Timothy Findley

Foxes

PRE-READING

1. As preparation for reading the story,
   a) Research the use of masks in theatrical dramatic presentations. What purpose do masks serve? When are they worn? How are they physically handled by the wearer? What are some of the theatrical protocols regarding the use of masks? If possible, research some of the history behind the use of masks in theatre. What are some connotative meanings that accompany the word “mask”?
   b) Research the history of the use of animal totems in various cultures and religions. What is the connection between animals and humans?
   c) Explore your understanding of the imagery of the fox. Draw up a list of words that come to mind when you think of “the fox.” Can any kind of suggestion or generalization be drawn?

The face is only the thing to write.
— Roland Barthes

All the appropriate people had been forewarned: Morris Glendenning would be coming to the Royal Ontario Museum to do some private research in the Far Eastern Department. He was not to be approached; he was not to be disturbed.

Glendenning’s reclusiveness was legendary, made doubly curious by the fact he was the world’s best-known communications expert—a man whose public stances and pronouncements had put him at centre stage as long ago as 1965. The thing was, Morris Glendenning could not bear to be seen.

But, as with most eccentric beings, part of what was eccentric in him seemed determined to thwart whatever else was eccentric. In Morris Glendenning’s case, his passion for privacy was undone by his need for warmth—which led to a passion for things made of wool and, as well, to what some considered to be the most
eccentric habit of dress in the whole community of North American intellectuals.

He wore old-fashioned galoshes—the kind made of sailcloth and rubber, sporting metal fasteners shaped like little ladders lying on their sides. He was also given to wearing a multiplicity of woollen garments layered across his chest: scarves, sweaters, undervests—each of a prescribed colour. He wore, as well, a navy blue beret, pulled down over the tops of his prominent ears. He was six feet, six inches tall and was made, it seemed, almost entirely of bone. His skin was pale, translucent and shining—as if he polished it at night with a chamois cloth. Glendening's overcoat was blue and had a military cut—naval, perhaps. It was pinched at the waist and almost reached his ankles. In magazine photographs—taken always on the run—Morris Glendening had the look of Greta Garbo, heading for doorways and ducking into elevators:

“COMMUNICATIONS EXPERT ESCAPES YET AGAIN!”

Mrs. Elston, in charge of secretarial work for the Far Eastern Department at the Royal Ontario Museum, had been told by her boss that Glendening would be turning up on the Friday morning last week in February. She was quite looking forward to meeting the famous man. Dr. Dime, the curator, had instructed her to offer all available assistance without stint and without question. On no account, she was told, was he to be approached by staff. “Whatever help he requires, he will solicit: probably by note....” By mid-afternoon, however, on the day of the visit, Mrs. Elston said: “it doesn’t take much to guarantee the privacy of someone who doesn’t even bother to show up.”

At which point Myrna Stovich, her assistant, said: “but he is here, Mrs. Elston. Or—someone is. His overcoat and galoshes are sitting right there....” And she pointed out a huddled, navy blue shape on a chair and a pair of sailcloth overshoes squatting in a large brown puddle.

“For heaven’s sake,” said Mrs. Elston. “How can that have happened when I’ve been sitting here all day?”

“You haven’t been sitting here all day,” said Myrna Stovich. “You took a coffee break and you went to lunch.”
The night before, and all that morning, it had snowed. The clouds were a shade of charcoal flannel peculiar to clouds that lower above Toronto at the dirty end of winter. Merely looking at them made you cough. Morris Glendenning had supplemented his already over-protective array of woollen garments with one more scarf, which he pulled down crossways over his radiator ribs and tied against the small of his back. Even before he departed his Rosedale home, he pulled his beret over his ears and bowed his head beneath the elements.

Walking across the Sherbourne Street bridge, Morris set his mind on his destination and, thereby, shut out the presence of his fellow pedestrians. His destination at large was the Royal Ontario Museum but his absolute destination was its collection of Japanese theatre masks.

Long after midnight, Morris Glendenning had sat up watching the snow eradicate the garden and the trees beyond his windows. Now, he was tired. And reflective. Progress with his current work had stalled, partly due to the residue of sorrow over his wife's midsummer death and partly due to the fact he had published a book two
months later, in September. The work itself—the massing of materials, the culling of ideas—had been passing through an arid stage and it was only in the last few days that he'd begun to feel remotely creative again. Not that he hadn't traversed this particular desert before. Far from it. After every piece of exploration—after every publication of his findings—after every attempt at articulating the theories rising from his findings, Morris Glendenning—not unlike every other kind of writer—found himself, as if by some sinister miracle of transportation, not at the edge but at the very centre of a wasteland from which he could extract not a single living thought. For days—sometimes for weeks—his mind had all the symptoms of dehydration and starvation: desiccated and paralyzed almost to the point of catatonia. Five days ago it had been in that state, but now it was reviving—feeding again, but gently. And all because of a chance encounter with a photograph.

The photograph had appeared in a magazine called _Rotunda_, published by the Royal Ontario Museum; and it showed a Japanese theatre mask recently purchased and brought from the Orient. "Fox," the caption read. But it wasn't quite a fox. It was a human fox, alarming in its subtle implications. Reading about it, Morris Glendenning discovered it was one of three or four others—a series of masks created for a seventeenth-century Japanese drama in which a fox becomes a man. Each of the masks, so the article informed him, displayed a separate stage in the transformation of a quintessential fox into a quintessential human being. Glendenning's curiosity was piqued—and more than piqued; a trigger was pulled in the deeps of his consciousness. Something had been recognized, he realized, and he felt the reverberations rising like bubbles to the surface: signals, perhaps—or warnings.

He very well remembered reading David Garnett's horror story _Lady Into Fox_—that masterful, witty morality tale in which the English "hunting class" is put in its place when one of its wives becomes a fox. But here, in these Japanese masks, the process had been reversed. It was the fox who took on human form. On the other hand, this was more or less standard procedure when it came to balancing the myths and customs of the Orient against the myths and customs of the West. Almost inevitably, the icons and symbols employed by custom and by myth were opposites: white in the
Orient, black in the West for mourning; respect for, not the arrogation of nature; death, not birth as access to immortality.

Whose fate, Glendenning had written in the margin next to the provocative photograph, is being fulfilled within this mask? The fox's? Or the man's?

Clipping the whole page out of the magazine, he slipped it into a file marked Personae, and five minutes later, he retrieved it—held it up in the snow-white light from the windows and stared at it, mesmerized. The question became an obsession. Looking into the lacquered face of the mask he imagined stripping off the layers of the human face. Not to the bone, but to the being.

The blooming of this image took its time. It occurred to him slowly that under the weight of all his personal masks, there was a being he had never seen. Not a creature hidden by design—but something buried alive that wanted to live and that had a right to life.

"Foxes into humans," he said out loud as he watched the photograph. Their choice, not ours.

Standing in the bathroom, later that afternoon, something sent a shudder through his shoulders and down his back when, in the very instant of switching on the light, he caught the image of his unmasked self in the mirror. And he noted, in that prodding, ever-observant part of his brain—where even the death of his wife had been observed with the keenest objectivity—that what had been unmasked had not been human. What he had seen—and all he had seen—was a pair of pale gold eyes that stared from a surround of darkness he could not identify.

Half an hour later, Morris picked up the telephone and placed a call to the Curator of the Far Eastern Collection at the Royal Ontario Museum, who happened to be his old acquaintance, Harry Dime. What privileges could Harry Dime afford him? Could he inspect the Japanese masks alone?

Privately, Harry Dime would later conclude he should have said no. For all his own awareness of intellectual curiosity, he had no sense at all of the dangerous threshold at which Glendenning stood. Dime had forgotten that, when he returned with these treasures from another time, he brought them with all their magic
intact. Not with ancient spells, of course, since all such things are nonsense—but the magic they released in others: in those who beheld them without the impediment of superstition.

On the snowy Friday morning, Morris Glendenning debated whether to walk or to chance the subway. Chancing the subway might mean recognition, and given the loss of time that recognition inevitably produced, he decided to walk. Walking, he was certain no one would see him—let alone recognize him. *How many eyes, he once had said to Nora, his wife, meet yours on a crowded avenue?*

Bloor Street on a Friday is always massed with shoppers, most of whom, Glendenning noted, like to give the appearance of worldly indifference. *I could go in and buy that coat if I wanted to, they seemed to be telling themselves. But I won’t do that today, I’ll do that on Monday. Maybe Tuesday ... Their impassivity was almost eerie and it troubled Morris Glendenning.*

The street, for all its people and all its motor traffic, was silent beneath the falling snow. Morris could see his own and everyone else’s breath. If he paused, he could count the breaths and he could take the pulse of where he stood—each breath embracing so many heart beats—all the heart beats racing, lagging—all the secret rhythms of all the people visible in the frosted air. Even the motor traffic gave the appearance of being alive; as much an appearance of life as the people gave with their wisps and plumes of vapours. In behind the windows of these vehicles, the faces peering out of the silence were reflected in the clouds of glass that fronted Harry Rosen’s; Cartier’s; Bemelmans; Eddie Bauer’s. Holt Renfrew ... moon phases; passing on Bloor Street.

Morris Glendenning could feel the subway tumbling beneath him, not like an earthquake—merely an indication that something was there, alive and at work, whose underground voice made no more sound than voices make in dreams. Morris paused at the corner of Bellair Street and watched a man he had intimately known in boyhood wander past him with his eyes averted. Later on, both of them would say: *I saw old so-and-so out on Bloor Street, today. He looked appalling; dead ... I saw old so-and-so today. We passed,*
Here, Morris thought, was a kind of debilitating apartness—an apartness that once had been entirely foreign to all these people: the ones who were perfect strangers and the ones who were intimate friends.

We needed each other. That was why we looked each other in the eye. We needed each other. Morris clenched his jaw, afraid that perhaps his lips had been moving over the words. We've always shared this dreadful place—these awful storms—this appalling climate—and we knew we couldn't afford to be alone. But now ...

Now he was approaching the final stretch of Bloor Street before the stop at Avenue Road, where he would wait for the light to change, the way he had waited there for over forty years.

Beyond the veils of snow he could see the vaguest hint of neon, red in the air above him: Park Plaza Hotel—though all he could see was part of the z and part of the final a.

A small crowd of people formed near the curb and Morris Glendenning was aware, all at once, how many of them wore fur hats. A dozen fur hats and fifteen heads.

Not one person was looking at any other; only Morris Glendenning, counting. Why were they so unconcerned with one another? When had they all become collectively impassive?

Probably last Tuesday.

Morris smiled. Rhetorical questions formed the backbone of his profession, but he delighted in providing stupid, banal and irritating answers. It was a form of private entertainment.

Still, it affected everything they did—this intractable indifference. It affected the way they walked, he observed—the speed with which they walked—their gait, as they made their way along the street. They moved, Morris thought—gazing at them through the falling snow—with the kind of apathy acquired by those whom something—bitterness?—has taught that nothing waits for those who hurry home. It came to him slowly, standing on the curb at Avenue Road and Bloor, that, when he rode on the subway and was recognized, it was not their recognition of him that mattered: but their hope that he—in all his ballyhooed wisdom and fame—might recognize them and tell them who they were. I know you from somewhere: that's what they yearned for him to say. I know—I recognize who you are.
In the cellars at the ROM, there is a labyrinth of halls and passageways that leads, through various degrees of light and temperature, to various sequestered rooms where various treasures lie in wait for someone to come and give them back their meaning. Bits and pieces, shards and corners of time—numbered, catalogued, guessed at.

Morris Glendennning stood in one of these rooms—perspiring, it so happened—holding in his fingers, his fingers encased in white cotton gloves—the very mask he had encountered first in its photographed image.

The door behind him was closed.

The room—effectively—was sound-proofed by its very depth in the cellars and its distance from the active centre of the building. A dread, white light was all he had to see by: “daylight” shining from computered bulbs.

The mask’s companions—three in number—were set out, sterile on a sterile tray: the fox on its way to becoming a man.

He thought of surgery.

He thought of layers.

How small, he thought, the face is.

Looking down at the others, beyond the mask he held, he counted over the variations and degrees of change—the fox in his hands at one extreme and the trio of variations, lying on their tray, burgeoning feature by feature into a close proximity of Oriental human beauty. The widely tilted, oval eyes of the fox became the evenly centered, almond eyes of a man. Of a priest, so the collection’s catalogue had told him.

A priest. So apt a designation, it could only be amusing. Though amusing, of course, in a sinister way.

Morris felt like a marauding and possibly destructive child bent on mischief. A vandal, perhaps. Most certainly, he knew he was trespassing here, the victim of an irresistible impulse: put it on...

He had spent over three hours standing there, touching—lifting—contemplating the masks. Around him, resting on shelves and laid out, numbered in other sterile trays was the department’s whole collection of Japanese theatre masks. Each mask was hidden: slung in a silk and sometimes quite elaborate bag, the drawstrings tied in neat, fastidious bows.
Heads, he thought. The victims of some revolution.
The truth was—he dared not open the bags to look.
Some of the bags were darkly stained. And, even though he fully recognized the stains were merely of time and of mildew, he could not bring himself to touch them.
Put it on. Don't be afraid.
Go on.

He held the mask up gently before his face.
He could smell its ... what? Its mustiness?
Or was it muskiness?
He closed his eyes and fitted the moulded inner surface over the contours of his bones.
He waited fully fifteen seconds before he dared to open his eyes.
The masks below him, sitting on their tray, were smiling.
Had they smiled before?
He waited, knowing he must not give up until the whole sensation of the mask had been experienced—no matter how long it took.
He thought he heard a noise somewhere out in the corridor. The voice of someone calling.
He held his breath, in order to hear.
Nothing.
And then, as he began to breathe again, he felt the vibrations of a sound between his face and the mask.
Another voice. But whose?

He was a long way off inside himself and standing in another light. A pattern of leaves threw shadows over what he saw: perhaps the verge of a clearing somewhere.
Creatures—not human—moved before him.
Foxes.
How elegant they were. How delicate: precise and knowing.
Why was he so unconcerned and unafraid?
He began to receive the scent of earth as he had never smelled the earth before: a safe, green, sun-warmed scent.
He looked at his hands. He held them out as far as he could. Human hands—in white gloves. Whose were they?
He tried to speak, but could not.
What emerged, instead of speech, was an inarticulate and strangled sound he had never heard before.
Down below him, where the earth replaced the floor, one of the foxes came and sat at his feet and stared up into his face. It seemed, almost, to know who he was.

Never in all of Morris's life had he been so close to anything wild. He was mesmerized.
Other foxes came, as if to greet him, and they leaned so close against his legs that he could feel their bones against his shins.

The fox that had been the first to come and sit before him narrowed its gaze. It stared so intently, Morris felt that something must be going to happen.

Say something to us, the fox appeared to be saying. Tell us something. Speak to us....

Yes—but how?

Morris was bereft of words. But the impulse to speak was overwhelming.
He could feel the sound of something rising through his bowels—and the force of the sound was so alarming that Morris pulled the mask away from his face and thrust it from him—down into the tray from which he had lifted it. When?

How much time had passed. An hour? A day? How far away had he been? Who was he, now? Or what?

He looked—afraid—at the backs of his hands, but they were covered still with the gloves.
The creatures in the tray appeared to stir.

Morris closed his eyes against the notion he was not alone. He did not want to see the floor—for fear the floor was still the sun-warmed ground it had been a moment before.

And yet...

He wanted them back. Their breath and their eyes already haunted him. He waited for their voices—but no voices came.

Morris removed the white cotton gloves. He took a long, deep breath and let it very slowly out between his teeth.

His fingers dipped towards the tray and even before they reached the mask, he smiled—because he could feel the head rising up as sure and real as the sun itself. And when the mask he had chosen was in place, he paused only for seconds before he dared to breathe again; one deep
breath, and he found his voice—which was not his human voice but another voice from another time.

Now—at last—he was not alone.

Just before five that afternoon, Mrs. Elston was putting the cover on her IBM Selectric and preparing to leave, when she became aware all at once of someone standing behind her.

“Oh,” she said—recovering as best she could. “We thought you were not here, Professor Glendenning.”

She smiled—but he did not reply.

His enormous height was bending to the task of pulling on his galoshes.

“Shall we be seeing you tomorrow?” Mrs. Elston asked.

With his back to her, he shook his head.

“Monday, perhaps?”

But he was buckling his galoshes; silent.

He drew his many scarves about him, buttoned his greatcoat, took up his leather bag and started away.

“Professor Glendenning... It was such a great pleasure...”

But Mrs. Elston could not reach him. He was gone and the door swung to and fro.

Mrs. Elston sniffed the air.

“Myrna?” she said. “Do you smell something?”

Myrna Stovich needed no prompting.

“Sure,” she said. “Dog.”

“But there can’t be a dog!” said Mrs. Elston.

“Yeah, well,” said Myrna. “We also thought there wasn’t no Professor Glendenning, didn’t we.”

“True,” Mrs. Elston laughed. “You’re quite right, my dear. But... goodness! What a day!” she said. “And now we have to go out into all that snow.”

“Yeah,” said Myrna Stovich. “Sure. But I like the snow.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Elston, and she sighed. “I like it, too, I guess.” And then she gave a smile. “I suppose I have to, don’t I—seeing it’s what we’ve got.”