

## Wakanomiya

By Christopher Blasdel

A gravel path leads up the mountain from Nara to the door of a wooden hut surrounded by trees. The last rays of the setting sun filters through the structure's walls, faintly illuminating a solitary profile poised deep in contemplation.

He knows from the activities in the village below that they are preparing to come get him. After all, it is that time of year. The harvests are gathered, the firewood cut and stored, and the frost line has already begun to inch its way down the mountain. The nights have grown cold, and the visitors who come his way are dressed warmly and move briskly through the forest. Their numbers will increase over the next days, until the night when they all arrive with their torches and the official summons. From ages past he has made a yearly journey down the mountain, but most of the year he just waits in solitude, recalling the previous times.

Sumptuous feasts will await him: table of the best fish brought in from far away coasts, nuts and mushrooms from the forest, bales of the finest rice, fresh winter fruits, brightly colored cakes and great barrels of local sake. The feast is the best the village can offer, and they take effort to arrange each serving on individual trays of freshly cut cedar festooned with red, white and golden bands. They cook the food with a specially purified fire, and it will be presented to him in a dignified ceremony. He knows it is the food of his ancestors, made over especially for him each year.

The place they take him to is always the same: a small grassy field located between the mountain and the village, surrounded by old, towering pine trees. They will make a special abode for him there, facing south, from which he can watch the sun rise over his mountain home and set on the village below. From here he can also view the villagers who come up to greet him.

Ah, the villagers! He fondly remembers them. There are the children who regard him with a fear-tinged awe, the ruddy-faced boys and girls who are too busy looking at each other to notice anything else, the village merchants trying to appear pious and the wizened elders with their deliberate movements and measured speech. He loves gazing at these people, though he no longer expects any of them to gaze back at him, except for perhaps a few of the elders.

Throughout the years he has noticed gradual changes in the villagers; changes that both hearten and worry him. Certainly, they seem more content than before. They are well fed, and no one gazes hungrily at his food anymore, as they

had so often in the past. They are also much better clothed. He amazes at the many woven textures of soft, colorful materials with intricate designs that they wear. Before, only the wealthiest priests or land barons could afford such attire, but now it seems even the laborers enjoy sumptuous garments.

He also admires the villagers' increasingly handsome faces, their elongated noses, delicate lips and arched brows. Throughout the years, their expressions have grown in worldly intelligence and happiness, always eager to laugh and make merry. However, he now senses in their souls a deep, dark discontent. Do they themselves realize it? He longs to look into their hearts to discover why, but he lost that ability long ago. Or perhaps it was they who lost the ability to become transparent to his gaze.

His thoughts turn to the music. Suddenly, his heart quickens at the chance to hear once more the ancient sounds that will welcome and accompany his trek down the mountain. The intricate tones of the flutes will thrill him as they pierce the still mountain night and reach deep into the forest. Several flutes play the same tune, each beginning a few beats apart. This creates a collusion of melodies that has the effect of sending him reeling back in time. It reminds him of occasions, ages ago, when several poets gathered and all recited the same poem, each voice minutely out of sync with the other. The individual words echoed and emphasized its counterpart in a delightful obfuscation of linear time.

But now other new and disturbing sounds compete for the villagers' attention. They don't come from living, breathing musicians, but emanate instead from lifeless boxes or poles set along the pathway. The sounds are as varied as the patterns on the villagers' clothing, but more jumbled and shrill. The rhythms are executed quickly and efficiently, but instead of quickening the heart, they induce a sense of dullness that carries no respect for the dignity of his world. Yet, he notices, the villagers appear to worship these sounds as they had once worshipped his music. The tones of his ancient music resound in his memory the whole year; the other is quickly forgotten.

After the music will be the dances, another of his beloved memories. He is particularly fond of the solo Serpent Dance. The movements of this dance stir in him strong yearnings and ancient memories—recollections that shimmer in the distant but don't quite come into focus. He knows, somehow, that long ago he had a vital connection to the serpent.

A young man, dressed in the finest robes, will come on stage and slowly encircle a serpent set mid-stage. Testing it and himself, the dancer will finally approach and capture the beast, holding it triumphantly aloft. He loves gazing at

this youth, and the climax of the dance makes him feel that, through the dancer, he has actually entered the world of the living; it is his moment of splendor and the highlight of his journey.

And then appears the masked theater troupe. With great deliberation they will begin chanting for him, their words a simultaneous combination of speech and song. The stillness of their rigorous voices calms him, and through their masks the players speak directly to him. They speak his language, and they know his secrets. This nourishes him as much as the choice foods. He realizes that although the villagers might have become opaque in their speech and action, the actors remain perfectly transparent behind their delicate, wooden masks.

The sounds of the wood-cutters awake him from his reveries. Yes, they are preparing the wood to make torches for the procession, he thought. They will come tonight, at the stroke of midnight, illuminated by the half moon. It is almost dark, and he realizes he must soon begin his own preparations.

Midnight approaches. He hears the sounds of people gathering outside his door, their feet crunching the gravel and their powerful torches illuminating the night. Suddenly, all is plunged into darkness as the villagers solemnly gather outside his door. A hush, and the men in front, dressed in white robes, begin to intone a chant that recalls from somewhere deep inside him an eternal longing. It is his summons, his call to life. Pine torches are set aflame and the censers lit. He hears the doors of his home open as the sounds of the flutes increase in volume, their mysterious tones mingling with the smells of incense and pine.

Out of the crisp, December night air comes a moment of clarity. It is what he yearned and waited for all year: the moment in which he rejoins the world of the living.

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The chief priest carefully removes the deity Wakanomiya from his mountain shrine and carries him down the mountain, led by men bearing torches and accompanied by the sounds of the *gagaku* orchestra. It is winter's solstice. Spring will arrive soon, and the deity needs to be appeased to ensure a bountiful crop for next year. They will fete him for a day before returning him to his mountain home.

Hundreds of locals and tourists gather along the mountain path to watch this procession and are momentarily warmed by the torch fires carried through the frigid winter night.

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