

'the prescription' Prizes in Creative Writing 2023

The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow

POETRY CATEGORY

Winner: AC Clarke

Item from the heritage collection: [Cupping set, c.1850. Ref: 2005/4](#)

Phlebotomist, old-style

*Acne, asthma, cancer, cholera,
coma, convulsions,
diabetes, epilepsy, gout,
herpes, indigestion, insanity,
jaundice, leprosy, ophthalmia,
plague, pneumonia, scurvy, smallpox, stroke* –*

an alphabet of ailments to be treated
with his box of tricks:
glasses, twelve-bladed scarifier, spirit torch
stashed in a handsome case which he'll flip open
at the drop of a hint.

He'll probe a plump arm
for an entry point.
First the torch to the glass
then the glass to the skin.
After the glass, the cutting.
After the cutting, the draining.
After the draining the cauterizing.
Hartshorn if need be to ward off faintness.

A steady hand is wanted, adroit fingers.
On cupping days
he'll not take strong drink.

Amazing how a little bloodletting
can set a patient up.

Some days he'll cup a dozen arms – good money
his patients never flinch from handing over:
such an expensive treatment must do good.

After each use the blade is cleaned and oiled.
If gangrene threatens more cuts will be needed.

In the last resort
he'll try leeches.
Claims he's never lost a patient.

*Among the ailments listed as treatable by bloodletting in a nineteenth century British medical text according to a Wikipedia article on this topic at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bloodletting>