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## Pandemic Teaching in Six Parts

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## **Pandemic Teaching in Six Parts**

*Even when a mask concealed the face. . .  
[it] brought a new face into view.*

– Hans Belting

1.

I hear a student speak. “Say that again?” Still a blur. “Say that one more time?” And I look harder at her polka-dotted mask. “No, it was her,” and she gestures to a woman one row back. There’s no telling where the voices come from. I burst into laughter.

2.

Yusef Komunyakaa, safely barefaced in 2014, speaks to my students and me from a screen. He tells us to write the truth. Right now that would mean, I’ve imagined dying. 210,000 as of this morning. Truth is one blazing yellow tree, a shade that sinks into the eyes deep back. It’s the tip of my pen and its trail of past tense. The thought that we have time now to bend time.

3.

My maskne got better with hydrocortisone—miracle cure—but now it’s back. No one will see my blemishes while I teach, however, because a mask will cover the maskne. I make a mental note to put on concealer before academic advising sessions over Zoom. Each part of the day builds its own little fiction.

4.

We are talking after class and a student starts to cry: bright, full eyes, then drops fall onto cloth and disappear. I would offer her a tissue if I had one, but even if I did, I probably shouldn’t. She is small with a high bun. The classroom is empty and shining—just re-

sterilized—around us. I asked them to be honest in their writing, and she was.

5.

What is funny also makes me want to cry. I see on Zoom how my work mask cracks. I laugh and almost cross that line, vacillating between heightened emotions. What's the sexist term for that?—hysteria. It is, I am hysterical until I disappear into the way a face is supposed to look on a work video call. Like putting on makeup from the inside.

6.

Today in class, there are no faces. My students are all black squares; there's no getting them to turn on their cameras. To be fair, the whole platform is malfunctioning and each of us waves in and out, present and not. There's a glint of blue hair and the cement wall of a dorm room, then a frozen, open mouth. There's no roster and no door, and no matter what I do, I can't retain them.

*Epigraph source: Hans Belting. Face and Mask: A Double History. Translated by Thomas S. Hansen and Abby J. Hansen. Princeton University Press, 2017, p. 33.*