

# *HEADS IN LIMBO*



**Poem by Geoffrey O'Brien  
Art by Susan Mastrangelo  
Afterword by Barry Schwabsky**



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"Who is who and who  
isn't who"--I croon myself to sleep  
from the moment I wake.



From the secrecy of my left eye  
I watch the neighbors  
without risking a word.



I would have told you all about it  
but in your haste  
you neglected to arrive.





What would my life have been  
without the burden of the clouds  
to unsettle the morning?





5

The end came  
just as I was enjoying  
yet another fresh start.



At the risk of seeming intrusive  
I have occasionally been so bold  
as to look out.





For so long I sat  
staring at the world  
that my face became a mask.



Confronted with a dead end  
all I can say is  
don't get me started.





So much has been hidden  
that the time has come  
to wait for the right moment.



What you think you see  
is what isn't visible  
except when you look away.





I took my time  
getting up, and now the grass  
is obscured by sunlight.

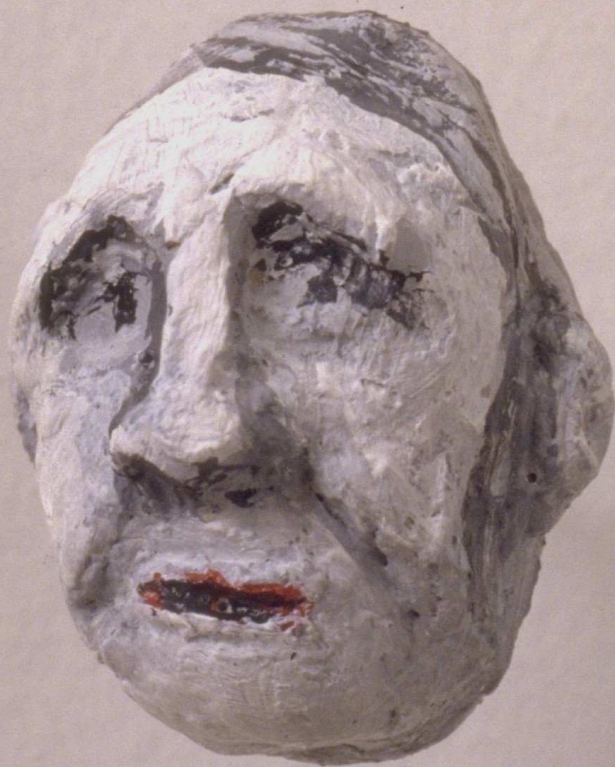


It's never easy,  
least of all when  
you think it isn't.





That we should be grateful  
even for what we didn't get  
is not such a bad credo, is it?

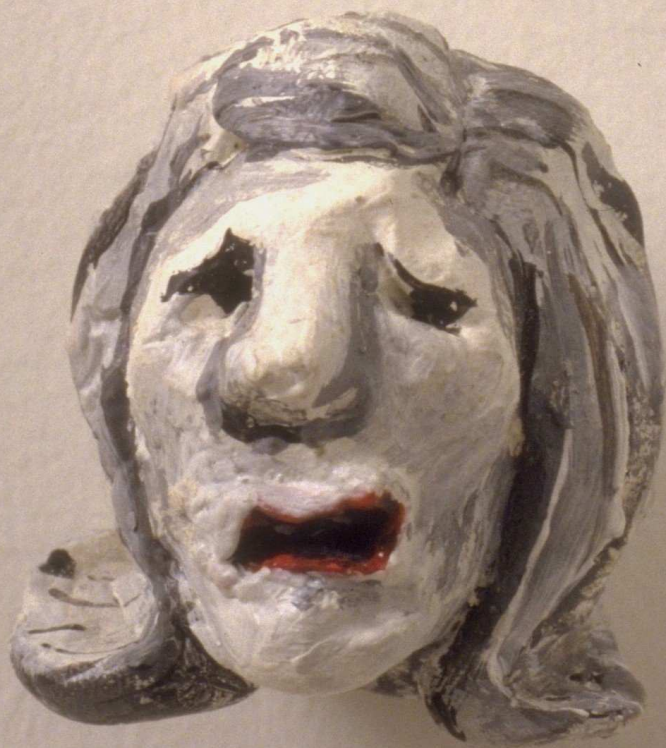


All the day through  
I see, I see, without a care  
for what I look like doing it.





It would have been better  
to come at a different time  
and now it's too late to leave.



The world is so simple  
that my face  
has not one wrinkle.





Watch out  
and you may avoid  
what is in fact inevitable.



Catastrophe  
always seemed a pretty word  
and somehow still does.





On the first day of school  
I was as I am now:  
how delightful.





All the same  
it's better to weigh your words  
before remaining silent.



The wind howls around me  
until I have the pleasure of feeling  
like a ruined archaic statue.





5

There are games  
so intricately delicious  
that not even their rules can be published.





Nothing here will hurt you  
and if it does  
you can go back from whence you came.



It's so wild here  
I've forgotten why  
I didn't get invited sooner.





Nothing like the satisfaction  
of composing one's features  
to relish the satisfaction of nothing.





Keep a sharp eye  
on the periphery while savoring  
the lantern show in the middle.



There is a tale so dark  
that even if I told it  
you would not remember.





If you don't know  
what I'm looking at  
keep it to yourself.





No care, not a hair  
misplaced, I told myself  
all the way here.



World, you're a picturesque vista  
I can close the blinds on  
anytime I please.







Really, that last bit, the  
elegant one that just turned  
the corner, was worth the ticket.



So surprised  
to find myself here  
that nothing since has surprised me.



Do you think anybody noticed  
when I stopped thinking  
about where I was?





It's just too slippery  
when a glance  
is the solidest thing around.



Think how cunningly  
even strangers can be disguised  
by my new wraparound glasses.







All was calm until  
one day when I blinked  
the sky cracked.



Who do you think  
this is, anyway?  
And who wants to know?



Afterword by  
Barry Schwabsky

Dear Susan,

I suppose you're wondering why I'm sending this letter rather than the essay you were expecting about your collaboration with Geoffrey O'Brien. But you know when I write about art I'm used to assuming a certain critical distance on the art I write about. It's more than just a habit - it's a part of the implicit ethics of criticism, I think. But how can I take that stance toward your work? After more than fifteen years of friendship, when I look at your sculpture I always feel, somehow, that it takes on a kind of transparency: No matter how hard I try to keep my gaze fixed on the surface, on what is materially present, I always somehow see through it to the person who made it.

And yet it may be that the fault here is not mine - that there is nothing wrong with seeing things this way; in fact I've always had a vague impression that when an artist's work reaches a certain level of accomplishment that it tends to take on the physical character of the person who made it. It's the mark of a certain kind of intimacy between the artist and her work that is simply beyond the reach of anyone who has not been sincerely immersed in an artistic project for a long time, no matter how brilliant and talented they may be. (Maybe it's no more mysterious than the way people and their dogs come to resemble each other after long cohabitation). What I'm not talking about by the way, is the obsession some artists have with portraying themselves. Is there anything more unbearable than some of those realist painters who seem to spend their whole working lives between a mirror and the canvas, incessantly painting their own portrait over and over again? I am talking about an involuntary resemblance, not a willed one (like Proust's distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory). Whenever I think about this notion, I always think of Leon Golub and Nancy Spero. Have you ever met them? If so, then you must have noticed that their very different individual physiognomies



exactly parallel those of their respective works - as if their art came directly out of their nerves, muscles, bones, without any conscious mediation, despite the high degree of consciousness which their work represents.

But I've never known what to do with an insight like this. I certainly wouldn't make it into a criterion for criticism - as if it were possible to measure each artist against his or her works and rate them on a scale of resemblance. It's just that when you notice this, it offers a kind of confirmation of an authenticity (an unfashionable word, I know) that has already made itself felt through means internal to the work itself. And in that sense, I want to tell you, I think the work that you've been doing recently, these painted plaster heads, manifests the person who made it in a far more direct way than anything you've ever done before. Again, it's not that I see the heads as a self-portraiture (well, not most of the time anyway) - it's that, whoever the heads represent, wherever you found the features that distinguish them, they bear an inexplicable resemblance (maybe something like what Walter Benjamin once called a "nonsensuous similarity") to your own particular way of expressing your presence in the world - your earnestness, your humor, your hesitations, your self - determination, your naivete, your self-consciousness. And this is related to what makes these heads immediately convincing even to someone who knows nothing about you.

I supposed that's why, in writing his poetic responses to the heads, Geoffrey found in each of them the seed of story that is at once idiosyncratic and abstract. Something about these pithy texts reminds me of epitaphs. There is so often a sense of the "too late" about them: "For so long I sat/staring at the world/that my face became a mask", "I took my time/getting up, and now the grass/is obscured by sunlight" - entire lives compressed by time down to a single point. Comparing the epitaph and the epigram, the authors of an entry in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* remark that "the Gr. Preposition *epi* (upon) shares out to both these genres the quality of being impressed upon something, and of the concision implicit into carving into a hard material."

They probably had in mind something like carving of letters into a tombstone, but surely this sense of *impress* must apply to any kind of sculptural work. Which implies that what Geoffrey saw in each head is an aspect of a person that's been stilled, frozen into permanency in the way both an epitaph and a sculptural depiction does. And that this eternalizing of something partial is always both funny and melancholy. Of course all these people are aspects of you-but it's just because these aspects have become separated, self-contained, that they no longer represent you. Which is what allows them, after all, to be written about with a certain critical distance - even by me eventually. But more of that later...

Love,  
Barry









