

The One She Calls Milk

Category: Poems

written by Amy Haddad | November 23, 2012

Amy Haddad

Is for pain but has a longer name
she can't pronounce. It's for when he shakes.
She is not sure if the shakes
mean pain since these days
he often cannot say.

Earlier when he could say,
he would mimic the circle faces
on the pain chart the nurses held up to him.
He would try on expressions
until he found one that fit his pain.
He would set his lips into a thin straight line
or deeply furrow his brow. "That one.
That's how it feels," he'd say
with just a small note of pride for
getting it right.

Now getting it right is her job.
She has to read his now strange body.
She walks the tightrope between calling
the doctor too often or letting him suffer.

When she finally breaks down
and dials the office, she repeats
the drug's proper name like a charm
and dampens the desperation in her voice.
But when they answer
she misspeaks and blurts,
"I'm out of milk."
Her fragile authority broken,
she hears the soft, superior snort
of the receptionist
and the light laughter in the background
as her mistake is shared over and over.

About the poet:

Amy Haddad, PhD, RN, is the director of the Center for Health Policy and Ethics at Creighton University, in Omaha. Her poems have been published in [Journal of Medical Humanities](#), [Touch](#), [Bellevue Literary Review](#) and [Janus Head](#) and in the anthologies [Between the Heartbeats](#) (1995), [The Arduous Touch: Women's Voices in Health Care](#) (1999), [Intensive Care](#) (2003), [The Poetry of Nursing: Poems and Commentaries of Leading Nurse-Poets](#) (2005) and [Stories of Illness and Healing: Women Write Their Bodies](#) (2007).

About the poem:

“The inspiration for the poem comes from watching numerous family members care for dying loved ones while struggling with the complicated language and rules of the healthcare system. I am particularly interested in how family members make sense out of the experience and how health professionals respond.”

Poetry editors:

Judy Schaefer and Johanna Shapiro