Counting Faces

How many faces are there in my mother’s garden?

A stone girl, rapt, intent on her book that is forever stuck on the same page. One.

An angel boy; one with pixie ears; another on his stomach studying something in the grass with a fixed stare. Two. Three. Four.

Someone nailed eyes and moustache to the big tree years ago, now the tree has grown a soul. Five.

A cat. Six.

Another cat. Seven.

A line of next door’s children peering through the fence, not social distancing at all. Eleven.

A man lopping branches appears in the tree. Twelve.

My mother, at the door.

‘You’re surrounded by faces’ I say.

Her face. Same one she’s always had. Except older now. Same. Not the same. Thirteen.

I panic, her face can’t be number thirteen. I search out another in the garden.

There, in the plant-pot a varnished ladybird stone with round black eyes I made at school forty years ago. Good, it can be thirteen, and my mother’s face is number fourteen.

Not so unlucky.

She has been unlucky, breaking her wrist tripping over the lawnmower cable.

Except now she says it was a flapping sole on her sandal.

And later, the front step, set too high.

Her face betrays no trace of confusion over the contradictions. It is untroubled.

Empty.

I saw no faces on the four hour drive down the motorway.

No other cars with their fleeting, unknowable faces, bored and pale.

Service station empty of crowds. Half-faces sweeping up non-existent cigarette ends.

‘Hello’ I said to one, trying to break the eery, apocalyptic silence.

‘Mmff’ said the half-face, the masked cigarette-butt raider.

‘Raider of the lost carpark’, I think, trying to keep myself company.

My mother’s vast collection of black and white cows. Anxious that there may be too many to count.

Pottery and plastic, comic and real, tiny egg cups up to as big as a dog. Jumbled. Riotous. Sticky with a film of grease.

Thirty-one cow faces.

A portrait of her Vietnamese friend Kai, she painted this herself. Thirty-two.

The cats come inside, their faces upturned, demanding food. I already counted them.

Family photos.

Forty-nine.

Propped up at the side of the dresser, not displayed, a portrait of her late husband. Fifty.

Stick pictures of mummy and daddy by the youngest grandchildren. Fifty-four.

Rag doll on the shelf. Fifty-five.

Photo frame with outsized beach beauty in striped blue and yellow. Grinning pinkly from her fat, happy face. Sixty-two.

Long line of medieval soldiers in a frieze from 1066 And All That, a play from thirty years ago. Still marching up the stairs, marching wearily on and up.

Hard to count exactly.

Seventy-eight?

The Castaway, Tom Hanks making a face to talk to out of a football.

Needing, yearning, wanting another face to talk to, fight with, and love.

His face-football bobs away across the relentless sea and he is inconsolable. Distraught.

I look over to her armchair to share the humanity of the moment.

My mother’s face is asleep, 2 metres away, a hundred million metres away.

Our two Faces in boxes on the computer screen.

Pixelated, fuzzy, breaking up, too dark, too bright, frozen.

Frozen laughter.

I can’t tell if you’re joking. You twinkle away telling a story, but your mic is muted and I can’t get you to notice.

You’re sort of there, but your big, physical presence, your hug and your smell, absent.

My face is smiling too much.

My eyes are hot.

My mouth says brightly ‘how normal this is’.

Normal?

Our faces in boxes stacked on top of each other, not catching one another’s cues?

Face of our loved small child. Warm and soft, alive, distant, in a faraway room.

My mother’s face at the garden centre framed with flowers. It is her face as I know it.

‘I don’t like that photo of myself’ she says, vain as ever, and I delete it.

She sees her own face differently.

She has many, many pairs of eyes in faces around her, crowding her, reminding her, mooing and miaowing and smiling and keeping her company. Ninety-two faces in total including the garden ones.

Our two faces aren’t alike even though she is my mother.

Even both with identical masks on for the socially distanced hospital appointment.

Our eyes are very different.

If we were really Castaways my mother and I would need each other’s faces. There would be visceral need.

We would not be distanced.

But the Face I need is yours.