

Still I Croon

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Abstract

This is a poem inspired by my conversations with several patients burdened with chronic pain and who found themselves dependent on opioids for relief. For these patients, pain is an omnipresent and debilitating force permeating their existence, curbed only by the use of opioids; I was struck by the vivid language these patients would use when describing their relationship with pain and with these medications—some of which are directly used in this poem. They would simultaneously express a torn affection for the opioids, while recognizing the danger of continuing to use them. The poem is structured as an imaginary conversation between the patient/narrator and a personification of the medication/addiction. With this poem, I hope to share with readers a sense of the nuanced struggle and affliction I witnessed.

Keywords: medical humanities; medical poetry; pain management

Pain is the background noise of my life;
it keeps a steady rhythm,
each heartbeat sending out pulsing
music I dance to
like a captive puppet on the strings
that force my feet to tap
to its involuntary measure.
“Dance, my dear, dance for me,”
the Voice whispers at first
then laughs out loud.
The song begins again.
I wince as I repeat
unrehearsed choreography
as the timpani rolls to its crescendo
and I collapse into a crying heap
upon the floor.

And still I croon—

Come to me, my White Angel.
Slip down my throat and enter my veins.
Hush the banging of the drums
and calm the wailing siren within.

Darkness falls and all the world's asleep,
but still I sense the beat.
I cover my ears, and my mouth opens wide
in a silent scream
that nobody hears. It reverberates
through empty chambers of my hollow life
and echoes back its mocking tune,
“Dance, my lady, dance for me,”
I lift my knees a little higher
and hope to appease my tormentor
who will not let me go.
But the laughs grow louder,
and trumpets join the beating drums
to blare their sinister psalm,
a cacophonous canticle
that will not let me rest.

And still I croon—

Come to me, my White Angel.
Tell me what you wish of me; tell me now,
and I shall do your bidding.
Take my wrists; I receive your shackles.

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The Voice that once only whispered
a reminder of its presence
as it knocked upon the door
of each nerve ending,
has gained entrance at last
and made itself at home.
It licks its lips and leers, purring,
“Dance, my lover, dance for me.
What will you give me?
What would you part with forever
to have me for a day?”

*Surrender the quietude of your home?
Spurn the embrace of your God?”*
I place my soul upon an altar
set before my idol in a bottle.

And still I croon—

Come to me, my White Angel,
my heart is empty, my spirit bare.
I know not how this story ends,
But you have triumphed for the day.

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