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Conjunctions
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Masking
Tedlock

11/01/88 p. fr: 166 p. 178 # pgs: 11

Masking Barbara Tedlock

I

SETTING OUT TOGETHER from Shell Mountain with our nephew Danny and his good friend Larry, heading south and west out of town coming down La Bajada hill we got caught in a dust-devil, around Laguna Pueblo, big-drop rain, from Striped Rocks to the little Mormon village of Ramah, fog, from there to Zuni, heavy snow. As we inched into the headlighted flakes Danny said, "Wow, now that sure would be something else if it were in all different colors." Laughing while Dennis held on tight to the wheel, we fishtailed into the center of town.

Arriving at Danny's mother's home we were given a warmer welcome than usual, partly because we had called ahead and warned Amy of our visit (for a change), and partly because we were bringing home the boys. A house full of visitors, the old ones from the farming community of Nutria, a son from Isleta Pueblo, another from Chicago, and a newly married-in Zuni husband. Talk centered on the difficulties of the space mission. According to television news last night, Apollo 13 turned back before reaching the moon after an oxygen tank exploded aboard the service module. According to Daniel they turned back when the Moon Mother got mad and threw dirt and rocks at them. We laughed and he added, "Well, maybe that's why we had that whirlwind and all that dust yesterday."

Old Man's logic, as usual, was impeccable. Witches travel in whirlwinds at the center of dust storms. The NASA Space Program is White witchcraft. Therefore, the astronauts on Apollo 13 (an evil number for Anglos) who returned to earth yesterday, causing the whirlwind, are witches.

Danny jumped up, lit a cigarette, and took us into the next room to show us his track ribbons, all neatly framed, glassed, and hung on the wall. I made some silly admiring comments about sports competition. Taking a long drag blowing a big circle above his head, Danny replied: "We—ll, but I'm smoking now instead of running."

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What could I say? "Oh that's too bad," or "Have you tried giving it up?" I rejected them both, feeling that they sounded insipid—maybe even offensive—since running, smoking, and the moon are all sacred topics at Zuni. Although I knew enough not to try to chit-chat about these things, as though I were at a family barbecue in Albuquerque with my Anglo nephew, I simply did not know how to talk about such things with my Zuni nephew.

Staring at the new wall assemblage located above the sink next to the track ribbons, I catch my face in the mirror at the center with two glassed-over pictures on either side of it. On the right, a full-color magazine illustration of a ten-point buck startled by headlights on a dark highway. On the left, an ancient tinted Sacred-Heart Jesus with a small cartooned green monster, her name, "Isabelle," pasted across the top. My mirrored face plus double-illustration triptych are held together by a banded-up wooden-and-gilt frame with a small wooden rack nailed to the bottom and five brass cup hooks, each with a dangling individually-colored toothbrush.

II

Rose shouts out from the kitchen, "ItonaaWAY!" I whisper to Dennis, "Thank God it's time to eat!" Daniel, Rose, Dennis, and I sit down on the flowered plastic-covered aluminum chairs across from Larry, Danny, and Chicago Carlos at the long oval turquoise dinette table. Dinner consists of posole, fresh roast leg of venison, mint jelly, giant purple-corn-dough tamales filled with hot chile, small conical piles of the body of Old Lady Salt, Indian sour-dough bread, boiled whole wheat and caramelized sugar on a cornhusk, sugary coffee with Carnation evaporated milk.

Remembering to eat a bit of each dish, one after the other, chewing slowly, deeply and deliberately, I'm keeping my eyes down—just like a character in a folktale. (Too bad I don't have a bow guard to shield my eyes.) Two hours later, when we're finished, the young men jump up, go into the bedroom and bundle up their masks, moccasins, and feather boxes. A second family group sits down at the table, and we retire to chairs around the pot-bellied stove in the next room for conversing and smoking. As the boys depart to dress for the dance Chicago Carlos tosses over his shoulder, "See you guys later. We've got to go play Indian now." Daniel smiles at hearing one of his own favorite lines from the lips of his youngest son, then pulls out a

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bag of wild tobacco and slowly hand-rolls a cigarette. Taking a deep drag he blows the smoke out westward towards the ancestors at Kachina Village and explains that tonight there'll be many dances in three of last year's Shalako houses: two groups of Apaches, one each of Cows, Old Mixed Animals, and a Hopi Harvest dance. There'll also be clowns and hundreds of masked individualists performing all night long to nonstop medicine society music. "But now it's time for me to go to my society, for I'm the one that holds the song string tonight."

Sitting around with his wife Rose and the grandchildren nibbling parched corn and piñon nuts flipping through dozens of plates in Tilly Stevenson's enormous 1904 monograph on Zuni published by the Bureau of American Ethnology. Heavy musky tome covered in Khaki with gold-feathered Indian wearing bear-claw choker pressed into the center of the cover. Oh how that woman struggled to get it all down for science, before they either died off or forgot their old ways. Lying her way into magical performances by offering to make lightning, she made photos with her flash powder.

Mask of Mudhead Clown: Front and Rear Views
Sword Swallower's Dry Painting, Fetishes and Wall
Decorations
Altar of the Galaxy Fraternity
Idol of Elder God of War
Scalp House and Pole
Playing a Beef
Child with Broken Leg in Splints

After going through the entire volume together twice Josie brought out a shoebox full of his own curled and faded color snapshots from Viet Nam.

Sioux Pfc. and Josie in army fatigues holding walkie-talkies
The Sioux and himself zonked on acid
Jungle dog with skinny kid
Zuni paratrooper who lost his leg in a mortar blast
Josie with a tommygun across his knees

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We got bored and went outside to watch the dancing through frosted storm windows. But we quickly got wet and cold wandering around in muddy snow and went back home to Amy's to get dry and warm. There, in the second room from the front door, were our nephews and their friends Danny, Pete, Carlos, Larry, and little Bozo. When we saw how it was with them, we hesitated a moment. But Pete emphatically invited us to enter, saying:

KeshSHE! PIKwaYII
HeLLO! PASS on IN!

III

Stepping into the room we notice that Chicago Carlos has a dark-blue woman's blanket draped around him and fastened onto his left shoulder, a string of small sleigh bells around his waist, gobs of streaky orange clay and goose bumps all over his body, fringed leggings, and red-buckskin moccasins. On the arm of his chair is the bumpy orange helmet mask of Hatashuku, the Laguna-style Mudhead clown. Each of the tiny knobs on his mask is filled with clay from the river bank at Kachina Village, tied shut with a hand-spun dirty-cotton string that ends with a fluffy turkey breast-feather. Danny and Larry have on salmon-red body paint with burnt-yellow racing spots, sweet-smelling bandoleers of cedar berries, embroidered kilts, Navajo-style woven red-and-green sashes, long black woolen hose covered with hanks of multicolored yarn, and red moccasins. On the floor before them sit Crazy Grandchild helmet masks with topknots of yellow-and-orange parrot feathers tied at the crossroads of four large stiff turkey feathers, each one tipped with a tiny downy eagle breast-feather. This is the only mask that uses these stiff turkey feathers and, of course, there's a story about that—

Loooooong ago, when Crazy Grandchildren lived in Kachina Village, a young Crazy went out hunting turkeys every night while the people slept. He was having fun and just left the turkeys where they fell, never bringing them into the house, blessing them. One day, Pawtiwa, the chief of Kachina Village, found out and said to the boy, "Oh what a wicked thing you have done. Turkey feathers are our clothing." Then he punished the boy, telling him, "Since you have hurt the turkeys you will always wear stiff ugly turkey feathers that no one else cares for." And that's why today, Crazy Grandchildren

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wear stiff turkey feathers on their heads.

Although we had seen Crazy Grandchildren masks many times before, tonight we were impressed by the individuality and sophistication of the artistry. Danny's mask had delicately drawn and beautifully painted bucks, does, and fawns romping in a forest glade, chasing butterflies and jumping over rainbows. Larry's mask had dozens of flowering twigs and meadow flowers with hummingbirds, bumble bees, and butterflies landing, feeding, and taking off. Both masks had dragonflies and tadpoles flying and swimming up the back.

They're all drinking Mountain Foamwater and immediately offer us some. But we're concerned with the possible consequences. First, Zuni is officially a dry community, so we could be fined for drinking here. Second, although we are relatives, we are also Anglos and thus not allowed to stand so close to gods—let alone take a beer break with them. Third, and worst yet, since Bozo is only six and not yet initiated into the Kachina Society and thus doesn't know that the gods do not really visit the village, but that his father, uncles, and brothers impersonate them, we could be accused of telling him this secret. And the proper punishment for this is beheading by Big Knife.

Looking at one another in that so now we've *really* done it way, we turn to examine the boys. But they seem quite calm, even pleased, at our finding them this way and clearly want us to be impressed. So—we each grab a Coors, and as we pop the tops Danny blurts out, "If the dance leaders see you stagger, or smell your breath, they'll wait outside a house and beat the hell out of you."

"You know you have to be initiated to wear these things, and when they initiate you, they whip you hard, it really hurts," said Carlos.

Larry elaborates this for little Bozo's benefit: "You know, at initiation time those Blue Horns whip the little boys with those long yucca blades so hard that blood runs down their backs and legs so bad they can hardly walk away. I just don't know why it doesn't break their backs."

Bozo trembled.

Danny called attention to the beauty of his own costume, saying, "In every house I was smiling at women through my mask and some of them smiled back."

We already knew he was concerned with impressing women, we'd

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heard it before, all the dancers seem to be. For that matter Zuni women do turn their heads for some dancers and whisper to one another. But on this occasion it slowly occurred to me, with some embarrassment, that Danny was addressing his flirtatious remarks directly to me, as a woman.

Dennis turned to Carlos and asked him about his life in Chicago.

"Yeah, well Ts'imaawe did you know, I married a nice Jewish girl?"

"Oh, no I didn't. Well how's all the bagels and cream cheese and lox?"

"And matzo balls and gefilte fish too. Ugh, pure grease!" groaned Carlos.

"Oh, yes I guess there's no mint or coriander leaves with those things."

"Did you know I brought her out here to Shalako this year? She was so impressed with those masked dancers, she wants to see it again next year!"

As though on cue, the three of them in perfect unison wordlessly get up, toss their empty beer cans basketball style into the corner trash can, and begin carefully wrapping strips of cotton cloth around and around their foreheads in preparation for remasking.

While struggling into his mask Danny comments, "Your nose sure gets awful sore in this kind."

"It's so hot inside this one, you could get smothered," replies Carlos.

As soon as the three are remasked, they act as if Pete, Bozo, Dennis, and I aren't here. Speaking no word of Zuni nor English, not even looking our way, they turn and head for the front door tsililing their sleigh bells. We no longer exist in their world.

IV

The overlapping of song upon song with the rattling of dew claws on turtle-shells, waterpools of sound crossed by lightning-gourd rattles, cow-bells, and pulsing pottery drums. Medicine men calling in the beast priests and game animals from their six directions: mountain lion and mule deer (north), bear and mountain sheep (west), badger and antelope (south), wolf and white-tailed deer (east), eagle and jackrabbit (zenith), shrew and cottontail (nadir). Clowns yelling out, masked dancers pushing their words through long leather teeth and lacquer-red tongues. Incredibly high-pitched deer calls, car horns, a

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softly-playing transistor radio, whispering, laughing, munching of piñon nuts and corn chips, and the asking of encore after encore.

V

During late winter, although no special permission is necessary to dance, any man who wears a mask should follow the rules of sobriety and sexual continence. If a man is drunk or promiscuous his mask may choke him to death or stick to his face and change him over into a dead person. Recently, the head of an important medicine society died while he was dancing Hilili. As Larry explained it:

He got muffled up in his mask. It just got pasted on, stuck to his face, and they had a hard time taking it off, he died that same night. He was wearing that Board-on-the-Head mask, and when a younger guy tried to dance with it a year later, it still had some skin inside. It almost got him too. So, we quit that one and no one has ever tried it again.

Sexual activity on a dance day also shows that a man is not in the right frame of mind. A masker must be willing and forget his worries. His mind must be blank so that the mask cannot control him. This is more likely to happen with the sixty permanent masks, not owned by any one person, than it is with a man's personal mask.

Permanent masks are kept in sealed pottery jars in private homes and fed at each meal by the homeowner. If a mask is not properly fed, he might send mice into the storeroom to eat the corn, or he might even eat himself around the edges so that everyone will see that she neglects him. If a man should die without having a personal mask he cannot return from Kachina Village to dance with his group after death. These masks have dream power over the men who wear them, appearing when they are just falling asleep or waking up. Since they can smother the wearer a man must sacrifice food and pray to the mask saying:

Now we shall live together, having one another as father. Do not be vindictive with me in your life and be sure to do as I have said. Now stand before me and ask for my long life.

Then, as he puts on his mask, it is said "he becomes the kachina," while simultaneously "the kachina makes himself into a person." But as Danny explained to us:

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You don't *really* become one, you imitate, you impersonate, you step into it. You make your mask come alive. You make him into a living, dancing, singing person. Otherwise, a mask is just sitting there sleeping until you get in there. The mask doesn't come over to you. No, you have to go in there, and then he'll move. You'll become part of it, but not really, because your body will be the same, but just the head, you know, your mind.

All permanent masks are copies of the original masks made by the father of the Mudhead clowns. He created them in Kachina Village for drowned children, placing his finger to his mouth and rubbing the spittle in a small spot on the floor of the dance house. Each time his finger touched the floor, a mask appeared. Later, when the Zunis were living on top of Corn Mountain, their Sun Priest decided to make prayersticks for the kachinas to come to dance for them. The kachinas came but someone went with them when they left. A few days later they came again, and again someone died. So the kachinas told the people that they should copy their masks and dance them into life, and that they would always come and stand before them when they danced. At first, with these masks, no one died. But now, once again, people die.

Some years ago, a man who was undergoing the year-long training to wear the Huututu mask at Shalako told the members of his dance group that he thought they were just wasting their prayersticks. He'd gone out to his fields the day after planting his feathered sticks and had found them still there, indicating that the kachinas didn't really come to get the feathers for their clothing. The following day when he was out cultivating his cornfields, he suddenly felt that he was bitten by a rattlesnake, a transformation of Huututu. In a waking dream the snake spoke directly to him, telling him that he would die four days after Shalako. Immediately he began to swell up all over his body. By the opening evening of the ceremony he was unable to perform his role. Late that night he admitted to a medicine person that he had dreamed that he had been bitten by a rattlesnake. It was too late, he could not be saved, so four days after Shalako he died.

VI

Maskers bring life in the form of babies, crops, riches, and health to Zuni from Whispering Waters, the Lake of the Dead, located just above Kachina Village. A woman who has had a miscarriage sits in a

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house near the plaza during a dance and when the kachinas leave the plaza one of them is called to her. He brings her a doll with a prayer:

Lilh tom'an he'teyapkuna l'tsu'makkye.
Here I sow a child for you.

Amy has one called "Kachina Girl." It is about fifteen inches long, wrapped inside cellophane and strapped inside a wooden cradle-board, hanging from a ceiling beam in her kitchen between a dressed side of sheep and a long string of braided garlic mixed with Chimayó chiles. She was given it years ago after her first two pregnancies ended in miscarriages. Today she reminds me that she is the mother of seven, including Danny.

Maskers increase the crops by carrying small packages of all-colored corn kernels, squash, melon, and wild seeds hidden inside their belts or yucca whips. Nowadays, since any Zuni family has at least one jeweler, most masked dancers also carry a turquoise nugget. Mothers and wives construct these packages, and just before dancing the masker spits on them saying:

Now you will be my heart. You will make me into a raw person. You will bring luck to me and to all my people so our corn may grow.

Maskers also cure fear, anger, rheumatism, pneumonia, and many other ailments. While a dance is in progress a sick person can request that the masks pay a house call. Late in the day after their last dance, they arrive outside and perform for the sick one inside. Since most dance songs have lyrics about the growth of corn and the fulfillment of promises, including the reaching of old age, these songs are especially healthy songs for depressed people who feel they may just die.

Masking also provides entertainment. When young boys are initiated into the dance society they listen to formal oratory known as "The Talk of the Kachina Chief," in which it is explained that long ago, when the Zunis were living on top of Corn Mountain, the priests got together and asked one another how the people might enjoy themselves. At this meeting the Sun Priest decided to make prayersticks to ask the kachinas to come to dance for them, thinking that perhaps in this way the people could be happy. The gods came, the people were happy, and so today impersonators of the gods appeal directly to Zuni aesthetic sensibilities, luring huge crowds by dressing in multicolored costumes with butterfly charms and singing

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beautiful songs embroidered by eagle-bone piping, falsetto voicing, and chromatic riffs.

Grandfathers and grandsons of the kachinas, the Mudhead clowns, are funny and dangerous rather than beautiful and alluring, but they also use aesthetically appealing love charms to attract large audiences to their joint performances with the gods. Their most powerful charm is the Rocky Mountain swallowtail butterfly. And, although it affects everyone to some degree (even Anglos), young Zuni girls are supposed to be especially vulnerable; becoming sexually crazed they follow any person who wears the butterfly. In folktales girls even follow masks all the way to Kachina Village. This is dangerous however, since, as the story "The Girl Who Marries a Kachina" teaches, after the girl follows a masker to Kachina Village and remains there four days, she can never return to Zuni again. So today when a girl sees a nice-looking kachina she tries hard not to want him.

Mudheads hide dozens of swallowtail butterflies mixed with yucca moths (when available) inside their small two-headed log drum, which when sounded draws people from the houses to the dances. The hidden zigzag erratic flights within the drum lure large crowds of admiring people. On that single night when a yucca flower opens moths take the pollen from one flower, knead it as Zuni women do their sour-dough for bread, then take it to a second flower, cut it open, lay their eggs inside, and die.

Muddy children of an ancient brother-sister incest, with strings tied round their penises, so childish and silly playing around with the dancers and begging through the village it's hard to believe that denying them anything, even in one's mind, attracts violent death. But then, just last year a neighbor of Amy's refused a Mudhead food one day, the next day her baby was badly burned, the following day he died. Mudheads are so dangerous that Amy bought them a whole case of Coke and a bushel of apples when we were visiting so that they would not become angered and hurt her sons or herself. When I wondered aloud if I should give them anything she said:

No, you don't need to. But, well maybe yes, since you have a Zuni name and a clan. But then no, you and Dennis are Anglos so you won't be living in Kachina Village when you die. But since you're not Christians you can't get into their heaven either, so perhaps with a new heart — No, I guess there's nothing you can do about those Muddyheads.

Half naked and dirty in raggy-black blankets, loincloths, and kilts,

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mean funny clowns waiting like ravens, like vultures— Well, maybe Amy will offer them a blood-pudding, charred sheep's head, or an eyeball on my behalf.

Navajo of Chil·Chin·Beto

Four Summers 1981-85

Photographs by Roger Manley

