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What Sick Looks Like: Concrete Poems and the 2025 Michael E. DeBakey Medical Student Poetry Awards

POET'S PEN

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ABSTRACT

The Michael E. DeBakey Medical Student Poetry Contest is now in its 22nd year. Previous winners have contributed greatly to the medical humanities, and this year's awardee is sure to follow in their footsteps. Ursula Gately, a third-year medical student at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, won the 2025 first-place prize with "Seesaw"—a concrete poem that explores the heartbreaking vacillation between a patient's personal and clinical details during moments of crisis. Her writing does great credit to the tradition of physician poetry so revered by Dr. DeBakey, in whose honor the contest continues to recognize the impactful convergence of medical care and medical humanities.

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SEESAW

Jaundiced eyes fall from half-mast to closed

He has two kids (45, 32)

Legs ballooned with fluid

Happily married, 50+ years

Jugular vein distended at 30°

Bologna sandwich at noon each day

Matching 16-gauge IVs in each arm

Crown Royal on the rocks with dinner

Endotracheal tube tethered to airflow, FiO_2 at 100%

Retired from the dockyards in 2019

The ventilator lifts his abdomen, his chest dragged inward

A card-carrying member of Local 47

Catheter tracing the side of the bed, a delicate spiderweb of cords

Guilty pleasure: a pack of Newports

Transfer board rigid beneath him and STAT X-ray glowing overhead

Here last for his grandson's birth

Blood pressure slipping, MAP no longer registering, heart rate fixed at 130 bpm.

Back too soon.

"Burn this into your brain. *This* is what sick looks like."
The PCCM fellow tells me.

I hover at the foot of the bed,
learning where to stand.

His daughter is on the phone at his side.
The chaplain on-call has been paged,
now waiting behind us at the door.
Pressors climb.
The nurse manages alarms without looking up.
Monitors rapidly beeping, then still.

PPE comes off.

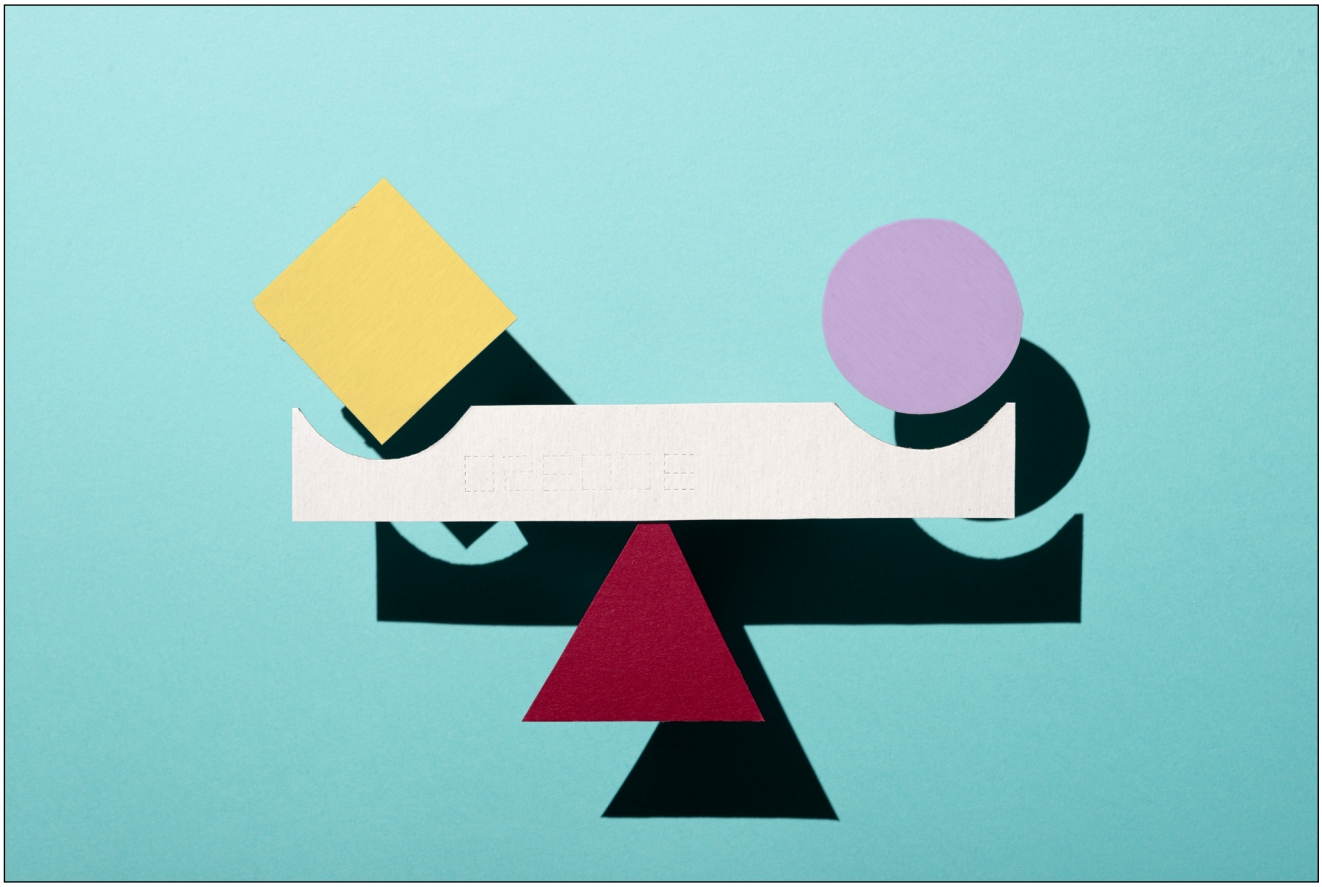
Everyone else works in perfect unison,
certain of their role.

What remains of him fits on a single line.

Ursula Gately, 2025. Used by permission of the author.

COMMENTARY

Each spring, Baylor College of Medicine announces the winners of its medical student poetry contest, which is held annually in honor of Dr. Michael E. DeBakey. The top prize for 2025 was awarded to Ursula Gately, a third-year medical student at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. Her poem "Seesaw" shows the captivating intersection between concrete poetry and narrative medicine, leading readers to consider her patient's social determinants of health alongside the medical details of his deterioration. It is a stunning piece worthy of this award and affirms the continued importance of poetry in clinical practice.



Dr. DeBakey was a pioneering cardiovascular surgeon with a deep passion for the medical humanities. A review of the DeBakey Archives held at the National Library of Medicine reveals dozens of poems that he was known to expound upon during afternoon rounds,[1] including a curated list of "A Few Physician Poets"[2] in whose footsteps the contest's winners are poised to follow. These honorees have hailed from eminent universities across the country, from Harvard to Stanford and from Case Western to Emory. Gately became the second contest winner from Johns Hopkins with this piece, which is her first published work of creative writing. Though she is currently undecided as to which specialty to pursue, her intention is to build a career in urban health at the intersection of clinical care and community advocacy. To that end, she has demonstrated a continued commitment to the advancement of public health through academic scholarship and her work with Medicine for the Greater Good, an initiative to train community health workers in the Baltimore area.

Gately's creative influences are many, including the narrative writing of Suleika Jaouad and the poetry of Dr. Rafael Campo. "Seesaw" was particularly impacted by the latter author's ability to capture the dehumanization that can occur as clinical care escalates. The piece is an example of concrete poetry, a form that uses the shape of words on the page to expand its meaning. It gained popularity in the 1960s but was predated by other visual works like E.E. Cummings' abstract grasshopper poem and "The Mouse's Tale" from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.[3] Perhaps James Merrill's "Christmas Tree" draws the most recent and relevant comparison, as the poem's subject becomes a metaphor of mortality and its lines are distributed in the form of its title in a manner similar to that which "Seesaw" has taken.

Though her career is still in its nascency, Gately begins with a well-earned recognition of her creative writing and may take inspiration from the path of the twenty-one DeBakey winners who have preceded her. Each would surely have earned commendation from the contest's namesake and will make a worthy addition to any reader's list of "A Few Physician Poets." "Seesaw" is a memorable piece within the subgenre of illness poetry, effective in its delivery and its ability to show "what sick looks like" in more manners than one. It is a fine example of the concrete form and how it may be used as an additional tool in connecting with readers, amplifying a poem's message and the words an author uses to portray it.

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US Army, US Navy, US Air Force, the Department of Defense, the US Government, or Houston Methodist Hospital.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Dr. Young is a member of the editorial board of the Journal, serving on a voluntary basis. The other authors have no competing interests to declare.

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