

POETRY | Fall 2019

## **Chronic Black Excellence**

By Michael Arnold

A hundred years ago, Abraham Flexner  
Eulogized Black medicine.  
The ink in his pen tattooed  
A sleeve on the arm of systemic racism.  
The idea that screamed off his report  
And echoed the loudest throughout history  
Was the notion that Black medicine  
Was fundamentally inadequate.  
For the last century, Black medicine  
Has been self-medicating with Black excellence.  
A treatment plan that may be just as bad  
As the prevailing social illness.  
Black excellence is a poisoned apple,  
Being eaten by a Trojan Horse.  
Side effects may include:  
Elitist attitudes, reactionary logic  
Burnout, brunch addiction  
And respectability politics  
The siren song of Black excellence  
Has veered us completely off course.  
It's a self-appointed pedestal that  
Makes us look down on the  
People that we dreamed of healing.  
It makes us want to walk away  
From the neighborhoods that

Raised us and never look back.  
Black excellence is a blade on  
The tongue of Horatio Alger's descendants;  
White people who will cut and paste  
Your story into anecdotal evidence  
That absolves them of their privilege.  
Black excellence is a weight that actively  
Compresses our humanity,  
Erasing the mere possibility  
Of us being normal, regular or average.  
It erases the relief of mediocrity  
That many of our white colleagues  
Comfortably enjoy during their careers.  
Who is Black excellence for exactly?  
What's the message we are trying to send?  
Who are we sending it to?  
Are we trying to claim that we are better  
Than the Black people who lifted us up  
High enough to access the white-dominated  
Space called Western medicine?  
Are we trying to signal that we  
Are one of the "good ones"?  
Is it an attempt to exorcise the demons  
Of ever-haunting stereotypes?  
Or is it just our insecurities  
Crying out, wanting desperately  
For white people to finally believe  
That we are adequate?

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**Michael Arnold is a Canton, Ohio native who is currently a second-year medical student at OUHCOM. He became enamored by the power of narrative medicine shortly after joining The Open Book Project on the Cleveland campus of his medical school. The radical vulnerability fundamental to putting his truths on paper has provided him with an invaluable emotional outlet while he navigates the medical field. In the future, Arnold is interested in exploring the intersection of preventative family medicine, public health and social justice.**

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