

Sarah Mook Contest 2016, Grades 6-8, Third Place winner, “Never alone”

This honest and searing look at schizophrenia reveals that living with it is harrowing. In two stanzas of nine lines each centered on the page, the writer explores a constricted life. With vivid language, the poet uses personification and the extended metaphor of living in an underground tunnel to aptly describe this illness.

In the first stanza, we see how skillfully the poet defines this illness:

Schizophrenia is solitude
inside the deep dark tunnel
Hateful hallucinations [sic] haunt me
hooking their microphones up to the brain

This opening aptly describes how terrifying schizophrenia can be. Aloneness is a hallmark of the disease; “solitude” resides in the “deep dark tunnel” that is schizophrenia. The personification and metaphor work well. The illness itself “hook[s] its microphones up to the brain” as if to speak, silence, and “haunt” its victim.

The next seven lines use personification and metaphor to show the effects of schizophrenia; they render its victims silent, even as the disease itself “talks.” “An unknown force” has “consumed” the speaker’s voice even as “they” (the voices of the disease) “unfair[ly] send “echoes down the pit / when I can’t manage a whisper.” The “mine” that is schizophrenia compounds the tragedy of this illness. This ‘talk’ makes it “impossible to tell what thoughts are mine.” One can only surmise the havoc caused by a disease that speaks, but renders its ‘host’ silent.

This second section explores the “tricks of the mind” that prevent the speaker from spending “time at the end of the tunnel.” This safe place would offer blooming “marigolds,” “warm sun,” and “meadows” where the voices of schizophrenia “can never find me.” However, at the end of the poem, doubt arises, and the speaker poignantly asks, “Will I ever see my meadow?” or will “I” always “suffer” from “screams in [the] underground trap?” This painful question ends the poem; we would like to think the answer is ‘yes, the meadow will appear.’

Precise verbs strengthen images in the poem. Words such as, “haunt,” “hooking,” “consumed,” “manage,” and “waste” give the poem energy. The powerful metaphor of equating having schizophrenia to living in a dark tunnel vividly illustrates the devastation it causes.

The title of the poem, “Never alone,” illustrates a disturbing aspect of this illness. While most of us might think that never being alone would be a positive aspect to our lives, for the individual with schizophrenia, it is not. As the speaker attests, the disease drowns out the speaker’s own voice.

I encourage this poet to continue writing and applaud his or her bravery. We need more honest voices like this one to skillfully explore the overwhelming effects of an illness, especially one as shattering as schizophrenia.

Thank you for the privilege of reading your work!

Marie Kane, Final Judge
Sarah Mook Poetry Contest, 2016
www.mariekanepoetry.com