She sat on the curb

Category: Poems
written by Tammy Hansen Snell | February 7, 2014

Tammy Hansen Snell

She sat on the curb in her hospital gown
pretending not to see me coming.
The tube from her hand to the IV pole in the street
lifted the flimsy sleeve of her robe.
Cars went by, and we both watched them
as if we cared what color they were.
The IV pole in the street didn't matter
unless two cars went by at the same time.
"You can go away and leave me alone," she said,
knowing my job wouldn't let me do that.

"You can do without the cigarette," I said,
knowing the craving in her brain wouldn't agree.
Today was warmer than the three days before,
so we didn't hurry the conversation to its conclusion
the way we had on the cold day,
the windy day,
the rainy day.
She inhaled and exhaled, and I positioned myself
where I wouldn't have to share in the chemicals.
We both watched the bird carry grass to its nest
in the flowering crab tree,
and both of us noticed how the sun made the dew
on the blooms sparkle that morning in May.
It was peaceful and beautiful, and the sunbeams
hugged us both, not caring what was being played out.
I had reports to write, and she was due for a lung scan,
but until we said the next lines we were free to be in the sun.
Me standing on the grass, her sitting on the cement.
She had opinions about why she was where she was,
and I had opinions about why I was where I was.
We didn't say them today, but they hung there around us
like weird fruit we refused to pick because of the seeds.
Our heads turned at the same time when we heard the roar—
a Hummer, of all things, coming from the east.
An engine whirred from the west, too, a Prius.
Somehow the chronologies of the two drivers—
an extra cup of coffee, or the skipping of one,
a dog being recalcitrant about coming back inside—
had resulted in each coming down the street
from their various directions and life histories,
en route at the same time to need the full road space
in front of us, quite soon.

I was irritated that neither one of them had had
the urge to change into a different pair of shoes,
or to give their partner a lingering kiss,
so that our time in the sun could have ended without urgency.
“I have to walk you back to your room,” I said softly.
“I only smoke one a day now,” she whispered, skipping ahead
in our pattern of lines because the Hummer was picking up speed.
I didn’t say my next line at all because I was holding my breath,
preparing to grab the IV pole if she couldn’t scoot it in time.
“Jackass,” she muttered, even as the pole’s response
to her successful tug made her smile,
“…doesn’t care about my morning
any more than you do.”

About the poet:

Tammy Hansen Snell was a patient advocate at Great Plains Regional Medical Center in North Platte, Nebraska, from 2001 until 2013. Before that, she worked at the local NBC affiliate as a reporter and news anchor. “As a patient advocate, I continued to put my communication skills to use, and I enjoyed the fact that my reports in the hospital were sometimes used to help change things for the better. I am also a certified medical interpreter in Spanish, and I thoroughly enjoy the interactions with patients and staff that this brings to my day.” She and her husband Ron currently live and work in Costa Rica.

About the poem:

“The events that inspired this particular poem drove home to me forcefully the significance of our individual choices—the choices about who we are in the moment that create who we are over our lifetimes, and the choices that seemingly have no impact on anyone else, but that may in fact affect others in ways we will never know.”

Poetry editors:

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