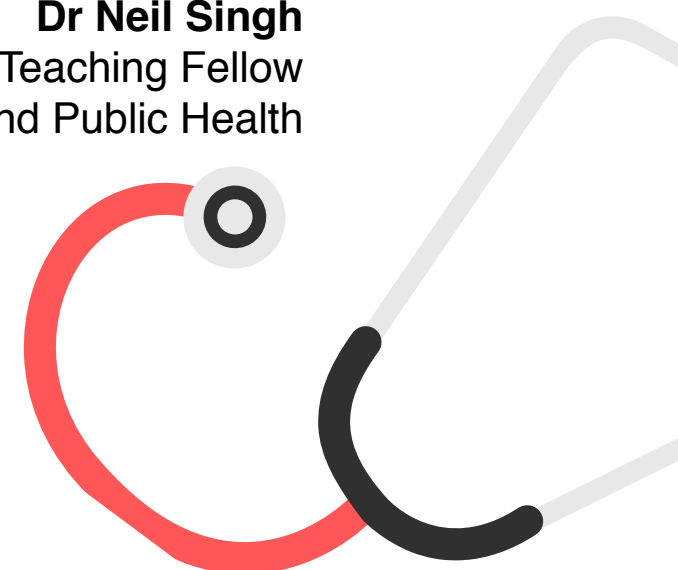
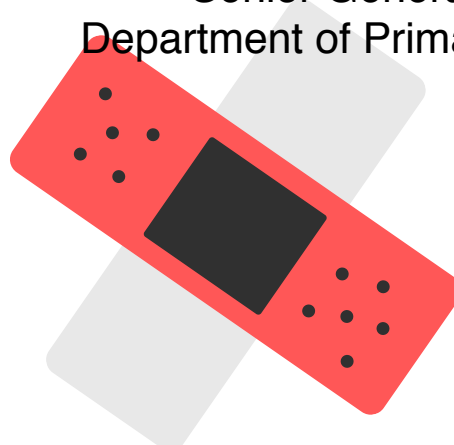
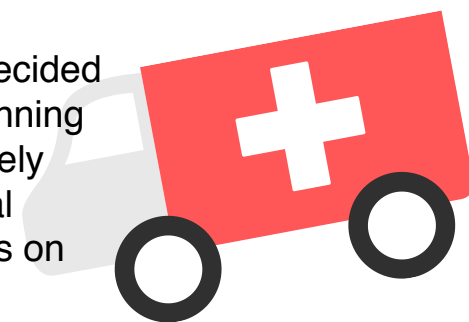
We at the medical school were so proud of what the students produced that we decided to host the first BSMS 'Poetry in Medicine' showcase event, as part of the long-running 'Ethics in Performance' series hosted by Prof Bobbie Farsides. The students bravely agreed to perform their poems at his public event, and they were joined by several other excellent published and performance poets from Brighton, all reading poems on the theme of 'Health and the Body'.

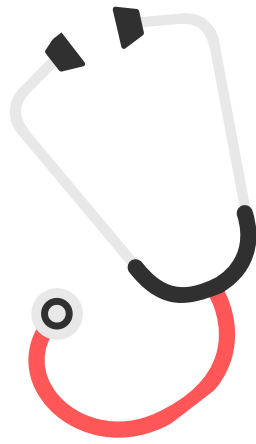
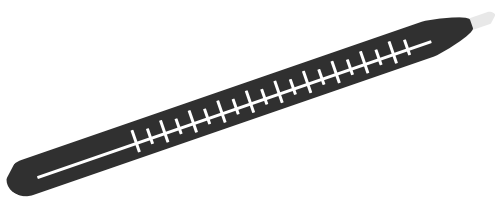
The event was such a great success that we thought it right to honour the poets' work by creating an exhibition at the medical school, to hopefully encourage other students and staff to read, and perhaps even write, more poetry themselves. Both the poetry event and this exhibition would not have been possible without the hard work and encouragement of Matt Bemment from the BSMS Communications team.

I hope you find these poems intriguing, beautiful, and inspiring in equal measure. They serve as a lasting testimony to the creative talent at our medical school, which I hope you agree is something we can all be proud of. For seeing the poetry in our everyday lives is surely something we should all encourage - and something that might make us not just better doctors, but better people too.

Dr Neil Singh

Senior General Practice Teaching Fellow
Department of Primary Care and Public Health





from Ode To Osmosis

By Kat Sinclair, local poet

My leg muscles ache now, more aware
of my laughter lines which are just beginning
from a smile which has just ended
reading the Song of Songs and thinking the Bible is a bit like a Hitachi magic wand
with uses beyond its marketing
like, explicitly, it should never be read with clothes on
or we should all be making notes in the margins
thou shalt ankle boot tan lines
thou shalt huge identity crisis
thou shalt wondering when the Oyster card went defunct mourning conversations with
American tourists
that will never happen again:
“Here, take this, it’s useless to me. I am going home now.”
I think that’s what happens to time
in the absence of proper meals
trying to eat a bowl of cereal
when we got back from the hospital at
half past three in the morning
as if I could will the school run back again.

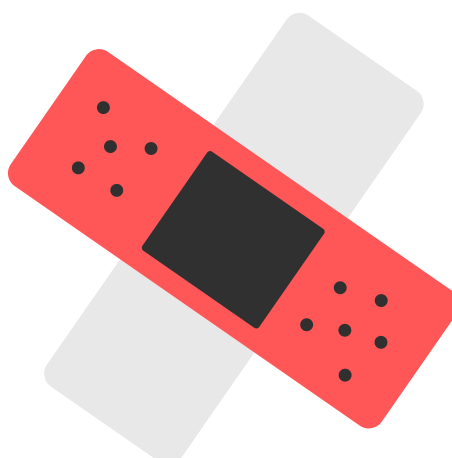
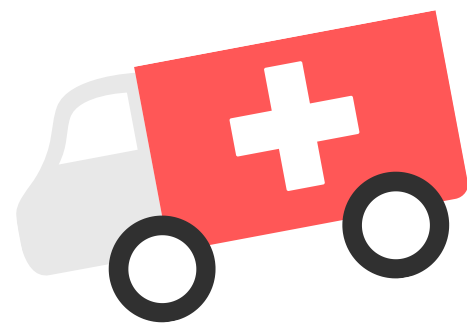
Now it’s all how to write about cancer
without slipping into a series of
cancer is like an advert for women’s shaving products
where all the hair is already never there
cancer is like Milo Yiannopoulos self-publishing
a book of poetry full of plagiarised Tori Amos lyrics
cancer is like but look, over there: the vegans who eat honey are engaged in a fight to the death
with the vegans who don’t eat honey
cancer is like I don’t have it, and why am I writing this, and why am I ever writing anything else
a regular Desmoulins but the lantern is a
spot on my forehead waiting to be popped.

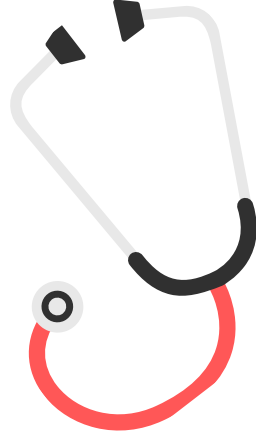
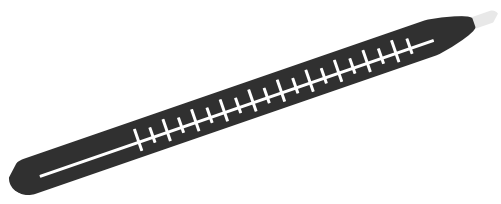
You just get used to it the laminated calling cards your new library
your old medicine cabinet, full
your new medicine cabinet, which was a kitchen your new theatre mask, open in a silent scream
with bolts on, and his name, part of your name, same shaped eye-holes
you just get used to looking through them and the self immolation the
cans of worms
or the Duolingo owl, who is capitalism
perfectly distilled and stupid
counting globules of care into tiny jewellery bags and pulling the strings tight
to be opened when most needed,
which is always, which is never
so the globules grow stale.

I just never thought you’d be another ghost on the Internet like ‘Glioman’, pun thief, with one
introductory post and we don’t know if he’s lazy, or tired, or dead
like here it is, collapsing at the end of a trial:
caesura the means of production.

Published in *Very Authentic Person*, The 87 Press, 2019.

@katmsinclair





Journeys Moving, Journeys Staying Still

By Alyssia MacAlister, local poet

In a nest of my folded legs, her favourite place to rest, my yoghurt-breathed, smudge-fingered, glasses stealer sleeps clutching her prize and my sight.

The sight of regurgitated ravioli in the chipped enamel bath tub, acid eroding enamel because I can't hack the toothbrush. The blood rush sloshing from head to gut, feet numb on the shuffle back to the sofa to watch the room spin, and take periodic glances at The Keepers.

In a nest of my folded legs, her favourite place to rest, my yoghurt-breathed, smudge-fingered, glasses stealer snuggles into the crook of my arm gurgling tiny snores as she does, pressing a lens against her cheek.

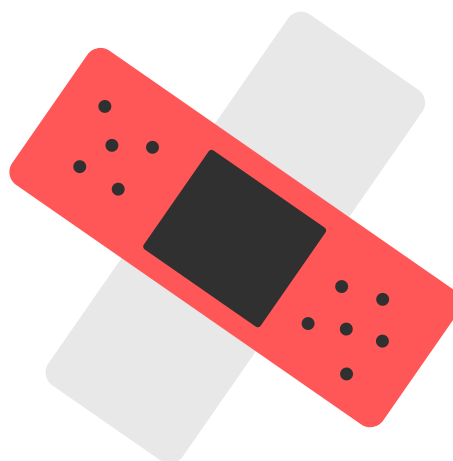
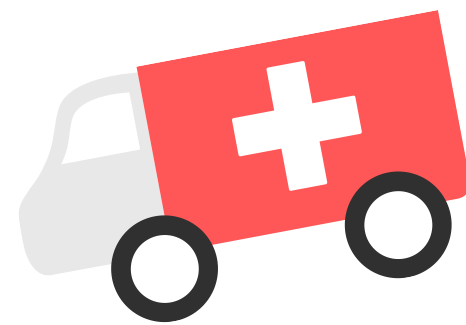
Cheek pressed against pillow, movements limited to making even more lemon and ginger tea and half hour episodes in the loo, scared to stand, expecting to see my bloodied blueberry baby bobbing in the toilet bowl. Even when the app tells me she's bigger than that, an apple or a mango, my mind still cuts to her baked in a pie. The only time I don't feel sick in the stomach or head is when I'm led by the hand by my husband to the sea, where the salt scours lungs that haven't breathed fresh air in a week. I think blankness and the wind whips tears from my eyes, like two pebbles in their sockets. We watch seagull parents teach their young how to hover, drop and crack mussels on the storm banked shore. Watch them soar, watch them swim. This is the only peace I get.

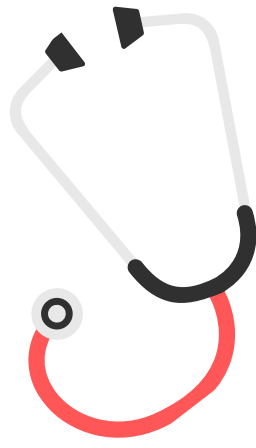
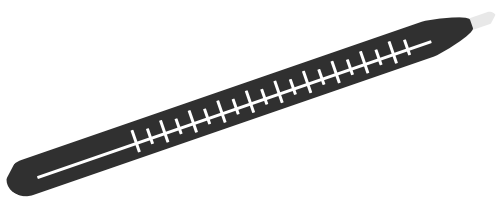
In a nest of my folded legs, her favourite place to rest, my yoghurt-breathed, smudge-fingered, glasses stealer wakes and immediately begins to whisper to herself, examining the blue frames, rubbing the lenses on her gums. She holds them out to view them wholly and murmurs 'what?'

Murmuring 'sorry' as a foot in the rib, in the lung, knocks me to stand-still when trudging the hill home. I insist on walking miles a day, disregarding the frost and frozen leaves, but attempts to dodge the tall, well-dressed men of all ages who've elbowed me into clothes racks, lampposts and shop windows are futile. I am shoved by teenagers. I am called a 'fucking pregnant'. I am forced to pound the disabled toilet door dry-sobbing and desperate while the guy inside takes a phone call. I walk eyes darting and down, shoulders hunched, arms wrapped around my bump.

In a nest of my folded legs, her favourite place to rest, my yoghurt-breathed, smudge-fingered, glasses stealer discards the drooled and chewed upon specs to point out of the window at things I describe for her: a magpie, leaves, a squirrel, the wind. Each with a tiny 'what?', 'what?' We listen to the rain. She twists a little in my arms but instead of nuzzling for more milk stares into my face, stretches out her index finger to the tip of my nose. I am seen.

@alyssiamacalister



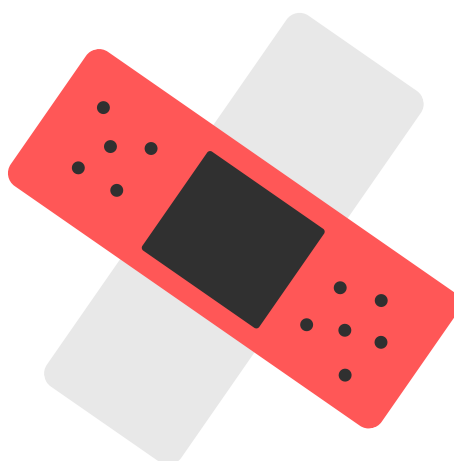
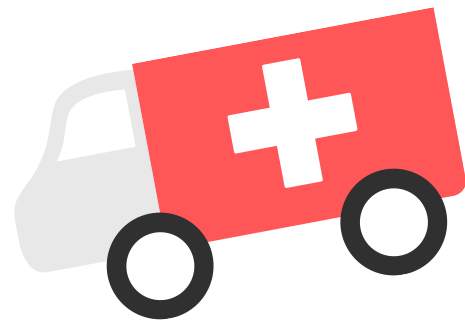


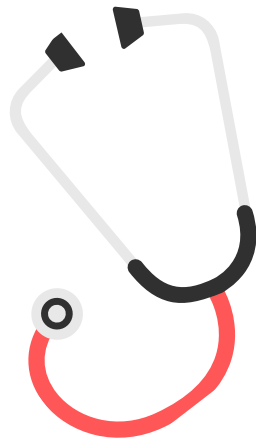
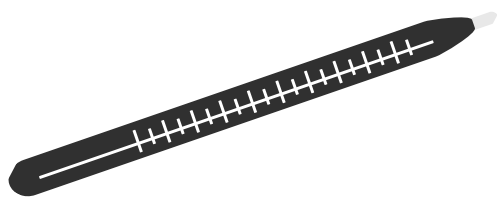
Clarus

By Orla Hanna, BSMS student

I see your mother in pearls of gold
rolling down the crest of your collar,
we melt into puddles of your nectar,
crystallised but your sweetness oozes-
you will not shatter, never sharp.
Honeyed words drip from your lips,
as you wade through swells of molasses.

The glaze crackles as it becomes smooth to touch,
cold air thawing as it settles, mirroring stillness.
Like nervous honey pauses as it is turned,
you are suspended momentarily-
your brilliant ribbons, falling home,
the slow bind of propolis, a hardening hive.





The Lifeguard

By Helen Johnson, local poet

This café is an island of shipwrecked souls,
washed up from endless streams of feet,
that pause and part and drift
and meet at last as respite calls,
then sink, where swollen silence falls.

Each trolley-bed that rattles past,
each tap of teaspoon
clink of glass,
resounds with the lungs of a choir,
to be lost in the single, longing note,
choking almost every throat.

We are specimen phials in clear,
plastic bags,
bottled, sealed, indexed,
summarised with tags.
We are bubbles of air in syringes,
waiting to be pushed up and out.
We are sterilised, anaesthetised,
lonely in the crowd.

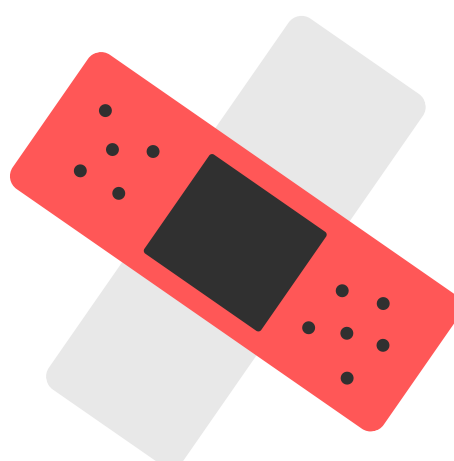
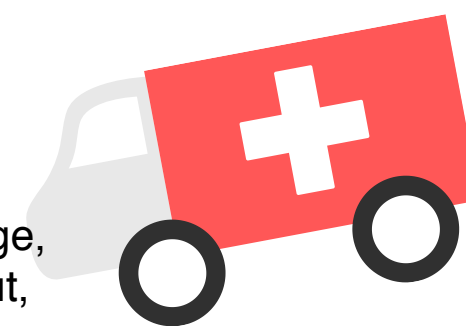
He sits like a dam in the riverbed,
still, amongst the eddies,
and he comes here so he'll feel
that he's still part of the world,
because here there are people,
fleeting lives and glances,
a regular bus that will stop at the door,
because it's the last place
that his wife ever smiled,
as she squeezed his hand,
and closed her eyes,
a year, a day, before.

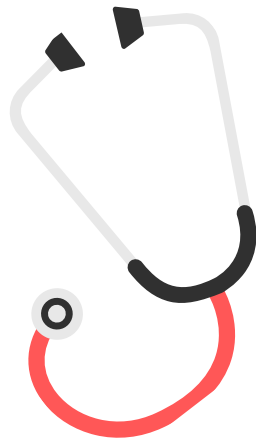
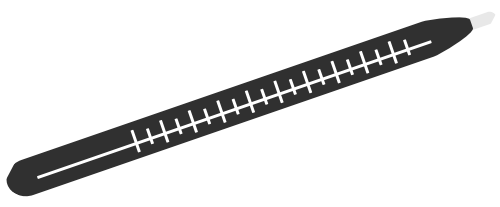
When places fill up
he'll invite any other
to dine at his table,
make space beside,
then narrating his story,
to strip-away coffee,
he'll conjure half a century,
of ordinary life.

Today, he'll tell of daisies,
dressed in a simple church,
of a reluctant, scuffing groom,
a bride who washed her mother's
gown,
in shyly sunlit smiles,
of countryside that turned to town,
bricks filling up the miles,
and perhaps today they'll listen.

After all
they too are a specimen phial,
sealed in a clear, plastic bag,
bottled up and indexed,
summarised by tags,
a bubble of air in another syringe,
waiting to be pushed up and out,
sterilised, anaesthetised,
lonely in the crowd.

www.hgregory.co.uk





Hipbones and ribcage

By Nigeen Akram, BSMS student

Our daughters are
disappearing
ounce by ounce
to please cultures
that celebrate
bones on the verge
of protruding skin

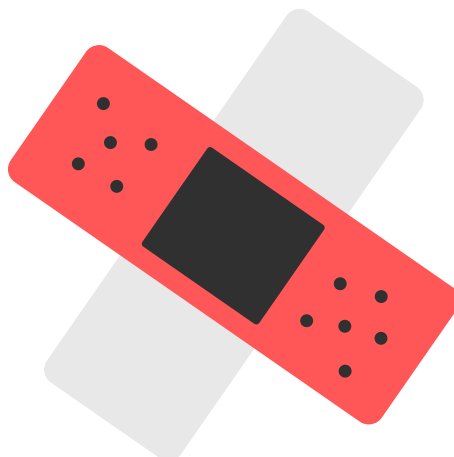
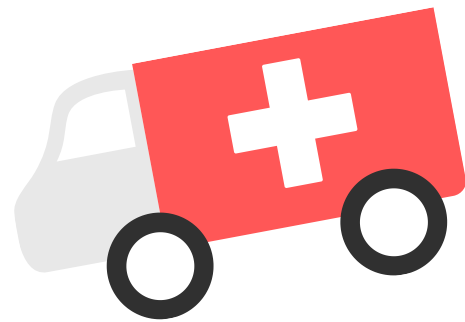
we sit back and
watch them
their cries covered
by layers of concealer
their hunger
hidden behind
pale faces

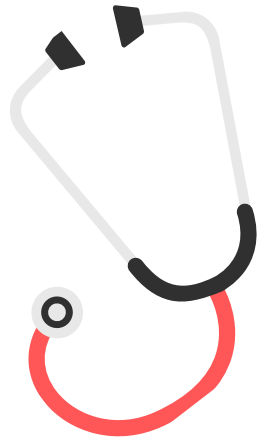
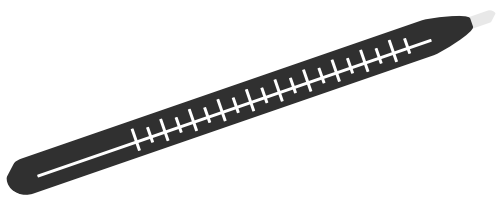
we teach our daughters
that to be beautiful
they must be supermodel
thin
until they become all
hipbones and ribcage

we fail to see the child
screaming for help

beneath
the glam and costumes
we do not hear the words
they are choking on
unaware of their pain and
the hollow of their
fleshless
bodies
we are starving our
daughters
so that they can fit into
the ideals of the fashion
world
a world based on
mockery
and theft of cultures
the ideal woman on their
covers
sickly thin one month
and curvy the next
a system they can never
please.

@niddaraa





That disease

By Darren J Beaney, Head of Admissions at BSMS and local poet

His last days were taxing, long black nights demanding. Living
a hopeless condition so brutally cruel,
rubbing him out. Consumed
by illness,
dying.

He refused to suffer the complaint,
in his way accepting the disease, carrying
its mass without grievance. Never a moan
or grumble,
just got on with it.

With the cancer
his final malady.

My lasting thoughts of him ail me. Bearing final witness
to a great man slowly passing, slipping away.
Barely able to smile at those gathered
around him.
But still strong enough to briefly squeeze trembling hands.

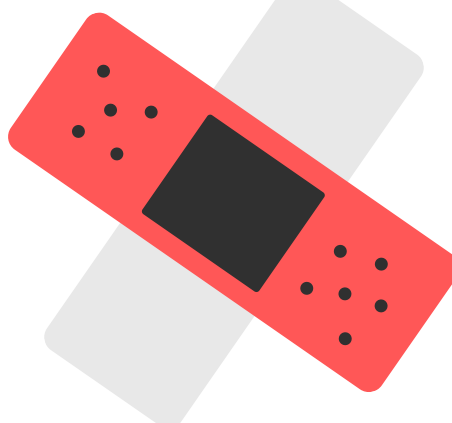
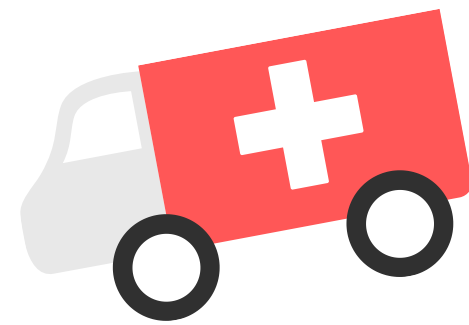
Aware enough to hide the pain, fear. Tough enough
to whisper haunting words of love and assurance.
Proud enough to preserve his prominence
as head of the clan.
Concerned enough

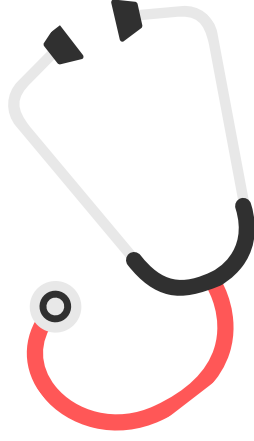
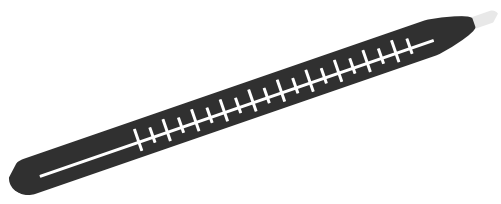
to wear a brave face, masking sunken eyes, and hollow checks.
I remember he died on his terms, well the best
he could negotiate. His final act
of defiance, disobedience
toward that disease -

an audacious act in the face of death. The ultimate
show of strength and resolution! In his armchair.
With his forever faithful friend sleeping
by his sporadically tapping feet.
Holding up

a large scotch, in a clean glass, in his skeletal left hand.
Smoke from his last cigarette chasing the lazy
jazz notes that crowded the air. His children
cheering for him
as he danced away.

@DJ_Be_An





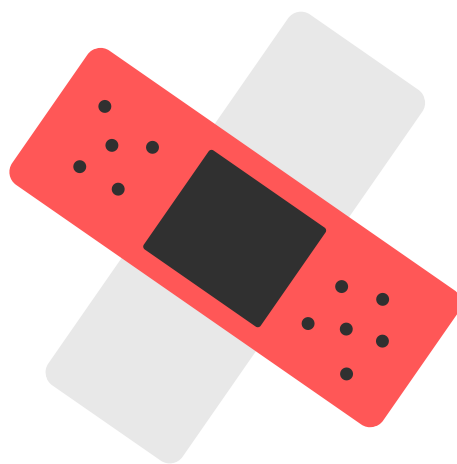
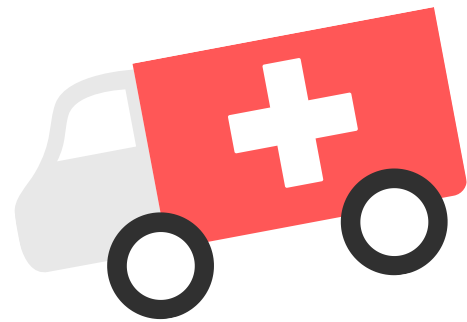
Survival of the Fittest

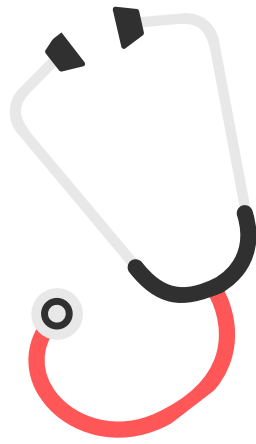
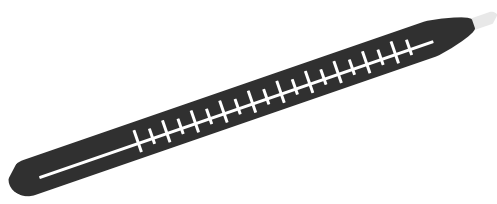
By Roshni Beeharry, GP and writer

After 'In the Microscope' by Miroslav Holub (1923-1998)

Let us wander through the landscapes,
ash-covered and derelict;
wander past cornflowers lying in masses,
an electric blue army entrenched in soil,
battling with hostile atmosphere,
fighters nurtured only by birdsong.

Wander past the cherry trees,
standing guard over cemeteries,
their fragile blossoms snow
over tombstones,
murmuring scented memories to the dead.



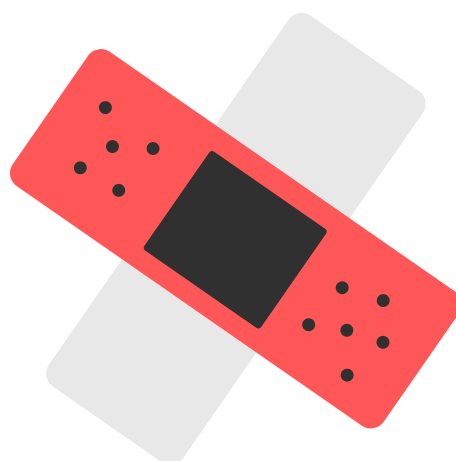
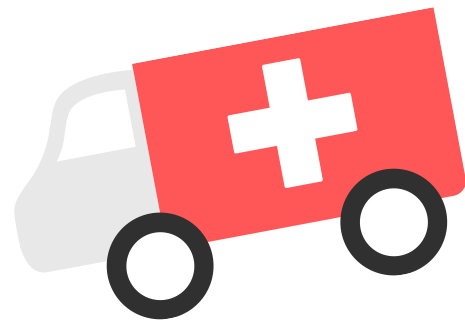


A memory of smoke

By James Chu, BSMS student

Thunder sounds as gunshot
But this seed's growth, rain affects not.
Insidious Lightning struck, 20 years past
In age of forest fire, die was cast
From charred remains seedlings sprout
Sewn deep, tracheal tree can't fight out


Secateurs in surgeon hand
Cannot remove triffid tendrils fanned
About arbiform airway unabated,
As vines wind, seasons turn as fated
and leaves will fall to cold tarmac
They will not grow back






Three Haiku, based on 'The Plague' by Albert Camus

By Morgan Brock, BSMS student

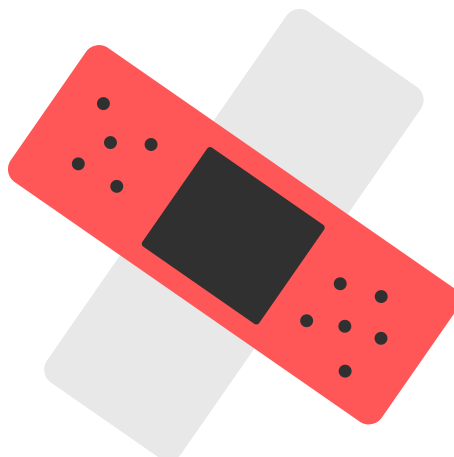
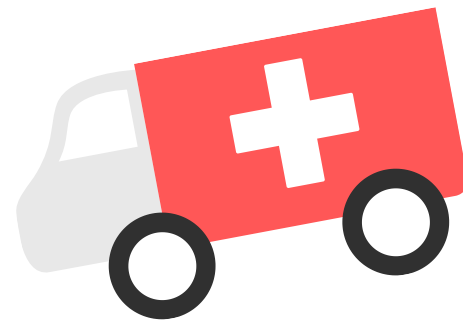


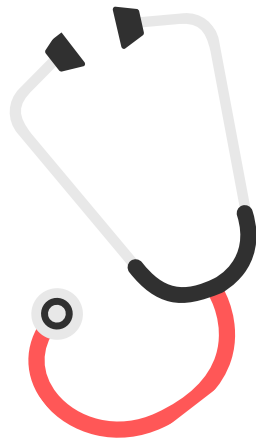
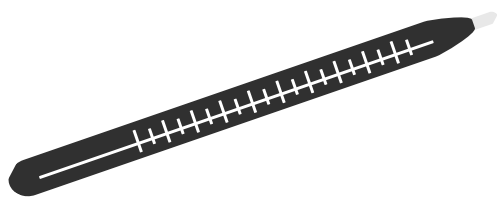
The pain I have seen;
I feel each death, each life fade.
But stand, disabled.

Pain seizes my life.
Pain of solitude and ill.
Won't someone hold me?



An inhumane death.
I made him suffer, weep and ail.
All for futile cures.





Depression

By Annabell Agate, BSMS student

This poem is dedicated to all people: healthcare professionals and patients who have suffered from mental health problems.

It was better until you came.
not even a knock at the door would
have warranted your entry

Leave as silently as you entered.
Mama said it will get better

But you wrote your own personal invite

You folded the card and tattooed a holiday home across the
back
And as you paced to the mail room
Clawing at the grey envelope

and mine on the return
And when it arrived, you unveiled your face as the courier
I didn't even have a post-box

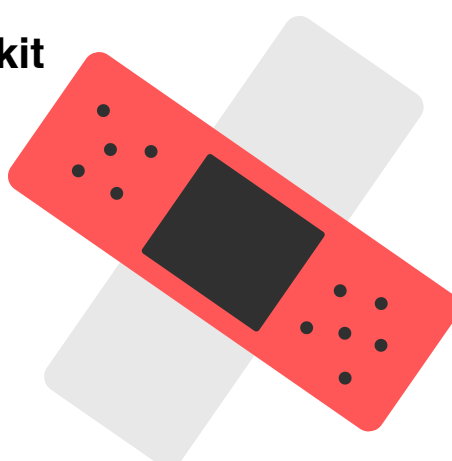
I'm so tired
You don't let me sleep as often

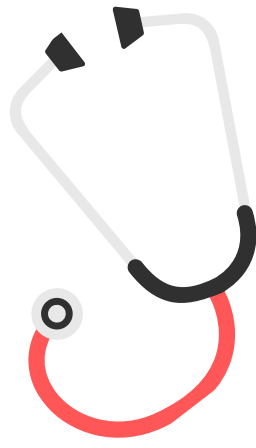
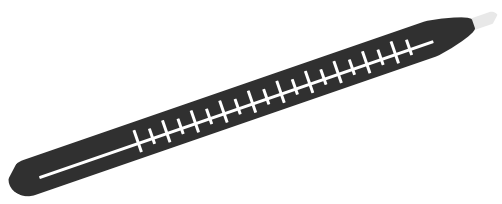
You've pushed him from the bed too
He would have slept on the couch
If it wasn't piled with tear jars and empty tissue boxes you
decided to collect
I want you to go

I never asked to be your national statistic
But I fear if you go

and the rest of me

@thepoetryfirstaidkit





Velcro

By Maddy Wood, BSMS student

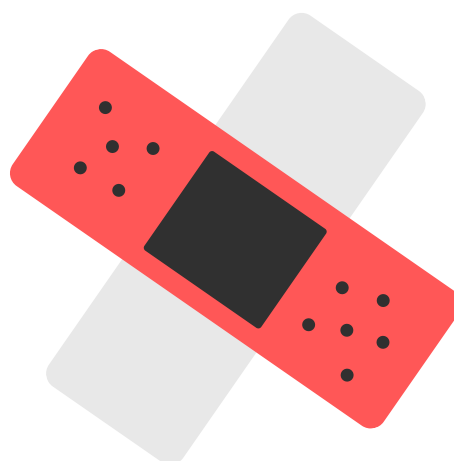
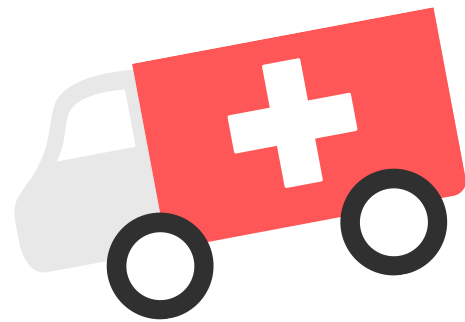
My idiopathic illness
Was pivotal to distinguishing my identity
Topography can't explain the velcro crackles
I feel, 50-80% of the time

I think my body is at least 10% velcro

Antibiotics don't help
Parallel lines of velcro all over me
Nausea, dyspepsia, diarrhea, cough
No doctor has any answers

They say it's called the patient journey


This style of poetry is called blackout poetry. It involves taking a piece of writing, in this case a scientific journal article, and blacking out words until you're left with words you'd like to create a poem from. In this case I circled the words I wanted to use for my poem, instead of blacking out words I didn't want. It was interesting to take a factual, scientific text and transform it into something else. Because this article is about pulmonary fibrosis, I wanted to shape my poem into a personal account of how it could feel to have this illness. The words 'crackles' and 'velcro' stood out to me, as they seemed quite removed from the formal tone of the article.





They fall in love with their reflection

By Dr Neil Singh, Senior General Practice Teaching Fellow
at BSMS and 'Poetry in Medicine' SSC lead




Mus musculus: the common house and laboratory mouse

He can't complain. Sterile
as a mule, he was designed
to stop running, break

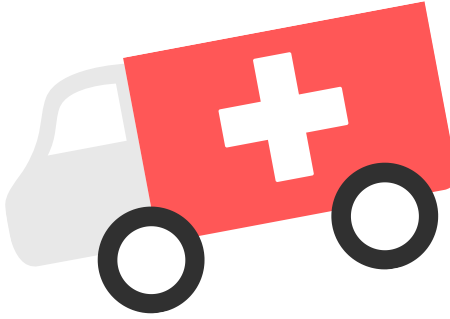
down, when gloved hands
infuse him with man-made
molecules. His death

will be timed to the nearest
minute, and until then
he pads a threadbare path



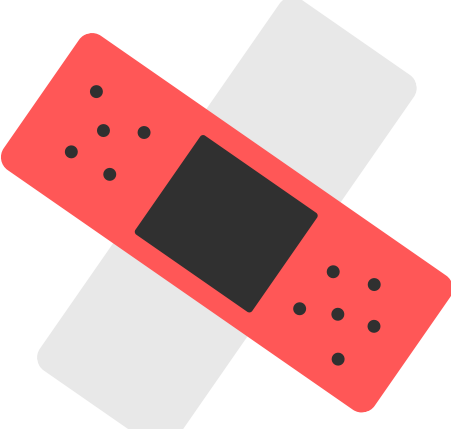
between two bowls – he feeds
ad libitum. He's a
monkey's uncle, a microcosm

but he will be remembered
only as a point on a graph.
Those who live in crystal balls



don't need their palms read:
he will be sick of being
sick until he is harvested.

He doesn't have a lot,
little enough to fit neatly
on a post-it note:

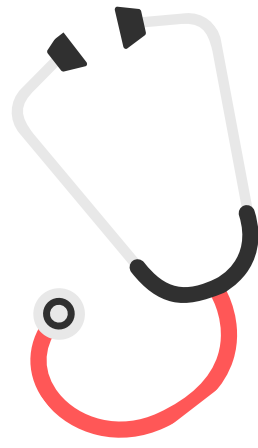
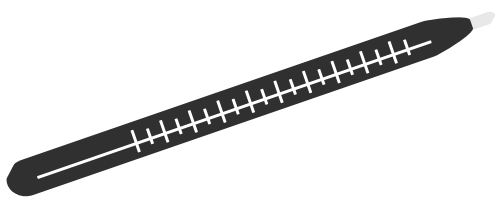


a name he cannot spell
an itch he cannot scratch
a run-down Ferris wheel
a friend who kisses back



@NeilSinghHQ

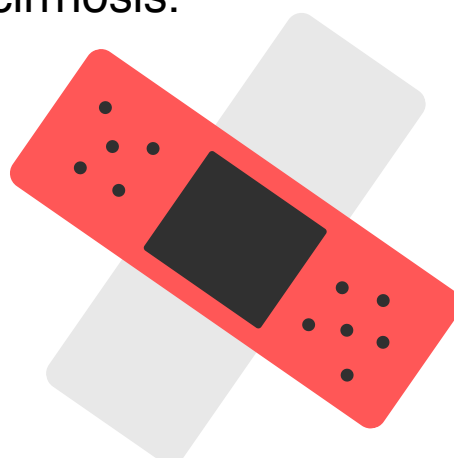
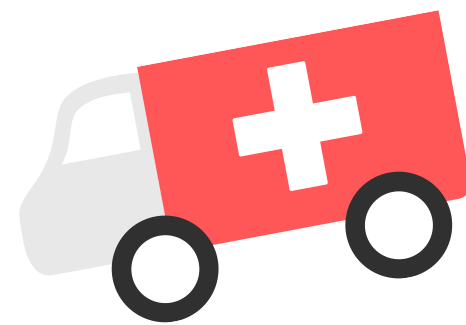


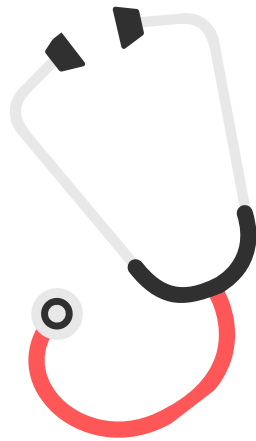
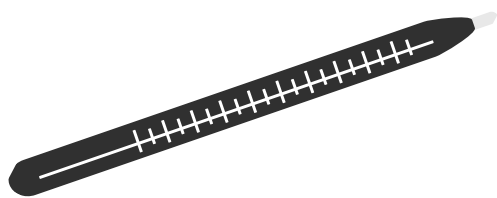


Decompensated liver disease

By Lopez Okhiai, BSMS student

The months are going by and my belly's getting big,
I don't even know what it is.
I'm feeling kind of bloated,
Fluid overloaded,
Yellowing of my sclera,
Sunrise in my eyes,
Now my third eye blind,
Cognition on rewind.
It's messing up my mental,
Out of sync with my own rhythm,
Corrupted instrumental,
Did I cause this demise or was it just an incidental?
And long time loved the bottle,
Liquid courage it was trouble,
Now I'm filled with a sea of pain deep in my side
Deep in my side and I'm not trying to die.
Let me set the scene,
Right now I can't rest,
couple hours past sunset,
Pain 11/10 at best,
I can't sleep,
Toss, turn, repeat,
Got an ache in my guts,
Its peak, real deep.
Initially I panicked, I need a cause for this damage.
Now I'm on the web,
Trying to find a differential diagnosis,
Family history of Wilson's disease,
Or haemochromatosis,
Are my electrolytes deranged?
Is this a metabolic acidosis?
But long loved the bottle
So maybe its cirrhosis.





Last smear

By Jackie Wills, local poet

Is there a quota of love for each of us, I wonder
on the examining bench, my question
something to do with how much rain has been falling,
and no-one next to me in bed. That rain has broken records.
A desire not to be alone is widespread in January.
Dating sites swell with singles. All ages and preferences.
When I bump into Sandra on Lewes Road she's adamant.
What does she need a smear for? She's given up sex.
I fill that space with a book. None of this passes
between me and the nurse (although our boots
are almost identical). She finishes, cheerful, that's it,
no more smears for you. It's been nearly forty years,
this protracted relationship with the speculum.
Is it already time for last things? Clouds rolling in, creamy,
pigeons taking advantage of the wind to curl and dive,
the phone line swaying to its own out-of-time lyrics.

From *A Friable Earth* (Arc Publications, 2019)

Jackie Wills has published six collections of poetry, short stories and non-fiction. She has been a journalist, editor, critic and tutor for more than 40 years.

jackiewillspoetry.blogspot.com

