

# Six Plaguing Pieces in the Shape of a Poem

by Kenneth Krauss

## Villanelle

by Kenneth Krauss

There are tortures far worse than sheltering in place,  
Than scouring your palms and fingers, or  
Wearing a mask over half your face,

Like being sprayed with tear gas or mace  
While cursing in the street what you abhor.  
These are tortures worse than sheltering in place.

Protesting safely in the public space,  
You'd think you were protected when you're  
Wearing a mask over half your face.

Uniformed, faceless men—a nation's disgrace—  
All dispatched to lesson the poor on more  
Tortures far worse than sheltering in place.

Flee from the fumes, outrun their race!  
What rites are these, you're right to deplore,  
By every man who's masked to hide his face?

No dining, no shopping here or anyplace,  
Stay safe at home? This life is a bore!  
There are tortures far worse than sheltering in place  
And wearing a mask over half your face.

## Unheroic Couplets in Plague Time

by Kenneth Krauss

Saturday last I felt such a fool  
Swimming alone (so I thought) in the pool  
Beyond my condo's sliding door  
Through which I've witnessed twelve or more  
Unmasked bathers in the small hot tub,  
Chattering close, a virtual club  
Determined to make each other ill.

I'd stopped all exercise until  
My doctor allowed that I might dare  
To swim in the pool when no one was there,  
So, every other day around nine,  
I do my laps when the sun can shine  
Through the morning haze, and the water warms  
Though it's still chilled enough to ward off the swarms.  
I do side and back stroke, because of my shoulder,  
Across thirty times, and as I've grown older,  
I tire rather quickly, then sit in the sun.

But Saturday last, long before I'd done  
My third lap of side stroke, I noted a sound  
Of a tiny brown creature, nearly drowned,  
Struggling to float near the pool's far edge;  
With a shriek I flung the mouse onto the ledge,  
Where it shook its head and suddenly bolted—  
No thanks for me, but I wasn't insulted  
And turned around for lap number four  
But was soon aware of a troubled roar  
And saw some lady was waving her arm,  
Who cried from her terrace, Was there any harm?

I laughed as I told her just how I'd thrown  
The mouse to safety; in grim monotone  
She stammered, *A mouse in the pool?*  
And shrieked as I had, then laughed like a fool.

No coronet, no cape of ermine,  
No title is bestowed on saviors of vermin  
In a place where the pestilence hasn't yet passed  
And your chat in the hot tub may be your last.

## **Sestina: Primo Lazaretto**

by Kenneth Krauss

*to my sister*

Before I can recall, an epidemic  
Revised my family through a quarantine.  
My sister and I remained at home, systemic  
Victims of how—we were told-- it had always been.  
Signs on the doors announced a grim polemic:  
“NO ENTRY! POLIO HOUSE!” Was this warrant seen?

We stayed inside, and we were only seen  
By aunts, who, dodging the epidemic,  
Waved through windows, thwarting the signs' polemic,  
After Brother and Mother fled the quarantine  
By ambulance, and Father, who, having been  
Away at work, remained so—quite systemic.

A toddler and teen alone? What systemic  
Response, if any, had ever been foreseen?  
Left to our own devices, we had been  
Abandoned seemingly by the epidemic,  
Though Grandpa Max soon joined our quarantine  
And launched at once an optimist's polemic:

“How lucky Mama,” went his odd polemic,  
“Died last year, missing this systemic  
Imposition of this ill-planned quarantine  
And Brother's illness; thank God she'd never seen  
The result of this God-damn epidemic.”  
How lucky, said he, Grandma had surely been.

How unlucky, we thought, we three had surely been!  
No argument, no reasons, no polemic  
Could logically explain this epidemic  
Nor help us comprehend why the systemic  
Familiar unit nowhere could be seen,  
Only its remnants under quarantine.

That was my very first quarantine.  
And yet, no matter how hard those weeks had been,  
They now seem pleasant compared with all I've seen  
These past eight months. Allow me this polemic:  
Grandpa, Sis, and I soon served our systemic  
Seclusion determined by this epidemic,  
And then we'd seen the end of quarantine;  
The epidemic passed; but now I've been,  
Sans polemic, in an exile quite systemic.

# Notes by a Shut-In on the Final Night of the Publicans' Irrational Contention

by Kenneth Krauss

Humpty Trumpty sits on his wall.  
Trumpty Dumpty must take a great fall.  
All the king's asses and all the king's kin  
Can never make Trumpty look better ag'in.

Melania, Ivanka, and Tiffany too,  
Like Eric and Junior, but not Baron, who  
Appears quite disturbed and remains out of sight,  
Continue the myth that Daddy's all right

To keep his thumbs on the nuclear button  
In spite of the fact that his head's full of mutton,  
Despite the way that he demonizes  
The victims of hate for their own demises.

Calling for justice makes one a vandal.  
Suppressing such speech is no cause for scandal.  
Bring up the subject of deadly virus,  
And he'll swear that the world is still desirous

Of all we have: The most numerous cases  
Among those, he believes, the expendable races,  
And as if we lacked all sense of reality,  
We're told to ignore the massive fatality.

Let Humpty Trumpty sit on his wall,  
Believing his numbers never will fall.  
All the King's asses and all the King's kin  
Will never say Trumpty has been a has-been.

# The Shriek of the Sheltering Shopper

by Kenneth Krauss

The Grocery Outlet's run out of caviar,  
And anchovies too, salted in a jar,  
And tins of Italian tuna in olive oil.  
The dearth of fresh fish sets my blood a-boil!  
The frozen shrimp's come back but all precooked,  
And scallops? None to be had—and I have looked!  
The cheese case lacked any prominent resident,  
And the sell-by dates of those there made me hesitant.  
The disappearance of artichokes on the condiment aisle,  
Which had no Dijon mustard, erased my smile,  
And the meat department caused my mouth to scowl:  
No veal nor lamb, just burgers, packaged fowl.  
There was chunk light in water, tilapia on ice,  
Some Swiss and Monterey Jack at an excellent price,  
Canned olives, jarred pickles—marinated pork,  
Even stuffed grape leaves—Don't call me a dork  
For my hunt for the luxe in this bargain-price store.  
Why shouldn't we frugal folk go seek for more?  
Chastise, if you must, my sad ingratitude  
As you recall last April and coyly allude  
To when all the toilet paper shelves were bare  
And paper towels were absent everywhere:  
"Isn't this better?" you ask with a smile pathetic,  
Like I don't know we're in a great pandemic?  
Well, I say "Duh! Who was it decreed  
We go without in this our hour of need?  
I need my caviar and albacore,  
I need raw shrimp and scallops, need my brie,  
My artichokes and veal. I guarantee  
That not by bread alone can we now thrive;  
Sans caviar and brie we just survive..."

## Sonnet: On Endings and Beginnings

by Kenneth Krauss

The weight of this sad time we must obey,  
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.  
The oldest hath borne most; we that are young  
Shall never see so much nor live so long.  
Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, V.3.

At the end will surely come a new beginning  
To signal we have reached the end of the end,  
Exposing at last the ghastly underpinning  
That all will see and finally apprehend.  
Nonetheless the truth's an ancient story:  
The plague was sent against autocracy;  
The Pharaoh, tyrant, fool in all his glory  
Denied our peril with gross hypocrisy.  
The sun will rise. The fog will fade away.  
We'll mourn the dead and curse the long, dark night.  
As the world returns, we'll often pause to say  
That hence all wrongs will always be set right.  
Yet how many decades of damage must there come  
Before we wake again from growing numb?

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Kenneth Krauss was born in Newark, NJ and grew up in Maplewood. He graduated from the University of Sussex at Brighton and later received an advanced degree from Columbia University. Having taught drama and film in a college in Albany NY for three decades, he also wrote seven books on theatre and culture, ran a black-box playhouse, and composed foto-novellas, drama reviews, and various simulacra under the name of Baron Laszlo Szekrényi. He is relatively new to writing poems but has published seven books and is currently busy revising the manuscript of his study on Casanova's memoirs. He became a member of SDIS in 2018 and participates in the film and reading groups; he is also a member of La Maison Française in Balboa Park.

The poems were sent to SDIS in August - September 2020.

Reprinted from *COVID-19: getting through with wit and grit*, published by the San Diego Independent Scholars. (<https://sdscholars.org>) © Kenneth Krauss 2020