Carousel

On this carousel
The scenery sequence repeats
While our hair turns gray
Children learn to speak, count, and read.

We could have done other things
But we gave up our youth.
Imprisoned by eighty-hour work weeks
Student loans the size of mortgages.

With my whole life in
I feel a bit powerless.
I cannot make change and I cannot
Walk away.

Having to work harder
Means less time
To take care of myself,
Less time to process
The constant worry
I’ll bring it home.

My family cannot escape it
My patients cannot escape it
My patience cannot escape it

Horses on the carousel
Are moving but seem stagnant,
I am moving but I feel stagnant

The horses are the shells of
Things I used to do,
Relationships I used to have,
Empathy I used to have,
Now seemingly forever out of reach.

How did a health care hero get to this point?
Protective layer by protective layer
Peeled back
Something very fragile is now exposed.

I would order endless replacement fluids.
I would request four-hour treatment times.
Will patients live if we reduce the flow rate?
What will be the repercussions of shortened treatments?
How do we decide who can skip sessions?
I am so tired
Of having to make these decisions
Of differential rationing.

I hide behind a mask and shield
For the majority of my every day.
I used to breathe more easily.

I used to spend time on the unit floor
Asking my patients about their families and current events.
Everything feels rushed now.
Human to human interactions truncated.
I remember drinking coffee in a cozy break room. 
Now I review labs in my cold car.
Clinical care meetings which once felt meaningful 
Now trigger anxiety and indifference.
I am still afraid to meet in crowded conference rooms.

I precept trainees and
So much of their experience
Has gone virtual.
There is so much missing
When I communicate through screens.

In my clinics my patients cannot hear me
Through my suffocating mask and foggy shield.
I use a dry erase board nowadays,
I write my name, Kidney MD and CKD clinic
Nine years of medical training summarized in those words.
A patient cannot explain their barriers
To care on a dry erase board.

I miss those carefree days of having
Meaningful conversations.
What keeps me going is hoping
That the horses will take me back
There.

Our patients are vulnerable
We are vulnerable
Our children are vulnerable

When layers are peeled back
Something very fragile is exposed.
I barely have any compassion for my family,
I hardly have any patience left to care for my vaccine-ineligible
children.

On this carousel
The scenery sequence repeats
Somehow I did not think we would be doing this again.
The exit sign evades me and I can feel myself spinning.
How can anyone want to be a health care hero anymore?

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