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Masks

Rachel Britton
SUNY Geneseo

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RACHEL BRITTON

Masks

In sleep, I discover my poetry and my seven faces. They all look like the woman captive in the mirror but here an upturned lip and there metallic eyes. My skin becomes their stage, their scenes more than often unscripted. It is in my bed that their absence leaves me wondering what my face looks like without them. Eyes closed, searching just behind the lids. Fold my cheek into the pillow, stretch out the eyebrows. If I want, I can mold my face like dough.

I.

We've just met. I stretch my brows up toward my hairline, widen my eyes. I want you to know I'm interested, even though the words are dried up and stuck behind my teeth.

You ask me to tell you about myself, because when you asked me out you only knew that I was an avid poetry reader and could name the summer triangle constellations, and I don't know quite what to say. Suddenly, it's as if my history is an abyss; I cannot reach in, cannot pull anything out. You stare at me, waiting, and I have to look up at the ceiling so that your eyes do not keep making me forget. I'm so nervous I'll say the wrong thing that my upper lip is sweating. When I finally settle on an answer, I tell you in short and restrained words that I'm a writer. Inevitably, my voice climbs up in pitch like climbing the tree I never scaled in my parents' front yard. Time reverses itself—my spine condenses and curves, body shrinks and drags me with it, and once again I am a child, so small compared to you.

Our first meet is short. As I walk away, into a city crowd I can get lost in, my voice returns and mutters with the exhale of stale breath. That wasn't

me, I think. That wide-eyed face tied me up in thick black rope and held me hostage somewhere deep in my stomach. I called up into the hollow of my throat, but my mouth was too far away and the sound only echoed back down to shiver me. Where did I get this malleable, rubbery face? And why did I let it mask me? Why did I wear it during the corporate job interview that resulted in a ‘we’re sorry to say’ email a week later? Why did I cover up my real, cheek-splitting smile when another writer gave me a compliment, so we parted ways at the end of the workshop without cementing a friendship? Now that I’ve been released, I wonder if the next time we meet, my voice will crack the silicone of that face and let me through.

II.

Open-mouthed is the way they meet me. With a book sewn to my nose and a planner marked neatly in black ink—every column brimming with letters. In college, students are often subject to group projects and, always, one student must take the lead and bear the weight of all of them. As the semester progresses, it becomes clear that the boys who don’t come to class, and the girl who schedules our meetings but conveniently misses them, have targeted me as their Atlas, although my shoulders slope and are not built for carrying.

Now that we’ve grown acquainted, I complain to you about my group project, and you notice my flickering eyes and the way my pencil shakes in my hand. Each of their suggestions for our project strays further and further from what our professor described in the assignment. Deftly, I steer them back toward what will work and, hearing their noncommittal ummms when we start divvying up the tasks, realize that I will be completing this project on my own. On a rainy Sunday afternoon, I will camp on the silent floor of the library translating six books at a time into coherent, streamlined notes. I will write a script, giving equal speaking time to each group member, and then construct a powerpoint presentation, and it will earn me an A in the class. Finally, once I am on break after the final exam and reading a novel on my parents’ couch, I will be able to breathe again.

You take my hand in yours, so my pencil has to stop, and make me look at you. It’s going to be okay, you tell me, I can get through it. And when it’s done, we’ll throw a wine-sweet celebration.

III.

“Be careful,” I’ll tell my roommate as she slips on her coat, car warming up outside for the drive. Once again I notice how alike I am growing to my mother. But that worry is shadowed by the sailor’s knot now roping fear into my chest, knowing that she’ll be out with all of those other drivers late on a Friday night. I remember all of the recent accidents: an intoxicated man

swerved off into a ditch, a fender-bender that crunched up the front of a small sedan, a ten car pileup. My face is granite.

And she'll just laugh, "Okay, Mom," as she slips out into the night. The red digital clock letters: 9:34 p.m. Sighing, I scan the pile of shoes on the mat by the door, now missing her heeled leather boots that leave a barren and muddied space, and shuffle away in my moisturizing socks and elastic sweatpants.

I'll write you a text message to make sure you're safe. You'll respond, thankfully, right away that, yes, you're staying in tonight and you're just fine, if not a little bored. I can sigh now and sink into the couch, into the space between cushions.

IV.

It isn't easy to convince me to go out. You have to stroke my spine a little, entice me with wine. But now, we know each other better and the merlot has loosened me up. It unravels my tongue like a new Persian rug and you can see the swirling designs, how they come together and fall apart.

My friend and I are driving the half hour back home from a paint-and-sip event in the city and I'm surprised by how incapable I am of keeping my mouth shut. In the dark, her face is hidden except for the occasional flash of headlights. Her voice is cloaked by the Top 40 on the radio, but I keep talking. The wine has stained my lips red. I wonder, aloud, if the reason it's hitting me so hard is because I haven't had a drink in nearly a month. My knees are cold, because the heat hasn't kicked on, but I'm somehow sweating. And though I worry that I'm annoying her while she drives—for which I apologize over and over—she is laughing, and the sound of the smile in her teeth soaks me in warm relief.

V.

My mother accuses me of being too critical. It isn't the first time, and I guess I am critical both toward her and myself. She is right; with me, there is no flexibility, and I crack when she tries to stretch me. It happens too often. Without meaning to be, my tongue is sharp and ribbons the roof of my mouth in long, thin strands that redden my lips.

"No, never mind," I cut into her sentence. It is jagged and leaves wisps of unfinished thought on either side. "Forget it. I shouldn't have asked."

"You're always so sharp," she cuts back. She's in the kitchen, behind the partition so I can't see her face. I know without even seeing her that she is wrinkling her forehead, pursing her thin lips, and scrunching up the nose she passed down to me.

My mother and I have been fighting. Of course, I'd never act this way with you. It's easier to be cruel to the ones who love you most because they care about you. It's easier because they can't help themselves when you cry in front of them, because to them you're worth putting up with, because they'll forgive you. What my mother and I are fighting about, though, is silly. It's me asking to change our plans and go to the local pub for dinner because I have an eating disorder and I'm afraid to eat rice noodles at the Thai place between the church and the hairdresser. When she wonders why I'm suddenly flip-flopping, my hand is beating my head, *stupid, stupid question*, and my voice now a stony octave lower mutters "never mind."

She probably would have said, of course it was okay. She would have understood. She would have rummaged through the folder on top of the fridge with our collection of takeout menus until she found one I could manage. But that question—*why*. I don't want to answer that *why*.

Dishes screech against the tin of the sink. "You never give anyone a chance. You just shut down." Sometimes I wonder if she thinks I can't hear her because I'm in another room. But she's right. This ceramic face is cracked down pale cheek, from eye to jawbone, and she isn't me. She must keep that missing ceramic shard in her mouth.

VI.

Maybe she swallowed it once, because now it's cutting up my throat and lungs and stomach. My face twists and I imagine the skin of my left cheek meeting the top right of my forehead. It hurts, and I am fighting not to open my mouth. You will hopefully never see this face. This face is haunted and contorts itself, runs liquid over itself. This face wants the Tylenol, but refuses it. This face steamrolls its quivering lips into a long, thin line, bends its eyebrows into concave wells, and drips from all its openings. Only a fistful of people have ever witnessed this face, enough to hold in one hand.

This face thrashes in a hospital bed. This face can't commit. This face is shadow behind the sun—please, try not to peel the gold back.

VII.

If the chisel is positioned just right, I can chip away at the sky and pull the stars down intact. I can melt them down in a great big vat and use the liquid glow to paint—both over and under the shadow. It laminates the page.

While I lie in bed, I let it pour over me, making sure it coats every crack, every pore, every crevice. It helps me sleep. Seals in all of the faces, makes them converge and conflict and I watch them all from a safe distance. I don't have to wear any one of them when I sleep. The muscles in my face unrav-

el and soften, relaxing into the pillow, the darkness, and night's untouched canvas.

Someday, when we share a bed, you might wonder who is facing you. It will be frightening, I'm sure. You'll probably miss me, think I've vanished and call my mother up in a frigid sweat to find where I have gone, but then I'll put on one of my faces and you'll see I was in front of you all along. You might even be able to see the blue, green, and red of the peony star leaking out of my left eye, and it'll blend with the white, gold, and purple in your eye. We'll meet somewhere in the middle, between our faces.