

Behind the Mask I've Worn So Long

I've broken out in hives, first time in my life,
eighty-four years without ever having them.
I'm sure it's from long-buried stress, born
in a war over fifty years ago. In those days,
I couldn't trust people on the street and open-air
market, as I drove an open jeep to the airfield.

*Does that man looking at me plan to lob
a grenade in my jeep? Does that scowling
woman walking next to the road have a gun
tucked in her long black sleeves?*

Today before I shop at the local grocery store,
I fit a mask to my face and pull on gloves
to protect me from a virus that's killing many.
I cannot trust the people I see in the store.
Any could carry, pass me the virus, casually.

*Did that woman, that one not wearing gloves,
handle this box of cereal I just put into my cart?
Did that unmasked man cough on my apples?
Did a stocker with the virus shelve my cheese
or carton of milk while not wearing a mask?*

My every-day fear in that long-ago war was
that this was the day when that golden bullet,
the one with my name inscribed on it in script,
would find me as I passed by, taking my life.

Today the death wouldn't be sudden, riding
a bright red tracer stream from a gun hidden
in a tree line or the edge of a jungle clearing.
Today it would come from a cough, a sneeze,
a covert viral bullet on something I touch,
then touch my face in an unconscious gesture,
to scratch an itch, wipe away laughter's tears.

And so, fears held tight many years in the
fist of memory are loose, crawl up my arms
in itchy red blotches.