



William Carlos Williams Poetry Competition Celebrates Medical Student and Physician Poets

Rachel Conrad Bracken¹

Received: 18 August 2026 / Accepted: 19 August 2026
© The Author(s) 2026

Keywords Poetry · Poetry competition · William Carlos Williams · Physician writer

Northeast Ohio Medical University (NEOMED)’s annual poetry competition was named for and envisioned in the spirit of the iconic American poet and pioneering patient-centered physician William Carlos Williams. It honors his legacy by celebrating contemporary clinician writers—both medical students and established practitioners—whose work illustrates the art of medicine and the dynamic interplay of health care and the humanities. An influential poet in the imagist movement in modernist art and literature, Williams’ poetry is appreciated for its stark minimalism and vivid attention to the details of early twentieth-century life, particularly in the working-class neighborhoods outside of New York City where he practiced medicine. While Williams at times struggled to balance his desire to write with the demands of his medical practice, his medical career afforded him the financial freedom to write, as well as the inspiration for poems jotted down on prescription blanks in the breaks between patient visits.

Each of the past 44 years, NEOMED has recognized exceptional medical student poetry by awarding first-, second-, and third-place prizes, as well as honorable mentions, to students enrolled in a medical degree program in the US, Puerto Rico, or Canada. Having begun under the leadership of Drs. Delese Wear and Martin Kohn in 1982, NEOMED’s William Carlos Williams poetry competition is the oldest running poetry competition for medical students in the United States. The competition introduced a new category for physician poets in 2025, welcoming submissions from any rank of physician (MD or DO) at any career stage, from residency to retirement, in North America.

Judges from the CSU Poetry Center evaluated poems submitted by more than 200 students and 50 physicians to select winning pieces on the merits of craft, originality, and content. In addition to publication in *Journal of Medical Humanities*, the top three student awardees and first-place physician winner were honored at an awards ceremony at the John P. Murphy Symposium in Medical Humanities, hosted by the Medical Humanities program at the Cleveland Clinic Learner College of Medicine. NEOMED’s Department of Family and

✉ Rachel Conrad Bracken
rbracken@neomed.edu

¹ Department of Family and Community Medicine, Northeast Ohio Medical University, Ravenna, United States

Community Medicine and the Oak Badge in Medical Humanism, funded by an anonymous donor, provided both financial and administrative support for the awards ceremony.

First place in the student competition was awarded to Dr. Safi Alsebai for his poem “The Passion According to a Citizen of Geneva.” Dr. Alsebai graduated from the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences in Little Rock, Arkansas in spring 2026. His poem questions the rhetoric of sentimentality in the clinic and the preconditions of speaking for and with others. Its focal point is a series articulated desires spoken by a physician-narrator, culminating in a recitation from the medical communications literature: “I wish the news were better.” “This poem’s repetitions and revelations create a wonderful experience of mystery, irony, and mourning,” the judges reflect. “Within one short poem, the poet considers how medical practice relies on power, and how a practitioner must somehow come to terms both with that power and with its limits.” This poem is the basis of an ongoing project on what Alsebai calls “the clinical wish.” Kiran Masroor, a student at Duke University School of Medicine, was the second-place student winner. Her poem, “Interrupted Connection,” recalls a late-night Uber ride in which, as the judges note, “a conversation about the driver’s pride in his daughter uproots the speaker’s earned suspicion of others.” Third place was awarded to Andrea Abi-Karam for the poem “VISCERAL SOUNDFORM,” which merges a critique of weapons manufacturing with the study of anatomy and the experimental film *Line Describing a Cone* by Anthony McCall. “Through dense, corporeal imagery and shifting temporal registers,” the judges write, “the poem renders the body as a shared, unstable space. Andrea is the author of *EXTRATRANSMISSION* (Kelsey Street Press, 2019), *Villainy* (Nightboat Books, 2021), and with Kay Gabriel, they co-edited *We Want It All: An Anthology of Radical Trans Poetics* (Nightboat Books, 2020). An honorable mention was awarded to Liahm Blank, a student at the Kirk Kerkorian School of Medicine in Las Vegas, Nevada for the poem “Noncompliance.”

The first-place award in the 2026 physician competition went to Dr. Matthew Dettmer for the poem “That Night,” which the judges describe as a “vivid, devastating poem [that] refuses punctuation, or any pause for breath or relief, as it renders a patient’s escalating crisis.” Born in Northern California and raised in the Middle East, Dr. Dettmer has called many places home. He currently resides in Northeast Ohio where he is a critical care physician and poet. Second place was awarded to K. Hari, a physician and poet of Tamil descent, whose work explores embodied heritage, inevitable harm, and poetic formalism as a means of healing, for the poem “Abruption Ghazal.” She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from New York University and is a practicing obstetrician-gynecologist in Queens, New York. Dr. Liana Meffert won third place in the 2026 physician competition for the poem “I Call Poison Control.” An emergency medicine physician in Wisconsin, her essays and poetry explore the intersection of clinical practice and human experience.

Winners of the annual William Carlos Williams poetry competition have been published in *Journal of Medical Humanities* since 2005, and it is an honor to continue to share the 2026 winners with readers in this venue. The competition remains enthusiastically received and nationally renowned, and we welcome interested students and physicians to consider submitting to the academic year 2026–2027 competition. For submission details, eligibility criteria, and to submit online, please visit NEOMED’s William Carlos Williams poetry competition webpage. Contact wcw@neomed.edu with any questions or for additional information.

Author Contribution The manuscript was authored entirely and solely by Rachel Conrad Bracken.

Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.