

Night Call

Category: Poems

written by Richard Weiss | May 11, 2018

Richard Weiss ~

At two am its insistent ring ambushes me awake.
I whisper, not wanting to disturb my wife or rouse
the dog who will whine for food, write down

the name and number before it's jumbled, swallow
my resentment on being awakened and listen
to his story—then ask those practiced questions,

scrolling his body from one organ to another.
Tell me about the pain—what it feels like—pressure
or a vise, does it stab, sear, rip, ache, is it steady

or fleeting, maybe a hand gripping your chest,
clutching at your heart, squeezing like a fist, each
answer weighed against my need for sleep

and what I know I have to do—once I said wait,
and it was too late. I dress quickly in yesterday's clothes,
make the long cold drive using the time to form

a plan—the emergency room timeless in fluorescent
sun. Wait, drink yesterday's coffee until the gurney
appears, my patient half sitting up, cyanotic with arms

extended grabbing air, until I take his hand—struggle
to find his blood pressure, uncertain of his pulse, calm
him, try again, search an agitated arm for that essential

vein, begin an intravenous, listen to his skipping heart,
gurgling lungs, palpate his abdomen, tympanitic like a drum,
as he is attached to monitors and half-buried beneath

equipment—doctors, nurses, orderlies milling about,
tubes and catheters jutting in an intimidating jumble,
medications administered in hasty progression.

I touch, sooth, reassure, appear so confident all the while
hiding the wrenching fear of doing harm, making
a mistake, being less than perfect.

His galloping heart slows to a canter, his breathing less
labored, the blue-grey pallor replaced by hyper-oxygenated
pink. The knot in my gut eases. The room quiets and suddenly

I am alone, standing among discarded needles, bloody gauze, strips of EKG confetti littering the floor. Now finally safe for me to leave I drive home slowly, fatigued, part of me in disbelief he has survived.

About the poet:

Richard Weiss is a retired internist/gastroenterologist. His poetry has appeared in [Pulse](#), [The Westchester Review](#), an anthology of Martha's Vineyard poets, and a recently released chapbook, [Titicus Loop](#) (Finishing Line Press). "I write on a daily basis and am a member of a group of poets, the Thursday Night Poets, who critique each other's work." He lives in Armonk, NY, and on Martha's Vineyard with his wife, Maggie, and their cat, Juno.

About the poem:

"The most alone I have ever felt was at 2:00 am in the emergency room, caring for a critically ill patient whose well-being relied solely on my judgment and skills. This poem is about one of those nights, and the overwhelming sense of responsibility one feels as well as the anxiety over possibly making a mistake. These were my patients, people I had cared for for years, and many had become friends. There were no obstacles between doctor and patient as there are today. You felt you were in the front lines practicing medicine."

Poetry editors:

Johanna Shapiro and Judy Schaefer