

## Poetry of PLME, AMS Students

The following poems express the creativity of The Brown Program in Liberal Medical Education Program (PLME) and Alpert Medical School (AMS) students.

### **RADICAL.** 2007, August

MARA FEINGOLD-LINK, MD'17

*"In 1980 the patient suffered from a right breast carcinoma. A total mastectomy was done, possibly a radical mastectomy."*

Radical: of or going to the root or origin.

Radical: thoroughgoing or extreme, especially as regards change from accepted or traditional forms

Radical: favoring drastic political, economic, or social reforms by direct and often uncompromising methods

In 1980, radical feminist Audre Lorde, (Radical feminism: a movement based on the belief that the power structure in society is the diffuse and male-dominated patriarchy, which works to oppress countless populations and individuals, including all women) published her memoir, *The Cancer Journals*, about her experience with breast cancer, from biopsy to mastectomy.

(Radical: losing a part of one's body.)

Lorde describes in detail

her vicious pain and the

excruciating process of recovery.

(Radical: speaking openly about one's body.)

(More radical: a woman speaking openly about her body.)

(Even more radical: a woman speaking openly and simultaneously about the pain, ugliness, horror, beauty, strength, and love of her body.)

That same year, Janice Robertson, who had never heard of Audre Lorde and would not have called herself a feminist, found a lump in her own breast that the doctors decided was malignant.

Her current doctor writes that she underwent a radical mastectomy,

(Radical mastectomy: surgical removal of the breast, underlying muscles, and lymph nodes in the axilla.) maybe.

(Radical: that neither the patient nor her doctor knows for sure what surgery she received.)

*Post-surgical checkup:*

What is the origin of the pain? asks the doctor.

The patriarchy, answers Audre Lorde.

I don't know; it's all over, answers Janice Robertson.

Can you point to it? asks the doctor.

I wish, answers Audre Lorde.

I wish, answers Janice Robertson.

### **WHITE**

ALEXANDRA WONG, PLME'18, MD'22

I hate white.

Paper.

The blank sheet in front of me mocks me, daring me to write something on it. Daring me to destroy the innocence, the purity of that flawless white. Daring me to besmirch perfection with the abstract smudges of graphite, or the dirtying blots of ink. Daring me to write something of worth – something worth butchering trees, something worth bleaching their natural splendor.

Snow.

The blizzard storm outside the window stops me, masking everything from my sight. Masking the warmth of a fire, the vitality of those flickering tongues. Masking the golden glow of the sun, or the silver shine of the moon. Masking anything of worth – anything worth seeing, anything worth noticing at all.

Four months ago, I never would have thought that I'd have to choose life or death for another person. Four months ago, I would've avoided this white, sterile room, this white, sterile bed, this white, sterile blanket.

This white, sterile person.

The blood is gone from his cheeks, once rosy and plump. The sparkle is gone from his eyes, once innocent yet penetrating. That was before a freak spell bubbled inside of him. The glow is gone from his skin, once radiant but soft.

Now, those specialists, resplendent in their white, clinical lab coats present me with a choice. A choice of life or death.

When I had my son, I was prepared. Prepared for the sleepless nights, the accidental magic, the energetic babbling. Prepared for the hair-color changing, the rebellious teens, the exploding food. I was happy to take those responsibilities. The bad came with the good, and I could find balance.

But this? The choice to encase him in a white, plastic tomb, still breathing, or to seal him into the earth, not breathing? What kind of a choice is that?

One spell. That's all it took: to seep into his veins and immobilize his nerves, throwing his natural chemical reactions into chaos. "Magic is just directed energy," they told me. I'm not stupid, I told them. Give me the science, and don't patronize me.

Silver-rimmed glasses slid down a nose, the eyes above it evaluating me. "Magically induced comas result from the blockage of the electrical signals of the nervous system. There are two types of such comas: one from an energy 'force field' blockage, the other from the disruption of electrical signals." He paused. A white, arched eyebrow. Continue, I said, my voice dead.

"Theoretically, to destroy the coma, you would break the force field or absorb the energy disruptions. But there aren't any therapies for that."

None? I ask mockingly, looking at this sheet of paper in front of me. No research papers published on the topic, their words and words of black meaninglessness?

"This spell," the white-haired man in front of me frowns. "It was painful. Spells like these augment the both the hormonal and electrical signaling in the nervous system. The magical energy tends to prefer the electrical side by exciting the electrons, although it also adds to the activation energy for the binding of neurotransmitters. Unfortunately, this spell wasn't developed well, so the curse isn't very stable. The magical energy wasn't a concentrated, controlled emotion, like normal incantations. With all of that extra magic bouncing around inside of him, it was almost a form of radiation, and it spread all across his body."

What do you get, when you combine radiation and spreading?

The dull beeping of monitors replaces the cracks of gunshots. Chemotherapy drugs and radiation treatments replace the last resort of the hydrogen bomb. The cancer cells are the terrorists, and the hospital bed is the battlefield.

Cancer.

That white tumorous mass. Growing inside of him, sucking out the warmth from his blood, the strength from his muscles, the life from his body.

The light from his eyes.

One cell. That's all it took: to replicate unregulated and

spread across his limbs, destroying every healthy part in its path.

When I learned of my son's powers, I thought that magic could solve everything. With a muttered incantation, it should have evaporated the tumor in the blink of an eye. Apparently, magic doesn't work like that. Not biologically.

What use was magic, then?

What choice is this?

Four months, the specialists gave me. Four months that he could run around, smashing his toy cars together and smiling that beautiful baby smile. Four months for him to chase the blue jays flitting about our backyard, to inspect the creatures dancing on the water's surface in our neighborhood creek. Four months for me to say goodbye.

Three pieces of paper for me to read. Three pieces of paper to sign.

Two days to decide to keep him on life support, or to let him go.

Let him go? How could you possibly ask a mother to let her son go? When he's just begun his life, his new eyes barely taking in the rainbows of colors and shapes in the beautiful world we live in? When he hasn't learned the pressures of middle school, the pains of a broken heart, the happiness of a healed one? How could you ask a mother to snuff out her child's life? How could you?

How could you?

One signature, and it was done.

One name.

Bianca.

They unhook him from all of the machines, removing the tubes that kept him entangled in this white, barren battlefield.

It took three breaths.

Two blinks.

One smile.

Snow.

And yet, the flakes of water sprinkled across your eyelashes can be the most delicate blur to see. A perfectly ordinary substance changed, sculpted, assembled. A crystal, flawlessly formed with its microscopic beauty, and its sparkling structure.

Paper.

And yet, the dark symbols on a piece of perfect paper can be the most satisfying work to see. The culmination of hours of emotion, of heart, of soul. A bubble, capturing the very essence of a person's existence, or a person's imagination.

I hate white.

**MATTERING**

ZOE WEISS, PLME'12 SCB HUMAN BIOLOGY  
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I think I've forgotten how to write.

Poised above a keyboard reaching for just one of  
a dozen thoughts each darting by –

gray and intangible,  
as if my focus could not  
— hold —

to capture even a single frame.

So here I am, armed with a *third* cup of coffee,  
a pile of half-opened deliberations  
creased into bookmarks, tucked into a wide white pocket  
writing about how I cannot write anymore.

My fingers — charmed into self-assurance  
Tracing intersecting stains into perfect rings  
As if to *reassure* the wood

It's not that I used to have such profound thoughts  
and suddenly have deadened.

On the contrary

they were *more-often-than-not*

tritely existential, too proudly compassionate  
written with the candor of a young scholar balancing  
cynicism, optimism, and reason,

Animated by the notion that I may consider what  
does or doesn't matter,  
about the meaning of mattering,  
and the *mattering of mattering*.

Until I have been immersed in mattering,

By a role most inconsequential.

Un-pretty-un-poetic- awkward-flustering-  
nearly-always-lost

Watching the rise and fall of a rounded baby belly, shaken  
into cerebral oblivion,

jarred by the shrill of the monitor remembering

Awed by toddlers whose bones break and bend and bruise

Begging for a sticky purple popsicle

Who become children chasing cars into streets and out of trees;

To teenagers whose dark eyes cast nooses as they roll,

Into young mothers, hair pulled tight,

Too thin or too thick, painted with worry,

lipstick, and cigarette smoke,

A sleeping number to the hip, another tugging,  
screaming at her shirt,

Dulled by paint chips, cockroaches

coughing on air heavy with smoke and  
smog and violence.

I think those are things that matter.

But here I am, and wordless, paging through manuals

Dense with impressive language, surely

I should find a formula,

Highly regarded, double blinded, multiphasic, systematic

Explaining this hierarchy of mattering

Fashioned from rules spun by egos, debt and deprivation,

Transiently occupied by people named "the ruptured  
spleen" and the "epidural in room two."

Here is where I begin forgetting.