Metagestures

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From his desk, and through his mask, Paolo watched the Grand Canal dissolve almost imperceptibly into the same oily darkness as the night. This process occurred only after the shimmering ribbon of water held on to the twilight’s rich blues for as long as possible. When distracted, as he was tonight, Paolo would try to identify the precise moment that the water decided to finally relinquish the very last shadowy hint of blue, and surrender, once again, to black. But this only seemed to happen when he blinked, since he could never quite observe the final transition. It was then, when the bleeding of day into night was complete, that Paolo finally pushed his chair back, engaged his stiffened knees, and started methodically lighting the candles attached to a large chandelier leaning against the wall, perched at an angle, like an abandoned, ornate wagon wheel. This chandelier had once been the centerpiece of the magnificent ballroom of the palazzo in which he now lived and worked, alone. But since the Exodus, two of the three floors had been flooded with the warm, salty waters of the Laguna Veneta. And all that remained habitable of the palazzo — at least for humans — was now a single story, perched above the ever-rising tides. Indeed, sometimes, during especially high tides, or storms, the water would begin to seep
through the floorboards of his room, as if beginning to sweat in the summer heat, or, alternately, bringing bad tidings of a winter fever. Paolo slept in a hammock, as had become the widely adopted custom of the city, which only enhanced the impression of living in a creaky ship. He would drift off to the lapping sound of the impatient sea, and sometimes even the enigmatic cries of seals, or the violent splashes of unfathomable sea creatures, new to these waters. Upon waking, he was sometimes surprised to find all the buildings moored where they had been the night before; half-expecting one of his neighboring dwellings to have sailed off over the horizon in the night.

After lighting a dozen or so candles — which groped outwards at odd angles, protruding from the paint-chipped skeleton like exotic fungi — Paolo put on a second coat over the one he was already wearing, and then returned to his desk, and the papers which awaited his wandering attention. The restless candlelight threw his dancing shadow on the wall, in marked contrast to his profound passivity. He wore a classic Bauta mask — the favorite of Casanova, it is said — which allows the wearer to talk, sip, or chew, without compromising one’s identity. The flickering wall was covered in masks of all kinds, which appeared to watch him, like grotesque trophies of different possible selves. The Carnival officially began the day after tomorrow, but already some members of the public could be seen removing their masks, albeit surreptitiously; impatient for the festivities to begin. Indeed, just this wintry morning, Paolo had been walking home with a canvas bag full of stunted carrots and half-moldy cabbage, when a quick motion behind a window, one flight above him, caught his eye. He had stopped in his tracks, arrested by the image of a woman in an elegant Colombina mask, sipping from a glass of champagne, and playing the coquette for someone else in the room. A man wearing a long-nosed Zanni façade soon joined her by the window, and she offered her graceful neck to him. The man was obliged, however, to remove his disguise, in order to place his lips upon her pale skin. Paolo couldn't help but feel a surge of indignation at seeing the man’s naked face; but could do nothing while they were behind closed doors. Nevertheless,
he fixated on this romantic tableau until the protagonists of the impromptu scene noticed him watching. Paolo then proceeded to make an exaggerated warning gesture to the man, exhorting him to replace the mask. The man bowed ironically, but followed these mimed instructions, while the woman curtsied with an air somewhere between the obedient and the mocking. Paolo then continued on his way, perturbed.

Such scenes, when he stumbled upon them, affected him more than his fellow Venetians, for Paolo held the important and demanding position of Masquerade Master: a burden which, of course, reached a peak during Carnival. Since the Exodus, Venice had changed a great deal, to the extent that it was almost unrecognizable. Most of the city’s inhabitants had fled inland, once the sea permanently covered the piazzas and pathways, leaving only the most stubborn and desperate souls to deal with the damp and unheated quarters in the winter, and the clouds of mosquitos in the summer. For every soul remaining, there were at least ten bedrooms to choose from, albeit ones increasingly at the mercy of the elements. Indeed, many of those who lived in the city were new arrivals, tempted by the lack of laws and landlords: often refugees from North Africa, the Middle East, and Far Eastern Europe. Resourceful carpenters and ingenious amateur construction workers had built a network of fixed planks and gangways between buildings, to allow — on a good day — dry-footed passage through the city. Younger locals often relied on spider-webbed rope ladders or bristling thickets of winches to scale from place to place, their hands permanently calloused or blistered; while some older folk relied on these very same young people to keep them alive, since the less nimble were now effectively trapped in their homes. Electricity was scarce, skimmed from the solar froth or scooped from pirate water-mills when possible, and subsequently rationed out as part of an elaborate, and often unsavory, barter economy (which co-existed with the circulation of crumpled Euros, or tattered American dollars).

But some things had not changed. Gondolas still cut swan-like trajectories through the soupy canals. The gondoliers them-
selves, sweating beneath their masks, even in the colder months, no longer fished for tourists — most of whom had fled with the last formal forms of sanitation — but for the hardy citizens of the new, ad-hoc Republic. On moonless nights the gondolas would become the main source of light for anyone brave enough to walk through the makeshift rigging of the city, thanks to the hissing gas-lamps or guttering lumps of tallow affixed to their prow. The Carnival also provided some measure of continuity for the city, along with the mask-making tradition that had once made it so famous. Indeed, Paolo’s job was to coordinate the policing of mask-wearing in public; a vexed affair, with a long history. Throughout the centuries, different authorities had attempted to control the fixed visages of the festival, often prohibiting all forms of incognito, beyond the fortnight preceding Ash Wednesday. In more lenient epochs, Venetians were free to conduct themselves in disguise for much of the year. Today, however, two decades after the Exodus, the mask-making guild (still known as the mascherari), were one of the most influential groups in the city. The recently deposed Doge, who ruled the New Venetian Republic with a loose but erratic hand from the converted domes of St. Mark’s Cathedral, insisted that masks only be worn during Carnival, in an attempt to make the inevitable gambling dens more transparent, in terms of who was fleecing who, and to avoid further street crime. The power of the mascherari, however, bolstered by newly-brokered links to the Mafia, had swiftly ensured that this tyrant be replaced by one of their own, who zealously implemented a decree that not only allowed the wearing of masks at all times in public, but imposed it. True, citizens were free to remove their masks in their own homes, provided their faces were not visible in the window. As a result, many locals embraced the habit of applying elaborate make-up under their masks, to discourage an unpleasant visit from Paolo’s enforcers, come evening.

Paolo himself, as we have seen, would even conduct his affairs at night and indoors, behind one of the city’s famous prosthetic faces, stylized and impersonal. Often he even slept in one of his two dozen masks, as a gesture of commitment to his role
and responsibilities. Paolo was not a man to risk breaking rules that he had been tasked with upholding. And yet, he was secretly sympathetic to the residents of Venice, who lamented that Carnival had lost its special allure when essentially extended throughout the entire year. If the masquerade is permanent, then there can be no sense of relief, release, or suspension. The mask-making guild was certainly living more comfortably than most of those huddled in this rotting urban shipwreck; many of whom eyed the countless rats with a gnawing hunger. What surprised the new Venetians most, perhaps, was how quickly it felt troubling—or even obscene—to be confronted with the face of a fellow human, uncovered by plaster and paints. And yet this surprise too submerged into the general commerce of things, as the current arrangement began to feel as natural as the wearing of trousers, shirts, cloaks, or shoes. After all, why should the face be naked to the world? Were we not the only species smart enough to figure out the social and evolutionary advantages of fig leaves, armor, disguise?...And besides, many of the newer masks were designed to house a specially-scented wadding beneath the nostrils, which would provide some olfactory relief from the overpowering pungency of the sodden streets and squelching squares.

Reflecting thus on his charge, Paolo returned to the paperwork that had prompted his mind to be so restless in the first place. The first leaf of paper announced a report from one of his more reliable scouts, who had recently overheard a conversation in a popular tavern. This conversation suggested subversive elements were agitating for revelers to forsake masks during the Carnival: a protest, the author of the report opined, with the potential to turn the entire system around. On its own, this intelligence would have aggravated Paolo, but not overly concerned him, since such rumors had been circulating for a couple of years now. Several other papers on his desk, however—from different emissaries, in different quadrants of the city—had been reporting the same thing. It seemed as if the idea was gathering momentum. And it was his responsibility to stop this idea, before it became as powerful as a surge tide.
Feeling the weight of this challenge, Paolo rubbed his chin under the mask, which made a soft scratching sound, due to his evening stubble. For a moment his attention was captured by one of the many canal fires beyond his window, probably started by a gondolier’s candle or gas lamp, coming into contact with a floating oil slick. But a soft knock at the door broke his flickering reverie. Glancing at his pocket watch, he was gratified to see that his housemaid and cook was delivering dinner precisely when instructed. The young woman, who timidly entered with a tray of food, was wearing a very simple mask, known as a *servetta muta*: a discreet black oval made of velvet. She held this disguise into place by biting down on a small ivory button, sewn into the back of the mask, which her mouth now considered as native to its intimate environs as her tongue or teeth. Given this arrangement, Paolo had yet to hear his maidservant’s voice. (Though on slow days he daydreamed of what it *might* sound like, especially in the throes of an overwhelming pleasure, that he himself was providing her. But his many duties, and pious instincts, kept him from ever acting on this fleeting caprice.)

The Masquerade Master gestured to the table near his hammock in a habitual and superfluous way, since the maid had placed his tray on this same surface for months now. Paolo’s nostrils registered the scent of the boiled carrots and cabbage that he had foraged that morning, as a cover for his assignations with local informants. He hoped that his mute employee had been diligent in removing the moldy cabbage leaves before throwing the others in the soup.

Unusually, he took a moment to observe his maid, who was standing near the door obediently, head bowed, and waiting for further instructions or permission to withdraw. Once again, he noticed her shapely silhouette, and felt a sudden primal thrill, interlaced with more subtle feelings regarding the ever-contingent asymmetries of station.

“Child,” he said, using the generic term he had taken to addressing her by. The maid seemed to sense the sudden tension of the moment in his tone, and lifted her gaze.
“Child,” Paolo said again, enjoying her suspense. “We are indoors. There is no law forbidding me drawing the curtains, and instructing you to remove your mask.”

Here the double-cloaked official heard an audible intake of breath, perhaps through delicate nostrils. He had a sudden, overpowering urge to see his domestic’s naked face, after never giving her identity a second thought.

“You see,” he continued, “I would like to ask you something. But this is impossible with your muta in place.” This was indeed the first time Paolo had considered posing his maid a question; since habitually the flow of information and instruction was in a single direction, from his lips to her ears.

Paolo sensed that the young woman suspected that this was some kind of trap, and became impatient with her hesitation. Stepping forward, he could feel the warmth of her body in the chilly room, and slowly lifted his hands to remove the object between his gaze and the young woman’s upturned face. While the features thus revealed stopped short of coalescing into that enigmatic form of defiance known as beauty, the paleness of her winter skin, the creaturely twitch of her nose, and the slight trembling of her lips, struck Paolo with a transgressive force; as if he had disrobed this maiden completely, against her will. Her hazel eyes — the only part he was familiar with — seemed smaller, unframed by the mask, yet more penetrating, for they looked at him directly, hoping for cues to help her navigate this unfamiliar interpersonal terrain.

For an extended moment, Paolo found himself resisting the urge to take off his own mask, and kiss this simple, denuded, fresh-faced girl. But instead he returned the mask to the woman’s hand, stepped back towards his desk, and asked the question which had been troubling him.

“Tell me, child. Do you hear whispers in the streets about people taking off their masks for Carnival?”

The maid stood silent for a long while, as if her lips had been permanently clasped by the button which Paolo had just removed from her lips. He silently remarked upon the composition of the moment: the young woman’s public visage now
neutralized, held fast by her left hand, next to her hip, like any inanimate object.

“Well child?” Paolo snapped, when it was clear the cat had her tongue. “Speak up! Either you have or you haven’t.”

“No,” came the quiet reply, after another pause; its single syllable already suggesting some kind of accent, a hundred miles or so to the East.

Talking like this — mask-to-face; he had almost forgotten how confronting it was, to attempt a conversation with the distraction of the interlocutor’s identity, hanging there in the room, like an unspoken provocation, demand, or even insult. Social interaction proceeded so much more smoothly when the agents involved presented accepted and familiar archetypes. To stand like this, in front of the quivering and unnervingly mobile flesh of an actual face...well, it was most disconcerting. Paolo preferred his interactions to be impersonal, and not complicated by individual expressions. And yet, his physical being, at least, could not deny the charge that unmasking this woman had sparked in him.

“No rumors at all about this?” he probed further. “Not even in the laundry quarter?”

“No,” she repeated, in a tone precisely mid-way, he thought, between truth and falsity.

“Very well,” Paolo said, at last. “You may replace your mask and go.”

The young woman’s tongue quickly darted out between her lips, instinctively preparing them once again for the ivory button. She then eclipsed her visage with the dark papier-mâché moon that so often followed her orbit precisely, and exited the room like a shadow composed of discreet relief.

Paolo felt the young woman’s human absence, and slumped back into his desk. He had no appetite, so let the soup squander its warmth. Reaching behind his weary head, he untied the black ribbon that kept his own mask in place, and then removed it; placing the delicate object gently on top of the papers in front of him. Meditating mindlessly for a while on this object, his attention was suddenly seized by the reverse side of the mask.
How unfinished it seemed! And how disorienting this vision became. The more he focused on the rough texture and warped contours, the more it seemed as if he were contemplating something prohibited; something which should not be exposed to too much light or attention. To sever this unnerving sensation, he pulled out a shaving mirror from his desk drawer, and looked into the reflection of his own naked face; asking himself the age-old question: is this not also a mask? And what of its verso, to his mortal recto? Only when he himself is no longer, Paolo realized with grim conviction, and fully decomposed, will another be able to see through his eyesockets, should they choose to make a memento mori mask from his remains.

Eventually breaking the gaze of his morbid narcissism, the weary official looked up at his wall of masks. They seemed to be jeering his lonely epiphany; daring him to turn them all around, and thus countering the forces of deception and deflection sealed into their structure. The mascherari were sorcerers, he concluded, not without admiration; forging one form of power in the mask itself, and another in the edict for the Venetian populace to wield such power without prudence — to effectively replace their faces, for all intents and purposes. The city was a vast puppet show. And he, Paolo, had his hand on one of the most significant strings. (Just as his wrists and ankles would suddenly twitch into life at the behest of the Doge, sitting in his throne, one mile to the North.)

With the foretaste of citywide subversion on his tongue, Paolo moved to the window, bare-faced, where any passing stranger could see him. He was almost disappointed to see the suspended streets outside empty, save for a boy of about ten years, and a mangy mutt, hopping around the little lad’s heels. The boy was wearing a plague doctor mask, too big for his head, so that it almost seemed to devour him. Paolo watched, intrigued, as the boy performed a strange and stylized dance, as if on an Oriental stage, many centuries ago. The dog was trying to join in, with his own clumsy limbs. The boy began to laugh at his furry companion’s antics. He then took his own mask off, and used the elastic to affix the grim shell over the dog’s slobbering face. The boy
began to waltz with the dog, now transformed into a grotesque and uncanny creature: half animal, half ghoul. But the dog had no patience for this encumbrance to his breathing and barking, and scratched it off his muzzle so violently that it crashed off the gangway and into the canal.

Both boy and dog watched the mask bob in the black water for a moment, before it swirled and sank under the slick surface. And then, as if of one mind, they swiftly disappeared themselves into the damp darkness of the city.