

Afflicted

Category: Poems

written by Kristin Laurel | February 24, 2017

Kristin Laurel

It is the night shift, and most of Minneapolis does not know
that tonight a drunk man rolled onto the broken ice
and fell through the Mississippi.
He lies sheltered and warm in the morgue, unidentified.

Behind a dumpster by the Metrodome
a mother blows smoke up to the stars;
she flicks sparks with a lighter
and inside her pipe, a rock of crack glows

before it crumbles into ash
and is taken by the wind.

Another mother waits up for her son;
he was shot in the chest, then pushed out of a fleeing car.
He bleeds on black pavement, exhaust fumes hover over him.

Through the back doors of the ER
medics dump off the indigent
and black-booted cops track in salt and sand.

We are all misplaced.

An Indian brave
is just plain drunk;
the white paint on his cheeks and nose
is from huffing paint.
He is snoring off his stupor
from drinking bottles of Listerine
(the poor man's liquor).

It's so easy to judge

but we are all broken, in one way or another;
The officer was just trying to clean up the streets
keep his back seat sanitary
when he picked up another filthy drunk
and shoved him into the trunk of his squad car.

The young nurse was conned
into being callous;
It only took being spit at, being called a bitch
and one punch to the face, to learn to be gruff
and keep them all cuffed to the bed:

She takes off soiled jeans,
uncovers scraps of a shredded newspaper
the homeless man's underpants (pissed-on words).
A grimy, tattered shirt is stuck to his chest,
she peels it off, holding her breath, while
flakes of dead skin detach into the air.

In one more hour it will be daybreak.
She will go home to her clean house,
her white down comforter on a pillow-topped bed.

But, she knows,

there is an affliction in the air.
Even the snowflakes fall like ash.

She washes her hands.

About the poet:

Kristin Laurel is employed as an emergency-department and flight nurse. She completed a two-year apprenticeship program at The Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis. Her work can be seen in [Gravel](#), [Hospital Drive](#), [The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review](#) and elsewhere. Her first poetry book, [Giving Them All Away](#), won the 2011 Sinclair Poetry Prize from Evening Street Press (Dublin, Ohio) and can be [read free online](#).

About the poem:

"After twenty-six years in critical care, I am a strong advocate for self-care, and I understand the reality of compassion fatigue. I believe in the power of narrative medicine, and writing has given me an outlet and a voice. In this poem, the narrator has also been 'afflicted' by what she has witnessed during her shift and is on the verge of complete burnout."

Poetry editors:

Johanna Shapiro and Judy Schaefer