

Silent Faces

by Jonathan Barry Sullivan

Brian, Ari, Megan, and Jane wear masks of clay and sit in front of a fire. They all remember Dr. Solomon's words. "When you are in my class," he said, "you wear two hats: the literary scholar and the mystic. This is a grain of salt toward your materialist diet of philosophy." They hear the crack of embers in the fire, the same magic that was in Solomon's voice.

Rilke and Rumi, Omar Khayyam and Ecclesiastes, the Taoist writings of Laozi and the Enlightenment of Buddha; they read them all. "If you haven't already started, it is time for you to stir the heavy sediment of your souls," Dr. Solomon had said, threshing the air with his fingers. "Stir deep. Don't worry if you cannot see to your core. Stir deeply to the bedrock of yourselves."

They have come to the forest with the masks. Sitting around the fire, Ari nervously fingers the surface of his mask. He had tried, and the others seemed to think he succeeded in evoking the image of a smiling old man.

"Maybe I could have done a better job if we painted them," he mumbles.

Jane hears him. "Nah, old people are pale anyway."

"I guess so." He wonders why he chose to make a mask of an old man's face.

When they are ready and the splinter of the moon is overhead, they enter the tent. The leaves glitter in the stars, and a cool, slow wind makes the trees groan pleasurably beneath the susurrus of leaves and the hissing embers of the fire.

The tent is dark, and Megan feels she has entered a deeper place as she crosses the threshold. She sees Jane sitting in the lotus position in front of the fire. *That is Jane*, Megan reassures herself, but the twists and curls of shadow make her mask a fey thing. Ari sees that Megan is stunned by the visage of Jane, so he takes her hand, and they sit next to her. Except for his eyes and a space in the hole in the mask's forehead, Ari's face is obscured. The calm smile of the old man seems genuine. "Sit, sit," he says.

The crickets chirp, vibrating the air with their music. They sit for two hours before the dying fire, and they fall asleep.

Megan dreams of a dancing, black fox. *Ari*, she thinks. It is not his mask, no, that is not there. Only the mask's calm expectant smile. *Something is coming*. She can feel it. So does the fox—that is why he dances.

The morning comes, but they sleep until the heat is uncomfortable. Brian opens a series of flaps to let the breeze into the tent. He realizes that he still has his mask on. He takes it off and appreciates the work. *It almost looks like a boar's reflection*. He fingers where he had smoothed away the tusks. It felt right to add them. It felt right, too, to blend them back into the surface, erasing them with a few, twisting strokes. *Can we really find what Solomon wanted us to? This is just sitting. Are we really meditating? This is more like hiding out.*

They explore the woods. Talking, thinking. Watching masks morph in the shadows under trees. Ari laughs as he watches two squirrels play tag, a low belly laugh; a squirrel tackles the other, and both animals twirl into the brush below the trees. The summer day passes quickly, absentmindedness and leisure shortening the hours until dinner. Brian realizes meals will probably be the only time they remove their masks. The clay mouths cannot eat and can only let so much water

pass bone hard lips. A rain comes in, light and slow. Brian returns to the tent.

“Hey, Jane.”

She waves and turns to him.

“You look like a queen in that mask,” Brian says.

The features of her face are covered in calligraphic swirling and interlocking loops and curly-Qs.

“I am the Wild Queen of Clay,” she says, “and you look like a chief of rogues. I love the confident sneer. The brows that seem to blend a lascivious look with an invitation. ‘Come with me,’ it says. ‘Come into this,’ almost.”

The sun dives into the trees, and the moon appears. Brian wakes the fire, and Megan says, “It doesn’t feel like I’m hiding. It feels like I’m searching.”

“Like looking around for yourself,” Brian adds. “Right? I was worried we were just hiding out.” He is afraid to say that he feels like he keeps seeing parts of himself in their masks. He looks at Ari’s mask. *That is how I feel when I finish a book. Like I’m living a long, good life.*

It begins to rain, and the four friends escape to the tent. It is cool. The rain lifts away the excess heat from the waxed canvas exterior. They all imagine a rhythm in the rain drops. The waxing moon peeks through the chimney vent of the tent.

Ari taps out the rhythm on his knees. For a moment, no one sees his hands. That is not where they are looking for it. The tap-tap-tap is not coming from the rain—it is coming from Ari’s orange and gold face. The face—their faces—staring, always looking through the fire for the fire hiding within.

Megan sees Ari’s hands and suddenly knows the actual source of the sound. The realization scares her, and the hair on her body rises. She shivers.

“Cold?” Ari asks.

“No. Maybe.” Megan rubs her arms.

Ari sees the hairs of her forearms, like swatches of supple dry grass, darkening with the fading light of dusk.

“The sun is setting on the field,” he mumbles. He decides to get more firewood. Megan’s lioness mask looks like the grass on a savannah, bright in the sun. More dancing shapes of masks, shadows. Ari sees a wave in Brian’s mask, oscillating as he breathes. The wave is moving in the rain. Hours pass, and the moon dips. The crackling embers and pattering rain lull them to sleep.

Jane dreams she is standing, waist deep, in a river. She does not feel the cold. In her hands are three white diamonds blazing beneath the water and warming her. She lifts them higher, and above the water they burst into light.

She opens her eyes and shields them from the sun. What am I looking for? She laughs and turns over. Brian’s masked face is staring at her.

“What is that shape?” she asks as she pokes the swirl on his forehead.

“Water,” he says. “An ice tunnel. I don’t know.”

“What time is it?” Megan asks.

“Food time,” Jane answers. “Brian, make us food.” He scoffs. “Won’t you please?” she adds.

“Oh, Mighty Breakfast King Brian,” Ari says.

“Yes, Sir Knight?”

“Wakey, wakey, eggs and bakey.”

“If the people so desire!”

They cheer with as much enthusiasm as can pass through their tired groans. Masks are removed and breakfast inhaled between garbled comments about the night.

"Things got a little weird," Ari says through a mouthful of fried egg. "In a good way."

Megan shrugs, unsure. "I felt lost. Sad. Disembodied."

Jane nods, "Same, just not sad. Melancholy, maybe. I liked it."

"Do we stay another night?" Brian asks before stuffing a piece of ham into his mouth.

"I don't want to stop short," Jane answers. "I still don't get it. We need to go further."

"Those animals still dancing in your head?" Ari asks.

"Something will come of this. Don't worry," Brian says. He hands her a cup of coffee.

A hawk swoops low and flies a ring around them. Its eyes catch the light, mirror and then dull the sun into the same bronze as its feathers. Four times it circles the camp. Nearing Brian, then Megan, then Jane, then Ari. The hawk cries and then soars higher, toward the sun. For a moment its shadow remains, but then the shadow also ascends. Gold beak and bronze wing and acoustic voice, sailing in the summer air. *Hidden*, thinks Ari. *The hawk is shade. The hawk still flies in the oak and pine and high flaking hickory.*

"Holy," Ari whispers, letting out his held breath. The dark exposed skin of his forehead catches a breeze. *Solomon would call it an omen.*

Ari breaks the silence: "To linger too long in awe would be wrong right now."

Jane laughs, "Hope not."

She tries to save the memory as she walks away from camp. Most of her dream has faded away now. Alone, she enters the woods. Ari was right: the animals are still dancing. *Dancing...something is coming.*

They all feel it. It tingles and buzzes. The something skitters and crunches like the detritus-laden forest soil. Jane wonders if Brian feels the same way.

They all wonder if they feel differently. They all wonder if they can reach the same depth of self-understanding, the bedrock that Solomon spoke of.

Their experience with the masks and tent and firelight, while similar, will always be different. But Jane wants it to be impossibly close to Brian's. Megan and Ari, too. But she does not see or think of her mask like they do. It is hers, made in her hands. That series of differences is all they share.

In the clearing, Brian finishes extinguishing the cooking fire. Little wisps of steam rise from below the thin layer of dirt and sand thrown over the fire pit. The memory of flame, ash and heat. Ash, memory, and sensation all flee from them and wait for them. Brian takes a pinch of wet ash and rubs it into the grooves of his fingerprints.

"Hey, Ari," Brian calls. "I'm gonna look for water."

Brian tries to find Jane. "Water," he mumbles, fingering the whorl on his mask's forehead.

He walks beneath the trees until he feels almost lost. He listens for Jane. Standing still, he feels his breath flow in and out. He breathes through his nostrils, but also the mask's. *My face*, he thinks as he feels the hard white clay. "Is this my face?"

"If you made it, it's yours," Jane answers.

Brian looks for her and cannot tell which tree her voice is coming from. He looks up and sees her sitting on the wide arm of an oak, her mask as stark as the sun through the leaves.

She laughs as Brian flinches, startled. He coughs in embarrassment. "I'm looking for water." He relaxes, laughs at

himself.

Jane swings herself down next to Brian. “Me too,” she pokes his forehead. “Not an ice tunnel, though.”

They hear soft laughter. Listening, they follow it slowly. When they find the source of the laughter, they also find the water. A stream as wide as Brian is tall and as deep as Jane’s waist.

Jane kicks off her shoes and steps in the river. Cool water glides over her feet and around her ankles.

“It’s nice. Swim?” she offers, as if it is all she has to give.

“Clothes?” Brian asks, a nervous thread in the word.

“Your call.” She unbuttons her shorts, throws them on the bank. Brian sees the graceful curves of her mask in her hips and buttocks, cheeks round like the apple shoulders of her cheekbones.

He follows suit, blushing under the clay smile. “What about our masks?”

Jane shakes her head. “No. Leave it on.”

She peels off her green tank top, throws it next to Brian’s shorts. Wading into the center of the stream, she dips low and takes a handful of silt. She uses it to scrub her shoulders and arms, trying to focus on the river and not Brian’s eyes that are flicking back and forth. Like the trees, her body is swaying; her body is blushing. Brian throws his shirt next to Jane’s shorts. The water flows around him, and he sees it fan around Jane.

“Hand me a stone, please,” he asks as he covers his arms and chest in sand and silt. The wet river rock shines in her hand as she lifts it, and his fingers touch her palm as he takes the stone.

They bathe as they have not bathed before, with only their masks and underwear for modesty. The quiet, burbling laughter of the water and the softly rattling leaves are what they hear—not the incessant hiss of a shower. They listen to the chirping of birds and cicadas, not the whine of pipes and the groan of tubs.

They hear the music of Jane’s mask when they are silent. They realize the quiet beckoning playfulness of Brian’s mask by taking turns floating in the current.

Megan and Ari, too, are also becoming. They hide behind trees, following impulses written for them in the shapes of clay on their faces, written in the lines of stone carved by water and wind and time. The impulse is so powerful that they can only surrender to it in the perfect sound of laughter.

“I will find you, Ari,” Megan hears herself say from the mouth of her mask. She feels it from her chest and throat.

He taps her shoulder. “But I have found you first.” Twisting out of her reach, he tries to disappear around the trunk of a pine tree.

Megan is there, waiting for him. “Can’t lose me, though.”

The words hang for a moment in the beam of sunlight between them.

Ari laughs from his belly. His eyes, bright, hold Megan’s from the other side of the light.

“Good,” he hears himself say. In his voice is all the richness of honesty that this ritual demands. When they return to camp, it is hand in hand. Ari’s in Megan’s, Brian’s in Jane’s. They smile beneath their masks.

Ari rekindles the fire, and all resume the ritual of stirring, what they came here to do. They sit and watch one another in protean light, themselves changing with slow, tectonic passion. They accept the open-eyed, meditative silence with the same devotion they gave the wet clay when they made their masks. The fire transmutes the wood into golden light. Brian sets up a teakettle over the fire, and it fills the air with steam. The heat of the fire pulls them in.

They sift through the day’s bliss: the chase in the woods, bathing in the river. They remember the strain of the semester, the energy they dedicated to studying and writing. They stir past their experiences, all the meaning in their

names stirred up like pebbles and sand and silt.

The moon is above them, the crescent fitting perfectly through the chimney of the tent. The tent fills with pale light. When Ari turns up his face to look, the moon and curls of smoke are all he can see. Then his eyes become stronger, and he sees into the moon's pitted surface. *Too bright.* When he looks down, he sees the same pitting in the masks of his friends, and he thinks: *like the moons of distant planets.*

To Ari, Brian's silent face is like sandstone, rippled and smiling. *And I have followed him, embarked on the same adventure.* The leaves rattle in the wind and the crickets sound like tambourines.

On Jane's mask, animals dance and obey the call of a forgotten place. Not quite forgotten. She smiles beneath her mask. *Speech and clarity will come when they are ready.*

Megan and Ari face each other. Behind the clay shapes, Megan sees her eyes reflected in Ari's, reflected in the crescent whites of Jane's and Brian's eyes. The flickering light brings perspective and full dimension to vision. In silence, she knows the fullness of things surrounding her. She becomes an open space that no longer needs the contours of her body.

Shadows in the masks and the creases of clothing and joints of fingers and limbs. She expects what is waiting to emerge from these shadows. The moon has settled beyond the horizon. It, too, is waiting to emerge from shadow like the sun.

Morning comes and peels back the night. Brian realizes the sun is out. But he no longer cares about the importance of morning. None of them care.

Stirring below the murk of his disturbed memory, he loses himself. *We are rooted and safe to descend into this.* He feels the clay on his face radiate through him. It shakes his mind and body into each other; it is an end, a beginning. The mind and body begin and end in the same forgotten shadows. Between them is the earth and the masks and the tent.

Brian loses the distinction between these things. Every unnoticed drop of sweat shrinks the differences between Jane, Brian, Megan, Ari, and their surroundings. Brian accepts it: *Like ripples on the river.*

Jane watches his muscles relax and shoulders sag. His hands unfold, and his fingers spread. They exhale together. The whirlpool on Brian's forehead unwinds and disperses into wide waves, barely rises on the brow, dips beneath the mask's eyes, rises above cheekbones, sinks into an arc that forms the sly smile, sits on the chin and off the edges of his mask.

The last of the ripples touch Jane, and she relaxes in the heat. The animals dancing around her brow slow to a crawl. Thunder rolls, soft, under the clouds they do not see but know are gathering. The rain patters down. The relaxed smile of Ari's mask promises them what they already know: a storm is coming, and they are safe. They must experience it.

The sun slides over the last clouds from the western horizon. The last of the embers emit dull, orange, mushroom flames. Megan relaxes, and the thunder and rain purr. It is her sound, their sound, given to her by the thunder. They all take in the growing purr of rain and forget it is not part of their silence. Lightning flashes like a tidal surge through the clouds, filling the empty spaces of the sky.

When they look up, a bolt flashes overhead. It is a bright river over the roof of the tent. The afterimage lingers. The current pulls, sweeping away the last sediment and smooth stone above the riverbed. From the inland womb, the lightning flashes a path as the last flame retreats into charcoal. The space is infinite.

Megan shudders with the thunder as she feels at once the origin and end of the bolt. She sees her reflection in the afterimage. In the dark, she sees the others beneath and outside their masks. They are veins of gold in the bedrock of

the river. From that bedrock, the river carved out stone and mud. From that mud, they made their masks—silent faces that articulated their desire. The mask is every particle of her. *All things are true here. Here goes on forever.*

Daylight waxes.

The rain slows.

They go to the river.

They bathe in the stream, naked. They have removed their masks. They dance like animals in the water. Their feet kick up flakes of gold.