

Patricia Nolan / TWO STORIES

DEATH MASK

ON STAGE OR AT HALLOWE'EN OR DURING THE MARDI GRAS AS MUCH AS
In death, the mask is painless and still; in the process of dying,
IN OUR DAILY LIVES, ALL OF US ARE CONFINED BY OUR MASKS AND
it is glazed though suffering, effete though warring. Sheets and
RESTRICTED TO THE MOVEMENTS THEY PERMIT. BEHIND THEM CHARACTERS
blankets usually cover the moribund's body, but not until death is
OF EVERY IMPORTANCE ARE OFFERED RESPITE AND LIBERATION FROM A
his face similarly wrapped by which time as vigilant sentinels you
STRICTLY LINEAR AND SINGLE-SIDED EXISTENCE WHILE FROM THAT VERY
have already seen the worst and marked the mask's unforgettable
STANDPOINT THE CONSEQUENCES FOR DISCARDING THE MASK OR FOR EVEN
pronunciation. The corpse dons the mask that will try to help
ADMITTING SUCH A MASK MIGHT SHEATH A REAL BETTER OR WORSE SELF
you forget but can't. Only the dying man's yeast-laden mouth
MIGHT BE DEEMED FOOLISH AND QUITE COSTLY BY A SOCIETY WHICH PRIZES
fighting for breath, working, and his lost fixed stare and his
ABOVE ALL, DISCREPANTLY OR NOT, DECEIT. AND EXCESS DOES NOT LIE IN
shaking head trying to stave off sleep grip your memory,
THE OBSERVANCE THAT THE HUSK AND THE IDENTITY MERGING INTO ONE
just like his hands holding fast to the bars of his hospital bed.
CAN FAST BECOME AS ACCEPTABLE AS HAS RESTRAINT. SUCH IS THE POWER
I watched a man weaken from cancer and that is the mask
OF THE MASK.

I most remember.

HISTORICALLY, OF COURSE, THE USES OF THE MASK HAVE BEEN MANY.

He led no exemplary life. He was no special man, though
THE PUBLIC MIGHT FIND ITSELF THINKING GENERALLY IN TERMS OF
neither was he common for those such men I pass every day with

COSTUME OR DISGUISE OR OF AFRICA OR OF BERTOLT BRECHT WHEN MORE little reluctance on street corners, on the bus, in shopping REALISTICALLY IT SHOULD BE FORMING A LARGER PICTURE OF MASKS FROM malls—the men whose obscure paths, whose anonymous eyes can MORE COUNTRIES AND REGIONS THAN COMPRISE THE AFRICAN MAIN AND OF never hope to carve a niche in my concerns except through chance THE OLDER AND WIDER USES OF MASKING IN THEATRE. THE EARLIEST MASKS or necessity. So it was through circumstance that he with his WERE WORN IN “CEREMONIES” AND GRADUALLY ASSUMED A PRACTICAL old blue sweater, with his long-tailed comb daring out of back PLACE IN DRAMA, FROM THE EARLY GREEK AND ROMAN PLAYS, TO THE pocket to pierce the wicker, pulled up a chair in the livingroom MYSTERY PLAYS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, TO THE DOMINOS OF of my existence. All his family noted where he sat and came to COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE, TO THE NOH PLAYS OF JAPAN, TO THE ST. GEORGE expect, as even I did, the chair to be filled, and our days MUMMING PLAYS, TO BRECHT'S EPIC THEATRE. MOREOVER, MASK FOR to have the constancy of his presence in them. Even after the RITUAL HAD ONCE BEEN AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE CULTURE OF doctor apprised him of the tumour on his lung and he pretended MELANESIA, BORNEO, THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS, SOUTH AMERICA, MEXICO, TO acceptance of the news and an imminent death by rooting himself NAME BUT A FEW. SINCE AFTER THE TIME WOMEN BEGAN TO WEAR THE deeper in the habit which made him sick in the first place, “LOUP” AS PART OF THEIR MAKE-UP, HOWEVER, THE MASK IN THOSE VARIED we cursorily glanced at him, his place, and told ourselves HISTORICAL USES GOT LOST TO LITERATE AUDIENCES WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED a long leash walked finality. For one whole year we saw his IN ITS STEAD THE ANNEXATION OF ITS FUNCTION TO THE VIZARD OF kind of face; in the last quick week, another altogether, PHILOSOPHIES AND PSYCHOLOGIES.

a face his and ours and one, too, unknown.

WHETHER ONE IS SPEAKING OF THE JEWELLED MASKS OF THE AZTECS OR I remember sitting in a chair at the end of his bed while the THE LACQUERED ONES OF THE NOH PLAYS OR EVEN OF BRECHT'S SATIRIC others went for something to eat. The sun's rays suffused the COVERINGS, RESPECTIVELY, THE FORERUNNERS DATE BACK TO THE STONE room with the colours of shadows on fire while his bald, AGE, WHEN MEN WORE THE HEADS OF ANIMALS, PROBABLY AS POTENTIAL jaundiced head moved almost imperceptibly right through them. CATALYSTS FOR GOOD HUNTING. STILL, THE DESIRE TO ESCAPE FROM ONE'S Like his motions without effect my book read without meaning

"SELF" INTO THE HOPED-FOR RICHNESS OF OTHER EXISTENCES IS IMPLICIT. and so I stared into his brilliant blue eyes wondering what IN ASSUMING MASK OR COSTUME THOSE MEN GAVE ABSTRACTION A VERY they saw—he had said he sometimes felt he had three minds VISUAL FORM, NAMELY, THE INHERENT LONGING TO BE OTHER AND, BY—or I mapped the polka-dotted venation of his arms and wagered INDUCTIVE LEAP, WITH FACE CONCEALED, THE DRAMATIZED DIVISION with myself where the next morphine shot would go. The friendly WITHIN, A KIND OF DOUBLE LIFE. THUS, IT IS NOT AT ALL SURPRISING THAT nurse came in and said hello at which point he looked up to her HUMANKIND ADAPTED QUICKLY ITS NEEDS TO THE EFFICACY OF THE MASK wistfully, with the pent up awareness of another self, as much AS TOOL AND THAT A COMMONALITY OF URGES PUT THE TOOL TO WORK as asking for confirmation he was still alive and not beyond EARLY ON. care to be kept that way.

IN CULTURES PRECEDING THE ADVENT OF CHRISTIANITY (AND IN CERTAIN In the hospital days his gruff voice and unpolished manners and CULTURES STILL EXTANT WHICH HAVE LONG GUARDED THEIR PRIMITIVISM), contrariety had all been dispelled and replaced by a fearful resolve MASK AND FUNCTION WENT HAND IN HAND AND THE ICONIC OR SYMBOLIC to be childlike, obliging and angelic so much so that each of his SIGNIFICANCE ATTRIBUTED TO THE MASK ON THE PART OF BOTH THE misdemeanours became comical in retrospect, and harmless. He tore WEARERS AND THE SPECTATORS ENSURED A TRADITIONAL LONGEVITY. AS AN at my heart in this way and squeezed the already pulsing lump of INSTRUMENT OF PROTECTION, OF METAMORPHOSIS, AS A MEANS OF pain in my throat. I felt him everywhere, in every remote corner I DOMINATION, AS A SIGN OF CASTE, IN WHATEVER THE ROLE, ITS PURPOSE tried to claim my own. Sleeping, I attended the horses first, WAS DESIGNATED AND FIXED, CHARGED WITH MYSTERY, A MEANS FOR MAN galloping on a beach, then going round and round on a carousel, TO TRANSCEND THE MUNDANE, AND, MORE TO THE POINT, HIS MUNDANENESS. then, swiftly he sat up and seized the bars and was drowning. Short WHEN MAN IN AFRICA, NORTH AMERICA, MELANESIA, AND EVEN IN IRELAND of saying I foresaw his death in a dream, I woke at the precise, DONNED A MASK FOR PROTECTION AGAINST PHYSICAL OR SPIRITUAL lingering moment. Otherwise it came unheralded in the night, with ENEMIES, HE HOPED TO INSTIL FEAR WITH A TERRIBLE FACE. MANY PEOPLES very little sign of the suffering he endured in the days before, or SAW THE MASK AS A PERSON OR BEING INCARNATE, RATHER THAN AN maybe the time suspended was a telling presage, an elaborate

OBJECT, A PERSON TO BE CARED FOR, GIVEN SPECIAL LIVING QUARTERS, FED, harbinger, but, simply and finally, yet quickly, it came. No rattle CONSULTED AND SIMPLY ABOVE ASSUMING CERTAIN TRAITS, THEY ACTUALLY issued from his mouth and no liquid as in my *Madame Bovary* either. "BECAME" THE BEINGS IN QUESTION. IN CEREMONIAL MASKING, TOO, PRIESTS Voices, loving and fruitlessly anodyne, some worried, whirled down AND SHAMEN AND MEDICINE MEN WERE THEREBY ACCORDED POWER. AS AN that dark tunnel of ebbing consciousness, down after him. The look OBJECT, THE MASK LIVED AS SURELY AS DID THE DIVIDED MAN BEHIND IT. he left us with took control of the clock.

GREEK AND ROMAN ACTORS SIMILARLY MADE THE MASK WORK FOR

Almost at once, despite whatever pain and tears, horror, we THEM. OF THEIR MASKS THEY MADE MEGAPHONES FOR BETTER ACOUSTICS. were forced to heed the practical matters at hand and to rely THEY, WITH MASKS, ELEVATED THEIR SIMPLICITY AS MERE "THESPIANS" AND on long-standing convention whose reasons had been forgotten. TRANSPORTED THEMSELVES AND THEIR PERFORMANCES TO MYSTICAL For the three-day wake we dressed the body in clothes he would LEVELS, AND MASKS HELPED WITH DOUBLE ROLES AND FACILITATED THE have worn were he alive with accessories to match — the FEMALE PARTS WHICH WERE PLAYED BY MEN. IN ESSENCE, THE FACE NOT HIS bi-focals, the rings, the handkerchief, the rosary — and during, OWN REMOVED THE ACTOR FROM THE STAGE AND MADE MORE AWARE THE we made offerings of flowers he could not, lying there, see or AUDIENCE OF HIS ILLUSORY CHARACTER. LIKEWISE, IN ENGLISH MUMMING smell. The half-open coffin with him in it gently reposed AND MIMING, ASIAN AND AFRICAN FOLK, JAPANESE COMIC DANCE, THE halted our entrances and exits into the parlour and set in THEATRE OF ITALY, THE AUDIENCE KNEW CHARACTERS BY VIRTUE OF THEIR motion the wheels of the grieving process. We used them, the MASKS, USED TO SATIRIZE BY DISTORTING HUMAN CHARACTERISTICS AND corpse especially, as we had his chair in the past year — OFTEN BY DENIGRATING THE ARISTOCRACY, TO BE CONTRASTED WITH we assured ourselves he was there, still dead, cold, still RITUAL MASKING, WHICH DIMINISHED THE SPECTATOR AND RAISED THE unmoving, encrusted in satin and oak, and grew accustomed MASKER, AND THE MASKING OF MORALITY PLAYS, WHICH BROUGHT TO THE thereby to his absence. His face was hardened wax to prayers FORE CONFLICTS OF THE MIND, IMAGES OF THE DREAM. AND MODERN and pleas, neither happy, nor sad, only somehow moulded the

DRAMATISTS CONSIDERED INNOVATIVE STAND ON THE SHOULDERS OF
shape of relief, by another's hand, to liberate him and us
THESE.

all from his last statement on life.

SEEMINGLY, THE MASK HAS ONLY WITH RARITY BEEN SUPERCEDED IN

Those paying respects to the living were invariably quick to point
IMPORTANCE BY THE PLAIN FACE. THE CONNOTATIVE PREEMINENCE
out how peaceful he looked, how good. The mortician dressed the
THROUGHOUT THE WORLD-WIDE PEOPLES OF HIDING WHAT WE ARE OR
mask well, secured everything, plugged everything tight, the death
PRESENTING WHAT WE WOULD LIKE TO BE STILL PERSISTS TODAY.
mask which precludes the return of the dead. The family and I
NIETZSCHE SAID, "FLEE INTO YOUR MASKS." JUNG SAID A STRONG EGO
nonetheless witnessed the mask of death in another function which
PRESENTS A FLEXIBLE PERSONA, SO THAT COSTUME BALLS AND HALLOWE'EN
guides the spirit and keeps it free from harm, so ugly, so resigned
TRYSTS ARE ONLY OUTWARD MANIFESTATIONS OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL
disgustedly to the battle that can never pluck victory from the grip
DISGUISES WE WEAR ALWAYS, ALBEIT INVISIBLY. THOSE MASKS, OUR MASKS,
of conundrum. The sides of his lips accumulated white caking, his
ARE NOT POSSESSIONS WE WERE BORN WITH—WE HAVE ACQUIRED THEM AS
head tilted forward, his blue eyes crossed, his dentures came
THE TREE ACQUIRES RINGS WITH AGE AND BY THE MOMENT OF OUR DEATHS,
unglued. He seemed to shriek noiselessly, "I let go. Only this much
WE WILL HAVE WORN SEVERAL.
I concede."

THE IMPORTUNATE EVENTS OF HISTORY ARE CONSTANTLY StRuGgLiNg
in my mind TO ADUMBRATE THE SHAPING OF a more personal and no
less important chronicle. SoMeTiMeS dEtAiLs WaStE iN tHe
MêLéE oF cOnFuSeD pRiOrItIeS oR iMaGeS wEaKeN aNd
FrAgMeNt. It is true that when I think of mask I FIRST THINK OF
TRICK OR TREAT, OF ITS FUNCTION THROUGHOUT THE MANY CULTURES OF
THE WORLD, OF THE TIME BRECHT, INFLUENCED BY THE KABUKI, USED
WHITE POWDER MASKS FOR HIS SCARED SOLDIERS AND I AM ALWAYS KEPT
AWARE OF MY DUAL NATURE, MY SOCIAL MASK ThRoUgH oNgOiNg
DiSiLlUsIoNmEnT, gRoWtH aNd ReAdJuStMeNt. But give me a
fraction of a second more and I will see before me a ceramic
skeleton mask, made in art class by his son, hanging on a familiar
wall and then I will see him, his distorted ugly features haunting
me, reminding me that where he has gone I am going too, the
masks he has worn I might wear also. THE MASK IS HISTORY, HISTORY
IS THE MASK. Yet in death both are painless and still.

HIDE AND SEEK

yet the question piques my curiosity and sets the culprit doubts afoot none of the earth-shattering consequence of a Hamlet weighing his bare bodkin in both hands and nothing that will lead to a last scene's stage strewn with corpses

yet, and yet I ask myself when did it become proper grammatically, or otherwise, to say "you're it" you're it! she's it! he's it! we're it! they're it! an it refers to things, to animals, sometimes gives a subject to verbs like rain and snow in the old neighbourhood the gang would tag me and spout that very mistake "you're it!" and they would, excited and laughing and scared, run from me and I was supposed to catch them and though they found my slowness hilarious, I never really tried that hard when the new game of hide and seek moved on the block, hiding rather and seeking the more far-reaching possibilities began to appeal to me I always found the best places since nothing in my life, I discovered, could give me more of a satiated thrill than to run last and unspotted to home base to free the bunch the looks they threw my way, grateful eyes, appreciative pats than to realize I could safely conceal myself anywhere and never be found

unless I wanted

to be

a lot of words start with i-t: itinerant, itchy, iterative, itinerary, words that give travel a common denominator and my exile an enviable boon some coincidence when you consider that I'm on a plane headed for the shade of some exotic tree where nobody will ever, ever find me because now the throng is far away and because once again through curdled time and sour space the game is on but I am it