

Through A Glass, Darkly: On Shary Boyle's Outside The Palace Of Me

By Michael Crummey

Listen. I had the strangest dream.

I was in a darkened passageway where three faces floated in a demi-circle of tinted glass. They weren't quite human somehow. Their eyes were mirrors or absent or strangely occupied. I had no idea what to make of them.

I moved through black curtains onto a brightly-lit stage, a runway flanked by an audience of miniatures under glass. A body without a head sitting behind a totem stack of pottery, a kind of sacred heart at chest-height, a pot with markings presenting as a stylized face at shoulder-level. A 1930s porcelain nude with white, white breasts and a thick pink penis as lush and flaccid as an orchid draped over one thigh. There was a woman without features sitting at a mirror—she had drawn a mouth and nose and eyes on the polished surface and was waiting for me to look over her shoulder at the proper angle to give her a face, so she could see me behind her in the mirror's reflection.

Beyond the stage there was a distant caravan of people on the march. Their shadows were thrown up on the back wall, as if the sun was lighting them from below—their figures elongated and elegant, like charcoaled cave paintings from the Paleolithic era. They had work to do, they ignored me completely. In a far corner, a woman with multiple arms like an Indian goddess stood holding a cast of hand puppets, one arm dangling a marionette on strings.

There was a dream's eerie, exhilarating sense of dislocation about it all:

Why was I on stage?

I felt as if I had no face, that I might find it somewhere in this room and wear it like a mask.

No, that's not quite right. Every time I think about it, the dream seems different, altered in some way, as if some new detail has suddenly come back to me. As if I'm forgetting what was most striking and unsettling about it altogether. Some truth at the heart of the dream always seems absent from the description.

Nothing was itself exactly, or nothing was itself alone.

The walls around me were lined with large, garish drawings. Nightmarish but almost comical, like medieval depictions of hell, like the overtly-sexualized cartoons of 1960s counter-culture. Three naked women looming over a diminutive male figure on a sculptor's dais, each painting his marble-white with gobs and lines of colour. A young girl looking like a character from *Little House on the Prairie* but for the cigarette she's smoking and the nipple rings barely visible under her not quite see-through dress. She is riding a western settler's wagon, wide-eyed and obviously pregnant, a gold chain draped across her lap. A hand reaches for her shoulder from the wagon's shadows.

Is that where my face is hiding?

Near the exit I re-encounter the three characters from the passageway I entered, approaching them from behind. I see now they are propped in front of a two-way mirror. The missing eyes of the first are staring at me through the back of its head. I lean close to another. Two tiny figures stand at the empty sockets, peering out through the holes, their hands on the narrow ledges of the eyelids. Through the two-way mirror I see myself standing in the entryway, mistaking their long fingers for eyelashes.

No, that's not it. Not quite.

Like all dreams it was surreal and non-sensical and drenched with veiled significance. It began slipping through my fingers the moment I tried to set it in order, to make it *mean*. But something about it felt more authentic than the world I walk through every day. And I still get flashes of it in my waking life. The masks we create for ourselves, the roles we slip or are pushed into. The audiences we crave and perform for, and resent and shy away from.

I remember one image in particular, just before I woke up. A figure in an artist's smock with a Victorian-era wig-stand for a head, its hands blindly fashioning a face out of clay. As if to suggest I'd be doing the same with the details of the dream, trying to make something of that strange material by feel alone. Something recognizable I could present to the people around me. To say, Listen, I had the strangest dream. Isn't that bizarre? Isn't it fantastic?

About the Author

Michael Crummey is the author of eleven books of fiction and poetry. His most recent novel, *The Innocents*, was a finalist for the Giller Prize, the Governor-General's Award and the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize. He has been working his guts out on a house in Western Bay for the last few years.