I Can't Breathe

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Isolated from the people and places I love
by a virus that preys
on the most vulnerable of us
I watched the sun set in front of my building
on the families and young people waving signs
as police dressed for war
surrounded them
as clouds of tear gas
filled the sky.

Later, my neighbor with asthma, who lives on the 11th floor
told me how she needed her inhaler to breathe that night
though she wasn't sure if it was from the fumes
or the fear.

The department's silence is suffocating
when I try to tell them,
full of old white men
who tell me my facts are wrong
that they have no responsibility for these things
that they shouldn't be judged.
This doesn't concern them
because they are objective and scientific.
they are busy
and this is not particularly important.
"I'm drowning"
my patient tells me.
How her panic attacks are getting worse
how she sits in the shower, ten times a day
how she's so scared, she throws up when she eats.

I try to think
of how to tell her
the department no longer takes public insurance
while she is telling me
how the walls close in on her
how she can't breathe
and I wonder if she sees
that neither can I.

Poet's Statement

This poem narrates three distinct but related events, drawing upon experiences from June 2020. In addition to reflecting on emotions shared by many during this period, my hope is that readers will critically examine the following topics:

- The role of academic psychiatry departments as leaders in recognizing the trauma of racism and advancing structural equity within academic institutions
- The role of academic psychiatry departments in advocating for equitable systems of care in the communities they serve
- The experience of residents in these systems, who often work with the most vulnerable patients, and have limited or no ability to affect health system policies
- That the multifaceted contributions of structural inequalities contribute to worse health outcomes for patients and physicians alike, with trainees being especially vulnerable

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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