

Supplemental oxygen

He fusses while he fiddles with his cannula,
2 liters per minute
unless he needs a pick-me-up.

He can dial up to 6 and does,
although I've told him *don't*.
He takes blood thinners and knows
that's why he chills so easy.

I tell him *slow to clot won't make you cold*,
But he knows I'm often wrong.

The pump humming like religion
is removing the nitrogen from room air
not extracting oxygen
as I suggested in a moment of distraction.

Whatever, the electric bill has doubled.
He needs another *Dear Virginia Power* note.

He doesn't breathe as much as exasperate.
The nebulizer helps. A cigarette helps.
He insists there's no danger of explosion
at therapeutic concentrations.

I counter with a lurid story.

What he knows he learned
in a destroyer's engine room. He knows
I've never been to battle. *Albuterol* helps,
and his hands shake like leaves
as he recites

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing

The room is loud with the loss of nitrogen,

Drink deep or taste not the Pierian Spring.
Long days, shallow draughts,
lungs that rattle inside hollow chests,
I've learned to save the Navy man for last.

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