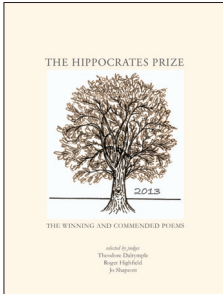


## Book

### Poems of perilous clarity



**The Hippocrates Prize 2013:  
the Winning and Commended  
Poems**

Selected by judges Theodore Dalrymple, Roger Highfield, and Jo Shapcott. Michael W Hulse, Donald RJ Singer, eds. The Hippocrates Press, 2013. £12.00. ISBN 9780957257115

Entries for the 2014 Hippocrates Prize for Poetry and Medicine close on Jan 31, 2014 see <http://hippocrates-poetry.org>

This slim, masterfully edited anthology is stern but not despairing. Uplift and consolation aren't the theme; rather, poem after poem offers clarity, courage, and above all attention. In the words of Roger Highfield, one of the panel of three excellent judges for the Hippocrates Prize, "Medicine is where science collides with life." In this zone of collision, a hard-won, perilous clarity casts a glow at once harsh and tender over scenes, situations, and memories that represent extremes of human experience.

As with any collection of work by different writers, these poems speak with different voices. Some give commands. Sue Wootton's lush, distressing "Wild" speaks with the voice of threatened nature: "Test me. How many tigers in my jungle,/ how many lions at roam? Map my rivers,/deltas, estuaries." Others apologise. Rafael Campo's "Morbidity and Mortality Rounds" humbly asks forgiveness of the "body before me": "Forgive me for/my stare, but when I look at you, I see/myself laid bare." Some pray. The first and last sonnets in Yakov Azriel's three-poem sequence "Cancer" turn in their final lines to God: "...but in the night, O Lord, my coming night,/please let me see the dawning of Your moon." Indeed, many of the poems here summon the focus and intensity of prayer even as divinity usually goes unmentioned.

The poems gathered here do more than depict waiting, watching, hoping, suffering; they seem to enact these experiences. In the unforgettable phrase of John Keats, who studied medicine at Guy's Hospital, such emotions are proven on the pulses of the lucky readers of these poems. No detail or association is too small or distant to merit mention. With a conviction that transcends memory, the poems

in their various ways salvage from oblivion a moment, a glimpse, a cry. Abby Chew's "Coughing" takes us into the room of the dying father: "There is no action in the wait. We all wait./We waste. We sit. We flinch. We try to sing.../I'm here with Brother. Standing, a pair of helmsmen." Peter Nash's "Tinnitus" loops us into the speaker's rapt attention to his companion: "You sleep with the fan on,/wind blowing your hair/as if you are in the pasture,/your forehead glowing/like a half moon in the night light./Watching each small rise and fall of the sheet/I listen for the slight noise you make/when you want an ice cube to suck."

**"Uplift and consolation aren't the theme; rather, poem after poem offers clarity, courage, and above all attention."**

In this rescue of past moments, time's arrow can point either way. Ann Elisabeth Gray's "Birds" moves from an origami construct back to a somber medical memory and forward again to the present: "Some things stay." Ann Lilian Jay's "Biopsy", on the other hand, starts with a specimen "trapped between glass slides" and glides backward: "It put me in mind of a fuchsia we had/Big fat globules, dripping their colour/From a basket by the front door,/That died at summer's end." Nick MacKinnon's "The Old Lady's Friend" recreates a moment with a precision reminiscent of the best of Robert Lowell: "I couldn't light my patients' teatime fags/with comfort-trolley matches till I learned/ some naval expertise, cupping a hand/against the headwind burling up Loch Gilp..." Derek John Peter Stanley's "Bomb" makes subtle use of line and stanza breaks to both amplify and qualify wrenching memories with

a gentleness more heartbreaking than graphic description could be: "and how I had to speak later/with your wife/your young wife./Of course this was all/a long time ago./A lifetime ago."

It isn't only memories and associations that are scooped from oblivion. Some of these poems recall words spoken. Perhaps because poems themselves are made of words, such recoveries seem to wield an extra weight of authority and truth. Jane Clarke's "Hands", a poem that begins with a dying father, ends, almost as an afterthought, with the words of another patient: "The farmer/in the next bed calls his dog/ through the night, Ben,/come back here, Ben, come back." But what an afterthought. Chris Bridge's "Gordon of the Prostate Ward" rescues the eponymous Gordon's voice from silence. Gordon cries out in the night "Can anybody hear me? Can anybody hear?" What follows should be engraved on the heart and brain of any health-care practitioner: "And suddenly the ward is full of pain/no analgesic calms. We start to list/the few who really hear us as we speak."

When these poems speak, we readers are the lucky listeners. We overhear as much as listen, I was going to write. But no; poems have the startling ability to float free of their occasions and transcend time and space. With its deceptively modest toolkit, poetry has always commanded this uncanny force. While the context of the poems expertly gathered in *The Hippocrates Prize* provides a particular focus, the power of the poems in this book can't be separated from the success with which the writers obey the laws of lyric art.

Rachel Hadas  
rhadas@andromeda.rutgers.edu