

FSH COMMENTS 2017 8

I like this poem a lot, especially after the first stanza. It addresses an important social topic (the killing of young black men and women by police) in a righteously indignant and honest manner. I think it can be considered as a kind of crescendo of artistry— a rather awkward, somewhat pretentious first stanza, a building second stanza, a strong third stanza, and a magnificent final stanza. The title is brilliant – short, succinct, a powerful command to the reader – but I wavered about how the author has chosen to “say their names,” i.e., by choosing victims with names that can be used as adjectives or verbs and integrating these into the poem, signifying the “proper name” double entendre with a capitalization. In certain places, especially in the first two stanzas, this device seems somehow too “cute” for the seriousness of the topic at hand and also omits victims who didn’t have the good fortune of a double duty name. (A very minor point, but for consistency, Philando Castile’s name in this context should probably be spelled “Cast-steel”). Yet in the third and fourth stanzas, the author succeeds very well with this approach. Let me lay out my concerns primarily with the first stanza, and heap praise on the latter two, especially the concluding one.

In stanza 1, I felt the word play was highly intelligent and clever, but somehow detracted from the power of the poem. For example, referring to “blue-blooded seizures” is interesting because blue-blood refers both to established elites (perhaps privileged white society?) while also invoking police (as in thin blue line, or blue wall of silence). Seizures can be caused by flashing lights, while also suggesting police who man-handle or “seize” victims, or more generally who lose control of themselves, so this is interesting as well. But when you put together these two words in a single image, it doesn’t quite add up to a clear, emotionally evocative picture.

Again in that stanza, the phrase “the violence they swear to protect (from)” is very clever, because it suggests that while the police swear to protect society from violence, perhaps it is really the violence itself that they are protecting. Yet a hanging preposition enclosed in parentheses seems more contrived than compelling to me.

Stanza 2 begins to build steam. It successfully introduces the first person plural, so moves the poem from the more abstract, distanced third person of the introductory verse to a more engaged voice. The acknowledgment of the ways in which medicine is implicated in despicable violence, despite its stated commitment as a healing art, is brave and, in my view, correct. However, the phrase attached to hospitals - “shed their walls” - is bewildering to me. What does this mean? Isn’t it more likely that hospitals are building even higher walls? By contrast, the image of the operating table as “asphalt (really black, not gray) /frying broken black bodies” is quite strong because the image it evokes is visceral and its use of alliteration catches the ear and eye.

The poem continues strong. The third stanza is very good. The author’s predilection for wordplay works somewhat better in the lines “with a past medical history/spanning history itself” which to me suggests that medicine is implicated in the history of this country, including its oppression of vulnerable populations. One of the best lines in my opinion is “Flatlined EKGs Garner/nothing from fibrosis/layered over generations” because it makes sense in itself and does not seem so much of a

stretch as the earlier efforts. I also liked the apparent contradiction of “stethoscopes [that] listen in silence.” I did struggle with the word choice in describing the father as “stolen.” This seems an unnecessary euphemism for killed or murdered.

Stanza 4 is completely compelling. I was swept away in the cadence of this stanza, its sense of lamentation and helplessness. I resonated to the idea that the medical community has failed these individuals who are our patients indeed before they “can become our patients.” A beautiful turn of phrase. I also liked the switch to the 2nd person – it is a personal form of address that moves the narrator and the reader closer to those who have died. I was deeply moved by the lines “we sow the seeds/ of your memory beside the/ graves of decades and days/before you, into rich Brown soil” (an example of an appropriate and meaningful use of the proper name). The last three lines are magnificent.

So what we have here is a poem that gets off to a rather self-conscious start and builds to an emotionally intense, authentic, and eloquent conclusion. I would like to see the author rework stanza 1 and clean up stanzas 2 and 3 and so that the beauty and heartbreak of stanza 4 can shine forth. This poem is definitely worth publishing, but it could be even better than it is.