

1973

Flayed mask, [poetry]

Michele Anne Birch
The University of Montana

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FLAYED MASK

By

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B.A., Fort Wright College, 1968

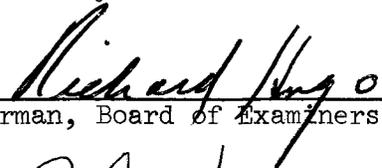
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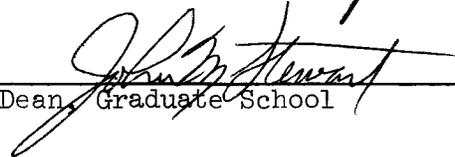
For the Degree of

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"The Only Portrait of the Mother Foundress" will appear sometime this year in Poetry Northwest; "For Mad" appeared under the title, "Our Eyes Get Darker When We're Down" in the fall '69 issue of Sumac; "Carkeek", "Hunchback: Navaho Spirit in a Twisted Oak", and "Poem to Accompany a Meditation on Death According to the Ancient Rule for the Last Tuesday of the Month" appeared in the winter '72 issue of West Coast Poetry Review; "On the Hi-Line" and "Chester-Opheim Circuit" appeared in Quarry, #1; "The Moon Looking Through a Cobweb", "Meeting Wounded Head", and "Night Ride" appeared in Kayak, #19; "Mineral Road and Highway 2" appeared in the spring '72 issue of Jeopardy; "Vigil", "Burlington Northern First Class", and "Chester-Opheim Circuit" appeared in The Garret, 1972; Sections ii and iii of "On the Ridge" appeared in The Wrighter.

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HUNCHBACK

HUNCHBACK: NAVAHO SPIRIT

IN A TWISTED OAK

The moon did this. Drew him
onto the plains, her raggy shadow.
Hunched under the weight of the sky
he crosses his arms like prayer-sticks,
the burning sweet-grass at his feet.

BLACK GOD'S FIRE IS A BURNING COAL BANK

Nine weeks covered with ashes,
washing his hands in burning pitch.
He would brush his hair,
brush the ashes into the smoke-hole.
He would begin leaping through the fire.
He would return to his home.

BONE MAN

What witchy toothless creature
hovers above my bed? The ghost
I saw once, full length
in a full length mirror,
a shaman, his goat-hair dress,
pointed cap? Kid's dreams,
under the bed, in the closet
calling the nearest name.
He comes like the Saturday purge,
Hunchback, with his plant mixtures,
chants. What should I drink?
What concentrate rub on my skin?
He's really serious -- Old Fringed Mouth --
that salt-stuff, those waves.
O sea-pull, moon-pull,
no-faced lover,
wind-pull, sea-pull.

CARKEEK

I found him in the sand,
skull still young,
teeth and antlers intact.
He must have gone on,
the winter they moved into the ravine,
eating every blade, every leaf,
locking horns and dying there.
Perhaps he smelled the salt,
wandered past the cabins, across the tracks,
heard the sea, his eyes pulling,
cheeks drawn in, his heart,
a long drum beat.

FLAYED MASK

There must be stringy hair.
Albino eyes fluttering in the light,
one navy eye filling the face.
Eyes moving like fish and then the mouth,
that cave through which the darkness
of the tribe was taken in. The skin,
marked by sand and wind would flake
at a touch. The chest, blown out
by a long cough records the standing
heart beat, while the ribs, tense
as the bony arms and legs, sink
into that dark water, the dark forest.

MEETING WOUNDED HEAD

I have hidden my bones in the tall grass
and am wandering through fields
talking to horses. Birds chase their heels.
I say: Where did you learn such grace
that you never step on living things?
They point their ears to the hills.
Any minute I expect a whirlwind
and the spirit of Wounded Head.
They called him gentle who never took a scalp.
A storm lifts my bones.
Wind in the veil. Wind in the hair.
And oh, the wild flowers everywhere.

HAIR LONG AS A SCARF

Hair long as a scarf blows in the mouth.

Veil pinned at the neck. Coif.

Fern around pine, around stone.

Grass that I braid at the river's edge.

Hair thick as a forest. Dark.

Dividing the moon. Falling as rain,

through this open window,

falls on hair.

THE ONLY PORTRAIT OF THE MOTHER FOUNDRESS

Those round spectacles inside the linen frame
haunt every cloister wall. Bells against sleep,
that cover of darkness, do not disturb, her eyes
far past the moon, wing-touch of owl a touch
of darkness she could not shake. What if she wrapped
herself in black, closed upon, back of her eyes,
the center of things, some river she knew,
a place for picking flowers. Should someone
follow she was not afraid. November,
month of the slender wind.

Perhaps she watched the stars too long,
began to feel their insect-leap.

It was then she took on chains, the pointed
bracelet under giant sleeves. Lost by the swamp
those tower bells rang far away. In dreams
I see her weaving through snow, wash of sun
against shadow. She never turns her face,
leaves nothing for memory, no relic
to become a saint. I know her Christ.
Wheat under sky. Snow. Pine.

ON BEING PHOTOGRAPHED IN THE CLASSROOM

They lean casually on their desks.
They are looking out the windows,
past the trees. No one hides.
They have forgotten the photographer.
One boy, he has not blinked
in half an hour, taps his head.
A few knocks with the fingers
as if to jar some creature
sleeping in that nest of hair.
I am surprised at myself. Not the nun,
coif framing a ghost-like chin. Hair
falling, crow-eyes, I am not hiding.
I am looking out the window, past
the trees. I can't remember
what we were saying.

THE MOON LOOKING THROUGH A COBWEB

When the clock is right it rains. Everything
colorful turns black. I know when to bring
in the bells and when the drums and cymbals.
In the basement I practice a fire dance,
praying to a god who has been burned.
I tell the kids that my kindling point is low. It shows
in the handwriting. They say I am bewitched. I have
hung my peace sign on the dog and declared war
on the spiders. Tomorrow I'll wear a chain of paper clips,
arrive on a motorcycle and play the flute. They'll laugh at that,
my fears more numerous than theirs: trees that can turn
into boats, ghosts on the back porch. Someday I may wake
up in Africa. I've thought of marijuana in the coatroom,
checked all the fire escapes. I believe in the crayon
paintings on the wall:
Indians dancing by the sea.
The moon looking through a cobweb.

NIGHT RIDE

FOR ONE WHO DROWNED

Past the clock I do not wind, lights hanging by shoestrings:
some derangement of the moon, the break I cannot get across.
The railroad ends where I was born. My ears ring, trying
to beat the ocean's drag. The feel of my pulse
keeps me on the move. In attic rooms I listen
for sounds on the stairs. The one who comes
is not the one I'm waiting for. I see you in the mirror,
eyes dark, set wide apart. I am falling through trees,
I am in a field, I am on a rock, watching
strands of seaweed lock. Strange things float by:
hands, hair. I remember the swing, the treehouse,
all that grass, your voice a bird-cry, your face
in every glass. When I went east I grew careless,
could not keep from breaking things. Child
attached to a suitcase. Pieces of shell.
The place I'm caught in a mother's bones.

NIGHT RIDE

All night, riding, down, down:
wheels, pedals, black rags, flaming.
Down, past familiar trees, the cemetery.
Stones collide in the brain. A landslide.
I can barely stay ahead of the rumble.
Down, down, in the faint glow of my own light.
An old woman waiting on the side of the road.
Fur scorching under wheels. Cat or skunk,
she will think its a devil. She lived
in a house with too many saints.
Down, down, sliding in gravel. I have
left everyone behind. No power lines.
I must be going through a mountain, a tunnel.
How I wish it would rain. The rumbling has stopped.
Down, down, into the great sad face of the moon:
thick dust beginning to taste like salt,
flesh falling away, bones turning white in the sand.

ANAESTHETIC

Who is this wound in mummy-cloth,
her face a clown-mask, a grin?
The wired jaw. Can she speak?

Her wrists in leather cuffs, hands
bound by gauze thick as a boxing glove --
she has been strapped in. She cannot
move her eyes. And the long fast. Breath of ash.
Now they are wheeling her down the hall,
the orderlies with their sterile boots
wheel her gently. Past green tile --
the tranquil moving sea. She can feel
the cart as if she were on a train,
wheels clicking every turn, or that other time,
snow-bound in the mountains. It is a gentle thing,
this trip. It is cold. That salt-stuff
running in the veins. It is the sea.
Now the surgeon comes into view. His face.
The hands, delicate and gloved.

What is this wound? This stripping,
the skin a dangling bandage? Is it healing?
Is there a crust at the edge?

She cannot remember what happened.

Does she have hair?

Now they are pulling the sheet to her chin.

They are covering her with snow.

Her first home comes into view.

Mountains falling into sand. The sea.

INCISION

I have been playing hangman again.

This ancient grief. Gall in the throat.

I wear a distant mask.

The rope-like hair. Eyes turned to look in.

It is all drama. Lamenting

my past as the year fades out.

And then this love. How it winds

me in its sheets. It is almost comfort.

The darkness. The silence. What boat

rides a far sea? The woman

in the next room cries in sleep.

I can't tell what she says.

Can't make myself clear. What wound

draws the salt from our hearts?

I would lie face down on the floor.

I remember nothing that would disturb.

Only the wind, its blade the thin edge

of a scalpel, this screen across my eyes.

KINNIKINNICK

All I can remember: the loneliness
of windows, a swing. The jungle knot
we straddled, slept in, shirts
berry-stained, knees bound by string
and a poultice of leaves. Back of the garage,
a slender plot. Vines up to the sill.
Rock salt blue all winter.

The creek that took the culvert
washed a log jam down the mountain,
everything pouring through the gully,
old jackets, hair, over the gates,
tangled branches, the dammed up season
pouring into the streets, men
banking the Columbia, flood-time.

In June the water fell. I've
forgotten what happened after --
Climbing past a line of Western Larch,
all I can remember: the river green,
mist above the river, trees, fields.
Wild asparagus bitterly spit.

BURLINGTON NORTHERN FIRST CLASS

This train, faster than the others, clicks
across country, trees, rivers under snow.
I've found the way home, lying here, my feet
in the right direction, one blue light
on the wall. The voice I love
coils through bones, hums in my ears.
I know where these crooked joints will take me.

In such a space I become a child, drawing
faces on the window. I was a mountain kid,
scraped elbows, knees, tumbling --
punkwood and whistling-grass
into the creek. No music I could play
would tame the teacher. Threat
of a cork-tipped stick. Mother was the same.
A mile away we could not escape her eyes.

I would be clean when I arrive, my skin,
teeth, Seltzer in my veins. My scarf
neatly arranged, on time
with the clock in my case, I would
step into the sun, the snow, shining
toward the right face, shining.

CYCLORAMA

This gale drives through a gap in the mountain,
familiar around the eaves, around the corners of the house.
We sleep in a strong wind, content as children,
when in the attic, rain fell hard on the shingles.
We'd hide under blankets, an arab's tent,
confederate soldier's coat. Costumes for the plays we'd stage,
sheets tied between rafters, the platform falling.

No alarm comes easier than the wind, these early hours
when our roles give way. Years I acted out my grief,
went backward in my sleep. Mother in her turban
read tea-cups at the church bazaar. There were these things
for the fingers, gloves, a ring. Her bracelets jingling
I'd go weak at the sound of tiny bells. Always I'd wake,
a glacier-like spot of blue, some famine gnawing my heart.

Dreams are gentler now, the terror gone,
the horse that carries us through the desert,
our throats dry, sand in our hair, or the boat
that brings us in, sea-worn, our nets breaking.
Morning makes windows of light, the gale, cut
before the final scene. Army drab, we blend
into the carpet, the walls, everything quiet,
our breathing quiet.

FROM THE ATTIC WINDOW

That woman crossing the field.
For days I have seen nothing else.
What the wind does with her hair.
I cannot tell why she has put on black.
Why the cast on her left foot.
I have become a stranger to myself,
all these days seeing nothing else.
How the sky winds itself around the moon.
The snow ticking its heart out.

AT LINCOLN CITY, OREGON

Nothing looks pretty this morning.
Litter of crab-claws, black shells,
all night turning in that roar,
the great sea-breath, rattle of dune-grass.
Half buried in sand I've covered my head
with a towel as if to tell the darker clouds
I'm here. I'm here with my heart now,
like a small bird, its rib-cage
moving in and out. Trembling.

Always before the touch of sand was light,
and lovers, knees against backbone,
knees against knees, found a log for shelter.
Small girls dotted the shore and the sea-parrot
knew the dazzle of sun on fluorescent suits
as he scrambled for his grub. No bird-scream
jarred a nerve but rode itself in, wings
folded down and that smooth echo.

My lover lives in the sky. One hundred
thirty-six stairs up these cliffs
a million footprints stop and cross.
Where levels break we may confuse
the tracks until we find the ones we know

and follow on. I'm married to a world
worn thin by wind, the constant sand-sting.
Grey mist in a grey morning, this cold
in my bones, I'm grounded on rock.

ON THE RIDGE

ON THE RIDGE

(For my friend who has been there)

i

Up here, roads run in circles,
identical houses, sixty chimneys in a row.
Wherever the Air Force went, that sonic boom
still cracks the glass. Moss on a rooftop,
a sunken porch. It may be that here
we will finally watch ourselves go,
easy as a pine cone falling,
or a shred of dandelion, its seed
parachuting into the ground.

ii

A dark and weedy place.
Frog noises, crack of my shoes on sticks.
Flood-stuff on the rocks, sticks.
How vulnerable I have become, your face
in the reeds, the jaw hanging, fixed eyes.

What knocks in my ears?
O heartbeat in the temple, wrist,
tortuous line of my veins.
I've nowhere left to hide,
this place where I shake.

iii

I'm trying to get somewhere, propped on a pine --
This far, no muscle promises to work, a turn
to the right or left stopping every movement.
Once I chewed on grass. Now I dream of lying there,
the whole rib cage gone. What mournful bird
carries my song? Birds at my feet, in the sky.
Look, the edge, a piece of ground, a hill
of blue flowers. My friend, how do we live
in such a place, here where my head
leans on a jagged trunk, where layers
of cobwebbed bark break and fall?
Place of knots and twisted branches,
place where the wind comes back.

iv

He came -- a strong smell, wire glasses,
paint on his pants. It took all day,
covering the mountain, and where the water
had gone down, walking the river bottom.
Dead fish and stinking rocks. Along the road,
an old asceticism, gravel in my shoes,
a locked back. Soon we were chanting --
Cheyenne perhaps. The whole way
we had been picking flowers.

v

It was a slow click, click, up and down the stairs.

When the feeling came back in your knees I left.

Perhaps it was the fireweed that kept me walking on the ridge --
you, hunched over your desk, nerves spread like tissue paper.

All winter we had been standing on the ice --

Twang! Like a bowstring breaking.

vi

A bird, sounding like a typewriter. 5:00 a.m.

I survey my domain. In the attic again,
cracked ceilings, walls. Used to be, one break,
and I'd think the house was gone. But it stands,
branches near enough to touch the windows.

MORNINGS WERE NEVER CLEAR

(For Madeline De Frees)

And the mist rose. Dark leaves.
A solid sky. We sat shivering,
no words to tame the wind, and wrapped
in black. Corn in the weedy patch
grew thin. If ever there was light,
it came through stained glass. Warmth
on the eyelids. Crow's feet in early snow.

What animals, wild in shadows
of our dreams, startled sleep?
What swallowed salt broke the voice
in waves? Was it a ship that carried
us, its hull, deep as the belly
of some great fish? What twist
in the throat cast us ashore?

I remember you, thin in your coat,
as if the shoulders had collapsed,
the main artery against a rib,
a violent striking in the head and neck.
What steady pulse brings that half-smile,
that twitch along the root canal? The place
we left -- light catches on a spider's web,
the dark strands under leaves, under snow.

GATE OF THE MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS

This time you pass through.

The world you dreamed

at sixteen. In a field

the perfect woman

a hundred feet tall

wound in polar hair.

Framed by a wall of rock

drift of blue light

you vowed yourself forever.

Always the half-remembered shape.

Nights across country following

the snowshoe tracks. No longer

the bridal veil. Along the cliffs

a white-faced deer. Your wife

Johanna watches where the road

goes dim. Certain hours she feels

the mountain shake. She dreams

a goat-skin flung in your face,

that drop into a bear's jaw,

bones gone stiff where the edge

gives way. Your woman by the wilder

streams, wrapped in fog, in the summit

mist. Roots. Bark. And the stone holds.

Johanna by the gate grows warm

those hundred days weaving

scarves against the snow.

MAN ON A TELEPHONE WIRE

Like a handkerchief, an embroidered cloth
he hangs, jeans in shreds, hair like silk,
corn-silk above the trees, the wind
humming, the wire from which he hangs
humming above the grass, the flood.
As if chained to a goat, or like a puppet
made to dance he jerks in the wind,
the movement of the water like the movement
of the sea, that gathering in of the town,
his fence, his roses. Never such a dream,
that stir in the trees. Never such a dream,
the crow, his wing-flap, his cry,
this burning of the hands.

Light scatters across the road.
He is in a subway. He is unable to brake,
whistle or sigh. It is necessary only
to get somewhere. Past that man
caped in rain, the screaming wreckage.
He hears clapping. He does not deserve
it of course. That punch in the jaw,
the gut. Not much light footwork possible.
Now he is dancing in a field. He sees a man
in a rocking chair. He rocks the man's chair

with one foot. He gathers flowers.

Fool chained to a goat. Like a puppet
made to dance he jerks in the wind.

Where wire cuts the palm the palm holds.

That curling of the hand, the hand
a bird-claw, now, bobbing like a sparrow,
ring cutting bone, air as much drowning
as water, fire in his hands.

HANGMAN'S CREEK

Here we are without pack or boots,
cold creeping through marrow, through
the center of the bone. Impossible to say
how we arrived. How long it has taken.

The bright flag of your scarf. I've followed
it for miles. Think of troops
on the wall of China, the ones
buried within, all the heads
of their Buddhas gone. How far
now to the great dark throne?

I see it blurred. The creek
looting the whole town,
half the mountain caught in its flow.
What did we expect to find?

The secret at the heart of things?
No strength in the beaten grass,
no shelter. The bright flag
of your scarf. I follow it for miles.

ON THE HI-LINE

CHESTER-OPHEIM CIRCUIT

(For John)

You set an easy pace, your steps
light on the leaves. You know these towns,
widow women out for news, and men, their eyes
weathered shut, hard on a stranger.
Fields are empty. Burlington Northern
opens track for wheat. After that --
Wind. Sky.

Places you have been remind you to survive.
Avoid the nervous restaurants. Pitch your tent
on the edge of town. The river keeps you calm.
At school you find your voice.
The daily forecast. Blizzard.
Only church bells change the hour,
those hundred faces routine as clocks.

A boy follows you home. You cast your line
a mile upstream, trout back of every rock.
On the outskirts, sparrows bend the trees,
suffering a violent wind.

MINERAL ROAD AND HIGHWAY 2

At that junction walls are falling.
Missing pans. Anxious women chicken-voiced
til dawn. Weeks we'd been taking a blizzard
full stride. Your tracks filled with ice.
Strange designs. Some break before you knew.
The place where your mother stood, windows
jammed, your father out where the lake held,
trout rising in the wind.

The trip on the Clark Fork Express, cardboard
glued the windows. A crazy driver
clocking turns at sixty. We sat on our feet,
faces turned towards the mountains,
chill factor, forty below. To have gone
like that, all the lovers shaped in air,
the backward spin of a worn film,
horses graceful along the road.

That late bus bringing us home. Over and over,
the reconstructed scene, fragments spliced
where the drift comes in, a crack
where the weather stripping is gone,
snow in our eyes, our hair.

FOR MAD

Profile charts predict these critical states:

our eyes, darker when we're down, hair

hanging like variegated yarn. Unlike you,

I cannot knit to find relief, sit long enough

to wind the wool around my neck. I'd sooner cut

the threads, remove disorder with a vacuum cleaner.

Days on fast forward run off my calendar, self-thread machines

keeping schedules tight. The slightest jar turns on my alarm.

Static in transformers. Snow on the screen. I ask for shots

to de-sensitize my skin, a lamp for deeper pain.

Nights I am content to move in darkness, repair

the seams: clash of pans and spoons, pennies in a tin cup,

the ringing of these bells. Leper bells. Idiot bells.

VIGIL

Nine days, like a loon, I have been sitting on the fence
hopping from picket to picket. I know you are circling
up there somewhere. Here, planes run every six minutes,
and at my window, cars flicker through the leaves all night.
You are in each one, with sirens: Fire, Mobile
Coronary Unit. You are lost in a hospital: No Visitors,
Do Not Touch. Your hand comes through the window
looking for my keys. The phone rings
and I wake in the hall. Another dream.
My left arm, knitting so many inches,
wants to hang from the ceiling. Waiting --
I become a monster. Witch-bitch in the mere.
Should that car door finally slam or the plane
descend, I will be there, tape-measure around my neck,
olive green wool still tangled in my hair.

EARTH ANGEL AUTOMATIC MINE

One of the places we passed
this long trip through sage-brush,
thin birch. I'm not seeing much:
shells of buildings, used car lots.
Wreckage of an entire year.
Some man wants to sit beside me.
I tell him I left myself a hundred miles
back. It's all I can do, looking
out these windows, letting the emptiness
carry me. Later Étoile: Look at the sky,
the long dark fields. Those streams
covered with ice. The first light
we've seen in miles.

MISSING THE BUS IN WALLACE, IDAHO

Wrapped in a brown blanket, I've shut
myself in a three-cornered room. The coughing
out there, the hacking and spitting tell me
life persists. Our ultimate groans. And then
my anxious sighs. Cutting my finger again.
These distracted accidents. Lost on my way home,
three dollars a night brings windows that will not open,
a one-stringed light. That hole in the curtain.
Someone's ashes going forever. There is only one home.
That place where eyes darken on the ragged cliffs
of our souls. Buildings here are grim. Tough
as the people who make the town survive, their banging
into things part of their singing, as if
this were the last dance on earth.

ESPRESSO

Here we are, drinking Medaglia d'Oro,
two demitasse cups, pale blue.
This is the coffee we drink at night.
Illumination at the center of ourselves.

LOVE POEM COME UPON BY SURPRISE

Today the deaf-mute, the crippled and the blind
are making love. I saw them briefly, then
turned. Their awkward twisted feet. Searching
a face as though it were the moon, the pock-mark,
eyes, mouth, and then their ease with hair,
as if it were the first thing found by man
for love. I imagine them all day,
tangled in the tangled grass, carried
into the air, the matted fern
their final soil. They find
their names, their bodies pliant
as if nothing had ever not quite fit.
At evening they return, he still wound
in her hair, she finding the way by moon,
senses surer than her cane could tell.

ON THE HI-LINE

At night, the slow pull out of the station,
leaning to the left, the right,
rain and snow down the train window,
lights, red, green, into the mountains,
ice around the wheels, doorways frozen shut.

Morning, forgetting where I am,
where I have been. Sun on scattered towns,
children ice fishing, red hats, scarves,
into fields of fog, horses dark against the snow,
my bones, slender sticks under snow.

Sleep, dreaming of charred wood,
dogs along the tracks. A brief stop,
still some green between the tracks,
past warehouses, the school,
children on the playground, hats, scarves.

Fort Benton, Malta, Circle,
the wires frozen, end of the track,
children on toboggans, red hats, scarves,
onto the platform, my breath still warm
behind my scarf, the night coming on.

POEM TO ACCOMPANY A MEDITATION ON DEATH
ACCORDING TO THE ANCIENT RULE
FOR THE LAST TUESDAY OF THE MONTH

May you leave quietly, having nothing,
needing nothing, walking or riding, your boots
strong in the snow, and entering a hotel,
may you know yourself in the mirror, your scarf,
coat, though your eyes darken and you have grown thinner.
Room 11, no clocks, phones, may you still see,
though your vision waves, the carpets, worn,
slanting floors, and may you open the window there
where the bridge stands in the fog, ice floating
down the river, remembering, how your black rags
went into the fire, may that be forever done,
and later, how you thought you were Jesus,
may that be forever done. May the proprietor
tell you the town history, that Indian
evangelist, how he comes, and may he come,
his moccasins soft at your door.