

The Witch Mask

(Kijo no men (1985))

My family has a strange heirloom. It is neither a historical artifact such as a scroll of calligraphy, an antique, or a sword, nor a jewel with some market value. It's not a memento by which our ancestors established the family's social or financial status. I am the only person that looks on this piece as a family treasure. Neither my grandfather nor my father told me about it; I just happened to discover it hidden away, completely forgotten, and kept it as my own treasure.

It is the horrific mask of a witch. At first it seemed to be a Noh mask, and I took it to be the mask of a *hannya*, or a witch, though I didn't have any deep knowledge of such masks. Years later, however, I realized that it was not the face of a jealous woman such as Namanari or Hashihime in "The Iron Ring,"* but that of a terrible witch—nothing more or less than that. It looked like the witch in "The Autumn Foliage Hunt,"** for example—but even more like some witch older than the bloody witch of the Edo period.

*"Kanawa," a Noh play. An entire translation of the work by Eileen Kato is included as "The Iron Crown" in *Twenty Plays of Nô Theatre* Donald Keene, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 193–205.—trans.

**"Momijigari," a Noh play attributed to Kanze Nobumitsu (1435–1516).—trans.

It was also a size bigger than a Noh mask—that is, it was just big enough to completely cover an adult's face. And there were no eye holes. In short, this mask was not for Noh plays.

It was a grim dark color, as if it had been soaked in blood and dried, over and over again. When I looked at the witch mask in my dim study in the rain and chill of early summer, the wooden skin grew wet, as if it were perspiring. The mask had come alive again and turned into a witch's face. The skin was moist with the sweat or—as appeared more likely—blood that oozed out of the flesh. What was even more uncanny was that the dark wooden surface seemed to me to take on a hectic flush. It seemed the witch mask had come back to life, to express a will of its own. I also noticed that just like a Noh mask, its expression would change from every angle; raging at one moment, deriding at another.

I have, by the way, never to this day put on the mask myself. I have tried in vain to wear it. The reason is as follows: while it is true that masks generally appear grotesque and ridiculous when we look at them from the reverse, I had to hold my breath from sheer revulsion when I first turned the mask over. The darkness—a darkness made of flesh, so to speak—was gleaming from the reverse side. It looked as if the mask had snatched shreds from the face of someone who had worn it, and made that flesh part of itself—and as if that bloodstained, ragged surface had crystallized into a darkness as black as lacquerware. Gleaming with phosphorescence in the darkness were the two eyes of the witch. As I told you, there were no eye holes. Light then from the real world could not have brightened those eyes through the mask: they must have been glimmering with light from the other world.

As I contemplated the mask in my hands, I was tempted, perhaps by that mysterious gleam, to put the mask on. But

when I drew my face close to the mask, the darkness on the inner side growled, baring teeth and trying to bite my face. Driven by terror, I pushed the mask aside with all my strength and looked away. I had come within a hair's breadth of being bitten by the mask, and I was still aware of a remote echo in my ears, as if it were that terrifying witch on the other side of the darkness growing.

Considered objectively, there was nothing unusual about the terror I experienced. Except perhaps for those cheap, thin masks for children, any mask might produce the impression that it would never let the face go if one were careless enough to put it on. If my memory is correct, the French writer Maurice Merle once composed a poem, "The Mask of a Samurai," about a mask that attached itself to a woman's face. In any case, I had learned my lesson and from that time on was discouraged from putting on the witch mask. What occurred to me was a different idea altogether, and as the years went by, this idea took root in my mind and grew into an irresistible desire.

When I was in college I had a girlfriend, like everyone else. I'm putting it modestly; in fact I was quite popular with the female students. Several of them were seriously interested in me. None of them were the frivolous type; they were well bred, conservative, and studious. I was also a bright and bookish student—at least on the surface, apart from my secret desire. I believe I can say that I was conscientious in my dealings with women.

When I was about to graduate, I decided to select one of these female friends as my future wife—or to be more precise, it was decided for me. We were engaged by the exchange of betrothal gifts and planned to marry in a year and half, when my fiancée was to finish her bachelor's degree.

This woman—let me call her K-ko for now—stood out among the female students I dated around that time because of her graceful demeanor. She was intelligent and reserved. Yet she was capable of becoming unexpectedly passionate—I am alluding to her behavior in the bedroom—a hidden trait in keeping with her voluptuous body, which one would not have guessed at, seeing her fully clothed. We quite naturally became involved with each other after our engagement. Our relationship grew progressively more intimate, our techniques more exquisite and ambitious. In short, we were something between a married couple and lovers, passionately desiring each other's bodies.

My parents had passed away by then, and my younger brother having inherited our property in the countryside, I took over a house in Tokyo that my father used to use in business. I earned a position in a government ministry. As a recent university graduate I was thus quite well off. Though a housekeeper who used to look after my father stayed in the house, she was almost completely deaf. Not counting her, I virtually lived by myself. K-ko frequently came to stay with me over weekends. Her father, by the way, was a university professor, who would take a "liberal" position about moral issues.

It was a rainy Saturday evening in autumn. K-ko had fallen asleep beside me—it had been as mesmerizing as ever, or even more so. I was well content with this soft white slumbering creature and was sure I was in love with her. Still, I was haunted by an idea—the call of the demon (I cannot hold it back from you any longer), the desire to put the witch mask on a beautiful face. And there an ideal beauty slept, eyes peacefully shut, her face turned toward me—that face looked like the mask of the *waka onna*, the young lady in the Noh repertoire. What might happen if this

"young lady" were covered with the "witch"? I knew the mask would probably cling to her face, but I could not imagine what effect it would have on the woman herself. My mind was reeling from its struggle with the "call of the demon."

I took out the witch mask. Hardly aware what I was doing, I laid it on K-ko's face—and it clung there as if by the witch's will, or some magnetic force. K-ko sat up as if she were still asleep, unaware what had happened. She made as if to uncover her face, tugging at the mask with her hands, but it seemed the mask would never let her face go. K-ko staggered to her feet. The jerking of her arms as she struggled to take off the mask was accompanied by a sinuous swaying of her entire body. Gradually this movement of her naked body turned into a sort of erotic dance. A cat bag. This beauty, her face transformed into that of a witch, performed an unrehearsed dance, her unveiled body swinging to a strange rhythm. I do not even know if one could call it a dance—perhaps she was writhing in agony. But the sound of her voice—if she made any sound—was absorbed within the mask and could not penetrate it.

The sculpted body under the witch's face soon grew flushed, as her dancing became more intense. The strangely graceful movement of the flesh was at the same time incomparably obscene. Completely out of my senses, I could not wrench my eyes away for an instant. I might describe it this way: the witch mask seemed hardly to move, to be fixed in space, as if it had, so to speak, pinned or perhaps crucified the woman's face there, creating a center around which her sleek body danced. The conviction grew in me that the dance expressed some surpassing pleasure, or sexual ecstasy; the horned demon's face was, strange to tell,

inflamed with bloody rapture. The demon's gaping maw looked as if it were silently screaming with delight. Then with a great orgasmic convulsion, the witch fell to the floor, shook her bare breasts and belly, threw out her limbs abruptly, shuddered, and suddenly stopped moving. K-ko was no longer breathing. Appalled, I rushed to prop her into a sitting posture, and when I did, the witch mask fell from her face as if it had never been stuck there. K-ko had been delivered from the mask by death. Her face did not betray the least trace of agony; she wore the antique smile of a Buddhist sculpture.

K-ko's death was attributed after an autopsy to "cardiac insufficiency," or heart failure—a misfortune for which I was not held at all responsible. I mourned for her as would any unhappy man who survived his fiancée. And it is true that I grieved her death. However, one thing was clear: what preoccupied my mind was not sorrow but the unforgettable memory of that dance unto death.

It took me a year to formulate a strategy, and then I began dating a woman whom I will call M-ko. Three more months passed before I carried out my plan for the witch's dance. This was necessary for me to convince myself that M-ko was a fit companion for me. Her dance was less graceful, probably due to her slim physique, but the beastlike violence of her movements and the raw obscenity of her gestures made it even more spectacular.

After M-ko, I decided to forgo the process of building a relationship or becoming engaged to the woman. I took an invaluable suggestion from the movie *The Collector*, which I happened to see at about that time. Since then, I have become a "collector" who catches and chloroforms "prey"—my "sacrifices" to the witch mask now occur approximately twice a year. The main difficulty I face is how to do away with the

body. I will spare you such details for now, however, for I have described them in a book to be published in due time. The only thing I might add here is that though I am not a connoisseur of boys, on a whim, I once chose a beautiful lad for sacrifice. The result was almost as I expected. There protruded something like the long bill of a water bird throughout the dance, ejaculating intermittently until the dancer drew his last breath.

All that remains in my mind, a clearly drawn picture occupying a corner of my brain, is the thought of putting the witch mask on my own face. I feel as if the golden eyes of the witch smile at me seductively every time they see me.