

By Sara McDonald

I am a covid veteran  
This is a different kind of war  
A war some don't believe in  
A war some mock, a "hoax"

The trauma is real  
The dying is real  
Running down the halls one room after another  
"put your mask back on"  
"stop pulling on lines"  
Mitts  
"You have to keep your mask on"  
"Your daughter is coming in the morning, don't you want to see her?"  
The goal is to keep that one alive  
"long enough"  
For his daughter to be here when they turn the oxygen off.  
"Let's just get him to morning."

There's that name I will never forget  
the first in a growing line,  
they declined for a time the use of their O2 device  
I had to take it  
I gave it to another, "more likely to survive"  
This one lives  
That one dies

They all suffer

The look in their eyes  
As they learn the rules of an unfamiliar game  
From room air to nasal cannula  
NC to oxymask  
Non-rebreather  
Highflo  
Bipap  
Max it out  
"I can't breathe!"

I know you can't breathe

I know

"I know it's uncomfortable,"  
"I know it's blasting air in your face."  
"I'll gladly take it off, just do me a favor,  
change your code status first."  
"I have a line of people waiting for that machine, if you aren't going to keep it on"  
"I need you to change your code status first"  
"What else can be done?"  
"Intubation is next"

That look on their face

"That's where we are"

The look on their face

"That's where you're at now"

The look on their face

"This machine doesn't go any higher"

"Intubation is next"

You don't like that option

You didn't realize

None of them realize

They would be so acutely aware

cognizant

oriented

at the moment facing that decision

I stand anxious,

waiting

I need them to make it faster

I realize what a cruel thing my impatience in this moment is, but

I need them to make it

faster

I have another one crumpling three doors down

I am still not able to be more places than one, at any given time,

Much as I try

As if I want to share my time between two atrocious scenes

So?

"I want this off my face. It's blasting me!"

"I can't breathe!"

ok

"I need you to understand what will happen if I take that off."

No sugar coating,

no lies,

no time for gentle deliveries

First you'll panic, gasping for air

You'll be agitated.

You'll start pulling at lines, and thrashing about like a fish out of water

In this case, a fish suffocating at the bottom of an ocean of air,

Surrounded by it, yet out of reach

"WATER WATER EVERYWHERE, BUT NOT A DROP TO DRINK."

The panic

We'll hold onto you,

Mitts if we must

keep you from hurting yourself on equipment  
manage self-damage  
You'll struggle  
You'll ask for the equipment back, but it's already been cleaned,  
passed onto the next

You'll grow tired  
You'll thrash less  
You'll stop talking  
You'll shift to a soft blue hue  
You'll fall asleep,  
so tired,  
just a rest  
The blue will deepen

You're not done, but you're holding still,

Onto the next

Someone else is crashing  
Thrashing  
Pulling on lines  
"Take slow deep breaths"  
"Keep them slow"  
"Try not to panic" (are you telling them, or yourself?)  
"Try not to panic. Take some slow deep breaths."  
Stable  
Back to the previous room

Agonal breathing, sporadic, gasp  
A deeper blue  
They're still alive

On to the next...

On to the next...  
On to the next...

On to the next, until morning

We just have to make it 'til morning  
We just have to make it, while mourning  
We just have to make it, still mourning

We just have to make it  
Onto the next