

FM REVIEW 2017 37 COMMENTS

COMMENTS TO EDITOR: This poem (I think!) tells a story of a woman who has just lost her mother traveling across town by bus to make her baby's medical appointment. None of the reviewers were enthusiastic, and one, who did not find the poem emotionally engaging, recommended outright rejection. The others thought there was "something there" but agreed the story was incoherent and the images often confusing non sequiturs. I'm going out on a limb, recommending that we give the author a chance to revise his work and "do better." I give several concrete suggestions below about ways in which he can improve this submission.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR: Thank you for this poem. I think (!) it tells a story of a woman who has just lost her mother traveling across town by bus to make her baby's medical appointment. It has many evocative images but in the view of reviewers does not cohere into a meaningful whole. Readers felt it was too obscure and abstruse, and they could not follow what was happening. Below I summarize concerns stanza by stanza and how these might be addressed.

In stanza 1, did somebody die (grandma?)? If this is so important (maybe it sheds light into the sorrows and burdens patients and their families carry with them into the exam office?), there needs to be some way to circle back to it toward the end. Otherwise, this stanza seems detached from the rest of the poem. What is the significance of the prodigal son? Does this have some connection to the baby? Why overgrown firethorn? Again, if these connect in some way (a window?), help us understand why that window matters.

In stanza 2, I think you could delete the phrase "a universe of determination/ and its inverse." I like the universe/inverse echo, but it is too clever, and detracts from the mother's suffering.

Stanza 3 is bleak, but also confusing. I read it as mom's arrival at a rather heavily protected healthcare clinic. Why is it so fortress-like? Is this a reflection of violence in the surrounding community? What sort of appointment? Why an "agent"? Is that really the correct term?

Stanza 4 is too abstract, and as a result, a jarring about-face. I understand it to mean that the clinic can become a safe, welcoming place, but I recommend conveying that through clearer images. It is definitely a necessary transition to the redemptive 5th stanza, but in its present form it doesn't do the work required of it.

The ending couplet is strong - straightforward and pithy.

Overall, I think the poem requires a major overhaul to achieve its potential. Especially for this journal, even poetry needs to be clear enough so that the reader ends up moved rather than puzzled. Please

see if you can find a way to refine the images so that they reveal a journey the reader can more easily grasp.

COMMENTS TO EDITOR II: The author obviously put a lot of effort into this revision. It is a lot clearer what is happening in this poem. It is more narrative, and tells a story, which I think will make it easier for readers to follow. Much of the obscure and overly clever language has been eliminated. The opening is still not very interesting (it sounds like a case note), and there is another stanza in particular that is somewhat confusing and awkward in its execution. I request that the author continue to work on these.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR II:

Thank you for what was obviously a lot of hard work invested in this rewrite. The poem is much clearer and more narrative, which will make it easier for readers to follow. Thank you for eliminating obscure references and overly clever wordplay.

There remain a couple of problems that I think can be addressed fairly easily.

1) The opening stanza is not very compelling. It reads more like a case note - the first two lines are rather abstract and academic, and the next two lines seem informational rather than emotionally gripping. On the other hand, the potential of the "windows" theme, which should be the organizing principle of the poem, goes untapped in this stanza. In the attached, I suggest a way to bring in "windows" and also YOU, as otherwise although the narrator, you seem strangely absent until the last stanza.

2) The 4th stanza is somewhat awkwardly worded.

a) The allusion to the station agent to me is confusing. I am used to thinking of this term in relation to train stations, not bus stations. Could you work in the word "bus" while still keeping the rhythm of the poem? I will leave this to your judgment.

b) The shift between past and present tense is jarring. I understand that you are using past tense to represent the mom telling her story, and the present tense to indicate the immediacy of your encounter (thus, you start off the poem with the involving phrase: "She tells me..." If you choose to add the earlier reference to "windows," I think it will help with this sense of dislocation.

c) Finally, because of this interjection of "windows/opportunities," the reference to "he" seems unclear (I assume it is the station agent). Please take a look at this stanza and see if there are ways to improve the flow.

The last stanza remains terrific. With a little more work, the rest of the poem will fall into line.

COMMENTS TO EDITOR: I read this poem as being about the courage of all those who leave home to seek a better life for themselves and their children; and the importance of a helping hand, in this case

outstretched by a caring family physician. The poem also makes evocative use of the metaphor of windows as opportunities. The author has done a good job of rewriting the opening stanza to make it less clinical and more involving. He has also simplified aspects of the poem such as confusing terminology and the use of different tenses, that distracted from the overall effectiveness. There remain a few very minor issues about word choice and punctuation. Once these are resolved, I recommend we accept this poem for publication.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR: Thank you for these conscientious and creative revisions. The opening stanza is much more involving, while also clarifying your role in relation to your patient, and the impetus for her journey.

I am suggesting a few more extremely small changes which I think will improve the overall flow and clarity of the poem (see attached). As poets, we are indefatigable wordsmiths, always seeking that perfect word. In pursuit of those perfect words, please consider the following:

- 1) There is one case where it seems to me you mean "and" or "so" rather than "but"; and another instance where "yet" could simply be eliminated.
- 2) In rereading the poem, I felt after the initial use of "she said," this phrase was unnecessary. By removing it you will tighten up the poem.
- 3) Finally, on revisiting the piece, I felt the punctuation (commas, periods, semi-colon) were not needed and distracted from the flow of your work. Punctuation is not often used in poetry, except for special effect, and I think your poem is cleaner without it.

These of course are only suggestions for your consideration. As the author, you have the final say, but I would ask you to think through the issues I raise, and then do whatever you think best reflects the spirit of the poem.

COMMENTS TO EDITOR: The author has made all recommended changes. he has ALSO made additional alterations in the poem that emphasize the central metaphor of windows (opportunities). I like the way the poem reads quite a bit, and cannot think of any other ways to improve it. I recommend we accept it in its present form.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR: Thank you for these latest changes. I like the way your second line "she and I framed what little opening we could find" starts working the windows metaphor right away. I especially liked your revision of the fifth stanza which both puts the emphasis on her hopefulness despite the difficulties she's faced ("yet she kept looking...") and also is written more simply and clearly. This is a poignant poem about how a patient and her family doctor come together through an unlikely chain of events; and how small signs of caring enable the physician to learn something of who his patient is. Lovely!