

POETRY | FALL 2020

Paper Armor

By Cara Haberman

Bird-bright eyes peer at us above masks as we move
Along the hallway to her room
It's all so new still
The jagged edges not yet worn smooth with familiarity

A questioning look — Do we have enough?
I have thought of nothing but masks for weeks
Yes, I say, for this, tonight, we do.

We carefully pull on each layer
We trade one paper mask for another
It feels like ritual
I hear an echo of ancestors sharpening blades
Raising songs around great fires for courage
It feels like war

Inside the room
A girl sits on the bed with shoulders hunched
Clutches the bedrail, fighting
To draw breath
She gathers air enough to mutter
That everyone here stands a bit too far away from her
(don't think she doesn't notice)

Her mother's eyes are wide above her mask
Her voice is calm as she recites the history
But the whites of her eyes all around
Are wild
Like a horse unable to run
From a burning stable

I remember who the enemy is
Not this child, not this
Gasping child too angry at our fear to show us her own

I put my trust in our paper armor

Kneel at her side in my bright blue gown, hold her hand with my gloved one
This, too, is ritual:
Take a breath for me, another — Yes, I promise I will be with you.

This is my battle ground
And it feels familiar after all

Cara Haberman is an Associate Professor of Pediatrics at Wake Forest School of Medicine. She was involved in the work of narrative medicine as a medical student and is slowly making her way back after a long hiatus. Her poetry has previously been published in Lifelines. Her non-fiction work “Being Seen” and her poem “Paper Armor” appear in the Fall 2020 *Intima*.

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