

To Freedom:

A Poetic Exploration of Trauma and Injustice in Obstetrics & Gynecology

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BACKGROUND

There is a strong historical precedent for the connection between medicine and poetry. Beyond the very well-known (white cis-male) poets writing in the 19th and 20th centuries, doctors have continued to read, write and share poetry across generations. However, while the poems written by contemporary physicians frequently reflect on patient interactions and explore conceptions of health, illness, death and dying, there is not an established body of poetic work that deals specifically with pregnancy, miscarriage, abortion and birth. Additionally, although obstetrics and gynecology is often thought of as a field focused on birth and beginnings, there is also a lot of trauma and tragedy in this realm of medicine that is not frequently articulated in narrative discourse.

OBJECTIVE

Motivated by my personal interests in ob-gyn and palliative care and drawing on my own clinical experiences, I aimed to write a collection of poems that explore, examine and reflect on patient and physician experiences of morbidity and mortality in the setting of ob-gyn, and call attention to the reproductive health crises we face as a society.

METHODS

1. Read in select contemporary poetry, both non-medical and medical focus
2. Gather material on sub-i's in gyn oncology, high-risk pregnancy, and family planning
3. Participate in form-specific workshop(s)
4. Draft poems based on gathered material and synthesis with new learned forms
5. Revise poems in revision workshop
6. Submit poems for prizes and publication

Time of Death

The code team calls it as you kneel on the floor
beside her crumpled parachute body, fetus a still

suspended doll. They suck air out of her lungs
with a clear blue balloon as you sprint backwards

down the corridor, STAT page quiet as a knell.
Her heart pumps the smack back into the syringe

and she pulls the borrowed needle from her arm,
lowers it into the sharps box like a baby just born.

You hunch at a computer in the workroom as the day
finally begins, forgetting everything she's told you

about wanting to get better. Screen brightening
as you delete the stories of illness, letter by letter.

Ode to Freedom

to the one whose mom thinks she's on a field trip
to the one who watched YouTube all through the ultrasound
to the one who won't disclose their pronouns
to the seventeen year old and the forty-seven year old
to the one who wants to know if the remains will be buried in the earth
to the one who hugged me goodbye as though we were sisters
to the one with the Hello Kitty sweatshirt (XL to hide the bump)
to the one whose cousin drove her all night and slept in the parking lot
to the one with the 4-month old and the unforgiving god
to the one who came back for the black and white printout
to the one with the grocery bag full of fresh clementines and silent tears
to the one whose mom walked her to the door
to the one who walked to the door alone
to the one who left three times and came back twice
to the one who made small talk in the waiting room
to the one who leaned in outside the hospital to be gathered in my arms
without knowing my name

Cite as: 597 U. S. ____ (2022)

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Opinion of the Court

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SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

No. 19–1392

THOMAS E. DOBBS, STATE HEALTH OFFICER OF
THE MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
ET AL., PETITIONERS *v.* JACKSON WOMEN'S
HEALTH ORGANIZATION, ET AL.

ON WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF
APPEALS FOR THE FIFTH CIRCUIT

[June 24, 2022]

a profound

end

body

invades a

Family Planning

*It's okay to feel sad about abortions,
the doctor says as she rinses
the steel tray clean, and still do them.*

RESULTS

Workshops and skills:

- Participated in erasure and found poetry workshop through The Poetry Barn
- Participated in revision and growth workshop through The Speakeasy Project

Erasure and found poetry:

- *Majority Opinion*
- *On the Rise*
- *Proclamation*

Short forms:

- *Bleeding at Six Weeks*
- *California*
- *Family Planning*

Other:

- *Active Shooter Drill at the Abortion Clinic*
- *Hospital Day Fifty-One*
- *Ode to Freedom*
- *poem from my uterus*
- *Protocol for Crying*
- *Time of Death*
- *War*

DISCUSSION

This project has evolved and morphed in crucial ways – most significantly, in response to the Supreme Court ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson* in June 2022. Over the past year, the reproductive health crisis looming largest for me, for my specialty and for our society as a whole turned out to be a crisis of reproductive justice. As the field of ob-gyn politicized around me, I channeled that political energy into poems that I hope begin to articulate experiences of trauma and loss around the violation of our human rights, and also call to account not only our opponents in their oppression, but also ourselves, in our fight for reproductive freedom.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am enormously grateful to my project mentor, Dr. Louise Aronson, for shepherding me through this year with care, accountability, and always-excellent questions. Many thanks also to my DCR cohort of fellow narrative medicine Deep Explorers for their feedback and support. Finally, I have profound respect and gratitude for the patients and clinicians whose experiences are depicted in these poems.