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Mask

Darkness. Each breath returns humid moisture to my face, and my eyes are straining to open but cannot lift an extra weight. A bristle tickles the back of my ears and a pain is arising in my chest. I feel my internal arms and I spur them to awaken and move about. They move helplessly above me grasping at the void before reaching closer to my face. The cool air lashes my burning forehead as the sheet is pulled from my face. Then the light from the streetlamp outside lets my eyes know that they are still in working order. My mouth is released and the moisture that had collected was now absorbing the crisp air of the night. My hands plant themselves into the shag fibers and I move up to face the window. The orange fog of light barely makes its presence known. My head twists sideways and a refreshing pop clears my ears.

My mind was rushing around trying to etch a sketch of the elaborate dream that held me captivated most of the night, but all it was coming up with was a mess of squiggles. My eye drifts to the alarm clock and its digital readout was fuzzy and unintelligible. "Can't read, Must be dreaming," I said to myself. I dragged my feet through the fibrous rug, stood up, and walked across the room to hit the light switch. As I hit the light, my eyes shriek in horror at the sudden upheaval of all things dim. "No I'm not," I said in a grunt, and I pawed at the wall till my hand reached the plastic knob. Depressing it, the restful darkness returned and my eyes poised for darkness were again at home.

The room was a pit of chaos where piles of clean clothes mingled with dirty piles that carried over to heaps of books that lay on top of broken guitar strings and dirty dishes. An amp gave off a hum of electrical boredom that has lasted for days. The guitar it belonged to sat strangled and indifferent to the whole situation. The musty scent of old deodorant and off-brand febreze fills my nostrils, asking me once again to make a trip to the Laundromat. A few posters on the walls drift and rattle in the light AC induced wind, bringing my eyes to their faded and torn reminders of favorite sights and sounds that were no longer relevant. The chaos that the room sat in gave no menace; it just sat quiet and forgettable.

But that's not true. Hung on the wall between dusty posters and photographs is a mask. Dragging my feet through the deep carpet fibers, I reach out and touch the roughly fired surface of the kiln-forged mask. The expression being null, it did not react as I slid my fingers around the round edges and then through each of the eyeholes, feeling the glassy inside. About to pull it from the wall, I hesitate.

I'm sitting in the car with her. She's laughing about my trip to doctor's office for the third time in two months for a cut relating to the creation of her gift. I pull it out of the bag at my feet; a hand carved wooden stein, coated in a waxy lacquer that gave the wood the quality of glass. She smiles and thanks me infinitely for the gift. She reaches behind her and hands me what feels like a great stone plate wrapped in wrinkled newspaper. I pry it all loose to find the clay mask that she had found on her trip to Mexico. She tells me that she thought of me instantly when she saw it. I thank her graciously and look directly into her eyes. I set my hand closer to her, hoping that she'd

take it; that she would feel the bandage that encapsulated the finger injured for her. She doesn't.

We're walking across a parking lot in the hot summer wind. Our feet are baking through the flimsy flip-flops that hold our feet. My back is wet with a mixture sweat from a long day of walking through the heat streaks and the remnants of the refreshing water that held us close within its depths. My hand extends as far as it can from my body and tries to find a perch upon her shoulder. Without caution she runs from my side and reaches down among the tall grass that lined the side of the lot and pull up a flat stone with a hole in the middle of it. She becomes obsessed with its coarse surface and its clean water worn hole, running her finger through and around repeatedly. She walks apart from me, held completely in attention by her beloved stone.

I look into empty holes of the mask. Without eyes they stare back. I grab the piece from the wall, thumbs through the eyes, and I feel its weight full on my arms. The clay scrapes at the wall as it releases from the nail. I walk through the carpet, sit next to my bed, and hold it in my lap. Rapping my knuckles on the face, I scrape off the dying drying skin, even off the knuckle that bears a scar from a carving accident. The face gives no sound or expression of discomfort. I lay my hand on its almost metallicly cold surface, as brisk as it ever was.

I feel the mask inside and out, from stony to glassy, round to rough, and hole to whole. The mask bore no quality that allowed it to hold light. The orange mist from outside was scattered around but not on its surface. I pound on it with my palm and my knuckle and in no case does it hold a ring. Every tone is held for a moment then fades between the heaps cluttering my space. No scent but the musty attempts at renewal can be found in the air. The mask held no memories of the smoke and cinder that made it what it is today. The taste of oncoming morning breath curdles on my tongue, and no amount of saliva swallowed can slake my dry and empty throat. In my eyes, now accustomed to the dim, and the unremarkable, I find myself staring at a shell, a shell that was made to express nothing of what's inside. It stares as I stare, without expectation, and without anticipation.

I grab the cold sides of the mask and liberate my lap of it. I hold it up so that the light from outside comes freely through the eyes. I move to the window, find the fastener that locks it shut, and hang the mask from it. Standing back, the face and its expression vanish from sight and all that's left is the illumination of the eyes. I turn from it, and go to find the water that will free my throat.