

Stick Up

By Partridge Boswell

...neither did the poplar tree—Danez Smith

Adjusting my mask as I enter the bank this morning, surly and
self-amused, I want to announce to the teller: *This is a stick up!*
but then see her wearing her own mask. She could easily say

the same to me. Our transaction ensues without alarms or security
or even moving our lips; she hands me a receipt, and I think how
in this country freedom can mean doing whatever the fuck you please

in pursuit of life liberty and happiness, or having a choice. Either
I'm saying *raise your hands to the sky* or *I hands-down support you*
in your pursuit. Either I'm taking what isn't mine (including potentially

your happiness liberty and life), or steadying the ladder so you can pick
the highest ripest fruit. In my getaway car, heist completed, I remove
the mask masking the one I already wear—my façade of private fear—

so my phone's face ID can recognize me. What can I possibly reveal
that hasn't been worn threadbare? That I covet identity that covers
both mercy and greed? That I'm a young brother who *fits the description*,

tying his shoes as he heads out for a jog that will end his life? Or a young
sister in Kabul dressed like a boy so she can go to school and learn how
to save other lives? Can I say I now empathize with the invisible, criminal, Dalit—

so marginalized they don't even fit on the page? That each time I affix
and don this flimsy piece of fabric, I kneel to wash untouchable feet?
Parked under this poplar, I'm seeing things I didn't before: its new heart-

shaped serrated leaves, soft-skinned and rough-edged, tender and dangerous—

its facile faces unpolluted, trembling in early light with unqualified faith
in what's to come—unlike our own sturdy stoic surfaces, boasting forty-

three muscles well-trained to betray us. A liar will look down to the left
when answering. Pupils dilate when a lover finds her world shining in
the eyes of one she's about to kiss. A breeze light as breath stirs a crowded

rally of hearts to silent elation, hands waving wildly in a massive muted
Zoom meeting's sign language ovation, cambium seething with unseen
life beneath the bark. Not one leaf is still, and still we say nothing. No,

I will not be beaten or executed today for breathing, nor stand in the way
of the guy who call's me *a fucking Democrat wearing a fucking mask*
while I'm holding the door to our general store as he tears off the one

the store required and provided him. *Thank you for keeping us safe* I'll say
as he storms away. No, I won't proselytize masks I haven't worn. I'll write
what my shrouded mouth can't rightfully say, free to love free of the fear

that divides us. The ground littered with limbs and disguises, I'll stay rooted
to the spot until leaves are leaves and wind is wind, and the world decides
how to spin as it stirs itself again, watching birds alight in high branches,

sing a verse of pity and regret, then beat their wings and vanish from sight.