

FM REVIEW 2014 7 COMMENTS

I find it a troubling poem, and I have very mixed feelings about pursuing it. The actual writing, while not wonderful, is not bad. I am more concerned about the ethical issues involved, per a recent passionate discussion on the ASBH listserv about physician writing that attempts to be compassionate (in that case, about an obese patient) but contains all sorts of judgments about the patient.

This poem (which I think is written by a medical student), does this in spades. It is "honest," and not cautious, and I like that the student is able to share her genuine feelings. However, as reviewer 2 also astutely points out, this authenticity leads to it being riddled with negative judgments toward the patient: "I imagined how you must have lived,/Smoking and drinking anything you could." "I didn't like you." "You asked him why he hadn't brought you a bottle./That didn't make me like you more." "I think you needed it [my prayer]". It is more doctor-centered than patient-centered – e.g., the one time the student's heart softens in when the patient expresses concern for her; and her decision to "pray" for this patient comes across as possibly arrogant.

I am sure that this student is "speaking her truth," and as above I respect this. I also know that such feelings are not uncommon. From this perspective, I feel they merit an airing. Yet, per the ASBH discussion, I am sensitive to the "positive power" of publication, which can often seem like an endorsement of a particular viewpoint or conclusion. As reviewer 2 says, this poem would make for some wonderful discussions with students and residents, which could bring to light some of these issues of judgment and stereotyping. But I worry that, on its own, it glorifies the somewhat patronizing, condescending aspects of this student's attitude, justifies her dislike for her patient, and its bottom-line is just too pat and self-congratulatory. I don't think the solution is to ask her to rewrite the poem deleting these phrases. Her dislike, judgment, and condescension are the heart of the poem. I don't think that the student fully gets that; and so, while it would be a great teaching tool, will it be a good poem to publish?

This is a conundrum for me. I'd really value both your opinion. Best, Johanna

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR: This is a very well-written, bluntly honest portrayal of the narrator's ambivalent feelings toward an alcoholic, smoker patient dying of head and neck cancer. We appreciated the sincerity of the poem, and think it reflects the feelings of many medical students and learners (and perhaps experienced clinicians as well). As such, we can easily imagine it being beneficially used as a teaching tool for both medical students and residents.

There are several aspects to the poem that read as quite judgmental (which of course may be your point), but we would like you to think about these lines to ensure that they express your intention. Two such examples are "I imagined how you must have lived/Smoking and drinking anything you could" and "You asked him why he hadn't brought you a bottle/That didn't make me like you more."

Another similar line is "I said a prayer for you/I think you needed it" which could convey a sense of your superiority to the patient – i.e., you are in a position to pray for his soul.

As well, as reviewer 1 points out, the time when you feel most sympathetic toward the patient is when he is showing empathy for you. We are not asking you to rewrite these lines per se, which would seem to threaten the narrative authenticity of the poem, but to consider them from the perspective of seeing them in print. Finally, we would like you to know that, if the poem is ultimately accepted for publication, we would like to provide a commentary pointing out different ways of reading this poem and how they implicate issues of power and perspective in medicine.

Whatever you decide to do with this particular poem, we urge you to keep writing. Your work shows evidence of good wordsmithing and you have already formulated a strong and distinctive voice.

COMMENTS TO EDITOR II: This is one of the better poems we've received, especially from a student. The author has paid careful attention to a lot of very detailed - and to some degree, critical - feedback and has meticulously either revised the poem or offered a compelling rationale why she wants to retain her original language. I'd like to give her a final opportunity to revise the last line, which I think comes across as rather patronizing, but in the end she is the author and the poem must read the way she wants it to read.

I do think, as we discussed at some point, this poem would make a wonderful addition to the issue focusing on "difficult" patient interactions. I also think it could benefit from a brief editorial comment about the delicate balance between authorial authenticity and portraying a patient who has no voice in the process, especially when the work is going to appear in published form (as opposed, for example, to a classroom reflective writing exercise).

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR II: Thank you for the obvious care and thought you've put into this revision. The revised poem softens some of the language that could have been misconstrued as judgmental and condescending, while still retaining an authenticity about the ambivalent feelings you had for this patient.

I am still struggling with the last line. I understand your explanation (it is intended to mean you hope he received the benefits of prayer rather than your prayer itself) but to me it reads as if, in your opinion, he is certainly in need of prayer. I wonder if you could figure out some way to keep the focus on yourself, i.e., something along the lines "I still wanted to do something. That was all that was left." Anyway, you are the poet, so please think about a way to make this poem about yourself, rather than the patient, which I think is its main point