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Snow Country Tales

Life in the Other Japan

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New York · WEATHERHILL · Tokyo
1986

How the Earth's Vapors Become Snow

The four kinds of precipitation that fall from heaven are rain, snow, sleet, and hail. Dew and frost do not fall, but form on earth. Dew is a tiny drop of the earth's vapors, and frost is a frozen crystal of the same; one or the other forms, depending upon the temperature. Rain, snow, sleet, or hail are formed when the vapors of the earth rise into the heavens. When any of these are warmed, they become water, and since the earth is made entirely of water, all of these forms of precipitation eventually return to the earth from which they originally derived.

Now the earth is very deep, and there is warm air in its depths that heats it, causing it to give off vapors which rise to heaven just as a person's breath does. This process never ceases for a moment, day or night. Heaven also gives off vapors, sending them clown to earth. This is the breathing of heaven and earth, which is just like the inhaling and exhaling of a human being. The breathing of heaven and earth produces and nurtures all existence. Occasionally heaven and earth become ill, their breathing becomes irregular, and we are subjected to unseasonal hot and cold, typhoons and downpours, and all sorts of other natural calamities.

Heaven is divided into nine levels, and these are called the Nine Heavens. The one closest to the earth is called the Moon Heaven.

It begins roughly 1, 180,000 miles from the earth's surface. There are three zones between the earth and the lower limit of the Moon Heaven. Closest to the Moon Heaven is a hot zone, with a cold zone below it and a warm zone nearest the earth. The vapors of the earth extend only as far as the cold zone; they never reach the hot zone, Neither the warm zone nor the cold zone extends very far above the earth's surface. Mount Fuji, for example, reaches beyond the warm zone and approaches the cold zone, which is why the peak is never tempered by warmer air and vegetation doesn't grow there-even in summer it's cold. Thunderstorms and violent rains are quirks of the warm zone and only occur there.

Clouds are produced by the warm vapors given off by the earth, which is why they are shaped like steam-they are formed just as steam is formed when we boil a kettle. Because they are products of warm air, clouds rise. When they reach the cold zone they lose their warmth and become rain, just as steam, when cooled, condenses into droplets. (Clouds which do not reach the cold zone disperse without turning into rain.) If it is very cold when clouds reach the cold zone and they are just about to turn into rain, they may freeze instead and fall to earth as ice particles. The size of these ice particles depends upon the degree of cold. This is the origin of sleet and hail. (Large hail sometimes falls in summer, when it is warm, but I will not discuss that here.)

When the earth is exceedingly cold, its vapors may rise to heaven without taking any form, like the weak steam rising from barely warm water. This results in an overcast sky. As these formless vapors rise and collect in great amounts, the sky becomes gray, and snow prepares to fall. These "formless clouds" first rise to the cold zone and condense into rain. But since the cold zone is not quite cold enough to completely freeze the rain, the vapor falls in the form of flowery powder. This is snow. Whether the vapor becomes ice or snow depends upon the degree of cold, just as the thickness of ice on earth does.

The principle of the three zones is apparent in human physiology as well : our skin is warm, our muscles cold, and our internal organs hot. The production and nurture of all things in the atmosphere is

dependent upon the vapors of heaven and earth. None of this is my personal discovery; it is an ancient explanation that I have seen in several works,

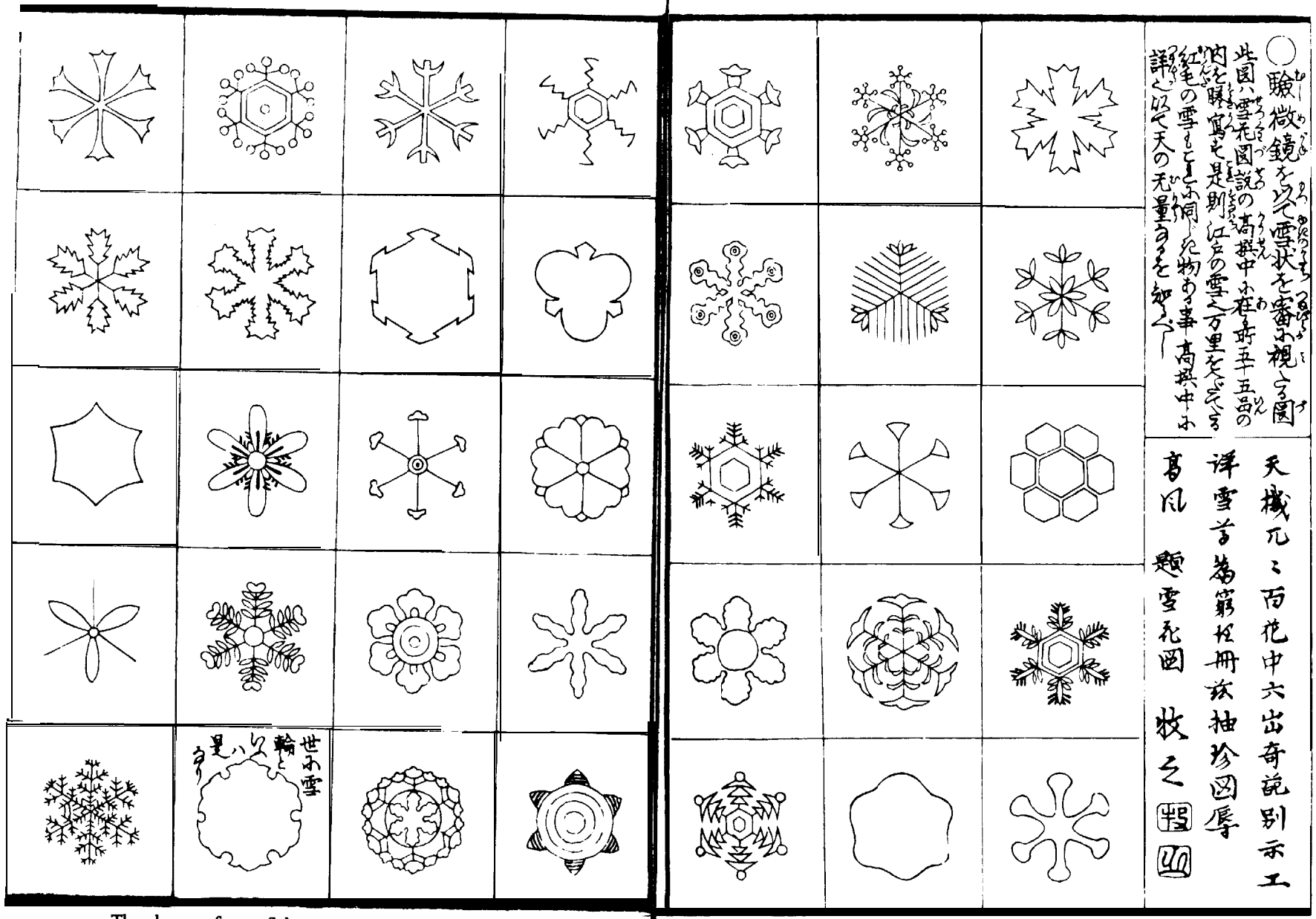
Shapes of *Snowflakes*

There is a limit to the power of our eyesight, beyond which we cannot see. Thus, when we observe snow with the naked eye, it looks like goose down; actually, however, hundreds of snowflakes make up each single downy "feather." When we rxaminc snow under a magnifying glass, the shapes of these creations of the heavens are wonderful and marvelous, as my illustration shows.

The reason each snowflake is different is that the conditions of the the cold zone, in which the snowflakes are formed, are not uniform, and snowflakes form in different shapes in response to these conditions. But because snowflakes are such tiny things that they cannot be seen by the naked eye, today's snow cannot be told from yesterday's, all misty white.

My illustration is based on Lord Kyoroku's work *Illustrations of Snowflakes* of 1832. I have copied it from the fifty-five drawings in that work. Snowflakes are hexagonal: Lord Kyoroku explains that "all square bodies consist of eight parts and all round bodies of six ; there can be no disputing this principle," and this is the reason snow has long been known as "six-petaled flowers." Now, it is my humble opinion that roundness is the'proper form of heavenly things, while squareness is the true nature of things of this earth, and thus all the myriad living things existing in the flux of the vital forces of heaven and earth are a combination of roundness and squareness. The human body, for example, is square and not square, round and not round. This is because we live between the round heavens and the square earth. Just as a child resembles its parents, our form is modeled after the forms of heaven and earth.

Snowflakes are six-sided because, being made up of water, they are yin, and even numbers are yin while odd numbers are yang. The body



The shapes of snowflakes seen with a magnifying glass.

of the human male is yang, for it has nine protruberances: the head, two ears, the nose, two arms, two legs, and thr penis. The human female has ten-she lacks a penis but has two breasts, Nine is an odd number and thus yang; ten is even and yin. People are a combination of yin and yang, however, so men have two nipples, in the fashion of the female, yin principle (though they don't produce milk), and women have the clitoris, after the fashion of the male, yang principle (though it doesn't produce sperm). All things that move within the influences of the vital forces of heaven and earth follow this principle, without exception.

Snow is not a living thing, but since it does transform and change, it, too, possesses the vital force of activity; thus within many of the hexagonal-shaped yin flakes are rounded portions, after the yang principle. Water is the most yin substance. Yet when a single drop falls, it always creates a round splash. In the activity of falling it takes on the active, yang nature and cannot help but adopt a round shape.

How wonderful indeed is the rule and rank of each and every phenomenon in the atmosphere between heaven and earth; I could never describe them all.

The Amount of Snowfall

Zuo'r Commentary on *The Spring and Autumn Annals* refers to a snowfall of one foot in the eighth year of the reign of Duke Yin as a great snowfall because the land of Wu in which it fell was warm in climate. And the remark of the Tang poet Han Yu that snow is the omen of a prosperous year also applies only to a warm land, though *The Five Miscellanies* records that cold regions of the Tang empire saw snow as early as November. When snow falls in these warmer lands, it never amounts to over a foot. The mountains, rivers, towns, and villages are all transformed into a silvery world; entranced by the dancing snowflakes, people liken them to blossoms and jewels. They delight in the lovely landscape, arrange for feasting and music, and amuse themselves by painting pictures and composing poetry on the

theme of snow, There are records of many such snow parties in both Japan and China, but these arc only pleasures in lands where snow is scarce, What enjoyment is there of snow for us in Echigo, where foot after foot falls year after year? We exhaust ourselves and our purses, undergo a thousand pains and discomforts, all because of the snow. The great extent of our sufferings will be revealed to you as this work unfolds.

Signs of Snow

The signs of snowfall hereabouts are quite unlike those in warmer regions. As a rule, the first frost comes in October. After that it grows colder and colder, and by the end of the month an icy wind chills our bones and tears the withered leaves from the trees. The sky remains a leaden color, and day after day passes without ever seeing the sun's light. These are the signs of snow on the way.

After several days of continuing gloomy weather, spots of white begin to show themselves on the peaks of mountains near and far. This is called "visiting the peaks' " (*take mawari*) in the local dialect. In places near the coast, the sea roars, and inland the mountains rumble with a sound like distant thunder. This is called "rumbling bowels" (*do nari*). When we see and hear these signs, we know that snow is not far away. The time varies depending upon the warmth of the year, but visiting the peaks and rumbling bowels occur each year at around the time of the autumnal equinox.

Preparations for the Snowfall

When, observing the signs mentioned above, we know that snow is about to fall, all the weak spots of the house are reinforced to prevent damage. The roof, roof beams, pillars, and eaves (the caves in front of the house are called in our local dialect *roko,* the same word used

households, where everyone pitches in, men and women alike.

And this is how it is, not only in my village, but wherever huge amounts of snow fall. The snow consumes our energy, it eats up our wealth. At the end of a long day one looks back at the places that have been dug out; that night a great snow falls again, and at dawn everything is buried anew. The master of the house and his servants awake and look out at the scene of vestrrday's labors; all thcv tan do then is hang their heads and let out a deep sigh.

Foam Snow

The spring snow of warmer lands disappears quickly, so people call it foam snow, likening it to the ephemeral froth on the waves. The fleeting existence of foam snow is often a theme of Japanese and Chinese poetry, but again, the poets speak of the snow of warm climes. The winter snow of cold regions can also be called foam snow, but for the following reason : no matter how much falls it does not freeze, remaining as soft as foam-or more precisely, mud. The only way to walk through this winter snow is to wear snowshoes. In fact, the expression in our dialect for walking through the snow is "paddling through the snow" (*yuki o kogu*)—because it very much resembles paddling across water or slogging through the muck of a flooded rice paddy. By spring the snow freezes and the paths are all as if paved with stone. Travel becomes much easier than in winter-; we drive nails into the soles of the wooden clogs we wear to keep ourselves from slipping and sliding. At any r-ate, our foam snow, which falls in winter, is just the opposite of the foam snow of warmer lands.

Roads in the Snow

The winter snow is soft, and it is usually easy to follow the well-

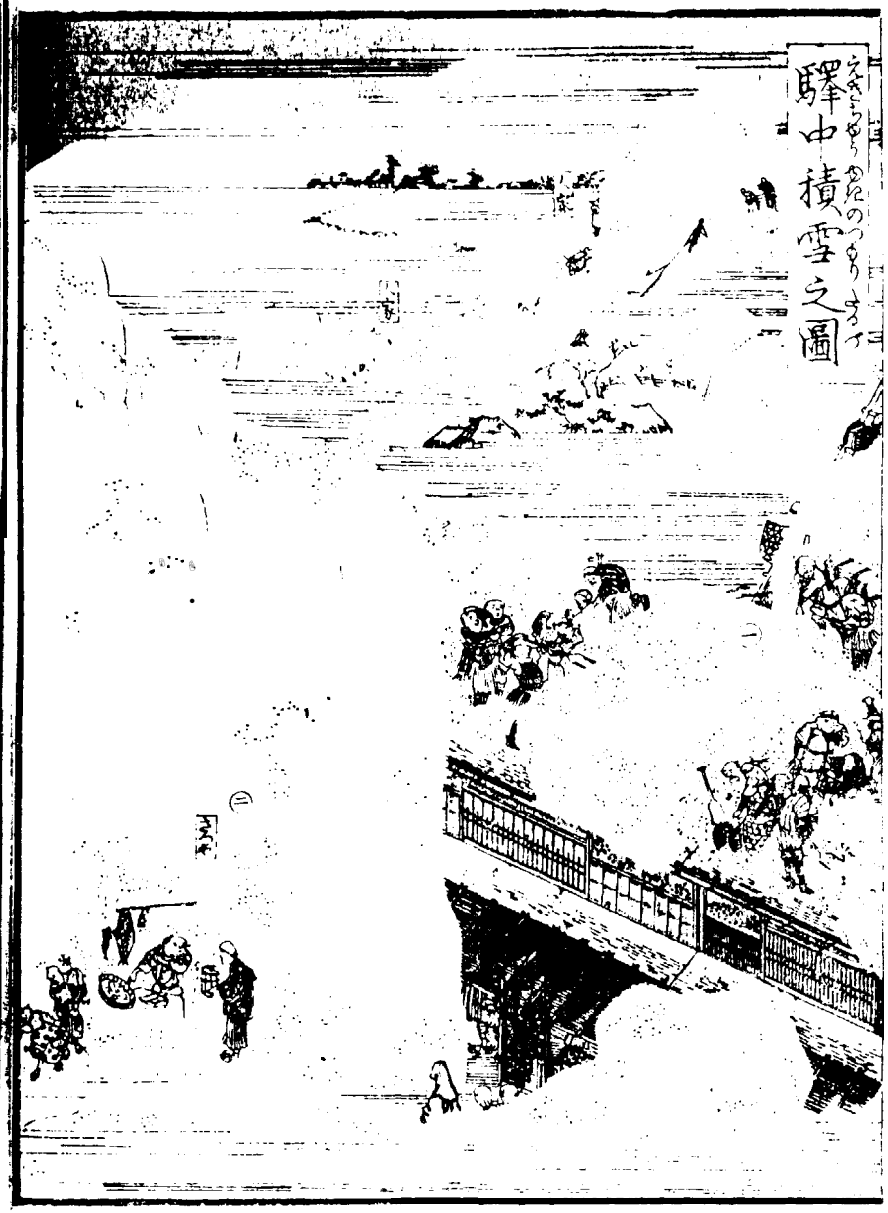
trodden paths that others have made. But when a great snow falls overnight, all paths are buried. A traveler who wakes after a night's lodging may find his road erased; it is especially hard to get one's bearings in open terrain, as cvcrvthing is covered in white. On these occasions some travelers employ a number of villagers to go out and tramp down the roads with snowshoes so that they may follow in the well-trodden wake, but this amounts to considerable expense, and travelers who cannot afford to hire such help must often spend many empty hours waiting for the roads to be opened. Even strong-legged couriers can only walk five or ten miles a day through the snow because they are hindered by their snowshoes and the snow that comes up to their knees. This is one of the great inconveniences of the winter snows.

But when the snow freezes hard as iron in thr spring, sleds (written with the Chinese characters meaning snow car, or sometimes, snow boat) can be used to get about and even to carry heavy loads. Villagers pile the sleds high with goods and ride on top of them, sailing over the snow as if on ships-they even speak of the sled paths as the "courses" of their "snow boats." I will describe the construction of sleds in another place, but suffice it to say that there are many kinds, large and small. The large type are called *shura*. Since the snow won't support the hooves of oxen or horses, sleds do a great service and are much better for carrying goods through the spring snows than beasts of burden could ever be. All in all, sleds are one of the greatest conveniences for life in the snow, though even they are of no use until the snow freezes hard in the spring.

Buried Under the Snow

Snow usually begins to fall toward the end of October, and we greet the spring still buried up to our necks, It is especially deep in February and March; gradually the snow begins to melt in April and May, and by June it has disappeared and the summer roads are visible. The flowers of spring all bloom at once, during May and June. All in

Life buried under the snow.



all, we spend almost eight months of every year under the snow. Only four months are completely without it, and for half of each year we are wholly buried beneath it.

Thus the construction of our houses and, indeed, all things is directed by the need to keep out the snow. It is impossible to record with brush and paper the resources and labor devoted to this task. Farmers must grow their crops in the short time between the beginning of summer and the end of autumn. They are often cutting rice stalks in the snow. The trials and pains of their urgent efforts must be at least one hundred times those of farmers in warmer regions. But those who live in the snow country were born and raised in the snow and, like the beetle that feeds on bitteroot and doesn't know its sharp taste, they think nothing of snow because they have never sampled the easy life of warmer places. Yes, home is where the heart is. All women feel this way, and even most of the men who spend several years' service in prosperous Edo return to their home in Echigo when they've completed their term. "The Mongol horse neighs when the north wind blows, and the bird from the warm land of Yue builds its nest in the tree's southern branch," says the old Chinese saying about homesickness. Longing for one's place of birth is felt the world over.

During the snowy season we hang snow blinds from the eaves that surround our homes and from the window frames. Like the shop blinds of Edo, they are woven from miscanthus reeds. But unlike shop blinds, their purpose is to protect us from blizzard winds. When the snow isn't falling, they are rolled up to let the light in. But when snow falls for any length of time it soon reaches as high as the roofs of the houses, and there is no light to be had whatever we may do; it's pitch black even at noon, and oil lamps must be burned all day. One loses track of day and night during these unceasing snows. When it finally stops and enough can be dug away so that a tiny window can at last be opened-then oh! the brightness that greets our eyes makes us feel as if we were suddenly born into a shining Buddha world !

There are many other hardships in this life trapped under the snow, too many to relate here. Most birds and animals leave the

region for places where the snow is not so deep, for otherwise they would be without food. The only creatures that remain to pass their days under the snow are men and bears, dogs and cats.

Creeping Through the Snow Womb

In the post towns that are the stopping points along the government routes, the eaves of the houses large and small extend far out from the roofs. They serve as protected passageways when the snow is deep, and since the streets of the town are no longer necessary, the snow cleared from the roofs of houses is allowed to accumulate there, saving the work of hauling it far away. It gradually piles up until it becomes a great wall of snow dividing the houses on opposite sides of the street. We build tunnels through the wall and pass from eaves to eaves in comfort, The tunnels are called "womb tunnels" in our dialect. They are also called *mabu*, a word borrowed from gold miners' parlance meaning side tunnel. (*Mabu* originally meant a woman's secret love affair.)

In settlements other than post towns, where the houses are not connected by eaves, the inhabitants USC the rising and falling snow wall in the streets as their passageway, treading down a single path on its crest to make it easier to walk. When spring comes and the snow hardens, we hew rude steps shaped like boxes piled one on top of the other into the snow wall so we can cross over it. We're quite used to scrambling up and down these snow stairways without ever making a false step, but travelers from afar find them quite frightening, and sometimes lose their balance and take a tumble--only to find themselves buried in a snowdrift. When this happens everyone laughs-except the victim, who naturally loses his temper. But of course these difficult passageways are not built simply to give visitors from more fortunate climates a hard time. Removing the snow entirely would require so much effort and expense that these terraces are built as a less laborious way of keeping the roads open.

floods in the Snow

After the first snowfall, villages near rivers and streams often suffer from floods, which are called *mizu agari* (rising water) hereahouts. Once at about the beginning of November, when eight or nine feet of snow were on the ground, I was staying with a relative, an oil vendor, in the neighboring village of Seki. Suddenly one night at midnight we were awakened by the shouts and calls of people nearby. "What could it be?" I wondered, my heart pounding. Leaping out of bed I saw the master of the house running about carrying things in both hands.

"Quick! The water's rising! Escape to the snow mound behind the house!" he shouted over his shoulder as he ran with his bundles up the stairs to the second story.

When I dashed to the kitchen to see what was going on, every member of the household was racing about grabbing whatever they could carry, lest the household goods be swept away by the approaching flood waters, which were crawling over the low spots on the ground like a tide, creeping higher and higher. They had already soaked the tatami mats, and the garden in front of the house was flooded. Though it was still early winter, a great deal of snow had already accumulated, and the ground was covered with a heavy blanket. Outside, the tight of the white snow shone through the dark night with an eerie glow that illuminated the rushing waters, a scene altogether too frightening for words.

The others helped me to escape to an elevated place. From there, looking down on the distant village, we could see a long procession of men carrying lanterns and pine torches, each man with a wooden shovel in his hand. Wading through the sea of water and snow, they approached, shouting. These were the people whom the flood had not yet reached, hurrying our way to cut an opening for the dammed water in order to release it and allow it to subside.

As the night was rather dark, I could not make out their figures, but I could hear the pathetic voices of women and children crying and calling, now nearer, now farther. In the light of the torch he held aloft I could see a man floundering about with a horse, both of them up to their necks in water. Looking closer I realized that the man was trying to lead his horse through the wild current of the flood waters,

In another place, much closer at hand, 1 observed a woman, kimono untied, clutching a child to her back with one hand and holding a lantern in the other as she tried to climb to higher ground. When lives are at risk, modesty is a luxury. How could I ever describe the many scenes I witnessed that night, some humorous, but most of them terrible and tragic? Only with the arrival of the morning did the flood waters recede and people rest easy again.

In my village, these floods usually take place in either early winter or midspring. In Seki, there are little streams in front of the houses on either side of the main street. They flow into the Uono River. Even during the hottest days of summer these streams run cool and clear. All the families along the street use these streams as their source of water instead of the usual wells. Since clean water can be scooped up by the bucketful anytime from just beyond their doorsteps, these streams are more convenient than a well could ever be. After the first new snow, however, the streams are blocked and buried by snow. To insure their winter supply of water, then, each family digs a hole through the snow cover just big enough to dip a bucket and fetch water. Since the hole is frequently buried again in a night's snowfall, it has to be reopened regularly. This happens even to the small freshets in front of people's houses in town. It is only too easy to imagine what occurs when the major springs of the region are blocked at their sources-not only do the villagers lose their water supply, but they are exposed to the dangers of flooding. Therefore the local people unite their efforts to keep the sources of these streams open.

But with everyone busily engaged in earning a living, the springs sometimes go untended. And if it should happen that during a night's snowfall a certain spring becomes blocked with new-fallen snow, the water is diverted from its usual pathway and rushes into whatever low spots there may be before anyone has a chance to prevent it. Unfortunately, since the snow in the village is well trodden by people coming and going, it is often the lowest place around, so the overflowing springs send water rushing into villagers' homes with the catastrophic results described above. If the blocked waterway is not speedily reopened, often requiring the labor of hundreds, households will be swept away and people drowned.

The flood in the snow at Seki.

The floods in March usually take place around the vernal equinox. At that time, of course, the snow has not yet melted and the slopes and fields as far as the eye can see are still blanketed in white. All the smaller waterways remain hidden beneath the snow, flowing out of sight. Even the largest rivers become frozen snow fields in the depths of winter. This is how it happens: as it begins to get cold, the water along the river banks gradually freezes into ice sheets, on which snow collects after each fall. The snow freezes hard as rock, and as it gathers throughout the long winter, layer on layer, the opposite banks grow closer and closer to each other until they meet and form a solid frozen field of snow arching over the river. With the approach of spring and the lessening of the cold, snow stops falling-usually in about March. Because water responds to temperature changes more quickly than does land, the frozen snow field over the river begins to melt from underneath, where it is in contact with water. First the snow just above the river's rushing surface begins to soften. It falls into the river, the channel grows narrower, and the water flows ever more fiercely. Burrowing through the snow with increasing strength and speed, the river finally comes bursting through its snow crust with all the power of a deluge breaking through a dam.

An old saying, "Like water poured in sleeping ears," means that something terribly unpleasant has happened. The floods of the snow country are surely an extreme and literal case of this, and one that deserves the sympathy of those from warmer climes. I have recorded here only one such disaster. Many variations can and do occur, depending on the lay of the land. It would be difficult to recount or even imagine them all.

Hunting Bears in the Snow

The northwest of Echigo is bordered by the sea and has no mountains. The southeast is crossed by a chain of precipitous peaks that span the five provinces of Etchu, Kozuke, Shinano, Mutsu, and Dewa. This range stretches for miles and miles, one towering summit after

another, and countless wild animals dwell there. When winter approaches, some travel to other provinces to escape the snow and some do not, but only the bear holes up for the winter in a cave beneath the snow.

The gall bladder of Echigo bears is considered the best, and the gall of bears in their dens under the snow brings the greatest reward. In hopes of obtaining this rare treasure, groups of five to seven hunters regularly set out from the neighboring province of Dewa as the warmth of spring approaches and snow stops falling. Taking rice, salt, and pots and pans, they lead small packs of hunting dogs. The water and firewood in the fastnesses is theirs to make free use of as they rove from mountain to mountain, living on the game they hunt each day; their nights are spent in the shelter of the roots of large trees or in caves, where they burn green wood to stave off the cold and for light. They sleep fully clothed, and from head to foot they dress entirely in garments made from animal skins. From afar they look like monkeys with human faces. The phrase "with saddle and blade for a pillow" certainly applies to these hunters, whose prey is the Echigo bear.

When the hunters from Dewa have penetrated deep into our mountains they choose a suitable place to build a temporary shelter, which they construct from tree branches bound together with wisteria vines. Then they separate, each with his dogs, and rove in all four directions searching for bears. When one finds a bear cave he marks the spot and returns to camp, gathering the other hunters to join in an attack on the beast.

Their hunting tools consist of a spear with a shaft about four feet long and a mountain axe resembling a halberd, as well as some kind of gun, a mountain knife, and a hatchet. When the blades of their tools grow dull, they sharpen them with the whetstone they are always careful to pack. All of the tools have sheathes made out of animal skins. Hunters such as these do not only venture out in the spring ; some even go up into the mountains in the winter.

The bear is the lord of all the beasts of Japan. He is brave and virtuous. He lives on nuts and berries, tree bark, and insects, and never eats animal flesh. The bear will not ravage farmer's fields: when, rarely, that does happen, it is only because he can find no

other food. According to *The* Book of Songs the bear is a good omen for the male sex. Elsewhere, he is called General Six Excellences because he is a virtuous creature.

In addition to searching for food in summer, the bear also gathers quantities of mountain ants, which he grinds into a nutritious paste between his paws and licks in his cave in winter to stave off hunger. Male and female bears do not retire to the same cave, but females with cubs take their offspring with them into their dens. Bears may hibernate in huge hollow trees that have been broken by avalanches, or in holes among rocks, or in fact wherever they please, making it difficult to predict their exact whereabouts.

The gall bladders obtained from bears in the snow are one hundred times superior to those of summer because, as mentioned above, bears abstain from eating in the winter. In Echigo we distinguish bear gall according to color: yellow, amber, or black. Among these, amber gall is the best and black gall the least desirable. In fact, much that is sold as black gall is not genuine bear gall at all.

There are several methods for catching bears. Which one is used depends upon the site at which the bear is found. As a rule, the bear retreats to his den about one month after the autumnal equinox and does not come out until about one month after the vernal equinox. Some say that until the day of his reappearance the bear falls into one long sleep, but since no one has witnessed this it is difficult to accept.

The foam snow of winter is soft and difficult to walk in, and so the hunters prefer to set out as the vernal equinox approaches, just before the bear leaves his hideaway-for the surface of the snow is frozen hard then. To catch bears hiding in caves at the foot of cliffs or in the roots of great trees, the hunters use a method called flattening. A platform of sorts is built out of branches and wisteria vines and propped against the bear's den like a lean-to: the edge of the platform closer to the den's mouth is held up with supports attached to crosspieces and the end farther from the den is anchored with stakes. Heavy rocks are then heaped on top of it. From one of the crossbeams, just before the entrance to the den, hangs a rope noose called a trigger that springs the trap.

After the trap is finished, the hunters bum peppers and tobacco

leaves, two odors that hears can't abide, and fan the smoke into the cave. Choking and angry, the bear comes rushing out, gets caught in the noose, and springs the trap. The shelf collapses and the bear dies, smashed beneath the heavy stones. This is an excellent means of catching bears without even dirtying one's hands, but it can only be used successfully when the bear's den is located in a suitable place.

Hunters who are especially experienced and daring may station a party in front of the bear's den. One hunter, clothed from the head down in a sedge cape called *hiroro mino* (*hiroro* is the name of a mountain grass; capes made of it are lighter than straw and so preferred by hunters), enters the cave, crawling deeper and deeper, until he is behind the bear. He prods the bear lightly with the prickly sedge grasses, causing the bear to move forward. Again the hunter tickles from behind with the sedge grass, and the bear advances farther. This happens again and again until the bear reaches the entrance of the cave. The moment he becomes visible, the other hunters who have been waiting with spears ready rush upon the bear and stab him. If a hunter misses his mark, though, the bear can easily end his life with a single swipe of his paw.

A man exposes himself to so much danger hunting bears, and all for the love of a little money. Yes, greed undoes many more than lust. Those who long for gold should seek it through proper means, and not attempt to gain it wrongly.

Some bears find a protected spot where no snow has fallen and dig a hole there into the earth, During the winter, snow drifts to some three to five feet over the opening, offering protection from the cold. A small hole in the snow shaped like a tube is always found at the den's entrance. This is created by the warm air the bear exhales. When hunters discover such a den they break through the snow cover and push twigs or grass into the entrance. If the bear pulls the grass into the den, the hunters know he's home. They repeat this until the opening is entirely blocked and the bear comes rushing out. At that moment they stab the bear with their spears. When the hunting dogs see that the bear has been bloodied, they leap on it in one biting, snarling pack, Dogs and men working together finally bring the beast down. This method is also used when bears are found hibernating in hollow trees.

According to the mountain villagers, a horrible storm visits the mountain whenever two or three bears are killed-or even one, if he is old and venerable. We call this a bear's rage. For this reason the farmers of the mountain villages do not hunt bears for pleasure. We even see accounts in ancient records of the spiritual powers of bears.

A White Bear

As snow is white, bears are black. But though that's the immutable law of nature, sometimes the Lord of Heaven plays a trick and sends us a white bear.

In 1832, a woodcutter from Okura Village of Urasa Post Town in Uonuma County where I live went up to Mount Hakkai and somehow captured a little white bear alive, Realizing what a rarity it was, he kept the bear for some time. Later a carnival showman bought it and put it on display at markets and festivals and wherever people gathered. I saw it at one such place.

It was the size of a dog, but the exact figure of a bear. Its white fur was like snow, with a beautiful luster, shining like velvet. Its eyes and claws were crimson. It was so very tame and lovable. The showman toured all around with the little fellow, and I never learned what became of him.

The era name was changed upon the discovery and presentation of a white turtle at court; a white bird is a blessed omen; the god Hachiman's doves are white, as was the flag of the victorious Minamoto clan. Since all white things are blessed omens for our empire, should Heaven see fit to produce a white bear it can only be a fortunate omen of a long era of peace.

Saved by a Bear

One comes across accounts in various books of people who fell into

holes and were saved by hears, but first-hand accounts are rare, so let me relate the following story.

When I was younger, I once had business in Tsumari and stayed there two or three days. Since it was summer, straw mats were spread beneath the trees of the garden of the guest quarters, a cool place to relax. The master was quite fond of drink and set out sake and food. Since I don't drink sake, I was holding a cup of tea when an old man passed by. Seeing the master, he bowed deeply and began to head for the garden in back of the house. The master called out for him to stop. Pointing at the old man he said, "This old fellow was saved by a bear once, in his younger days. And thanks to that bear, who saved him from a dangerous scrape, he's lived a long and healthy eighty-two years."

The old man smiled and once again tried to escape. But I called him back. "Saved by a bear? That's a strange story. Tell me about it." At that the master took the teacup that had been sitting before me, filled it to the brim with sake, and offered it to the old fellow: "First down a cup," he said. The old man sat at the corner of our straw mat and with a gleeful smile drank down three cups. Smacking his lips happily, he began, "Well, let me tell you."

"It was in March of my twentieth year. I went into the mountains to collect firewood, pulling a sled behind me. Near the village, all the wood had already been cut, or else the footing was bad and the wood out of reach. But after I crossed a ridge of mountains I found plenty of wood and cut as much as I wished. Singing a sled song I bundled up the firewood without more ado and packed it on the sled. Then I slid my hatchet into its sheath and set out on the sled, following the dips and hills, when one bundle of firewood fell and wedged itself into a crevasse on the edge of a snow-buried valley. (Frozen snow regularly splits into crevasses when exposed to the sun.)

"Thinking it would be a shame to abandon it there, I made my way to the place it had fallen and, grasping the bundle by its end, tried to pull it out of the crevasse, but it wouldn't budge. It was firmly wedged in by the force of its fall, and it was heavy. Trying to pull it from an angle, I lay on my stomach and stretched out my arms. With a loud cry 1 gave it a mighty heave, but since I was not firmly planted

Saved by a bear. The old man tells his tale (*inset*)..

on the ground, I flipped myself over with the strength of my heave and fell down into the bottom of the valley, far below the snow crevasse.

"Fortunately, as I had slid down the snow, I was unhurt. For a while I lay there quite benumbed. Soon I recovered and looked up and saw a huge wall of snow above me that threatened to come crashing down in an avalanche at any moment. I felt more dead than alive, and all around me was darkness. Thinking at least to get out into the light, I made my way slowly through the narrow valley and finally came to a place where I could see the sky. But the snow was viciously cold, and my hands and feet were bent and stiff, so that each step was an effort. 'At this rate I'll freeze to death!' I urged myself on, thinking there might be a path in a hundred steps or so, when I found myself at a waterfall. Looking to the four directions, I saw that I had arrived at a dead end in the valley, like a mouse that falls into a pot, with no place to go.

"There was not a thing I could do, but as I stood there blankly, despairing, I could not even think 'What should I do ?' And now begins the story of the bear. But first let me have another drink!"

He poured it himself and took a deep draught; drawing a tobacco pouch from his belt, he began smoking his pipe. I had to prompt him to continue.

"As I looked to one side, I saw a cave that was big enough to crawl into. There was no snow inside, and when I entered I was greeted with warmth. Just then I noticed that the lunch of rice balls I had tucked into my sash had fallen somewhere along the way, and I realized I would certainly starve-though I might survive five or ten days by eating snow. If only I heard the sled song of a villager in that time, I could call out in a loud voice and be saved. But even so I was convinced that my only chance was to entreat the gods of Ise Shrine or the Zenkoji temple, and as I diligently intoned the name of the Buddha and prayed to the gods, the day drew to its close.

"Deciding to make the cave my bed, I felt my way forward in the darkness. It began to get warmer and warmer, As I groped a bit further, my fingertips felt what could only be-a bear! I was frightened to death. My heart threatened to burst. There was no escape—

my last hour had come, I thought. My life or death I laid in the hands of the gods and huddhas. I was resigned to my fate.

" 'Sir Rear,' I stammered, 'I am only a fellow who went out to collect firewood and fell into this valley. There is no way for me to return, and I have no provisions on which to live. Surely I must die, If I am to be torn apart by your claws, kill me now; but if vou have any mercy, help me.' And I stroked the bear all the while, most fearfully.

"In the darkness, it seemed to me that it got up. In a moment it was beside me and nudged me with its rear end. When I sat down where the bear had been, what warmth! It was like a hearth, and as my whole body grew warm and 1 forgot the cold I thanked the bear profusely and begged it again to save me, repeating the details of my sad story. At this the bear raised its paw and softly pressed it to my mouth several times. Recalling that bears live off a store of crushed ants in the winter, I licked the paw and found the taste sweet, but a little sharp.

"After licking the paw several times I felt refreshed and my thirst was quenched. The bear began to snore; it was asleep. Realizing that the bear was going to save me, I was greatly relieved. I lay down back to back with the bear and thought only of returning to my village, not the least bit sleepy, Then before I knew it 1 was asleep, too.

"Later I awoke as the bear began to stir. Looking toward the opening of the cave I could see that dawn was just arriving and, crawling to the entrance, I looked about for a path leading home, or at least a wild wisteria vine with which I could pull myself up the valley's steep slope. There were neither. The bear came out of the cave, too, and went to drink at the bowl of the waterfall. For the first time I saw it-and a great, huge bear it was, seven times the size of a dog. It returned again to the den, while I waited at the entrance, straining my ears for a sled song. But there was nothing, not even the call of a bird, only the sound of the waterfall.

"That day ended sadly, and as it grew dark I once again entered the cave to spend the night, Staving off starvation with the bear's proffered paw, I passed several days without hearing any song, and it

is hard to describe my despair. It was during this time that the bear gradually grew tame and quite lovable."

Here the host interrupted the old man and, slightly tipsy, declared, "It must have been a female hear!" upon which we all roared with laughter. What with the drinking and exchanging cups that followed, the story got lost, so I asked what happened next.

The old man continued: "Well, the heart of man changes with events. When I first encountered the bear I was certain I was going to die, and I was resigned to it. Rut after having been saved by the hear, I began to entertain hope again **and** believe that even if no one passed my way, I might pull myself out of the valley by scrambling up tree roots and overhanging rocks and find my way back home, if only the snow would melt.

"And waiting for that I spent day after listless day--l lost track of how many. The bear became as tame as a dog and learned, I think for the first time, that man could be a friencl. The snow in the valley melted even more slowly than that in the villages, and the only thing that gave me pleasure was that time was passing. One day, while I was picking my lice in a sunny spot at the cave's entrance, the bear came out of the den and began pulling at my sleeve, Wondering what this was about, I followed, and we reached the place where I had first fallen into the valley.

"The bear went ahead of me, easily opening a path with its paws and allowing me to follow. I followed the bear this way and that until we finally came upon human footprints, At that, the bear looked about in all four directions and raced away, I know not where.

"1 thanked the bear for leading me there, prostrating myself in the direction in which it had fled and repeating my grateful praises. 'This is all due to the kindness of the gods and buddhas,' I declared and bowed toward Ise and Zenkoji. Joyfully I returned to the post town, hardly knowing where I walked, and arrived at home just before it was time to light the tapers. The people in my neighborhood had all gathered and were reciting the Buddha's name. At first my parents were so surprised that they thought I was my own ghost, and they made quite a fuss. That was to be expected. My hair had grown and was sticking out like a straw cape, and my face was as thin as a

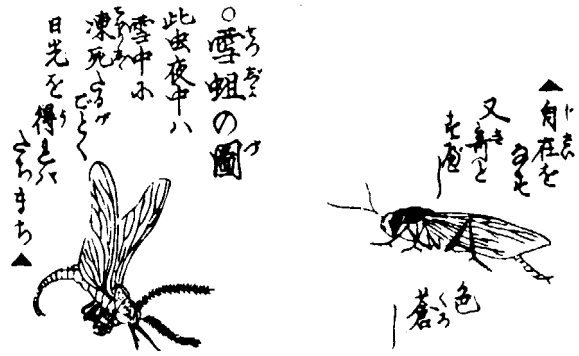
fox's. Gradually the cries of surprise became laughter, and my parents and everyone else rejoiced. Exactly forty-nine days had passed since I had gone out for firewood, and so it was the eve of the service for the rest of my soul. Thus the solemn Buddhist ceremony became a welcome-home party." And with that the old man ended his narrative.

His name was Kyuemon and he was a farmer. I went home and by the light of an oil lamp wrote down everything exactly as he told me, hut that was long, long ago.

Snow *Insects*

Snow lies deep on Mount Omei in Sichuan of' the land of Tang, even in summer. *The Mountains and Seas Classic* records the existence of an insect called the snow bug living in the snows on that peak. I am sure this is the truth, for we have snow insects in Echigo as well. They begin to make their appearance in the snow at the beginning of the year, and when the snow melts they, too, disappear, their life cycle bound to the snows.

The five elements of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water all nurture



Snow insects.

insects. We frequently see wood insects, earth insects, and water insects, and there is nothing remarkable about them. Flies are produced by ashes, and ash is the burned residue of fire, so the fly is a fire insect. A fly that has been killed (as long as it hasn't been crushed) will come to life again if placed in ashes. Lice are produced by the warmth of the human body, and warmth is fire, after all. This is why both flies and lice like warm places.

People are ignorant of metal insects because they are so small that they cannot be seen by the naked eye. But when metal begins to decay metal insects appear, and the places they appear change color. Metal does not decay if you polish it regularly, for this kills the insects. Rust is the first sign of decay, and metal insects are always to be found in rust. It is only because we cannot see these insects that we are ignorant of them. (This is the theory of a Dutch writer.) If insects are to be found even in metal, there can be no doubt that there are insects in the snows! But because this is out of the ordinary, it is recorded in the annals of China as an oddity, a wonder.

The snow insects of Echigo are as tiny as a mosquito. There are two kinds. One has wings and flies; the other also has wings, but always crawls. Both have six legs and resemble a fly in color, though one is darker. They are found both in towns and in the fields, just like mosquitoes, but they do not sting. I have drawn them as they appear under a magnifying glass. Further discussion of the creatures waits upon the conclusions of naturalists.

Blizzards

A blizzard occurs when the snow that has accumulated on trees and on the mountain peaks is whirled and blown about by the wind. Since in some cases the wind is a gentle one, in many ancient poems the snow has been likened to the scattering cherry blossoms, but such a thought is only possible in lands to the south and to the east, where no more than an inch or two of snow ever falls. The blizzards of our northern land of Echigo, deeply buried in foot after foot of snow, are whirl-

winds and snow twisters; the cruelest trial of our snowy land, they take the lives of many, year after year. Let me relate just one such tragedy to let those who gaze at the gentle snow breezes of warmer climes know the terror those winds bring to our land of snow.

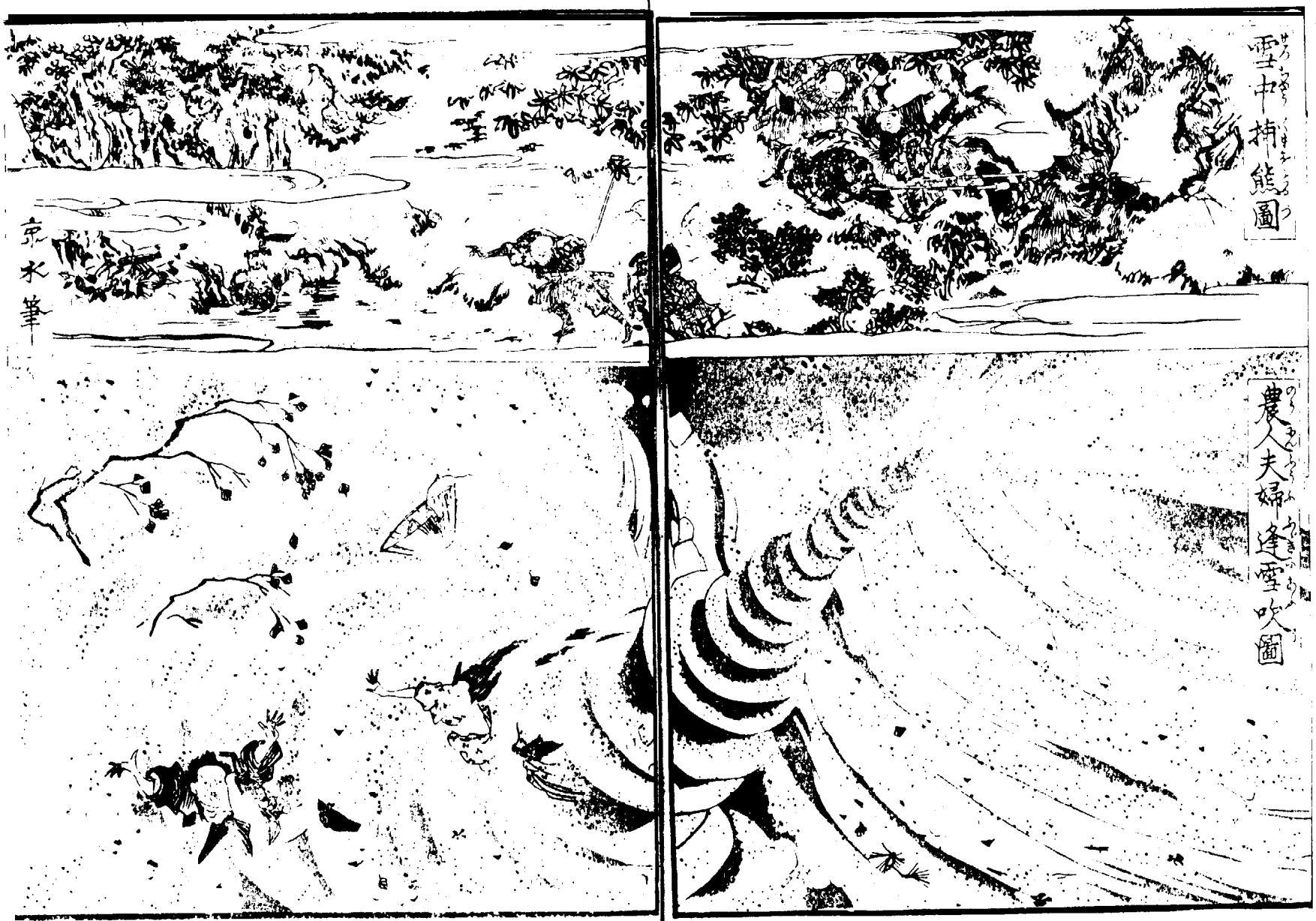
In a village not far from Shiozawa, where I live, there was a farming family. They had one son, a good fellow who always served his parents well. In the winter of his twenty-second year he took a bride of nineteen from a village some two miles away. She was quite good-looking, had a sweet disposition, and was skilled at the loom, all of which endeared her to her husband's parents. Husband and wife were devoted to each other, and the whole family looked forward to spring in a happy mood.

That same year at the beginning of October, the wife was safely delivered of a fine boy. The whole family was in high spirits; they felt as if they held a precious pearl in their hands. The new mother quickly recovered from childbirth. She had more milk than her baby boy could drink, and he grew plump and strong. They christened him with an auspicious name to insure long life.

Everyone in this family was industrious, and they worked hard in the fields and at the loom so that, though they were just small farmers, they were not poor. With a good son, a fine daughter-in-law, and a beautiful grandchild, they were the envy of all the others in the village. Why is it that Heaven sent suffering to this virtuous family?

A good time after the birth, when the snow that had been falling continuously stopped and the skies brightened and cleared, the young wife said to her husband: "Today I would like to visit my parents in my home village. Would that be all right?" Her father-in-law, seated next to her, answered, "That's a fine thought. Your husband should go with you. Make your good old mother happy by showing her her new grandson, and you two can act the proud parents." The daughter-in-law beamed at this. When she told her mother-in-law of the plan, that good woman began to gather together gifts for the couple to take with them, while the young mother dressed her hair and joyfully changed her clothes. The wadded cotton headgear that is always worn in the cold suited her well.

As she tucked her child into the breast of her kimono, her mother-



Hunting bears in the snow (*above*). The young couple struck by the snow whirlwind (*below*).

in-law came up to her and said, "Give him plenty of milk now. It will be hard for him to drink on the road," showing with every word her love for her grandson. The husband wore a cape, hat, and leggings made of straw and put on snowshoes and slung the bag of gifts over his shoulder (farmers always wear straw capes when they go out into the snow, even on clear days). Begging their parents for their leave, the couple started off happily on their journey.

But this was to be their last parting, for what followed was a tragedy.

For a time the husband led and the wife followed behind. He said to her: "Today is such splendid weather. That really was a wonderful idea. Your parents will never suspect that today we are coming and bringing their first grandson to meet them ! They'll be so happy when they see his face." She answered : "Though Father saw the child when he came to visit last, Mother hasn't seen him yet. If it gets late, may I stay the night? You stay, too." "No, no-if we both stay my parents will worry. I'll return." And while they talked about this the baby began to cry, so his mother pushed her breast to his mouth and they pressed on.

When they had arrived at an open plain called Misashima. the color of the sky suddenly changed as it grew covered with black clouds. The husband looked at the sky and was startled-"A blizzard's on the way !'' And while he hesitated, a roaring wind blowing snow fell upon them like a great wave crashing over the boulders at the seashore, and a whirlwind of snow funneled up into the sky like white dragons storming up a mighty peak. A moment before, everything had been quiet and peaceful; in a flash heaven raged and earth ranted, the cold wind slashed the skin like a lance and the frozen snow pierced the flesh like arrows.

The wind tore the cape and hat from the husband and blew the wife's hat away, whipping her hair about wildly. In an instant, snow was blown into their eyes and mouths, down their collars, into their sleeves, and even up the hems of their kimonos! They began to freeze, and breathing grew difficult. Already half-buried in snow, they called out with all their might, for life was at stake: ''Halloo, halloo!'' But no one passed by, and they were far from human

habitations. Their hands and feet soon grew stiff and useless and they were toppled as easily as withered trees by the blizzard winds; side by side they died, in the snow where they had fallen.

The blizzard ended with the day, and the following morning four or five men passed by the scene under a blue sky. The corpses of the couple went unseen, for they were buried in the snow, but the men happened to hear a strange sound: the crying of a baby, *under* the snow. At first they were gripped by fear and ready to flee, hut a stronger-minded fellow among them began to dig through the snow. The first thing he came upon was the young wife's hair. "She must have been felled by the blizzard !'' Some of the men ran off to get help, and everyone began to dig in earnest.

Soon both bodies were found. Buried in the snow they seemed as if still alive, and several people easily recognized them as man and wife who had perished side by side. The babe was still tucked in his mother's breast, his head covered hy her sleeve, shielding him from the snow-that was how he had survived and sent up cries from between the corpses of his parents. How all wept as they looked at the scene, imagining the young wife lovingly covering the child's head with her sleeve before she and her husband had died hand in hand. One of the villagers tucked the child into his clothing while others wrapped the corpses in straw capes and carried them back to the home of the husband's parents.

Now the parents had supposed all along that the young couple had only stayed the night at their in-laws' house. When the frozen corpses were brought to them, at first they could find no words to speak, no sound to make; then thev threw themselves on the bodies, pressing their own faces to the cold faces of their children, wailing at the tops of their voices. Their misery was a pitiful sight. One of the men finally brought the child out from his breast and passed it to the grandmother, who wept with tears of grief and relief to see her grandson alive.

Deaths due to snow winds are usually of the sort described here. The difference between this and the snow winds of warmer regions, likened to falling flowers and praised prettily in verse, is as great as the difference between sporting in the surf and drowning in a tidal

wave. And those in warm lands should know of the difficulties of life in the snow country. It is quite common for a spell of bright, clear weather to change in an instant to a blizzard strong enough to uproot trees and crush houses, and it is difficult to calculate the harm done to men and their dwellings.

If you are caught in a blizzard, the best thing to do is dig a hole in the snow and crawl into it. In a very short time you will be covered with snow, and, surprisingly, this is the warmer place to be. You can breathe and thus escape death. Men traveling through the snow always wrap their testicles in wadded cotton cloth, otherwise they are the first part to freeze, and a man's vital energies are lost.

Those who have been frozen may sometimes be revived with warm water or heat, though very hot water and high temperatures must be avoided or, with the first warmth of spring, the victim will be afflicted with swellings that even the best doctor will be unable to cure. The first thing to do for those who have been frozen is to apply heated salt wrapped in cloth to their navels. Then they should be gradually warmed with a straw fire. This way there will be no complications later. (It is best, you see, to warm such victims of freezing to body temperature and no warmer.) If great heat is applied to frozen hands or feet, they will swell up like a bum when they come into contact with natural warmth, only to rot and later fall off. No medicine can prevent this. I am writing here of what I have actually seen.

Both freezing to death and frostbitten hands and feet are the result of the blocking of the veins by yin poisons. If a frozen person is warmed quickly by intense heat, his vital energy will assist the flow of blood, but though the yin poisons temporarily dissipate, they are not completely eliminated. Since yang is stronger than yin, the presence of the yang drives the yin poisons into the flesh, where they start to fester. No, people who are frozen when out walking in the snows should never be warmed too suddenly; it is far better to wait until the body heat returns on its own. This is one of the arts of insuring long life.

Fires in the Snow

One of the famed wonders of Echigo is the fire that burns out of a hole in a stone mortar in a farmer's kitchen in the village of Nyohoji, Kambara County. Everyone considers it a wonder, and its fame has been spread by word of mouth as well as by mention in a variety of sources. Since the first record of this flame's appearance is in the Temmon era (1532–55), it has been burning continuously for some three hundred years, which is itself a miracle of miracles.

But Heaven has not produced just one wonder; there is another such fire in our land, in Uonuma County. Since everyone knows of the former, but no one from other lands has heard of the latter, I would like to introduce it to the world.

There is a low mountain to the west of the post town of Itsukamachi in Uonuma County of Echigo. At the foot of the mountain is a small pond. One day in March, sometime during the Temmei era (1781–89), a group of children had gathered about the pond and were playing all sorts of games. Bored with their play, they decided to make a fire of twigs. After they lit it and were just about to gather round and warm themselves, they were startled to see another fire flare up and burn merrily at a place a little distance from their own. Frightened, they scattered in the four directions, but one lad, after returning home, told his parents what had happened. Being smart folks, they returned to the scene and observed the burning flame. A hole large. enough to insert a hand had been made in the snow, and a flame was burning about four or five inches above it.

After carefully observing the flame, they concluded it was like that at Nyohoji Village. Placing a stone over the hole, they extinguished the fire and returned home without saying a word to anyone. When the snow had melted they returned to the scene and were able to see that the flame had burned from a place in the pond's bank. They ignited it once more with tinder, which they then tossed into the water: flames, for all the world like little garden bonfires, ignited and danced over the pond's surface! This sight was even more wonderful than the flame at Nyohoji Village, and people gathered from all over the area to watch.

Later a money-minded fellow built a bath near the edge of the pond. He drew the fire from the ground with a pipe, just as one draws water from a river, and used it to heat and illuminate the bath. Warming the water drawn from the pond, he charged admission to his bath, which was quite popular for a time because the water contained sulphur and was beneficial in treating skin diseases.

There are veins of both fire and water in the earth. Because the earth is the Great Yin there are nine water veins for each fire vein, and fire veins are very rare. The veins of fire in the earth never cease to flow, for the earth breathes just like a human being does, though we cannot see it. The breath of the earth burns when we ignite it with the ordinary sort of fire we use every day. This burning breath of the earth is known as yin flame or cold flame. The reason that the pipe used to draw the cold flame does not burn is that the earth's breath has not yet been ignited as it travels through the tube; untouched by yang, it remains in its breath state. When it comes into contact with yang at the tube's mouth, it burns with a flame an inch or two above the mouth, proving that it is the earth's breath that is burning. The flame at Nyohoji Village is of the same sort. This is not my discovery, but based on the writings in classical works.

Crevice Mountain

There is a mountain more than two and one-half miles high and the same distance around behind the village of Shimizu in Uonuma County. Since the mountain is riddled with great crevices, it is called Crevice Mountain. The lower half of the mountain is clothed in a web of ancient trees ; above are rocky peaks of boulders stacked one upon another like twisting dragons and raging tigers, a scene too strange and wonderful to describe. Mountain streams rush down about the base of the mountain, where they come together and form an indescribably beautiful waterfall. If during a drought one prays for rain at the basin of this waterfall the heavens will not fail to grant the plea, it is said.

One year, in May when the snow was just beginning to melt, some twenty farmers of Shimizu Village gathered to hunt bears on this mountain. Certain that many of the creatures lived in the caverns of the numerous mountain crevices, they burned firewood mixed with tobacco and hot peppers and blew the smoke into the caves to drive the bears out. But the caves were so deep that the smoke did not penetrate to the back, and not a single bear was flushed. The next day the farmers decided to increase the firewood as if to burn the entire mountain, but still no bears appeared. Instead, the smoke began seeping out from the crevices here and there on the mountain, forming a great black cloud hanging over the eerie peak. So very strange was the sight that the farmers abandoned their bear hunt and returned empty-handed-that's how the farmers of Shimizu Village tell it.

The upper half of the mountain is a skeleton of stone, with very little earth. The shallow veins of earth allow vapors to pass through, and it was from these veins that the smoke billowed forth. This is certainly a wonder of the natural world, far beyond our comprehension.

Avalanches

Avalanches, together with blizzards, are our greatest tribulation. The snow on the mountains is both deeper than that in the villages and freezes much harder-as hard as rock, in fact. In the mountains of the southeastern part of Echigo, fourteen or fifteen feet of snow fall even near the villages; yet this is considered a light snowfall. When warm, yang air begins to rise from the earth in March and the snow begins to melt, fissures form in the mountain snows because of the difference in the temperature between the air and the land. One section breaks off, then another and another, with a crack like the sound of giant trees falling. This is the unmistakable portent of an avalanche. Avalanches occur in some places but not in others due to the topography and the position of the sun. And avalanches always take