

Notes From the Pain Committee Meeting

Category: Poems

written by Pam Kress-Dunn | October 5, 2018

Pam Kress-Dunn ~

She was always my favorite nurse, her smile
genuine as I took my place at the table, my role
to supply the research and stats they might need
on the floor, or in preop. The chronic migraine
I brought along was my little secret, my inside joke
every time the talk turned to pain scales
and nerve blocks, the bright lights and overheads
nothing I couldn't live through.

Her quiet story began and I sat up straight, stricken
with a thunderclap only I could hear.
*Sometimes, she told us, people wake up before the anesthetic
wears off. They can't move, can't talk, can't even
open their eyes to show me their fear.*
Somehow, she knows.

*So what I do is, she said, taking my left hand in her right,
I hold their hand and I talk to them. I tell them, It's okay;
I know what's happening. I'm going to stay right here
with you and I'm going to keep talking to you
until your body wakes up, however long it takes.
This happens sometimes. You're not the only one.*

Could the rest of them see the look on my face?
I could hardly breathe, the hair on the back of my neck
standing up, shocked. Her hand was strong,
a mother's hand, long fingers that might rest
on your brow and know if your fever's dropped.

Like my own mother who, the time I vomited
sixteen times in a row, knew to press her hand
across my forehead as I slammed into the toilet bowl.
The hand that means business when she tells you to take it,
crossing the unmarked street. The hand that writes the letter
while you're sobbing homesick into your sleeping bag
at Girl Scout camp.

What does she say to these people, stunned, buried alive?
Maybe she tells them the surgery went well, or
maybe she uses her words to take them someplace else,
walks them outside into the cut-grass air,
the loose-weave clouds, where the sun can kiss

their frozen faces back to life. Maybe she describes the way they will finish waking up, very soon, and this will pass, turned into a tale they can tell without shuddering.

Her story over, she let go my hand and I sat, unable to move, as the group got up to leave. Looking out the bright window, I saw my headache, a 9 on the NRS* when I came in, lying out there on the lawn, consoled.

**NRS stands for the Numerical Rating Scale, a ten-point pain-measurement system.*

About the poet:

Pam Kress-Dunn was a medical librarian in Dubuque, Iowa, before chronic migraines forced an early retirement. She holds three master's degrees—in library science, in English and in poetry writing. Her poems have been published in medical and literary journals, and the newspaper columns she wrote for more than two decades are being archived on her blog, SiegeOfWords.com. Two of her stories, "[Hospital Librarian](#)" and "[Catching My Breath](#)," have appeared in *Pulse*. "I write to remember things, to sort things out and to make connections. Since I've been both a patient and a hospital employee, I enjoy seeing the elements of health care from both sides."

About the poem:

"I was stunned by this experience, and I wanted to hold onto it the same way that nurse held onto the hands of her patients. It was a privilege to sit on the pain committee and to hear these revelations from great nurses. This is why I write poetry—to preserve a moment as lucidly as I can, and to let others in on the story."

Poetry editors:

Johanna Shapiro and Judy Schaefer