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Faces

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Mark Levine

Faces

We can't make the faces go away.
The bodies—the bodies are not such a problem.
We pull them apart with chemicals and stretch them
out
along the cracked surface of the old freeway.
Even the noises the bodies make, which come mainly
from the chest and hands and sometimes
from the side of the head, even the noises
can be pushed into the background
where they won't keep us up.
We use iron pokers for this.

But the faces. First we slice them off with shears.
Some are fed to the guards. Some prisoners are made
to wear the faces, and a few choke on the blood.
We boil some into a white paste to make paper.
We burn some. Some are stitched with bright thread
into the masks we wear at our meetings.
But there are always more. More faces, limp and
slippery.

Once there was a face I couldn't make
go away. Its story is a sad story.
When I paced at night, making my rounds, planting my
footprint
in the trace of my old footprint, I thought about
the face. Thinking did nothing.
I was afraid to get caught. But fear didn't work.

Neither did hunger or sex.

I was afraid when the face was gone.

I was afraid when it reappeared.

The drawings I made with my pencils
on the floor beneath my bed were a good
effort. The face became clear and abstract.
It looked like the empty outline of a face.

Was I trying to hurt myself? I did hurt myself.

I was brought before a panel. Explanations were
required.

When I finished talking they sent me out again.

Then, in a pale room surrounded by other such rooms,
I made love and did not look at the face.

I was looking away from the face.

I committed a forbidden act

and I met with the Master in his private theater

and I was not contrite. I stared at him.

It hurt to stare. I said *Fix me*.

I wish it hurt more.