

FM REVIEW 2018 36 COMMENTS

COMMENTS TO EDITOR: This is a beautifully written poem about the frustrations of being unable to provide optimal healthcare in an underresourced African nation (Gambia). I sent the poem to Peju Simoyan (black, African, female) for review, and she made some excellent points about the poem's unconscious stereotyping of an entire nation and its populace as backward and primitive. Given recent White House comments, buying into this implicit bias would be particularly unfortunate. (Interestingly, the other reviewer (white, nonAfrican, male) noticed a similar problem, although he did not express it quite as directly).

In addition to this contextual problem, the poem suffers from a lack of clarity in places. Both reviewers made excellent suggestions for rewriting, and I have highlighted these while also raising the larger issue above. Given that it is so well-written, I think we should give the author the opportunity to rewrite in such a way that eliminates the stereotypic implications.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR: This is a well-crafted, poignant poem that conveys both the patient's and physician's despair and helplessness. The language and imagery are elegiac and often deeply moving. However, aspects of the poem were not always as effective as they might be. The reviewers offer some excellent critiques which we urge you to take seriously.

1) I would suggest eliminating periods, which are not usual in poetry, unless you are using them for special effect. Also, as reviewer 1 points out, the capitalization of lines is inconsistent. It should probably follow a sentence structure (i.e., capitalizing the first word of a "sentence" rather than capitalizing each new line) unless once again you are using a specific capitalization for effect.

2) Both reviewers are confused, as am I, about how the patient "knows" that she is sick if "she has not yet fallen ill." Poetry is meant to be ambiguous and make readers think, but not to confuse them. Please clarify this line.

3) I agree with reviewer 1 that "plan of care" is an excessively clinical phrase. Think about what this patient might truly be seeking if she returns to the clinic and incorporate this more human language.

4) Although it is a tender moment, there is also something uncomfortable about the narrator bending forward and whispering such dire news about its mother into the baby's ear. This might work better if the narrator merely looks at/touches the baby and thinks the line.

Finally, we hope you can address a troubling larger issue. A couple of lines in the poem may inadvertently be read in a stereotyping way, specifically the following:

1) "There is nothing to offer her/in this country of poor resource" plays into a simplistic image of African nations in general as backward and lacking all resources. In these times when casual slurs of Africa emanate from the highest places, we need to be especially careful to include nuance in language.

2) "This is the way of the Gambian Woman": the phrase "the Gambian Woman" and capitalizing "woman" both imply that all women in Gambia are in this same dreadful boat - underserved, neglected, hopeless. Again, I think this may send the wrong message about an entire country. (The title itself has a similar problem, and might better be changed to A Gambian Woman).

We would like to see a revision that finds a way to retain the sadness of this encounter while not implicitly making an overgeneralization about this African nation .

COMMENTS TO EDITOR: The author has corrected the most difficult aspect of this submission, which was its unintentionally patronizing tone toward developing countries and too broad generalizations about Gambia. There were certain confusing aspects to the writing which have now been clarified; as well as some inconsistencies in the use of capitalization which for the most part have been corrected. The poem could benefit from a little additional wordsmithing, for which reason I am returning to the author for one more go-around.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR: Thank you for this thoughtful revision. The title is much better (interesting what a little indefinite article can do!), and overall the poem makes clear that although this particular country is limited in the medical care available, other options for treatment would be possible in the region if only the patient had greater resources (introducing the option of Dafur, only to snatch it away, is quite wrenching). I liked bringing in the village midwife, and it is now understandable that this woman knows her fate before she has actually fallen ill because she has seen a similar story unfold for many other village women. I also appreciate your cleaning up the capitalizations.

The larger concerns regarding the poem are now very well addressed. I suggest a bit more wordsmithing in a few places. Occasionally there is a turn of phrase that sounds a bit flowery and grandiloquent: "by urging of," "this country of poor resources." The last two lines are powerful - I don't think you need to add "with heartache." This is "telling" the reader how you feel, when it is apparent that you are broken-hearted. There are a few other places where I suggest a word change. Please look these over and consider whether you like these modifications, or whether you can find better language.

Thank you for your meticulous work on what is truly a heart-wrenching encounter.

COMMENTS TO EDITOR III: The author has made minor but significant changes per editorial suggestions. Although small, these changes involve more than copy editing. They speak to the flow of the piece, establishing a consistent tone throughout, and avoiding pretentious phrasing. I am completely satisfied with this poem, and think it should make a moving contribution to the journal.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR III: Thank you for your patience with the editorial process. As you know, in a poem every word counts and how they are arranged and utilized influences the overall effectiveness of the poem. Your poem is a moving representation of a small yet telling cross-cultural encounter, worlds colliding in empathy and helplessness. I am sure our readers will recognize something of their own experience in it, whether or not they have engaged in medical missions abroad.