To walk in beauty once again
by Sriram Shamasunder

Fragility sticks to everything alive like the quiet wetness of morning dew in this global pandemic
as a doctor
I see this fragility
threatening to swallow so much of what we love
like a large red blanket covering a small bed
and I can’t unsee it

In the spring
I spent five weeks in Navajo nation
An indigenous community in the southwest of the United States
Taking care of Covid patients
Covid as common as desert cactus in Arizona
blooming like dandelions in an open field

That evening like every other evening
I stood outside a patient room
an emergency room converted into several pods of plastic cocoons that separate one patient from the next and them from us all in the hopes of keeping the virus at bay

Blue plastic reflects emergency room light
light like a parking lot at night or a mall perpetual and yellow glow fluorescent

I methodically wear my PPE
Velcro gown clasp
secure the back
face shield
N 95 on
cloth mask over
double glove blue glove pulled over brown skin
no brown skin between gloves and gown
Double-check
Zip up tent step in/ zip closed
behind me

He lies left side down
a young Navajo man
Black hair braided down long past his lower back
right down the middle of his back
like an outer beautiful spine  
stark against  
bleached white sheets

each thick hair knot  
Dense and Strong as rope  
like ancestors clasping hands one over the other  
Each knot  
a closed Knuckle  
Gathering like a prayer at the base of his skull

He has an oxygen mask on.  
I watch his eyes closely for signs of fear  
And I watch his hands for signs of trembling or what they might reveal  
About a life before and up to this moment

guilt hangs in the room  
like fog  
“where did I get Covid and why  
and who in my family did I expose?”

He breathes fast  
We make small and short talk  
A few words between catching his breath  
he says real soft between quick breaths  
I don’t wanna die

I say we will get through this  
and then again louder  
the first time for him  
the second time for me  
we will get through this

I leave the hospital at midnight

The next morning  
short coffee run in my rental car  
my colleague calls to say that overnight my patient emptied his lungs like a gas tank and puttered into the early morning in fumes  
exhaustion  
He was just intubated  
He will be flown to Albuquerque or Phoenix  
Off indigenous land

My wife calls at that moment FaceTime with my five-year-old daughter behind her shoulder

I submit to the fact I likely will never see him again  
I submit to the fact that he may not survive  
I submit to tears that slip down my cheek  
And I watch my own hands as they wipe them away

Everything submits to something I tell myself.
The bears rummage through rotted wood and suck up and slurp up ants. The ants submit to the bear
The bear submits to winters
trees submit to fire
the rocks submit to water as it etches grooves across grey
the river water submits to the seasons thinning out come late summer
and our bodies to time.
And so many black and brown bodies this time.

This is the year of submission
Or surrender
Or survival
I can’t decide which

When a patient is about to be discharged from the covid unit a call goes overhead
From all over the hospital

like a bird migration we descend on the covid unit from anywhere we might find ourselves in the hospital
All the health providers gather in a line on either side of the hallway like a sports team
waiting to high five their star player to come out of the tunnel onto the field

It is this moment a covid survivor gets wheeled out the big doors into the sunlight
Like exiting a dark tunnel
Into
Their families arms
in those sweet moments, i think
This is the year of resilience
the year of I won’t let you go

my Navajo friend tells me with confidence
The navajo people will walk in beauty once again
And she repeats it again
We will walk in beauty once again
The first time for me
The second time I think she says it to convince herself

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For more context on the work Dr. Shamasunder and the HEAL Initiative are involved with on the ground in Navajo Nation check out these links:

Three minute segment on NBC evening news live

On Democracy Now

UCSF Press Release

ABC nightly News on story in Navajo Nation