Jim Ferris: *The Hospital Poems*

"Child of No One" and "Abecedarius Hospitaler"

Literature and Disability

Prepared by Dr. Tanima Dutta

Introduction: The Poet, the Book and the Hospital

Jim Ferris is an American poet, performance artist and disability studies scholar. He was born in Illinois with one leg shorter than the other, and throughout his childhood he was in and out of hospital as doctors tried to make his legs equal through surgery. As an adult he worked as a newspaper reporter and television producer, earned a doctorate in performance studies, and taught disability studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. From 2008 he held the Ability Center Endowed Chair in Disability Studies at the University of Toledo, Ohio, and he has served as president of the Society for Disability Studies.

The Hospital Poems (2004), his first collection, won the Main Street Rag Poetry Book Award. In his foreword, the disability historian Paul K. Longmore reports that Ferris described the book as "a memoir in verse." Read in order, the poems tell the story of a boy who spent long periods in a children's hospital and underwent repeated operations meant to make him more like a "normal" child. The book has three parts: "Child of No One," "Sweet Soul Music" and "The Treatment." "Child of No One" is the title poem of Part I. "Abecedarius Hospitaler" belongs to Part III and comes near the end of the book.

The hospital

The poems are set in the Shriners Hospital for Crippled Children in Chicago. The Shriners are an American fraternal order linked to Freemasonry, known for their red fez caps and an emblem that includes a scimitar (a curved sword). In 1919 the order decided to fund hospitals for disabled children. The first opened in Shreveport, Louisiana, in 1922, and the Chicago hospital opened in March 1926 on Oak Park Avenue. Treatment was free, and stays could last a year or longer. In the 1950s and 1960s, when Ferris was a patient, children were often separated from their families for months, and parents could visit only at fixed hours.

The word "crippled" in the hospital's name was ordinary at that time. Today it is considered offensive, although disability activists, Ferris among them, have reclaimed the short form "crip" as a word of pride. The book is dedicated to "all my crip brothers and sisters."

The treatment and its result

The poem "From the Surgeons" in Part III reproduces Ferris's hospital case notes from 1960 to 1970. They record that his shorter left thighbone (femur) was repeatedly broken into fragments and fixed on a metal rod to stimulate growth, and that by 1963 the difference in leg length had grown to three inches. At his final discharge in 1970 he was still wearing a long leg brace with a high lift. Longmore points out that the treatment did not achieve its medical aims, and still less the social aim of making the boy "normal." Students should keep this in mind: both poems question a system that put children through years of pain in pursuit of a "normal" body it could not deliver.

Disability studies background

Ferris was a child in the 1960s, before the American disability rights movement won laws such as the Rehabilitation Act (1973) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990). He writes as an adult shaped by that movement. Its central argument was that disability is not only a problem inside a person's body (the medical model) but is also created by social barriers and attitudes (the social model). Ferris calls poetry

written from inside the disability experience "crip poetry." Both poems studied here look back at the hospital through this lens. A glossary of key terms is given at the end of these notes.

Poem 1: "Child of No One"

Context

"Child of No One" opens the first section of the book and gives that section its name. It recalls the five-year-old Jimmy Ferris being admitted to the Shriners Hospital and left there by his mother. Other poems tell us he had already been operated on as a very small child ("For His Own Good" imagines how tiny his first hip spica cast must have been), but this stay is remembered as the first real separation from home.

Three pieces of context help. First, the Shriners were the hospital's benefactors, and their public image was one of cheerful charity. Second, the speaker was Catholic, and another poem, "Keeping the Faith," notes that the boys' fathers were not fond of Freemasons; being handed over to a Masonic order therefore added a further strangeness. Third, children's hospitals of the period usually kept parents at a distance, with short, fixed visiting hours. Researchers had begun to warn that such separation harmed young children (in Britain the Platt Report of 1959 recommended unrestricted visiting), but practice changed slowly. The poem shows how this separation felt from the child's side.

The Title

The title states a paradox. The speaker has living, loving parents, yet he calls himself a child of no one. The phrase sounds like a description of a foundling or of an orphan in a Victorian novel. It also names the whole first section of the book, so the feeling of abandonment frames everything that follows. The phrase returns in the final stanza as a conclusion, so the title works almost like a verdict. Finally, "no one" hints that the child is reduced to nobody in particular: not a person with a name and a family, but a case to be treated.

Summary

"Child of No One" is the title poem of the book's first section. The speaker remembers being admitted to the Shriners Hospital at the age of five. He calls himself an orphan, although no one has died. His mother simply took him to the hospital and left. For a small child, being left among strangers felt exactly like being orphaned, and the words "for the first time" suggest that it happened again and again.

He immediately becomes a waif and a "ward of the Shrine." The boy feels like damp, trembling clay that will be shaped under the Shriners' sign of the fez and scimitar. His own clothes are replaced by standard issue: underpants, a sleeveless undershirt, white nylon socks, jeans, and a shirt suited to a small, unlucky old man. Everyone is dressed alike because, in the hospital's view, all these children share one identity. They all need fixing.

He is allowed to keep only his shoes, one of which has a thick cork sole to make up for his shorter leg. A voice in italics, the voice of the institution, tells him to say goodbye, because he is now "inside" and his life belongs to the staff.

The speaker then describes the hospital's order of power as if it were a religion. Nurses are strict commandants in white caps, but they quickly give way to doctors, the "lab-coat gods" with stethoscopes, scalpels and saws. The chief surgeon is the highest god, a bald, distracted "gnome" wearing half-glasses on the tip of his nose. Monday ward rounds are "weekly worship." Parents become unseen, unheard afternoon visitors, like distant relatives who only faintly remind the children of life outside the "orphanage".

The last stanza sums up the children's condition. Until they make their "sacrifice" (surgery), until their bodies are "corrected," and until the doctors choose to let them go, they belong to no one. They are wards

of the Shrine, looked after with condescension by jolly men in fezzes, and orphaned by three things: their supposed flaws, their families and their fate.

Allusions and References

- **The Shriners' fez and scimitar.** The order's full name is the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, and its members wear Middle Eastern style costume. Ferris's "jolly mystics in fezzes" plays on the word "Mystic" in the name and on the order's cheerful public image. The exotic costume makes the hospital's rulers seem like the priests of a strange cult.
- **The potter and the clay.** The image of the child as clay "to be moulded" recalls the Bible, where God is the potter and human beings are the clay (Isaiah 64.8; Jeremiah 18). Here the doctors take God's place as the shapers of human bodies.
- **Sacrifice and worship.** "Sacrifice," "gods," "divinity" and "worship" borrow the language of religion, and "weekly worship" on Monday parodies Sunday church. The idea of parents giving up a child to a higher power may also remind readers of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22), though the poem does not name it.
- **The orphanage.** The uniform clothing and the language of wards and waifs recall Victorian orphan stories such as Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, in which a child is raised by an institution rather than a family.
- **The gnome.** In European folklore a gnome is a small, odd creature living underground. The comic image cuts the "chief divinity" down to size.

Critical Appreciation

Central metaphor. Ferris turns the hospital into an orphanage, and this metaphor carries the whole poem. The child's parents are alive, yet he feels orphaned, because long institutional care cut disabled children off from home, family and selfhood. The opening remark that "no one died" is bitterly funny: the loss is real even without a funeral.

The poem is a sharp critique of the medical model of disability, which places disability inside the individual body as a defect that experts must cure. The phrase "all need fixing" shows that the hospital sees faulty bodies, not children, and the identical clothing erases individuality. The cork shoe makes up for "my lack", and the final stanza speaks of "flaws". These are the institution's words, absorbed by the child, who learns to define himself by what his body is said to lack. The impairment/disability distinction helps here: the shorter leg is the impairment, but the sense of being lacking, separated and powerless is produced by the institution and its attitudes.

The poem also exposes the charity model. The Shriners are generous benefactors, yet "patronized" has a double meaning: they are patrons who pay, and they patronize, treating the children with kindly condescension. Gratitude is expected; the children have no say. The religious language recalls the older moral (religious) model too, which saw a disabled body as a sign of sin or a test of faith. The children must make a "sacrifice" before they are "corrected," as if their bodies were wrongs to be paid for. Medicine has taken over the old vocabulary of sin and redemption.

Imagery. Doctors are "gods," the chief surgeon a "divinity," rounds are "worship." This irony shows the unquestionable power doctors held over child patients. Military imagery ("commandants") adds discipline, and the "clay" image makes the child raw material to be moulded into a "normal" shape. Calling the chief surgeon a "gnome" deflates his authority and reveals the child's private resistance.

Form and style. Free verse with short, plain lines suits a child's direct vision. Lists of clothing and instruments create a flat, official rhythm, and the italic voice breaks in like an order. "Ward" is a pun: a

hospital ward and a legal ward under guardianship. The closing alliteration of "flaws, families, fate" gives a heavy, final sound.

Conclusion. The poem speaks from inside an experience usually recorded only in doctors' case notes. In this way it does what disability poetry aims to do: it gives the disabled child his own voice.

Poem 2: "Abecedarius Hospitaler"

Context

"Abecedarius Hospitaler" belongs to Part III, "The Treatment", and comes near the end of the book, after the poems about surgery and recovery. It returns to an event described more fully in an earlier poem of the same section, "The Coliseum". There, on his first Monday in hospital, the boy is taken to a small room and made to exchange his clothes for a gown and a G-string. He is then pushed onto a stage, the gown is whisked away, and he must stand, bend and walk before a large group of doctors who study his body and talk about him as if he were unconscious.

Such examinations were common in teaching hospitals of the mid-twentieth century. Disabled children were displayed, often nearly naked, before groups of surgeons, residents and students, so that their cases could be discussed and treatments planned. Many disabled adults later described these sessions as among the most humiliating experiences of their childhood; the writer Lisa Blumberg named the practice "public stripping" in an essay first published in *The Disability Rag*. Ferris's poem shows the same event from inside the child's mind.

The Title

The title has two parts. An abecedarius (from the Latin for "alphabet") is a poem in which each line or stanza begins with the next letter of the alphabet; the related word "abecedarian" means a beginner who is still learning the ABC. Hospitaler (usually spelled "Hospitaller") means a person who works in or for a hospital, and it recalls the Knights Hospitaller, a religious order founded in Jerusalem around 1100 to care for sick pilgrims, which later became a military order. The title therefore brings together learning, medicine, religion and military discipline, the same mixture found throughout *The Hospital Poems*. Its formal, Latin sound also resembles a medical term or the label on a specimen jar, which is ironic in a poem about a child being labelled and studied. Put simply, the title means "a hospital alphabet": the ABC of being a patient that the boy is forced to learn.

Summary

An abecedarius is a poem in which each line begins with the next letter of the alphabet, so Ferris's poem has twenty-six lines, from A to Z. It describes a disabled boy standing almost naked on a stage before a group of doctors who examine him and decide what surgery to perform.

The doctors form a "small sea of white coats," reduced to mouths and eyeballs. The sea bobs and waves as they watch the "specimen on stage" and chatter about him.

The boy, the poem says, would be thoroughly cold if he were really there. But in his mind he is not. He imagines entering the sea of doctors and putting on a lab coat for style, warmth and safety. From there he looks back at what remains of himself on stage. The doctors' talk bores into him like water into wood and washes away everything human (shame, joy, jealousy) until only bone, like "driftwood," is left. His feelings are kept in "cold storage," and his body is left standing without support. Now the pronoun changes: the speaker says "we look," as though he has become one of the doctors examining himself.

The doctors mutter over this "new problem," this "puzzle with a name." For them, the question is never whether to operate. It is only where to cut and which bones to saw first.

But the escape fails. The sea is dense, the mist always rolls in, and the safety of the white coat melts away to nothing. Standing among the doctors is no safer than standing under the cold spotlight, because the outcome is the same: vomiting and pain. And the pain falls on him, not on them. Whatever they decide, the doctors keep their coats, X-rays, tools and tricks. The boy knows his place. Someone tells him he is "up there," and his job is to be the zoo animal. The poem ends with him pacing and shivering, but refusing to cry.

Allusions and References

- **The echo of Hamlet.** "Cut or not cut" echoes Hamlet's famous "To be, or not to be, that is the question" (*Hamlet* 3.1). Hamlet agonises over a choice of life or death; the doctors do not agonise at all, because cutting is never in doubt.
- **The abecedarian tradition.** Alphabet poems are very old. Several Hebrew psalms are alphabetic, most famously Psalm 119, and the first four chapters of Lamentations, a lament over suffering, follow the Hebrew alphabet. Chaucer's "An ABC" is an alphabetic prayer to the Virgin Mary. By using a form linked with prayer and lament, Ferris quietly connects the poem to the religious language of the whole book. The form also recalls children's alphabet books ("A is for apple").
- **The Knights Hospitaller.** See the note on the title above.
- **The arena and the stage.** The "stage" and "spotlight" link this poem to its companion, "The Coliseum," whose title recalls the Roman Colosseum, where people were exhibited and killed before a watching crowd.
- **The zoo and the freak show.** The boy's final image of himself as a "zoo animal" recalls the long history of displaying disabled people for curiosity, as in nineteenth-century freak shows such as those run by P. T. Barnum. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has shown how the staring of the freak show was later taken over by the medical clinic.
- **The medical gaze.** The French thinker Michel Foucault, in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), described the "medical gaze," the way modern medicine looks at a patient's body as an object of knowledge while overlooking the person. The poem dramatises this idea exactly.

Critical Appreciation

Form as meaning: The abecedarius links the poem to children's alphabet books, reminding us that the patient is a boy still learning his letters. It also suggests ordered classification, just as doctors sort and label bodies. The strict A to Z frame mirrors the boy's position: he is held inside a system he cannot break. The strain shows when "all-important" is split across two lines so that "Important" can begin the I line, as if the word itself were being cut. Yet by mastering so difficult a form, the adult poet gains control over an experience in which the child had none.

The medical gaze: The doctors are reduced to "mouths and eyeballs": they only look and talk. The boy becomes a "specimen," a "puzzle," a "zoo animal." He is talked about, never talked to. This is Foucault's medical gaze in action and the medical model at its most dehumanising. The doctors measure him against the normate, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's term for the imagined "normal" body, and he exists for them only as his distance from it.

Dissociation: The poem's most moving device is the boy's mental escape. Unable to bear the exposure, he imagines joining his examiners. The pronouns shift from "he" to "we" to "I," tracing how the self splits and

then returns. Dissociation is a common response to trauma, and Ferris presents it without self-pity. The escape fails because no one can leave his own body.

Power and cost: By reversing Hamlet's question, Ferris shows that the doctors never ask whether surgery is needed; they assume it. In the context of the book, where the case notes record years of operations that never equalised his legs, this assumption looks dangerous. The phrase "for me, not for them" exposes the unequal cost: doctors decide, the child suffers.

Imagery: Sea imagery (bobbing, gabbling, boring, washing away, driftwood) suggests the slow erosion of selfhood. Cold imagery ("cold storage," "cold spotlight") links the physical chill of nakedness to the emotional coldness of the clinic. Theatre imagery turns the examination into a public show, and the zoo image completes the loss of humanity.

Ending: "I don't cry" is quiet resistance: the child refuses to give the watchers his tears. It shows dignity, but also how early he learned to hide pain in order to survive.

The Two Poems at a Glance

Aspect	"Child of No One"	"Abecedarius Hospitaler"
Place in the book	Title poem of Part I, "Child of No One"	Part III, "The Treatment," near the end of the book
Event	First admission to the Shriners Hospital at the age of five	Examination before a group of doctors (also told in "The Coliseum")
Speaker and voice	Adult memory of a child; first person, broken by an italic institutional voice	A boy whose self splits into "he," "we" and "I"
Form	Free verse in short, plain lines	Abecedarius: twenty-six lines running from A to Z
Central metaphor	Hospital as orphanage and temple	Doctors as a sea; the boy as specimen and zoo animal
Key imagery	Clay, uniforms, gods, worship, sacrifice, commandants	Sea, driftwood, mist, cold, stage, spotlight, zoo
Main allusions	Potter and clay (Isaiah, Jeremiah); the Shriners; orphan stories	*Hamlet*; alphabetic psalms; Knights Hospitaller; freak show
Disability issues	Institutionalisation; medical, charity and moral models; disability as "lack"	Medical gaze; objectification; dissociation; unequal cost of treatment
Tone	Ironic, bitter, quietly comic	Cold and detached, ending in quiet defiance
Ending	Children orphaned by "flaws, families, fate"	The boy paces and shivers but refuses to cry

Key Terms for Disability Studies

Term	Meaning
Impairment	The physical or mental difference itself, for example one leg being shorter than the other.
Disability	The disadvantage produced when society, institutions and attitudes respond to impairment with barriers, exclusion or control.
Medical model	Sees disability as a defect in the body to be cured or corrected by experts. The person becomes a patient or a case.
Social model	Argues that disability is created by social barriers and attitudes, so society must change, not only the body.
Charity model	Treats disabled people as objects of pity who should be grateful for help. Power stays with the givers.
Moral (religious) model	The oldest view, which saw disability as a sign of sin, a punishment or a test of faith.
Normate	Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's term for the imagined "normal" person against whom everyone else is measured.
Medical gaze	Michel Foucault's term for the way medicine looks at the body as an object of knowledge while overlooking the person.
Institutionalisation	Long-term placement in a hospital or home that cuts a person off from family and community.
Dissociation	A mental escape from an unbearable experience, in which a person feels detached from their own body or self.
Crip / crip poetry	"Crip" is a former insult reclaimed with pride by disabled people. Ferris uses "crip poetry" for poetry written from inside the disability experience.
Abecedarius	A poem in which successive lines or stanzas begin with successive letters of the alphabet.

Short Questions and Answers

From "Child of No One"

Q1. What happens to the speaker at the age of five, and why does he call himself an orphan?

Ans. At five, his mother takes him to the Shriners Hospital for Crippled Children in Chicago and leaves him there for treatment. No one has died, yet, separated from home and surrounded by strangers who control his body, he feels exactly like an orphan. The metaphor shows how long hospital stays cut disabled children off from family, even when their parents loved them.

Q2. What is meant by "ward of the Shrine"?

Ans. The hospital was run and funded by the Shriners, a fraternal order. "Ward" has a double meaning: the boy lives on a hospital ward and is also a legal ward, a dependant under someone else's guardianship. The phrase shows that the institution, not his family, now controls his life. "Shrine" adds a religious tone that prepares for the image of doctors as gods.

Q3. What does the idea that all the children "need fixing" reveal about the hospital's view of disability?

Ans. It reveals the medical model of disability, which treats the disabled body as a broken object to be repaired. The children are dressed alike and considered "equal" only in being defective; their personalities and feelings do not matter. The hospital sees the impairment rather than the child and assumes that a "normal" body is the only acceptable goal.

Q4. What is the significance of the cork-soled shoe?

Ans. The shoe, with one thick cork sole to make up for his shorter leg, is the only possession he is allowed to keep. It marks his individual body and history. He says it makes up for his "lack," showing that he has already learned to see his body as deficient. Disability is defined by negation, by what the body is supposed to be missing.

Q5. Who are the "lab-coat gods", and why are they so called?

Ans. They are the doctors and surgeons. They are called gods because they hold absolute power over the children's bodies and futures: nurses obey them, and no one questions their decisions. Ward rounds become "worship" and surgery a "sacrifice." This ironic religious imagery criticises a medical authority that behaved as if its judgements were divine, leaving the disabled child without a voice.

Q6. Explain "orphaned by our flaws, our families, our fate."

Ans. The closing line names three causes of the children's isolation. Their "flaws" are their impairments, which the hospital treats as defects. Their "families" have handed them over to the doctors. Their "fate" is the chance of being born different. The alliteration gives the line a heavy, final sound and stresses that the children are helpless before all three forces.

Q7. What clothes is the boy given on admission, and what does this show?

Ans. He is issued underpants, a sleeveless undershirt, white nylon socks, blue jeans and a sport shirt fit for a small, unlucky old man. Everyone receives the same outfit. The uniform strips away personal identity and turns the children into interchangeable patients, as in an orphanage. It shows the institution's view that the children are equal only as bodies needing repair.

Q8. Describe the order of power in the hospital as the poem presents it.

Ans. At the bottom are the children, who have no say. Above them the nurses rule like military commandants in white caps. The nurses quickly give way to the doctors, the "lab-coat gods" with

stethoscopes, scalpels and saws. At the very top is the chief surgeon, the "chief divinity." This hierarchy, part army and part church, shows the total control exercised over child patients.

Q9. What happens on Mondays, and who is the "chief divinity"?

Ans. Monday is the day of ward rounds, when the doctors visit the patients as a group; the speaker mockingly calls this "weekly worship." The "chief divinity" is the head surgeon, described as a bald, distracted gnome with half-glasses tipped on his nose. The comic portrait undercuts his godlike status and shows that the children saw through the solemn authority around them.

Q10. How are the parents presented in the poem?

Ans. The parents are "unseen, unheard," appearing only as afternoon visitors, like distant relatives who bring vague images of life outside. Children's hospitals of the period limited visiting to short, fixed hours, so parents became almost strangers. The poem does not blame them harshly; it shows how the institution itself pushed families aside and left children feeling they belonged to no one.

Q11. Briefly comment on the significance of the title "Child of No One".

Ans. The title states a paradox: the boy has living parents, yet he feels he belongs to no one. It sounds like a description of a foundling and names the whole first section, so abandonment frames the book. The phrase returns in the last stanza as a verdict. "No one" also suggests he is reduced to a nobody, a case rather than a person.

Q12. What is the allusion in the image of the child as "clay to be molded"?

Ans. The image recalls the Bible, where God is the potter and human beings are the clay he shapes (Isaiah 64.8; Jeremiah 18). In the poem the doctors take God's place, shaping children's bodies into an approved "normal" form. The allusion fits the poem's religious imagery and suggests that medicine has claimed a godlike right to remake human beings.

Q13. Who are the "jolly mystics in fezzes"? Explain the word "patronized".

Ans. They are the Shriners, formally the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, who wear red fezzes and funded the hospital. "Patronized" has two meanings: they are patrons who pay for the children's care, and they also patronize them, treating them with cheerful condescension. The word exposes the charity model, in which disabled people must be grateful and silent.

Q14. What "sacrifice" must the children make before they can leave?

Ans. The "sacrifice" is surgery and the pain that follows. The children must give up their bodies to be "corrected" before the doctors allow them to go home. The religious word suggests that their bodies are offerings to the "gods" of medicine, and it echoes the old moral model, in which a disabled body was treated as something to atone for.

From "Abecedarius Hospitaler"

Q1. What is an abecedarius? Why is the form suitable for this poem?

Ans. An abecedarius is a poem whose lines begin with successive letters of the alphabet; Ferris's has twenty-six lines, A to Z. The alphabet recalls a child's schooling, reminding us the patient is a boy. Its rigid order mirrors medical classification and the system that traps him. Mastering such a strict form also gives the adult poet control over a helpless experience.

Q2. What happens to the boy in the poem, and how are the doctors described?

Ans. The boy is made to stand almost naked on a stage while a group of doctors examines him and discusses which operation to perform. The doctors are a "small sea of white coats" that bobs and waves,

reduced to mouths and eyeballs because they only stare and talk. The image makes them an impersonal force that slowly wears away the boy's sense of self.

Q3. Why does the boy imagine entering the sea and wearing a lab coat?

Ans. Exposed, cold and humiliated, the boy cannot bear the examination, so he escapes in his mind. He imagines joining the doctors, wearing a lab coat for warmth and safety, and looking at his own body as a specimen. This is dissociation, a common response to trauma. The pronoun shift from "he" to "we" shows the split, but the escape soon fails.

Q4. Explain the allusion in "Cut or not cut."

Ans. The phrase echoes Hamlet's "To be, or not to be, that is the question" (*Hamlet* 3.1) but reverses it. Hamlet agonises over his choice; the doctors never even ask whether to operate. They discuss only where to cut and which bone to saw first. Ferris criticises the medical assumption that a disabled body must always be corrected, without asking whether it should be.

Q5. Why does the speaker call himself a "zoo animal," and what does the ending show?

Ans. Displayed under a spotlight, watched and discussed but never spoken to, the boy feels like a caged animal shown to visitors. The image completes his dehumanisation and recalls the freak show. Yet he ends by saying he paces and shivers but does not cry. Refusing to give the watchers his tears is a small act of dignity, though it also shows how early he learned to hide pain.

Q6. Explain the title "Abecedarius Hospitaler".

Ans. "Abecedarius" names the form, an alphabet poem with lines running from A to Z. "Hospitaler" refers to the hospital and recalls the Knights Hospitaller, a medieval religious and military order that cared for the sick. The formal, Latin-sounding title resembles a medical label, which is ironic in a poem about a boy being labelled. It suggests "the ABC of being a patient."

Q7. What do the doctors discuss while the boy stands before them?

Ans. The doctors mutter and mull over what to do with "this one," this "new problem," this "puzzle with a name." They do not discuss whether he needs surgery at all, only where to cut and which bones to saw first. They speak about him, never to him. The boy is reduced to a diagnosis, a technical problem for experts to solve.

Q8. What does the "sea" wash away from the boy? Explain "driftwood" and "cold storage".

Ans. The sea of doctors washes away his shame, joy and jealousy, all his human feelings, until only bone remains, like driftwood worn smooth by water. His emotions are kept in "cold storage," frozen and set aside like specimens. The images show how the clinical gaze erodes a child's inner life and leaves only a body to be studied.

Q9. Why does the boy's imagined escape fail?

Ans. The sea is dense and the mist always rolls in, so the safety of the white coat melts down to nothing. Standing among the doctors proves no safer than standing under the spotlight, because the result is the same: vomiting and pain after surgery. The boy cannot leave his own body, and the doctors' decisions will be carried out on him alone.

Q10. Explain "for me, not for them".

Ans. The words come after the speaker says that everything ends in vomit and pain. The suffering belongs only to the boy. The doctors decide, but they keep their coats, X-rays, tools and tricks and walk away untouched. The phrase exposes the unequal relationship between medical experts and disabled patients: one side holds the power, the other pays the cost.

Q11. Which other poem in the book describes the same event, and what hospital practice lies behind it?

Ans. "The Coliseum" describes the same event: on his first Monday the boy is stripped to a gown and G-string and paraded before a crowd of doctors. Behind both poems lies the mid-twentieth-century practice of displaying disabled children at teaching clinics so that surgeons and students could study them. Lisa Blumberg later called this humiliating practice "public stripping."

Q12. How does the poem connect with the tradition of alphabet poems?

Ans. Alphabet poems are ancient. Psalm 119 and the first four chapters of Lamentations follow the Hebrew alphabet, and Chaucer's "An ABC" is an alphabetic prayer to the Virgin Mary. These are poems of prayer and lament. By using the form, Ferris links the child's ordeal to lament and to the religious language that runs through the whole book.

Q13. Comment on the shift of pronouns in the poem.

Ans. The poem first calls the boy "he," as if describing someone else; then the speaker says "we look," placing himself among the doctors; finally he returns to "I" and "me." This movement traces dissociation: the self splits off to survive the exposure, then is forced back into the suffering body. The grammar itself shows the psychological damage of the examination.

Works Cited

Blumberg, Lisa. "Public Stripping". *The Ragged Edge: The Disability Experience from the Pages of the First Fifteen Years of The Disability Rag*, edited by Barrett Shaw, Advocado Press, 1994.

The Bible. Authorized King James Version, Oxford UP, 2008.

Ferris, Jim. *The Hospital Poems*. Main Street Rag Publishing Company, 2004.

Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. Translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith, Vintage Books, 1975.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia UP, 1997.

"History of Shriners Children's Chicago". *Shriners Children's*, www.shrinerschildrens.org/en/locations/chicago/about-us/our-history. Accessed 23 Oct. 2026.

"Jim Ferris". *Poetry Foundation*, www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/jim-ferris. Accessed 23 Oct. 2026.

Longmore, Paul K. Foreword. *The Hospital Poems*, by Jim Ferris, Main Street Rag Publishing Company, 2004, pp. vii-viii.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet.* Edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, Arden Shakespeare, 2006.