

Winning

Category: Poems

written by Amy Odom | February 12, 2016

Amy Odom

Like an old Atari video game I attack the folders in my inbox
Successfully devouring each power pellet placed in my path
Gulp, gulp.
Faster, faster.
Pushing to the finish line where husband and kids are waiting.
I am anxious to hear the digitalized music announce my victory.

Apparently, I am accumulating rewards for all of my clicking
 cherries for remembering to recheck labs
 stars for sending patient reminders
 extra lives for erasing the red in my registries
It seems that I am winning the game.
Perhaps on target to my all-time highest score.

One by one the inbox folders disappear
 Results-gone
 Patient messages-annihilated
 Refill requests-vaporized
Pretending to be invisible Ms. Pac-Man
I navigate through the maze of stories and ping-ponged charts
Excited that the screen is almost clear and
I am closer to winning...

Until, out of the blue,
a ghost appears
And gobbles me up.

While tabbing into chart review
I am warned
"You are entering the chart of a deceased patient"
And the game stops
My extra lives are gone
The joystick is short-circuited

As I enter the chart, the arcade façade fades away
Replaced by a weighted cloak of grief and warm memories
I smile as I think of him ten years ago,
Wearing a saucer-sized belt buckle with a picture of his young wife baked
onto its enamel

And the times in between then and now
when he joked and smiled and never complained as the waves of dementia,
pulmonary fibrosis and lymphoma lapped at his feet.

Then my mind turns to his wife,
Whose caregiving roles include her husband, an adult son with disabilities,
an alcoholic daughter, 11 birdhouses and countless squirrels
I close my laptop and pick up the phone.
She answers, and the authenticity of gratitude in her voice sounds better to
me than any victory song.
My attempt at high score will have to wait for another day.

About the poet:

Amy Odom is a family physician on the faculty of the Sparrow/Michigan State University Family Medicine Residency program. She devotes much of her academic time to helping young physicians navigate the intersections of behavioral science, clinical care and personal growth. "Throughout my life, writing has always been the most natural way of practicing self-reflection." Her poems have appeared in the journals *Family Medicine* and *Families, Systems, & Health*.

About the poem:

"For me this poem represents the hard and soft edges of what we do every day in clinical practice. We are constantly forced to perfect new ways to be efficient and clinically up to date, while also getting home in time to put dinner on the table. In the midst of all that, however, comes the reality of what it means to have a loving relationship with patients and their families."

Poetry editors:

Johanna Shapiro and Judy Schaefer