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Straightening My Face

The smiling mask.
Mom put one on too,
rule-maker, power
that mustn't be known.

* * *

Some words are like nails
lost for hundreds of years
then drawn from clots
of rusting clay—a tang
of tetanus or jolt of worm lore.
Elk, snake, shark, lion, bear.
They scratch regular maps
of good healthy fear below
what she warned of, how
I'd never be clean. Rising,
stretching, *lion* shadow
expands, cave wall curved
like a mask inside. *You,*
she said, *are wrong, are freakish,*
are the apple of my eye,
are dirty. You are whacked
by her wooden spoon still nestled
near the eggbeater after 40 years.
You'll never be clean. Doing
things like that. You
are a stranger hooked on nails
of her words and her hands
in the bathtub. *You* she cleaned
outside and in, taming. And threw
you on your back on the bed
to scrub harder. As if *you*
were a *bear's* lover.

* * *

Bear: sour plum smell of whole
drifts of fur, teeth like a dog's.
I slept enfolded on his belly,
in his grip, and his feet, fleshy pads,
struck flat like mine. By day,
I tumbled along, grabbing
pine moths, swallowing

all the grit of wings and mast
of legs. He fell in his own blood
leaked from ears, eyes.
Only then a rifle shot.

* * *

She hooked me, built masks,
scrubbed. I lost my scent.
She said *Don't be mad.*
I love you. I was scared
of the tub. Pictures danced
on the mask's insides but it fused
to my flesh, this stupid smile.

* * *

Blank mist or fog of one
solid seamless unwrinkled sea
cool sheet blameless moment
but what is clanging at first
unconsciously sounding now
louder persistent to show
underneath seething wreckage
bellbuoy where the *bear* turns.

* * *

Fear skin and love rifles. All long,
hard, steel missiles. Bullets. Shells.
Love crafted metal: it'll save you.
She scrubbed because she could
still smell *bear*. My nails tore
a streak brown as a *bear*
beneath my clothes. Over
the smiling mask I placed another—
steel, smooth mask, and I swear
I could see better along the gunshaft,
the smell of disinfectant, the razor.
This is how to be clean, she said.

* * *

A sea-garden of words: *grunt*, *grunion*,
snook, *stingray*. Any good ocean word:
halibut, *sprat*. Turn it on its side,
lick it alive until it spins like a hot nail,
casting light. If you ask I say, *nothing*.
Nothing at all. The blow, hammer,

surf falling. Who can say I won't
hurt a child? . . . *Don't be mad*, she said.
I never am. Eyes churn in eyeholes,
but she sees the smile. A cargo
of silent words keeps me still
while I punch skin down, mind
down, scrape of my own nails
down, and straighten my face.

* * *

I saw a mask
with a clever hinged door,
the outside a raven
beaked, wily, savage.
From inside, once opened,
you saw emerge red
and black segmented
features of the soul.

Another the face of a man
with one eye blinking,
concentric circles of wire
affixed with amulets—
seal, salmon, bear—
from the Kuskokwim River
a century ago.

Falsefaces give migraines,
said the curator,
and he'd had them for months
ever since the crate arrived.
The masks are, he said,
carved from living basswood—
healers' disfigurements.

* * *

*Here, she said, take this face
bland as an aspirin.*

* * *

Morning I saw on a wild riverbend—
by plaits of water and snow-borne drifts of boulders—
mist rising, grasses where a bison rose through the rising,
its hump, its mane, and the two steins of horns,
petal skin of nostrils, whisk of a tail.
At the edge wolves sliding mist, gray shadows

barely discerned, waiting. Bison and wolves lock
in grass's green wave, river flashing,
light cutting boulders like fangs.

* * *

I've wanted a dragon mask, wolf
mask, long wire snout of a needlefish,
whale's hinged-door mask. *Bear,*
wolf, elk, shark, woman
joined at the *rose*. Long, clever
line of *snook* crumples in a wave.
Cow-nosed *rays* herd and brush my thigh.

Holding my face
like St. Bartholomew
on Judgment Day.
All nice and neat,
she said. *Put it on.*
I did to be judged
with the rest.