



Izumi Kyōka, *Kerria Japonica*, directed by Nakamura Takao, Parco Part 3, September 1992.

KERRIA JAPONICA

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IZUMI KYŌKA

TRANSLATED BY M. CODY POULTON

Known for his rich and poetic prose style, Izumi Kyōka (1873–1939) wrote romances and fantasies that challenged the work of his contemporaries and that, with the rise of naturalism as a literary movement, tended to be simpler, more direct and realistic, and even autobiographical. Kyōka's inspiration came from predominantly traditional sources—folklore, *nō* and kabuki theater, the illustrated fiction of the Edo era—but his literature already anticipated the decadent turn in Japanese culture in the Taishō era. He attracted an avid following of younger writers like Tanizaki Jun'ichirō and Kawabata Yasunari, and, even later, Mishima Yukio, Kara Jūrō, and Terayama Shūji. In fact, from as early as the mid-1890s, the *shinpa* theater adapted many of Kyōka's novels to the stage. (See his *Nihon-bashi* and a discussion of *shinpa* theater in part VI.) Primarily a novelist, as were many of his contemporaries, Kyōka also wrote many plays, mostly during the Taishō era. Many of these original works, like *Demon Pond* (*Yasha ga ike*) and *The Castle Tower* (*Tenshu monogatari*), are unbridled fantasies with supernatural characters and elements drawn from ghost stories and legends. Although most of them were never performed in his lifetime, thanks to revivals since the 1960s by the kabuki actor Bandō Tamasaburō V and various avant-garde stage artists like Ninagawa Yukio and Miyagi Satoshi, these plays have become the favorites of Kyōka's works and are, in many respects, more accessible to a modern Japanese public than his fiction, which is difficult to read.

Kerria Japonica (*Yamabuki*, 1923) is an exception to much of Kyōka's original work for the stage, in that all the characters are human, yet the play displays touches of the grotesque and decadent that can be found in his wildest

fantasies. A favorite of Mishima Yukio, who said of it that all the people it portrays are in fact monsters, the play is a study of obsessive love. It was first staged in 1978.



How like a lovely woman fresh from her bath (her dark eyebrows, faint mountain crescents) are the white blooms of the kerria rose, strikingly pale against their deep green leaves damp with rain!

Time: The present. A morning in late April.

Place: A back alley in Shuzenji hot spring. Later, also in Shuzenji, a shortcut in the woods to the road to Shimoda.

Characters

AN ARTIST, Shimazu Tadashi, forty-five or forty-six years old

A LADY, Nuiko, Viscountess Koitogawa, formerly the daughter of the proprietor of the restaurant Yukari, age twenty-five

A traveling PUPPETEER, Heguri Tōji, age sixty-nine

A YOUNG BOY and GIRL, festival pages. A SHOPKEEPER of a general store. A

GROOM. Fourteen or fifteen VILLAGERS

SCENE 1

A general store. On one side are three double-petaled cherry trees in full bloom. Inside the closed glass doors of the store are a variety of products for sale: cotton batting, paper, bolts of cloth, dried shiitake mushrooms, patent medicines, soft drinks, and the like. In the earthen entrance, with its door open, are some chairs and a table laid with beer, juice, a keg of saké covered in straw matting, and a bottle of shōchū. Right beside the store is a rice paddy.

To the other side of the store is a hedge of cedar over a low stone wall, beneath which flows a small stream. Saffron flowers and weeds grow in the wall. Behind the hedge is a willow in fresh green leaf, its branches drooping over the path. A purple magnolia in blossom would also look good in the background. There is a path between the store and the hedge. The rice paddy, which has not yet been tilled, is covered with green waterweeds. Here and there bloom milk vetch and mustard blossoms. Following the path along the hedge, farther on is a bamboo grove and a tall zelkova tree, in whose shadows the path disappears up the mountain.

The PUPPETEER is seated, his back to the audience, at the squalid-looking table at the earthen storefront. As he speaks, he rubs his upper lip.

PUPPETEER: Master—Kind master! Pour me another, won't you?

SHOPKEEPER (*Enters the storefront from behind the glass partition*): Why, there ain't no need to be calling me "kind"! A simple sir will do me fine. (*Smiles wryly.*) Don't you think the sun's high enough yet, old man? How do you expect to make a living if you drink like that?

PUPPETEER: Hah, hah, hah. I've done with work for the day already. Pardon me for saying so, but once I'm through here, I'll just stagger off to my little nest in the woods.

SHOPKEEPER: You needn't tell me how unsteady your legs will be, but it's a bit too early to be heading back to that nest of yours! —I have to mind the store today on me own, but this side of the bridge to the public baths don't see much traffic compared to the crush of visitors in Shuzenji. Now's when you ought to be making money.

PUPPETEER: Right you are. First the locals, then the pilgrims from all over the country— aunts and grannies, grandpas with their grandkids, swarms of them, black as the smoke rising from the ritual bonfires, undaunted by cloudbursts like the monsoons of summer. —And then, the boom! boom! of festival drums have drowned out the tinkle-tinkle coming from the little sideshow tents—why would anybody want to come way over here? Cross the bridge, and so long customers! Hah, hah! —I can ply my trade come evening and make some money, but I've earned enough right now for a drink or two, and I don't need no more than that. —And if worse comes to worst, well then, just let me die here. (*Bows deeply, bumping his head hard against the glass pane.*) —Kind master, pour me another drink!

SHOPKEEPER: You're just like a dying sailor begging Davy Jones to give him water. Maybe that's where the expression "bottomless cup" came from. . . . Drink as much as you like. It's my business, after all. (*Wipes the neck of the bottle.*) —Just don't go smashing the merchandise there, old man.

PUPPETEER: Let me die in peace. (*Gulps down the drink and laps up what's left on the palm of his hand.*) Besides, it's the anniversary of the Saint's death. —Reverend Kōbō, come pick me up and take me away in your automobile with its shiny gold trim!

SHOPKEEPER: It won't be the saint that comes and takes you away, but the town hall, and there'll be hell to pay for that. Easy with the alcohol there. (*Starts to go inside.*)

PUPPETEER (*Shouting*): Kind master, pour me another!

SHOPKEEPER: It's the Feast of Saint Kōbō, so I won't have my spuds turn into stones on account of you! . . . I hate to be stingy, so be my guest, drink as much as you like. But are you sure you finished the last drop of the one I just gave you?

PUPPETEER: So far, I knocked back five cups. I drank to the snow . . . and now I drink to the blossoms. . . . Kind master, three cherries grow under your eaves. . . . Young trees but in full bloom. . . . There ain't another house in Shuzenji that can boast such

1. Saint Kōbō (Kūkai, 774–835) was the founder in Japan of Shingon (Mantrayana) Buddhism, an esoteric sect. He is reputed to have established springs, wells, and reservoirs all over Japan, including Shuzenji hot spring. A folktale has him turning potatoes into stones, to punish stingy farmers who refused to give him alms.

blossoms. —And it costs me nothing to look at 'em. The drink costs me dear, but still this is a fine sight. Damn, that's good!

SHOPKEEPER: Don't spout nonsense. You're drunk, old man. . . .

PUPPETEER: Why, just the occasional cup or two is a libation for the cherries, to ensure they blossom better. A blessing from Saint Kōbō himself!

SHOPKEEPER: Cut the cheap compliments. —It's awful how nobody passes this way. . . .

Just two children a while back, in a procession over the mountain from Tatsuno, and nobody else since then, not even a horse and his groom. —It's such a bore having to mind the shop. —Ah, I can hear the drums!

(The drums are the kind held up on a pole by two musicians who beat them in turn on both sides. The sound—boom! baboom! boom!—can be heard dimly in the distance.)

PUPPETEER: The pipes and flutes, men in formal jackets and *hakama*. —An escort of firemen and pages. In fore and aft, monks burning incense and chanting sutras. The procession of young men in court caps from the Inner Sanctum, carrying the portable shrines. —Hail to the Great Teacher, Diamond of Universal Light! Both right and left of the path are thick with men and women. Offerings fall like rain. . . . The young ladies of town have come to pray in their best kimonos with their flowing sleeves. An old lady leaps out of the Vajra Bath stark naked!² —Ah, hah, hah, hah! Bet Saint Kōbō would've been pleased if it were a young 'un instead!

SHOPKEEPER: Shut up! You'll pay for such profanity. *(Goes inside.)*

PUPPETEER: Hail to the Great Teacher, Diamond of Universal Light! *(Sipping his saké, slumps down.)*

(Enter the LADY, Nuiko, holding a handbag and a folded umbrella downward by the handle. Her hair is held up with a comb, and her obi is simply tied. She is wearing wooden clogs. She gazes at the late, double-petaled cherry in blossom.)

LADY: My, how lovely! —Such work for such beauty — *(Pause.)* . . . You ought to be thanked for it. —You really are so lovely. Such blossoms! *(So speaking, she follows the path along the little stream. Gazing at the saffron flowers growing on the wall, her attention is turned to the water.)* Why, it's a carp! Such a big one! —Dear me! He's dead. *(A longish pause. As the LADY steps aside to avoid the carp, she stops in front of the puppet that the PUPPETEER has left propped against the wall. It is a beautiful and elegant figure of a shirabyōshi dancer, attached by strings to bamboo sticks.³ The LADY studies it carefully, saying nothing. The sound of rain.)*

LADY: Ah, it's started to rain. *(The Japanese umbrella she opens has the insignia of an inn, the Igiku, or Well-Side Chrysanthemum.)* There are dewdrops on the doll's eyelashes, as if she were weeping. . . . *(She holds the umbrella over the puppet as if to protect it.)*

2. Vajra bath (*tokko no yu*) is the hot spring created by Kūkai when he struck his *vajra* staff against a rock.

3. *Shirabyōshi* refers to a type of female dancer in the Middle Ages who danced in a man's cap and costume.

(The PUPPETEER sticks his head out of the shop curtain to stare at the LADY. His mouth is large, his brow is furrowed, his face wrinkled and flushed with liquor and pockmarked with a grizzled five o'clock shadow. Covered in a headscarf, he looked mild mannered, but now he is without it, and with his boxy forehead and gray hair, he is a fright to behold.)

(Enter the ARTIST, wearing a thin cape and fedora. His face is long and narrow, elegantly thin, his hooded eyes a little sleepy looking. He sports a slender and well-trimmed mustache that is dappled with gray. His complexion is a little pallid, his expression mild, yet dignified. He is shod in borrowed clogs from the inn he is staying at, and heedless of the rain, he carries only a walking stick. He stops to gaze at the cherries. The PUPPETEER turns back and flops down at the table.)

ARTIST *(As if unconcerned about the LADY's presence)*: A puppet, I see.

LADY *(Sigh)*: —Excuse me, but she doesn't belong to me.

ARTIST *(Only now seeming to have noticed her)*: Excuse me, Madame. Actually, I never thought it was yours. It's just a strange sight to see in this day and age. —In Tokyo, you hardly see such a thing nowadays, not even in the little shrine or temple fairs off the beaten track. . . . This would be Lady Shizuka, right? Turn her around and there's bold Benkei, with his halberd. . . . Turn Benkei around and you've got yourself an octopus, sporting a red bandanna, who'll dance you a jig.⁴ But this one doesn't seem rigged out for such tricks. *(Nonchalantly leans in under the umbrella that the LADY is holding.)* Nope, this one is just the dancing girl. Ah, but she's a real work of art. —Take a look, see how fine the workmanship is! . . . Who's the owner? Who'd leave a lovely thing like this out in the rain?

LADY: The puppeteer, I believe, is over there. —*(Modestly indicating and lowering her voice.)* . . . The old man's been drinking.

ARTIST: I bet he's a master. . . . Shall we have him perform a bit for us?

LADY: Please don't, sir. . . . He's had rather a lot to drink, it seems.

ARTIST: I see. It would be a bother if the man's as drunk as he looks. Ah, but this puppet is truly a work of art! —If you'll excuse me, Madame. *(Half muttering.)* Maybe we'll meet again on my way back. *(Coolly saunters off in the direction of the mountain path.)*

LADY *(Following a few steps behind him)*: Sir! Uh, sir. . . . Which way would you be going?

ARTIST *(Again, as if noticing her for the first time. Speaking softly)*: Please. *(Pause.)* . . . Don't call me "sir." The town's in such pandemonium that I thought I'd take myself to the mountains for a bit. —Excuse me, Madame. *(Gazing at her with his sleepy eyes.)* I failed to notice you before, but would you be staying at the same inn as me?

LADY: Yes, near you. . . . In back, downstairs. Uh. . . .

ARTIST: Is that so? Then, you'll excuse me. *(Again, makes to go.)*

4. Lady Shizuka was the mistress of Minamoto Yoshitsune (1159–1189), the famous general in the war between the Genji and Heike clans, and Benkei was his loyal retainer. Yoshitsune was eventually hunted down and killed on the orders of his brother Minamoto Yoritomo (1147–1199), who became the first shōgun of the Kamakura period. Many tales and plays hail Yoshitsune's exploits.

LADY (*Following a step behind*): Sir, on your way here, did you happen to run into a manservant wearing a jacket with the inn's insignia?

ARTIST: Yes I did.

LADY: Did he say nothing?

ARTIST (*Slowly crossing his arms*): Well . . . just as I was about to cross the bridge over to the Kikuya and Nodaya inns, on the railing, attached to a long pole, was a straw raincoat. — Seems they were selling a lot of them in the market for the Saint's Day. It was an advertisement of sorts for it, but it looked for all the world like a scarecrow. I stood there looking at it and had to laugh. — I look like a scarecrow myself, mind you. (*Smiles.*) Thought of buying one, but it'd have just weighed me down. That was when the manservant from the inn passed me.

LADY: Then what happened?

ARTIST: Ah, yes. (*Uncrosses his arms.*) . . . "The lady went that way," said the man, then passed me. . . . I see, he must have been talking about you. I suppose he thought we were a couple and went out together. — If you'll excuse me.

LADY: Well, sir. We're separate now, but late last night we arrived together, you know.

ARTIST: With you?

LADY: Yes.

ARTIST: I know nothing about that.

LADY: In Ōhito . . . We came in separate cars, but at the same time. . . .

ARTIST: I shared a car. — Ah, come to think of it . . . there was someone I think who called for the cab, with the most modish hairstyle parted on the side . . . (*Half to himself.*)

LADY: A woman . . . (*Breathing heavily.*) That woman, as soon as she got to the inn, sir, she shaved her eyebrows.⁵ (*Looks up, suddenly embarrassed.*) Her hair was done up in curls, like this.

ARTIST: Ah hah. (*Growing more suspicious, yet acting nonchalant.*)

LADY: Sir. (*Holding out her umbrella, hangs her head. Snow could not be whiter than the nape of her neck.*) None other than I was the lady the manservant from the inn was talking about. (*Rather excitedly.*) He meant your wife.

(*Pause.*)

ARTIST (*Quietly*): . . . Meaning?

LADY: Last night, as soon as I arrived at the inn with you, I told the innkeeper I'm with Mr. Shimazu. You see, I, uh, . . . (*Haltingly, pausing a moment.*) I know you from your photographs, your exhibitions. — "I'm Shimazu's wife," I told the innkeeper. "I followed him on the same train in secret, so he wouldn't see me," I said. Of course, what I said didn't make much sense, but I said it. . . . And the reason I gave was my husband was having an affair and was meeting a woman there.

ARTIST: I was.

LADY: Yes, you being my, uh, husband.

ARTIST: That was quite impertinent of you! (*Smiles wryly.*)

LADY: Please forgive me, sir. — "Book me next door to him in secret, so I can spy on him.

I'll make myself look different in case we run into each other in the hallway and I get caught," I said. . . . And right then and there, in front of the mirror stand, I shaved my eyebrows, rearranged my hair, shook off my *baori*, and retied my obi this way (*Lisomely turns around and gazes at the bow.*) loosely, telling him, "For heaven's sake, keep this a secret." Then in the register, after your name I wrote "his wife."

ARTIST (*Frowns slightly, but then generously*): One comes to a place like this for rest, so

I'll indulge a prank like that, I suppose. . . . Well, you'll have to excuse me—

LADY: Please, sir, don't be angry with me.

ARTIST: What? Have somebody's beautiful wife play a joke on me? — You never know, I might be pleased. — But I really must go.

LADY: What'll I do? Sir, this was no joke I was playing.

ARTIST: What do you mean by that? (*Speaking sharply for the first time.*)

LADY (*Upset, trembling slightly*): I beg you, look. I have something to show you. (*Pulling forcefully at the sleeve of his cape, she draws him back toward the edge of the stream.*)

Look there. (*She points at the dead carp. It still is invisible to the audience.*)

ARTIST: That is awful! How frightful!

LADY: Sir, I feel like that carp. I'm at death's door myself. (*The ARTIST says nothing. Pause.*) There are men after me. If they find me, they'll have to take me away. — I happened to recognize you and followed you as far as the inn, then I took it in my mind to do something unpardonable. I was desperate and made up my mind to die. — Anyway, I shaved my eyebrows, changed the way I look, and pretended to be your wife. I was lost, at my wit's end, at that busy inn. Please forgive me. . . . Never in my dreams would I ever play a trick on you.

ARTIST: I suppose there's nothing I can do.

LADY (*Reluctantly, as if unsatisfied with his response*): Can you forgive me? . . . I know this sounds as if I'm taking advantage of your kindness, but . . . would you please let me join you on your walk? I'll even follow behind you. If you grant me this wish, no one will notice me, I'm sure. — Sir! (*Ever so slightly coquettish.*) Please, let me come with you.

ARTIST (*Firmly*): You'd be in the way.

LADY: Ah . . . but, no. You see, even if I went with you, I'd go only so far as it took to make up my mind to become like that thing there. (*Points at the dead fish.*)

ARTIST: We can't have that happen to you! I have no idea what your situation may be, but you mustn't end up like that.

PUPPETEER (*Lying face down, then bolting up suddenly*): Master! Gimme another drink! Master!

ARTIST (*Hearing, but trying to pay him no attention*): I consider it my duty to see that at the very least you do not turn out that way. — If you'll excuse me. (*Steps away and heads toward the path into the mountains.*)

5. Although outlawed as a practice in 1870, shaved eyebrows traditionally indicated that a woman was married.

LADY (*As the ARTIST disappears into the trees, she hastily runs after him, then holds back, watching him go*): Nothing lasts, does it? (*She looks around, ashamed of her own voice. She opens her umbrella, though there is no rain, as if to hide her embarrassment, then dejectedly heads into the grove of trees along the same path the ARTIST took.*)

PUPPETEER: Master! Another drink!

SHOPKEEPER: Tch! You are a troublemaker, aren't you? (*Pours him another.*)

PUPPETEER: But this drink—hah, hah, hah—I dedicate to the moon. When the clouds come out, the full moon hides his face. (*Drains the glass in one gulp.*) Aaah, whew! . . . The bill, sir. . . . (*Sloppily pulls out a change purse from a string around his neck and tosses down some coins.*) For Saint Kōbō and the moon as well. These coins, too, shine like the diamonds of universal dharma. Oof! (*Stands. He is tall, staggering on a pair of scrawny shins poking through torn gaiters. The SHOPKEEPER, paying him no mind, clears off his table and goes indoors.*) Oof! (*Tipsily staggers over to the puppet.*) My dear Lady Shizuka! (*Suddenly respectful, he practically collapses to the ground to prostrate himself before the doll. Pause. His drunken eyes take in the dead carp.*) Ah, brother, you lie there still. Did an otter bite you? A weasel take a nip out of you? Somebody's surely taken a chunk out of you—look at them teeth marks—and now the maggots are making off with what's left. Any stray cat or dog that saw you here would have taken one sniff and left you to rot. Even a dog wouldn't eat you. You had it in you to become a dragon, but some ill karma fell on you that your carcass should be exposed here, food for the worms. Poor thing! —Let me give you a proper funeral. (*Pulls out the bloated, rotten corpse of the carp. Now the audience can see it.*) But I don't know what to say for your last rites. How 'bout this: "A curse on all who think ill of you! Go haunt the lot of them, even charge an admission fee! Amen!" (*Wraps the carcass in the headscarf tied around his neck with his change purse, straps it to his waist, and kneels down again.*) Ah, Lady Shizuka! (*Unties the ragged cloth around his throat and wraps it over his mouth, like a gag. He has done this so as not to offend the beautiful woman with his breath, stinking of stale alcohol. He raises the doll on its bamboo pole high over his shoulder and heads toward the mountain path.*) Oof! (*Tipsily staggers from side to side.*)

(*The LADY steps out slightly from the shadow of the trees, watching this scene.*)

PUPPETEER: Oof! (*Staggers.*) Oof! (*Staggers.*)

LADY (*Slowly steps from the shadows and crosses the PUPPETEER's path, as if turning back the way she came, and accosts him*): Grandpa, grandpa!

(*The PUPPETEER, tall and red faced, looks eerily at her as if he were possessed.*)

LADY (*Boldly strides up to him*): I no longer have any wishes for this world, nothing holding me back, so please, if there's anything I can do to make your wish come true, I'll do it for you. Please make me a wish, grandpa. (*The PUPPETEER, still silent and gazing at her as if to consume her with his eyes, eventually picks up a rope lying under a bale of rotten straw by the roadside. He approaches her, with it dangling, swinging limply from his hand.*) Ah! (*She steps back. The PUPPETEER sneers at her.*) I thought

it was a snake! — Oh, so what if it is a snake? What are you going to do? — What will you do to me?

(*Saying nothing, the PUPPETEER merely stretches out his wrinkled hand and beckons her. Beckoning her, he backs again into the shadows of the trees.*)

LADY: What will you do to me? What are you planning to do? (*She follows him into the trees.*)

(*For a while the stage is empty. Five white ducks waddle through the rice paddy in a line, hunting for grub. It is, as it were, a portent of spring's passing.*)

GRANDPA (*Loading a horse, emerges from the trees, gazing back the way he came. There are two sacks of rice on the horse's back, donations to the temple. The sacks bear labels on which are written: "White Rice. Hail to the Great Teacher, Diamond of Universal Light!"*): There was a sight to chill your blood! Why, makes me wonder whether now, even in the noonday sun, this rice I'm carrying hasn't turned to sand. (*Wets his brows with spittle and fishes out a few grains from one of the sacks.*) Still safe. (*Listens to the beating of festival drums.*) —Thanks be to Saint Kōbō! Still, it was awful! Damned devils, they were, scared the life out of me!

THE STAGE REVOLVES

SCENE 2

On one side a steep hill where alternate rows, two to three feet wide, of mustard flowers and barley grow. On the brow of the hill bloom bushes of Kerria japonica, a wild rose. Below in a ravine where the foot of the mountain has deeply eroded away, is an expanse of grass where mulberry saplings grow here and there, small and spindly as stalks of rattan.

On the other side is a wooded mountain with stands of evergreen oak, some trees tall, others shorter, their boughs so thick they seem black with leaf, roiling like eddies of black clouds, in stark contrast to the brightness of the scene on the other side.

A narrow path wends its way down the hanamichi and between the hills. In the distance looms the Izu mountain chain.

Alone, halfway up the slope between the kerria roses growing on the cliff and the mustard flowers below, the ARTIST quietly takes a swig from a flask of whiskey. — The call, far off, of a bush warbler. Two, three sharp cries of a cockerel, then, farther away, the belling of a deer. He stands there for some time, seemingly surprised. Then, as if spying on someone, he hides himself among the leaves and flowers.

The LADY enters. In one hand she holds her umbrella; in the other she clings to one end of the rope. She is leading the PUPPETEER, his headscarf tied like a monkey's bit. Strapped crosswise to his back is a black, Western-style umbrella and, vertically, his Shizuka doll. His arms, which hold the puppet's bamboo staff, are tied behind his back with the LADY's rope. Head down, his shoulders slumped, it is as if he were being led to slaughter. Still drunk, stumbling on unsteady legs, he steps forth into the shadows of the deep ravine at the foot of the

mountain. The LADY releases the rope, and it falls to the ground. In fact, he wasn't bound at all, it only appeared that way. He props his puppet against the trunk of a mulberry and kneels in prayer. Thus, at some distance from the LADY, he unties the headscarf.

PUPPETEER: Lady, honor your promise and grant me what I beg of you. (He rises on his hands and legs and grovels face down into the grass.)

LADY: Are you sure, grandpa?

PUPPETEER: Could I make up such a lie? Please, thrash me as hard as you can.

LADY: Strike you? Are you sure?

PUPPETEER: Thrash me till you draw blood, till I can't breathe no more. I beg you!

LADY: Really hit you? You're sure, are you?

PUPPETEER: Please, don't trifle with me! I can't wait no longer.

LADY: . . . I won't trifle, in case later you resent what I do. —Well, in that case, since I made a promise, I'll really beat you. Bear with it. (She strikes him three, four times with her Japanese umbrella, then five, six more times to follow.)

PUPPETEER: No good! No good at all!

LADY (Whipping him): Like this? —Like this?

PUPPETEER: Too weak! (Twisting around to look at her.) Let me really have it! Like you were giving me what for.

LADY: Like I, uh, was giving you what for —

PUPPETEER: That's why it's not good enough! Hang on a sec. (He removes his padded vest together with his worn and filthy crested jacket, baring his skinny, wrinkled back. He totters to his feet and embraces the tree with his back toward her. He turns around and glares at her.) Rip off the parchment so the staff and ribs are exposed. If you just continue swatting me the way you were, you won't even scratch me.

LADY (Sighing): Ah!

PUPPETEER: You'll never be able to put any muscle into it if you keep thinking I'm just some old, drunken beggar. Surely, lady, there's somebody you hate in this world, someone you'd like to thrash the living daylights out of. A mother-in-law, a father-in-law, a brother-in-law, some relative, some stranger, even a friend. You needn't hold back.

LADY: Ah!

PUPPETEER: Think of those bastards and give me what for. All right? Are you ready?

LADY: Ah!

PUPPETEER: Pull yourself together!

LADY: Ah, all right, then! (Growing aroused, she begins ripping the parchment off the umbrella, and in so doing, she cuts herself. Her fingers and arms grow pink with the flow of blood to her extremities. —She grasps the umbrella again.) —You beast! You beast!

You beast! You beast, you!!

PUPPETEER: Unh. (Groaning faintly.) Unh, yeah, right there, uh huh, that's better now.

Oh, yeah.

LADY: Is that how you like it? Huh? You beast!

PUPPETEER: No, it ain't enough for you just to whack me 'cross the rump or back that way. Smack me 'cross the head, box my ears, as hard as you can!

LADY: You beast! You beast! You beast! (Losing all control of herself, as if possessed, she leaps and dances around, her hair flying, her face growing pale. Beating and thrashing him for all she is worth, she begins to run out of breath.) Ah! For pity's sake, I can't take it anymore!

PUPPETEER: Can't take it anymore? Good! That's the spirit! Keep it up!

ARTIST (Following the embankment, descends into the ravine. Though calm, he hastens to stop them): —Madame!

LADY: Why, sir! (On seeing him, her frail arms freeze, her legs turn to jelly, and she sinks down and falls half into a faint.)

ARTIST: This is whiskey. —To revive you. —What on earth has been going on here? (In shock, the PUPPETEER writhes around on the ground. The ARTIST observes him.) I've no idea what this is about, but I do know anything taken too far is wrong.

LADY (Gasping for breath): What have I done? I've exposed you to something so base, something no human should ever see, let alone do. Oh, what am I to do? (Begins weeping hysterically.)

ARTIST (At a loss to stop her, he rubs her hands, her back, in an effort to soothe her): Please, calm yourself.

PUPPETEER (Wraps his bloody flesh in his jacket and, panting, bows on hand and knee in the grass): Ah . . . This must be, er, er, your husband. Would it, ma'am?

ARTIST: I'm no one to this lady, particularly. Call me an acquaintance.

PUPPETEER: Then let this old man tell the gentleman—her acquaintance, if you will—what's happening here. Yes, er, forgive me my impertinence—this ain't an easy story to listen to. . . . In short, this dried-up, decrepit ruin, slimy and black as a strip of eel jerky, was once a young man, and long ago committed a great sin. All for a woman. I was a snake that wound itself around an angel on some high balcony. No, rather, I was a lizard who'd gobbled up a frog in a pond. I'm at a loss for metaphors. . . . I sucked the very lifeblood out of her. —And when I awoke from my dream, the sin I committed terrified me. There was nowhere I could go. . . . Exposing myself to the elements, risking life and limb to lose myself, to disappear, I met a traveling monk on the pilgrim's road in Shikoku—surely it was Saint Kōbō himself—who left me this mysterious gift. This doll attached to this bamboo pole is the image of a lovely woman. I'm sure she's offended every time the old man gets drunk, so I bite on this kerchief to protect her from the fumes from my foul-smelling mouth. . . . This beautiful young lady is a goddess for these ancient eyes, so every time I see her I'm reminded of my old sin. Were someone able morn and night to punish me, to beat and torture me, then perhaps I could rid myself of at least some of the sin I've piled up. I'm not afraid neither of going to hell in the afterlife. My load of suffering in this life is not enough, so I long for nothing else in all the world. I'd have old wives and women, the kind who'd lie

with me in seedy flophouses or under the verandas of village shrines, kick and beat me, but it was never enough. It was a beautiful lady who lost her precious life, all due to the recklessness of this here beggar. So, if I'm not punished at the hands of a young and beautiful woman like her, my flesh and blood scarcely feel a thing. —And when such a wish, the veritable prayer of a ghost or vengeful spirit, comes from someone with my face, anybody in his right mind would run away. . . . You'd have to be a saint or a genius, a fearless hero or a man of peerless virtue, to listen to a tale like mine! —This ruin you see before you was born sixty-nine years ago, and it's forty-one years to the month and day today that he made this vow. —And here it was just now that this beautiful lady accosted this beggar, called to me, promising me she'd grant me any wish I had, whatever it might be. —I may be no expert, but it's my trade, after all, and I made the most fearsome face I could, but I could see she was afraid of nothing, no ghost or demon crying for vengeance. I told her my wish, a wish I'd borne so long, that I wanted to be exposed like some common criminal on the execution ground. And so we came here, on the roadside to be sure, but in a hidden place in a gully where the mountain has washed away, where I could submit to this blessed beating, this exquisite torture. . . . Master. —Thank you, lovely lady, thank you most kindly!

LADY (*For the first time, calm*): Does it hurt you, sir?

PUPPETEER: Why, lady, this pain brings as much joy to this besotted face as the caress of a spring breeze, or the sweet nectar proffered by Kannon herself from the tresses of a willow.⁶ . . . And that it was a beauty like you, ma'am—better yet, somebody like one of them Buddhist she-demons—makes me worship you even more, like you was some kind of angel or goddess. Surely, thanks to the pain you inflicted on me, my flesh and bones have grown soft and supple, my blood courses fast like I was twenty-years old again, and I can live another blessed day with joy in my heart.

ARTIST (*Cocking his head as he listens, he casually lights up a gold-tipped cigarette*): Old man, care for a smoke?

PUPPETEER: Why, sir, if saké is holy water, then tobacco is incense burned for a dead man.

ARTIST: Have a smoke, then. (*Holds out a cigarette case encrusted with pearls.*)

PUPPETEER: Now don't it shine like Saint Kōbō's staff? 'Tis a sin. (*Crawls out and lights one of the gold-tipped cigarettes.*) There'll be hell to pay for this. 'Tis a sin, to be sure.

I'll fly up on a waft of this here purple smoke and sail off to paradise.

LADY: I have to leave now, sir. . . . Are you sure all you wanted was to be beaten?

PUPPETEER: Even if the Katsura River turned round and flowed back the other way, I'd tell you no lie.

LADY: Ask me a favor. I feel I still owe you.

PUPPETEER: Had I anything left to ask, it'd be for you to beat and punish me again, another time, three times more.

LADY: Anything else?

PUPPETEER: My utmost desire would be for you, my lovely lady, to beat me day after day and day and night, till my body was pummeled to dust. —But I've sobered up now. Enough of this nonsense. —By day I avoid others, but just like the badgers and otters and goblins, none can begrudge my coming on this mountain trail to Shuzenji, bedding down in a flophouse in Tatsuno along the way, to enjoy a dip in Saint Kōbō's springs. —Today, I'll let my feet take me somewhere down the road to Shimoda. I spoke of clouds and water, but Heaven's River⁷ and the runoff in a ditch each have their separate courses, so here's where you and I must part and I'll never see the likes of you again. May the two of you prosper till the end of time. —Lady Shizuka, aye, I'll keep you company.

LADY: Sir, wait. (*Having made an important decision, she steels herself.*) I'll follow you down that muddy course for ten years, a hundred even, to make your wish come true each morn and night. (*PUPPETEER, by his visage, wordlessly expresses shock.*)

Master—I left home. I'm the wife of another man. So he won't drag me back, I'd hide myself anywhere, no matter how out of the way it was. As it is, I've nowhere to go. —When I saw that dead carp in the ditch, how dreadful it was, I made up my mind I'd drink poison or drown, commit suicide somehow, no matter how ugly my corpse would look. But maybe it was just out of impatience with me that you said you'd never let me end up that way. . . . In any case, because of what you said to me back then, I decided not to kill myself.

Sir—I am the wife of Koitogawa, a family with a title but no money.

ARTIST: Ah, the viscount's?

LADY: What should I say? Why . . . it was some years ago, back when you had just returned from Europe. With your friends and fans, you used to come often, to Nihonbashi . . . (*Gazes at the ARTIST ecstatically.*)—Have you forgotten me? I'm Nui, the daughter at the Yukari Restaurant.

ARTIST: Ah, so you're O-Nui? . . . The little sister, right? I heard folks say how pretty the younger one was.

LADY (*Wistfully*): Yes, master. I'm sure my mention made no more impression on you than someone commenting on how cold it was on a chilly day. I was so shy about being seen by you that I wouldn't even dare stray past the threshold of a room you were in, but I stayed close enough that I never missed a single word of what you had to say at any of your parties. When you held court in the room downstairs, I'd lie face down on the floor above and listen in. And when you were in the room at back, I'd hide out in the bathhouse in the courtyard behind, pressed naked against the wall, listening. Whatever room they put you in, like a mouse, I'd find a spot to hide myself, my heart like a moth drawn the light of your heart. Nobody, not the hardworking

6. Kannon is the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, sometimes called the goddess of mercy.

7. The Milky Way.

maids nor even my worldly sister, ever guessed how I felt about you. My heart was true. My gestures, my whole demeanor, betrayed nothing; I never spoke a word of this to anyone. Only love shames one. That's why from that time on—I wonder if I wasn't even hysterical—people said I was a little strange. . . . Please, sir, understand what I say. . . . I truly went a little crazy. When you married, for a whole year all I could do was weep; my hair grew long and wild. It wasn't as if they locked me up, but I just lay there like an empty shell while they tended to me. It annoyed me that I couldn't die. . . . I felt wretched that I couldn't simply disappear, and so somehow I went on living.

—When I came to my senses, I was already twenty-three. My mother, who had so spoiled me in that big house, had passed away. When blind love dies, the world grows dark. Having been able to have my way so long made me feel obligated to crush that selfish nature of mine. Still, I stayed selfish. —I turned down all the suitors that my brothers and sisters and relatives picked out for me—keen merchants, savvy businessmen, every one—and married into the family I did.

There was the mother-in-law and two sisters-in-law, one divorced—three women. It's the family tradition, they said, for a wife to serve her husband, so I had to go fetch the water from a well, the house being located in the suburbs. . . . I cut vegetables. Evenings I went out with the mother-in-law to shop for groceries—I didn't mind those household chores. For savories for supper and sweets for snacks, the boys from the restaurant brought them by bicycle, all the way from my home in Nihonbashi, cases of food, pails of fish, every single day. My mother-in-law would berate the chef, saying the fish wasn't fresh or the omelet hadn't set, that they were feeding us the restaurant customers' leftovers, and sometimes she'd even kick the trays of dishes. At first, knowing I was still so inept, I swallowed my anger, my bitterness, but when this went on for a year, two years, I learned how they really felt. — My husband, for starters . . . well, they all had their eyes on my money, that is, my share of the family business. The monthly interest—how shall I say it?—it was enough for living costs, but it was never enough for them. Every time a niece had a suitor, or a cousin got married, I lost some heirloom, like a formal kimono or ornaments for my hair. My brocades and white underthings, my black satin and crepe—every single bolt of cloth for my kimonos was sold for summer and year-end gifts, presents to pay off the people they knew with some favor or other. The chest of drawers I brought with me when I married was practically empty by then. . . .

And what did my husband do for a living? He wrote poetry, both classical and in the modern style; he wrote plays; he sent letters to the editors of newspapers.

ARTIST: It must have been hard on you. But surely he still has prospects.
LADY: But no! His prospects were my inheritance, and they bullied me unless I brought my inheritance to them. If I coughed or complained of a headache, all the in-laws would huddle together and mutter lines like you'd hear in a play or movie, that it was "that lung disease" and for the sake of the family they had no choice but to send me back home. —"Put up with it! Put up with it!" was all my husband ever said, but I'd

have died before I'd finished putting up with what they had in store for me. Finally I came down with a cold that kept me in bed for three days. Then in the hall on the way to get some water to drink, I heard my mother-in-law say, "Now's our chance. . . . What say we send her home?" That cut me to the quick.

ARTIST: Cruel, for sure.

LADY: Cruel? Was that all it was? —I was so mad, my cold cleared up completely and I said to my husband, "Even if I have to fight for it, I'll go home and bring you back my inheritance. But I want you to do something for me, just once—take your mother and throw her out of my room, then grab your one sister by her ponytail and slap the other one hard across the face!" . . .

FUFFETEER (*Slithering out*): That's the spirit! That's the spirit!

ARTIST: Hah, hah, hah! Bet that made you feel better! Hardly meek, mind you.

LADY (*Furious, then smiling as if all were forgotten*): Hardly.

ARTIST: Not then, anyway.

LADY: "You're a demon!" my husband suddenly shouted, and he flung me out of the room, grabbed me by the hair and slapped *me* hard across the face. That night was last night? No, the night before last—had I left that night it would have been too obvious. Sir, if I was as good as a goldfish or quiet as a houseplant, then the house where I was born or one of my relatives would surely take me back, but I have my pride. . . . Ready to die because there was no place for me, I've found a place to go now. (*With resolution.*) I'll follow this old gentleman. —This man understands the sin of making a woman suffer, and now he wants to pay for it by being beaten night and day. I'll become all the women of this world to avenge ourselves on this one man. —He worships this doll of Lady Shizuka as if she were human. He'll offer me the pride and blessing of having been born a woman, and in return, he can have my weak and discarded body, like the carcass of that dead carp he saved from its fate.

ARTIST (*Sometimes nodding, sometimes cocking his head doubtfully*): Madame. I mean, O-Nui.

LADY (*Happy, laughs guilelessly*): Ye-es!

ARTIST: Is there nothing I can do to change your mind?

LADY: No, sir. Unless you take me by the hand, back to the inn . . .

FUFFETEER/That's right! That's right!

(*The ARTIST is silent.*)

LADY (*Turns around*): Sir.

ARTIST: Madame, you are ill, you're sick. But I'm no doctor and I cannot tell you what to do. —I can't fathom your reasoning, but then again, I don't claim to understand the ways of other people. I've nothing to teach you. Whether it's right or wrong to take you back with me, I can't say at the moment. I'm not leaving you out of cowardice. I'm preoccupied with my own work right now and haven't the freedom to pass judgment on you. —I'm sorry to say I'm weak, and I can do nothing for you. But if you could wait for a month or even a fortnight, then I'd find it in me to do something.

LADY: Master, in the course of just one night I've changed the way I look. My destiny can't wait any longer.

ARTIST: Understood. *(As if no longer able to look her in the eye, he turns to the PUPPETEER.)*—Old man, promise to keep her company.

PUPPETEER: I'll be her dog— *(He picks up the LADY, then gets down on all fours. The*

LADY *mounts his back. The ARTIST takes her hand so she will not fall.)* I'll be her horse and take her wherever she wants to go.

ARTIST: Madame. . . . May all go as you desire.

LADY: Please give us your whiskey, sir. . . . Then be witness to our union. *(Saying nothing, the ARTIST takes out the bottle, pours a cup, and offers it her. The LADY drains the cup in one gulp, then takes a deep breath.)* Grandpa, we need something to go with the toast.

PUPPETEER: I could sing a ditty in place of a formal speech. . . .

LADY: No, bring out that rotten carp you rescued.

PUPPETEER: Surely not!

LADY: Take it out. Have you a knife?

PUPPETEER: I always carry a knife, to fend off dogs and whatever else may come my way. *(From a bowl wrapped in his waist he pulls out a rusty blade.)*

ARTIST: Surely, Madame!

LADY: We'll be traveling together. —I'll have to get used to eating this sort of fare. . . .

PUPPETEER: Now you're talking! I'll have some, too.

(Shocked, the ARTIST turns his head away. From far off, voices chant "Hail to the Great Teacher, Diamond of Universal Light! Hail to the Great Teacher, Diamond of Universal Light!" A young BOY and GIRL enter, in procession.)

CHILDREN *(Innocently)*: Hail to the Great Teacher, Diamond of Universal Light!

(The two CHILDREN at first enter slowly, the GIRL with her hair tied in a ponytail with purple cloth, the BOY with his hair formally tied back with a long white ribbon. Then, noticing the PUPPETEER, the LADY, and the ARTIST, they suddenly become afraid and hastily race past them, running down the hanamichi. As if they have come to an understanding, the LADY and the ARTIST both turn and look their way. The PUPPETEER also gazes after them, beckoning. The scene created by this ensemble is truly eerie. The two CHILDREN return, as if pulled back.)

ARTIST: Fine children! We need your services.

LADY: Aren't they sweet?

ARTIST *(Removes his cloak and lays it on the grass)*: Madame, please seat yourself down next to grandpa here.

LADY: Surely we don't deserve this.

ARTIST: Of course you do. But if you're sick, then maybe I've fallen a bit ill myself. — Now, seal your oath with a toast.⁸

(The LADY and the PUPPETEER sit down side by side. The two CHILDREN, as if in the service of demons, take turns pouring the whiskey. Silence. A cloud passes over, darkening the stage. A bush warbler cries impatiently. Distant sounds of court music. Then, gradually, the cries of "Hail to the Great Teacher, Diamond of Universal Light!" draw nigh, and some dozen or so VILLAGERS, old and young, men and women, enter chanting.)

VILLAGER 1: Hey! Why are you children here?

VILLAGER 2: You're Saint Kōbō's emissaries. That's why we keep a respectful distance from you.

VILLAGER 3: We follow you reverently. —You mustn't play tricks on us.

VILLAGERS 4, 5, 6 *(In turn)*: Come! Come! *(Surrounding the CHILDREN.)* Hail to the Great Teacher, Diamond of Universal Light! . . . *(Thus they exit off the wings.)*

LADY *(Takes the cloak, brushes off the dust, and drapes it over the ARTIST's shoulders)*: It was only once — perhaps you don't remember? You were drunk and put your hand on mine. This one. . . . Please take my hand, once more, in memory of me. I wish for no more. *(Kneels on the grass and bows to him.)* Dear sir. If only it could be otherwise.

ARTIST: And if I could do anything else.

LADY: Grandpa, let's be going.

PUPPETEER: Aye, aye . . . Farewell, sir!

LADY: Let's go! *(As they start off, it begins to rain in earnest.)*

ARTIST: Wait! *(Rushing after them, he holds out an open umbrella.)*

LADY: Sir, what about you?

ARTIST: A little rain won't hurt me.

LADY: Thank you kindly. *(Takes the umbrella.)* Oh, to hell with them! *(She kicks off her clogs and, barefoot, hikes up the skirt of her kimono, exposing fetching scarlet petticoats underneath. She pulls hard on the PUPPETEER's hand.)*

PUPPETEER *(Follows on tottering legs)*: Hail to the Great Teacher, Diamond of Universal Light!

LADY *(Halfway down the hanamichi, she turns back. The ARTIST sees her off)*: Master! . . . Farewell! Pay my respects to the world.

ARTIST: Take care of yourself.

(Wrapping the PUPPETEER's wrinkled arm around her own, the LADY leads him, holding high the umbrella, toward the curtain at the end of the hanamichi. The ARTIST watches them. From offstage, the PUPPETEER's voice is heard chanting, "Hail to the Great Teacher, Diamond of Universal Light!" Then we hear the LADY also chant, "Hail to the Great Teacher, Diamond of Universal Light!")

ARTIST: Ah, are we in hell? Or surely, this is a dream. No, it's real. —*(Sees the LADY's clog)* Should I throw it all away, I wonder? My name, everything? *(Takes the clog in his hands, looking distressed.)* But no, I've got my work. *(Throws the clog away.)* *(The sound of the rain stops. The vesper bell of Shuzenji Temple rings.)*

CURTAIN

8. In a traditional Japanese wedding, rather than using rings, a marriage is sealed by an exchange of cups of sake.