

The Silver World: Snow in Japan

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Snow is more than rain. On some occasions it appears beautiful, on other occasions ugly and suffocating. Indeed, snow seems to contain its own animistic spirit, which may be why it is one of the most difficult phenomena to express in words. Snow must be experienced, even by scholars. *Nakaya* Ukichiro, one of the first Japanese physicists to devote his life to discovering its numerous secrets, observed that snow is a message from the sky, but we have not yet learned how to decipher it.¹ This remains true today, despite ongoing scientific research.

Exploring the essence of snow can be compared to exploring the essence of a country, in this case Japan; an impossible task, yet an enticing, never-ending one. My approach to the aesthetics of snow from a Japanese point of view is fraught with possible blunders and oversights. Still, perceiving snow as a metaphor for the transience of human experience may enable us to gain valuable insight into the significance of aesthetic understanding. Put another way, carefully examining these tiny flakes in context may lead us to a larger truth.

In a short eloquent essay the American journalist, Thomas Boswell, writes with admiration and a tinge of regret about his 81 year old father, Paul Boswell.² It seems that his father loved beauty and ideas and, according to his son, lived his life immersed in both without any hope of public recognition or tribute. He loved writing poetry, drawing elegant buildings, learning about science, reading literature and building his own furniture. His son notes that society had no use for his father's assorted talents; still, Paul Boswell spent his life *in love with things that mattered.*

His wife claims that she married him because he was "the only man I met who had an original thought."³ Original thoughts seem to be in short supply these days and aesthetic insight is currently frowned upon, even occasionally maligned. Thomas Boswell's appreciation of his 81 year old father is at once a mourning of a generation of people now approaching death, and a celebration of that same generation who, while experiencing the hardships of the Great Depression in the U. S. and the Second World War, continued to create beauty and to love ideas; in short, *to value things that mattered.* This is true in Japan, too.

One of Paul Boswell's poems reminds me of snow — its birth, its extraordinary beauty as it meanders toward our earth, and its demise and simultaneous survival. Boswell refers to our planet as "this splendid speck," which indeed it is, if we place it within the context of the universe.

This splendid speck,
This DNA experiment station
Where life seems, somehow,
To have designed or assembled itself;
Where Chance and Choice
Play at survival and extinction;
Where molecules beget molecules,
And mistakes in the begetting
May be inconsequential,
Or lethal or lucky;
Where life everywhere eats life
And reproduction usually outpaces
cannibalism;⁴

Boswell managed to suggest in a few words what will take me much longer to render. He is describing our planet and I am discussing the life and death of snow, yet there exists remarkable aesthetic and phenomenological similarities.

“Winter is by far the oldest of the seasons,” notes Gaston Bachelard in his book *The Poetics of Space*. “Not only does it confer age upon our memories, taking us back to a remote past but on snowy days, the house too, is old.”⁵ Bachelard suggests that snow reduces the outside world to nothingness too easily. To him, nature’s snowy blanket is a single, undifferentiated noncolor. Inside, he feels, one experiences diversity, while the whiteness of the outside world engenders a kind of experiential simplification. Bachelard believes that this universal whiteness provokes us into what he terms “cosmic negation.”⁶ His poetic view creates a dialectic between inside and outside. Outside is, so to speak, out of place, while inside is replete with stimuli, memories and activity. His view is one which many western and some Japanese intellectuals share.

Most Japanese tend to take snow seriously, for their lives oftentimes depend on understanding the subtle yet treacherous dynamics of falling snow and its deceptive permutations once it lays on the earth. Still, when discussing snow’s intricate nature, they find it difficult to resist using non-quantifiable adjectives such as “mysterious”, “elusive”, “sensual”, “ethereal” and the simple, unaffected word “beautiful”. Since ancient times, aesthetic appreciation of snow is thought to be the key to true aesthetic awareness. In many parts of Japan, most particularly the island of Hokkaido and what Japanese call “snow country” on the main island of Honshu, snow permeates and unifies the human experience. Thus Japanese are intimate with snow; it touches them physically, spiritually and passionately.

Despite snow’s inherent danger, this unique form of solid precipitation exhibits qualities of beauty, transience and seeming infinity that continue to intrigue scientists and artists of all kinds. Physicists and climatologists study it, poets eulogize it, writers describe it, artists paint it, potters emulate it in their glaze, movie and video makers film it, photographers

photograph it, ski resort owners imitate it if not enough is available for skiers and bobsledders, and advertisers even employ its romantic image to sell products. Snow continues to seduce, sometimes causing chaos while chaotic itself.

Indeed, "snow falls inside out." This straightforward statement of chaotic fact is the title of a poem by Japanese American poet Soichi *Furuta*⁷, who spent a good portion of his life in Hokkaido. Much of his poetry is enveloped by snow. It seems as if Furuta carries snow with him in the innermost recesses of his being. To quote part of his inside out poem. . .

when
the world
becomes
snow-dim,
my world
begins
a
little
feast
for
the incessant
snowfall
plays
a music
upon
the
thin
shell
dome
that
encircles me
to
set up
a
timeless
formless
magnificent
circus
of
air.⁸

Soichi Furuta now lives in New York, where the musical touch of snow is infrequent and,

for the most part, unwelcome. However, many contemporary poets in Hokkaido actively seek snow's music. *Harako Osamu*⁹ notes that intense snowstorms feel like symphonies radiating volume, rhythm and melody. To Harako, falling snow is the symphonic music of northern life — the harmony of living in a place where winter is the primary season. Severe, cruel yet beautiful, snow settles on the ground with gentle defiance eventually becoming crisp, sharp and frozen.

Each fall Harako “hopes to meet the snow”¹⁰, to become one with it even under the most frozen circumstances. The aesthetic qualities of snow touch him literally and poetically. Snowflakes landing on his body feel like tiny firecrackers bursting on his skin, he says. The more he tries to grasp the flakes, the more they elude him. He is unable to catch snow or to control it; indeed, it conquers him and his surroundings. In one of his poems he asks:

Who switched my nose
with crystal cutting pliers?

The delicate yet keen impact of surprisingly cold snowflakes and their startling musical sound astonishes him and us. Oftentimes his snow images are sharply felt, revealing what he calls a “painful sensibility”:

White birch tree
pierces the sky
with a platinum sting.

Exquisitely fatal, snow has the remarkable power to pull us into itself. The snowy, bitter-cold air and earth frequently charm us into romanticizing our inner and outer environment. Snow drifts into our consciousness, sometimes quickly, other times slowly, always full of enticing innuendo. We are forced into reconsidering issues such as whiteness and paleness, scale and pattern, sound and texture, fragility and transience, sensuousness and sensuality, and finally negation and death. Falling snow feels sexy. Harako's vivid description of snowy firecrackers exploding on his (and our) warm skin is surely an erotic sensation. In addition, it tastes delectable causing us to savor a kind of sensuous fulfillment. Nevertheless, it has the power to gradually seduce us toward inevitable extinction while it simultaneously extinguishes itself little by little by melting into the earth.

But, first a word about clouds which, after all, is where the story begins. The fact that clouds are simply accumulations of very fine droplets of water or (depending on the temperature) particles of ice that are light enough to remain airborne, doesn't really describe them, nor does categorizing and labeling the different types. We understand only the abstract notion without really comprehending clouds as remarkable floating poetry.

Clouds seem to be designed by some clever architect who grasped the significance of merging function and aesthetics with time and space. Clouds appear on other planets, not just

ours. Astronomers tell us that the clouds covering the planet Saturn consist of fine particles of frozen ammonia and that they look somewhat like snow on New York City streets — very dirty.¹¹ During a storm, clean, white ammonia flakes temporarily cover the old, dirty particles, until it too becomes dirty.

Snow occupies space, place and, in an almost mystical way, time. Earth and air seem interchangeable. In fact, it seems that our earthly atmosphere is full of surprises. Snow is not what we may think it is or should be. Exploring the physics of snow, that is, the interaction between matter and energy within a newly conceived snowflake, suggests intriguing aesthetic dimensions. One fascinating aspect is the speed of change, or transience, which occurs from the moment each snowflake begins its six mile voyage from the upper atmosphere. This “spatial chaos” is the subject of intense scientific study that is leading us toward a better understanding of stable and unstable conditions in our expanding environment.¹²

What emerges as a small speck of dust trapped in a droplet of water vapor floats, seemingly randomly, to earth, gathering water molecules along the way. Each flake freezes from the *inside out* (as Soichi Furuta’s poem reminds us) not from the outside in (as ice, for example) and thus the process of heat diffusion is unstable. While meandering along its way, each flake is buffeted by wind, humidity and varying temperatures, in a “. . . timeless/formless/magnificent/circus/of/air,” to quote Furuta again. The unique design of every snowflake then, is quite literally the physical result of all the experience each one had on the way down to earth.

One wonders about the haphazard quality of these countless chance encounters. Once the speck of dust or bacteria (or perhaps nothing at all) catches a bit of moisture and forms a crystal, the emerging flake may, or may not, be far behind. The upward draft of cold moist wind provides strong encouragement and a kind of dance of emerging life takes place as dendrites begin to form. These delicately decorative arms create unique patterns that evolve, change, and grow again. Their choreography seems to be an interplay of randomness and determinism resulting in a remarkably beautiful stage performance. Each flake has its own instructions and is subject to its own fate, yet together they render a dramatic dance like on other.

Billions die as soon as they touch a warm surface such as our skin. Many more billions are crushed by cars, feet and just about everything else that touches them. Those which survive the hour long trip are destined to undergo still more remarkable changes. Large flakes may expand still further as the smaller ones donate their lives to them. In fact, once they release their vapor to a larger neighboring flake, the surviving neighbor becomes denser and stronger without melting. *It is a suicide of survival; instant death for the sake of temporary immortality.*

Aging snow surrounds us almost immediately. New snow turns to old snow. Clean snow turns to dirty snow. Dry snow becomes wet snow or the other way around. Snow begins to melt, and perhaps it is then covered over by fresh snow. Layers form and choreographic changes take place within these layers. Outside forces such as temperature determine how and

when these dances will be performed beneath the surface and how and when the surface will be affected — and how dramatic and forceful each dance will be, the deathly dance being, of course, the avalanche.

Snowflakes fall with entrancing beauty and grace touching, then settling, on us and everything surrounding us. Our outer place seems to change within our inner one. Outside (in) and inside (out) intermingle. We observe the infinite while reflecting on the finite which is expanding yet diminishing, living yet dying. In an elegant, three page, short story, *Kawabata* Yasunari describes the ethereal and aesthetic experience of a middle aged gentleman who, at the beginning of each new year sequesters himself in the same hotel room to relive in his mind's eye, the sensory and ultimately sensuous qualities of a snowy environment. As he lies in bed, he imagines powdery snowflakes beginning to form in the distance, slowly falling within the darkness of his closed eyes. Becoming larger, they change into peony snowpetals slowly fluttering to earth. The snowpetals seem to embrace him. When he opens his eyes the walls of his hotel room “. . . had become a snowscape. What he'd seen behind his eyelids was merely the snow falling; what he saw on the wall was the landscape in which the snow had fallen.”¹³

The snowy landscape changes before his eyes. He recognizes his father covered with snow standing (with some difficulty) on an enormous amethyst boulder. The landscape continues to change. The peony snow petals turn into snowbirds on which ride the women who had once loved him. Deliberately creating his private snowy landscape compels him to reflect on the subtle complexities of beauty, transience, isolation and death. The sensual and sensuous merge, and he and his snowy environment coalesce once again.

A critical analysis of Kawabata's story seems somehow superfluous. The sandness and the ecstasy of experiencing the aesthetics of sensuality and sensuousness while contemplating our inevitable journey toward death eventually touches most of us. Eighty-one year old Paul Boswell surely experienced these emotions as he steadfastly continued his personal exploration into what constitutes beauty and the world of ideas. He loved existing on our planet and, like Kawabata and others, understood the distinction between chance and choice, survival and extinction. “This splendid speck,” to use Boswell's words, whether it be a snowflake or our small planet, has the power to awaken our spirit, not merely our scholarly appreciation.

Fortunately for Kawabata's character, his elegant breath-taking drama took place within the comfort and safety of his hotel room. Had he decided to submerge himself in an actual blizzard, the story might have a different ending. Instead of meeting all his past lovers, he might have met the snow woman (or snow maiden, snow ghost, or snow demon, depending on who is telling the tale). The end result of this encounter is almost always the same: a languorous death via gentle yet determined seduction or a defenseless death resulting from kindness towards another. Had he (or we, for that matter) agreed to hold the snow woman's baby, it would have become increasingly heavy, ultimately burying him (and us). Endless variations of this and other snow ghost tales exist, the most well know ones suggesting

eventual death by surrendering oneself to the beautiful, irresistible snow woman. The tale remains meaningful even to sophisticated, western influenced Japanese as a metaphor for snow's exquisite beauty and hidden danger. Indeed, Kurosawa Akira's film *Dreams*, released in 1990, devotes one segment to snow and the mysterious snow woman. Snow apparitions are invariably female. Some are temporary spirits, others remain awhile, marry, bear children, and eventually disappear due to a broken promise or some other unintentioned indiscretion. Some may appear more compassionate than others, but yielding to the allure of gradual destruction is the norm, not the exception.

It seems discomfoting to dwell on the aesthetics of death, while simultaneously celebrating life. Yet most cultures do just that and most religious beliefs emphasize the tenuousness of our mortality. Metaphors and symbols abound. In Japan, the two enduring symbols of beauty and death are cherry blossoms and snow and, despite how antiquated and quaint these cliches may seem to current and future generations, they continue to express the most significant aspects of human life.

In the West, the symbol of death is graphic and literal: the human body without flesh — a skeleton — and the color black, another graphic and literal manifestation of what happens to our blood after we die. These are unpleasant, even frightening images. Time becomes a negative force, not a positive one, and we spend time trying to freeze time. Our paintings of snow, for example, rarely depict snow falling; snow is already on the ground, frozen in time. Yet the reality is that snow continues to change and shift — even snow buried for millennia in the polar regions and in other remote locations on our planet.

The never-ending struggle to survive while appreciating the beauty of what might easily kill us, frequently results in snow fatigue. In his short story *Crab Under Snow*, Yoshikichi Furui, a contemporary Japanese writer, suggests that too much snow induces a kind of aesthetic and physical hypnosis that is quite different from mere lethargy. Each day he and others — indeed, just about everyone in snow country — shovel snow off the roofs of their dwellings to keep them from collapsing and to prevent total envelopment during the next storm. The threat of snow immolation is terrifying yet strangely satisfying. Day in, day out, year in, year out, the ritual of shoveling roofs, tunnels, and air pockets continues. Yoshikichi notes that there is “. . . something pleasant in the feeling that the house was gradually being buried under the snow.”¹⁴ The snowflakes “. . . looked almost black falling from the ashen sky in dark, heavy whirls.”¹⁵ However, appreciating their somber beauty forces him to continue shoveling. After a few scoops, he glimpses “. . . a tightly compacted layer with a delicate texture that sent a sensation like that of stroking silk down the handle of the shovel.”¹⁶ He continues to scoop up the snow and soon discloses to the reader that, surrounded by snow's heaviness, his entire being responds to an “. . . endless repetition of scooping up snow and throwing it down.”¹⁷ Before long, the snow sits higher than the roof and shoveling becomes excruciatingly difficult. Still, the snow and the shoveling continue.

Yoshikichi's reference to the silk-like quality of snow contains penetrating layers of aesthetic and corporeal significance. Irresistibly smooth, soft and delicate, silk appears to

conceal its strength, durability, and intensity. Our eyes, our ears, our fingers, indeed our entire body surface longs to experience silk's subtleties. The natural, sometimes brilliant white of the filaments produced by silkworms represents an elegant metaphor for snow's seeming and real contradictions: fragility and endurance, delicacy and strength, seduction and danger and perhaps most intriguing, purity and mourning. All are bound together by life's continuum rather than isolated by disengagement. Inevitably, then, aesthetic appreciation has its risks as well as its benefits, its dangers as well as its satisfactions.

Bokushi Suzuki (1770-1842)¹⁸ spent his life in Niigata Prefecture recording every nuance of his snowy world. He reminds us that ancient Japanese were keen and loving observers of their environment, believing that snow materialized from vapors caused by the perpetual breathing of heaven and earth, a poetic, albeit fairly accurate, description of snow's initiation into the world. Wind, or what many call heaven's breath does, indeed, offer each snowflake a helping hand. Bokushi illustrates with penetrating realism how snow dominates farm life in the northwestern part of the main island. Despite many sophisticated technological amenities, snow continues to dominate the lives of those farming there today.

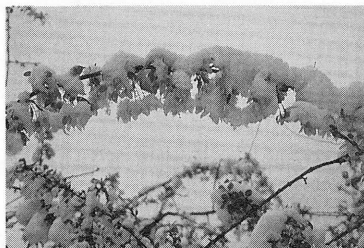
A lifetime of cold snowy winters continue to leave their mark on every hardworking farmer. Poet and professor *Noguchi* Yonejiro (1875-1947), father of Japanese American Isamu *Noguchi* (1904-1989), the renowned sculptor, was born in Aichi Prefecture where winter weather is much less brutal. In one of his poems, Noguchi invites us to look at his pale, clumsy hands which, he says, look just like the joints of winter bamboo. The struggle of his ancestors for survival appears on and within his aging hands. His poem expresses his deep appreciation for the humble heritage of those who spend their lives "... looking into the face of the earth."¹⁹

In contrast, artists and poets living and working around Kyoto tend to romanticize the transitory qualities of snow, since it snows only occasionally. Thus, "root snow," the first fall snow in the north which normally stays on the ground until the following spring, rarely appears in poems, whereas "foam snow", fleeting flakes similar to whitecaps briefly atop ocean waves, appear quite frequently, as do romantic metaphors such as falling petals, falling feathers and falling flowers.

Early spring snow seems to be the epitome of aesthetic fulfillment. The first snow of the new year inevitably catches those blossoms and flowers brave enough to emerge from the winter earth. As spring slowly awakens, the life and breath of each and every determined flake quickly dissolves. Their rapid demise intensifies their aesthetic impact. Life and death become one, happening simultaneously. The life of the flower or the life of the snow — which will survive longer? It doesn't matter. The ethereal beauty of snow on blossoms or of extremely wet snow clustered together like flower petals is heightened by the realization that fleeting moments such as these hold special meaning and value in our lives.

Snow is unstable from birth until death, raising questions in the Western mind about whether we can even refer to it as aesthetic. It is the essence of chaos, truly the condensation of heaven's breath, affecting our sensibilities in unique ways. Of course, I have not been

discussing a flake of snow but, rather, flakes over time. A snowflake is more than merely a flake. I suggest that it is an aesthetic monument to understatement. The individual snowflake and its delicate neighbors affect all our sensibilities creating a “silver mantled world” (*ginsekai*) as poetic Japanese like to call their snowy environment. Every flake has the potential to become a delicate veil, a protective blanket, and a suffocating mountain of snow.



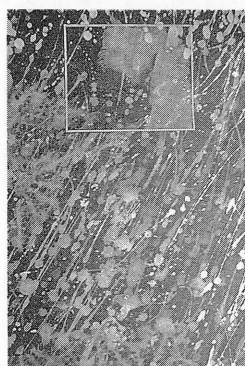
(1) CHERRY BLOSSOMS UNDER SNOW



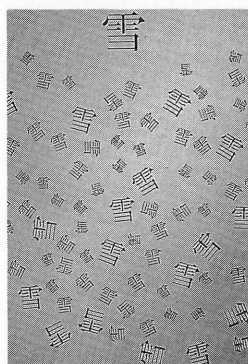
(2) CROCUSES UNDER SNOW



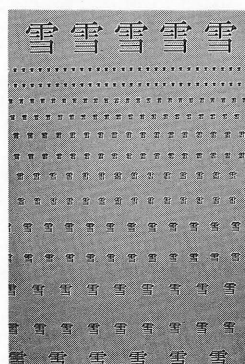
(3) SNOW ON EVERGREEN



(4) SNOW PAINTING SNOW PETALS



(5) SNOW POEM #1



(6) SNOW POEM #2

Notes

All Japanese names are rendered family name first, except for Soichi Furuta and Isamu Noguchi, who are Japanese Americans.

- 1 Quoted by *Endoh* Tatsuo (and many others) during our discussion in December, 1986. Endoh is a professor in the Solid Precipitation Physics Section, Institute of Low Temperature Science, Hokkaido University. Special thanks to Professor Endoh for sharing his thoughts with me concerning snow research conducted at the Institute.
- 2 Thomas Boswell, "The Things That Matter", **The Washington Post**, September 25, 1994, p G1.
- 3 Ibid, p G6.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Gaston Bachelard, **The Poetics of Space**, translated by Maria Jolos, Boston, Beacon Press, 1958, p 41.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Soichi *Furuta* was born in Los Angeles, studied in Japan and in California, and now lives in New York. His book of poetry **Montefeltro: The Hawk Nose** was nominated in 1990 for a Pulitzer Prize.
- 8 Used with permission from the author.
- 9 *Harako* Osamu is the director of the Sapporo Museum of Sculpture and a well known poet.
- 10 From lengthy discussions in December, 1986. At that time he recited a few of his poems and discussed his ideas on snow (in English). Special thanks to *Ueda* Hisaki for introducing us.
- 11 Malcolm W. Browne, "Mysterious White Spot is Spreading Over Saturn," **The New York Times**, September 27, 1994, p C11.
- 12 A term used by Professor Endoh and other snow experts to describe snow's enigmatic descent.
- 13 *Kawabata* Yasunari, "Snow", from **Palm-of-the-Hand Stories**, translated by Lane Dunlop and J. Martin Holman, San Francisco, North Point Press, p 225.
- 14 *Yoshikichi* Furui, "Crab Under Snow", **Japan Echo**, Volume XII, 1985, p 50.
- 15 Ibid, p 49.
- 16 Ibid, p 51.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 *Bokushi* Suzuki, **Snow Country Tales (Hokuetsu Seppu)**, Tokyo, John Weatherhill, Inc., 1986, p 3.
- 19 *Noguchi* Yonejiro, "My Hands", **The Japanese Image**, translated by Kaneko Hisakuzo, edited by Maurice Schneps and Alvin D. Coox, Tokyo, Orient/West Publishers, 1965, p 353-354.