# OSPREY

From: *A Gallery of Masks*
By Linton Robinson

Forget this mask, it can wait it out
In a cedar box, wrapped in furs,
it only gathers strength unseen
Buried, it might sprout
Might send up concentric rings of shoots like a circle of whips
lost in the forest that will come to be
Or it can wait for generations just hanging on a wall
Disguised as art, as relic, as curio,
as bric and brac or time out of mind
Hanging and waiting,
Like a hawk hanging on the still air, waiting, watching
At no time anticipating the plunge to earth, talons spread
That's the way it waits
A shaft of cedar, a hank of hair, a feather, a bone, a length of cord
Because a time will come



And in that time a very young member of the family,
too young to know a disguise from a miracle,
will open the box
And unwrap the furs like Christmas morning
He will dig in the forest of shoots with his toy shovel,
Knock off the clods, wipe off the dust and mold,
Blow away the decay with soft, tentative breaths
Or just climb up on the mantelpiece
Finally old enough and big enough
To reach what's taunted him for years--the cord
And when he pulls on the cord,
the great beak drops open at last

The old wooden skull splits in half, showing the clever way the cords attach inside.
And there is no time to worry about disguise, or even art
Or even birds
Because inside the wood is slick and hard with red paint
Inside is the graven face of God,  scowling with ineffable love
The thrust-out tongue of God supports the broken back of an enchanted child,
like a fetus, but with eyes wide open
The child lies touched by the teeth, between two red arms that reach out from the face of God along the inside of the halves of the skull
Two red arms holding small human bones
The mouth of God holding polished human teeth
But nothing human in its eyes
And nothing human in the glimpse, beyond the teeth and tongue
Of a throat
And the child finally knows what perhaps he suspected all along
But now knows for certain
Probably he flees
From the room, the box, the living grave
Into the dark
Into his adulthood
Into disguise





Later an adult will come and see the mask open, the cord swinging back and forth as if to tease a cat

He will smile, and gently close the beak, turning the mask back into a bird of prey

Back into a piece of art

He will look around, still smiling, for the child

He will touch the cord, roll it in his fingers

Wearing a smile




This poem is included in a master collection, The Hummingbird Review, with many other very distinguished contemporary works.  See it on amazon.com.

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