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Intensive Care Unit Blues

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Gerard Sarnat won San Francisco Poetry's 2020 Contest, the Poetry in the Arts First Place Award plus the Dorfman Prize, and has been nominated for handfults of 2021 and previous Pushcarts plus Best of the Net Awards. Gerry is widely published, including in *Buddhist Poetry Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Main Street Rag*, *New Delta Review*, *Northampton Review*, *New Haven Poetry Institute*, *Texas Review*, *Vonnegut Journal*, *Brooklyn Review*, *San Francisco Magazine*, *Monterey Poetry Review*, the *Los Angeles Review*, the *New York Times*, the *London Reader*, and *Review Berlin* as well as by Harvard, Stanford, Dartmouth, Penn, Chicago and Columbia Presses. He has authored the collections *Homeless Chronicles* (Pessoa Press, 2010), *Disputes* (Pessoa Press, 2012), *17s* (Pessoa Press, 2014), and *Melting the Ice King* (Pessoa Press, 2016). Gerry is a physician who has built and staffed clinics for the marginalized as well as a Stanford University professor and healthcare CEO. Currently he is devoting energy/ resources to deal with climate justice, and he serves on the board of Climate Action Now. Gerry has been married since 1969, has three children plus six grandsons, and is looking forward to future granddaughters. gerardsarnat.com

Intensive Care Unit Blues

*...Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet — and here's no great matter...*

-- T.S. Elliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

i. Star Chamber

Asterisked
elder at-riskers*

are now briskly
dust/whisked off

by their brusque
feral caregivers

themselves without
bad vertebral disks

which prevent us
from being as frisky

as in our distant past -- or
at much real COVID peril

although unlike balding me,
they may need to go for haircuts.

* just speaking for Gerry

ii. Patients Just Fading Away haiku

Failed anonymous
septuagenarian's
name image likeness.

iii. **I See You In ICU...Do You See Me?** -- thanks to Eliana V. Hempel M.D., Blood Ties, *NEJM*, 28May20

Distraught woman before us
with that hunted look
in her eyes seems all too familiar.

Filigreed monogrammed hankies
make repeated trips
from mouth to lap then back again

as our collective horror
at the rapidly increasing amount
of bright red froth intensifies.

She's barely able to breathe
let alone talk rationally as metallic
smells mingle with Mom's viral raw fear.

iv. C-Ward #17

-- thanks to Silvia Castelletti, M.D., A Shift on the Front Line, *NEJM*, 4June20

Thursday. Just finished another shift.
Look me over in barber-shopoid cascading mirrors:
C on nose from doubled-up N95 masks

worn all the time and leaving deep marks
engraved by four overlapping elastic bands.
Eyes are tired. Hair damp with sweat. Oy.

I'm simply a physician no longer —
now also one unprepared soldier drafted to fight
against invisible Coronavirus blown in dirty wind.

Before frantic nightshift,
I have to don protective gear
which's when get predictable adrenaline rush...

Earlier in on-call room with colleagues,

you try to crack bad jokes
but our bodies must reflect shared worry

regards shielding selves adequately
as we attempt to carry out correct steps dressing:
gloves, gown, second pair of gloves

glasses, cap, mask, visor, shoes, shoe covers...
tape over tape to keep everything sealed.
Persons who help you dress

write name/ role on white lab coat
with a red marker because thusly-costumed,
no staff recognizes once familiar teammates.

After s/he says "Done," it's showtime to face the music.
Each caregiver feels like about to jump from humming plane,
hoping their very-complicated parachutes

will pretty-please open to keep us clean plus safe.
Entering is walking into some surreal silent bubble
with sounds muffled by mounds of heavy equipment.

For first ten or fifteen minutes can't really visualize
since breathing fogs my visor
until it adapts to cooler ambient temperature.

Then gradually begin to see between droplets
of condensation, proceed into ward hoping shoe covers
won't come off (as usual). Ninth shift so far this week starts.