# In Praise of Shadows

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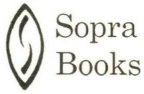

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## On construction

These days, anyone with an interest in architecture who wants to build a traditional Japanese house will find themselves going to great pains to come up with ingenious means to install electricity, gas, water and other modern facilities in ways that will not disturb the austere harmony of the *zashiki*, the formal tatami room. If they have spent any time at all in traditional structures like teahouses, restaurants or inns, even a rank amateur will sense the challenge. While some solitary tea ceremony aficionado might be able to ignore the benefits of technology and make a life in a thatched hut in the midst of a desolate wilderness, a man raising a family in the city—regardless of how much lip service he gives to "Japanese style"—is not going to give up the benefits of modern living such as heating, lighting and hygienic bathrooms.

An obsessive might tear his hair out over where to put the telephone so that it doesn't become an eyesore—under the stairs, perhaps, or in the corner of the hallway. He might conceal outdoor electric cables by burying them in the garden, for example, hide light switches inside the closet or in cupboards, secrete wires in the shadow of folding screens; in the end, however, all his neuroses would simply leave us with the annoying impression of overly fussy artifice. Our eyes have become so accustomed to electric light that a naked light bulb in a conventional, translucent white shade seems far more natural in its simplicity than the results of some half-baked attempt at concealment. To someone watching the countryside glide past

from a train window at dusk, the muted glow of a solitary bulb under an old-fashioned shade seen through the *shoji* of a farmer's thatched-roof home can even appear elegant.

The appliance called an "electric fan" is another matter; even today it is impossible to reconcile its shape and noise with the aesthetics of the traditional room. If an average household doesn't like fans, of course, it can easily do without them, but a family in the service industry won't last the summer if they cater to the whims of the old proprietor who loathes them, and fail to provide them for their customers. A friend of mine who runs the Chinese restaurant Kairakuen is a stickler when it comes to traditional architecture, and resisted putting in fans for ages; after years of complaints from summer season customers, however, he eventually broke down and had them installed.

I had a similar experience a few years ago, when I spent much more money than I should have to build a home. I became deeply involved in the details of all the fixtures and the fittings—such as the *fusuma* and shoji sliding doors—and ran into an endless range of problems. Although shoji was my preference over glass for the sliding doors, I was facing huge security and lighting issues if I used only paper door styles throughout the house. The unavoidable solution I came up with was to use shoji on the inside and glass on the outside, a double frame that increased the cost. Even so, seen from the outside it was simply a glass door, while viewed from the inside, the glass behind the paper destroyed the rich, yet subdued effect that is shoji's true nature, and ultimately left me unsatisfied. I now

regret what I did, and believe that it might have been better to just go with glass doors in the first place. Of course, while it is easy to laugh at others' mistakes, it's harder to accept that you yourself are going in the wrong direction and must change your mind mid-stride.

I was able to find electric fixtures resembling standing oil lamps, as well as hanging lanterns and candlesticks that were meant to harmonize with the atmosphere of the tatami room, but they didn't do anything for me; instead, I found myself poking through second-hand shops to find the real thing: old oil lamps of various styles to which I affixed light bulbs.

The biggest headache of all was the design of the heating system. First of all, nothing called a "stove" comes in a form that goes well in a tatami room. On top of that, with gas stoves comes the irritating roar of burning fuel and the fact that, without a proper stovepipe, everyone will suffer from headaches. It would seem, therefore, that an electric stove would be ideal, but they suffer from the same lack of inspiration in their design. One idea was to install heaters in floor-level cupboards like the ones used in trains, but it wouldn't feel like winter without the sight of the comforting glow of the fire. After racking my brain for a solution, I decided to build a hearth like those in farmers' houses, but with an electric heating element that looks like charcoal; this worked like a charm to boil water and heat the room, and thanks to its appearance—if I overlook the soaring cost—I now count this as one of my successes.

With the heating problem handled somewhat skilfully, the

next troublesome areas were the bath and toilet. My friend, the proprietor of Kairakuen, despises the use of tile in bathtubs and sinks, so his guest bathroom is done completely in wood—though for practical and economic purposes nothing beats tile. But if the ceiling, posts and walls are done in beautiful Japanese wood, finishing any of the other parts in highly reflective tile destroys the harmony of the room. And while it may seem acceptable at first, as the years go by, little by little, the grain of the wood of the walls and posts begins to exhibit the depth of its character, and the shiny white expanse of the tiled area will begin to seem as incompatible as bamboo grafted onto a tree.

In issues related to the bath, practicality can be sacrificed to one's taste to some extent; in the toilet, however, more perplexing problems crop up.

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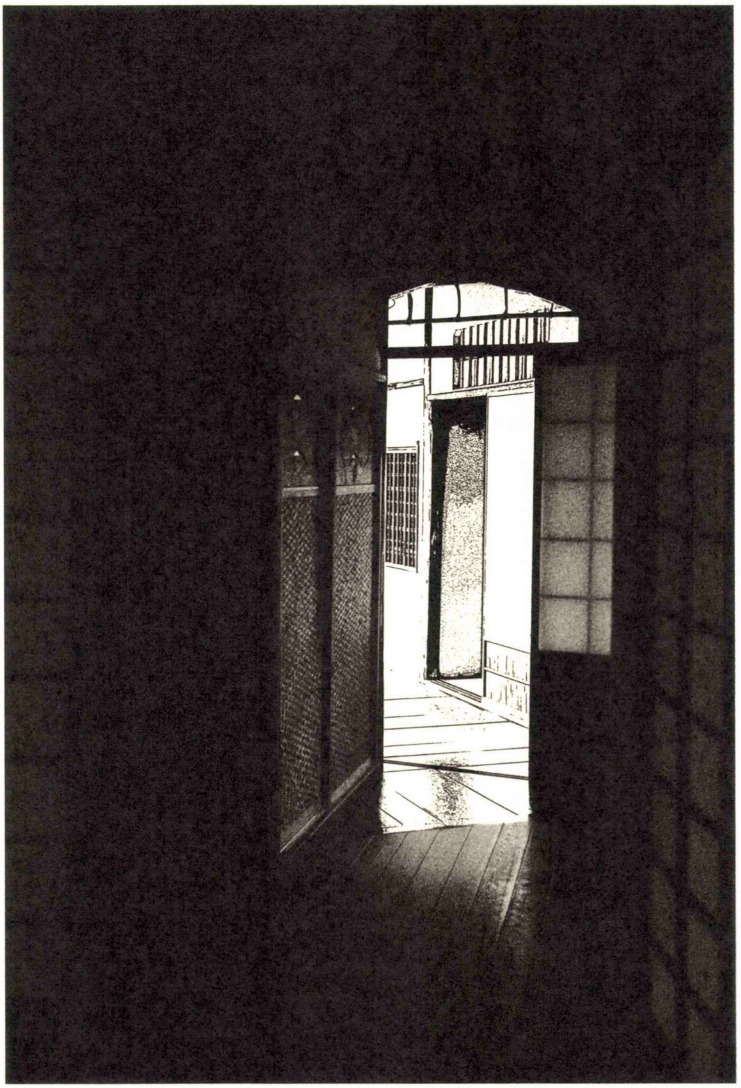
**The toilet aesthetic**

Every time I am led to an old-fashioned, dim and impeccably pristine toilet during a visit to a temple in Kyoto or Nara, I appreciate all the more the virtues of traditional Japanese architecture. The tatami room is fine as far as it goes, but it is the design of the toilet that truly soothes the mind and soul.

It is set apart from the living quarters, down at the end of a hallway surrounded by a shaded grove, redolent with the aroma of the shrubbery and the damp moss. To squat in the faint glow of the light reflecting off the shoji,



and surrender to a meditative state or gaze out the window at the garden scenery is a sensation that is impossible to describe.

The novelist Natsume Soseki once said that the visit to the toilet every morning was one of his great pleasures—a physiological joy. And what better place to savor that joy than in a tranquil setting surrounded by the fine grain of wooden walls, eyes graced with a view of the lush hues of the sky and garden. There are some indispensable conditions: a certain level of gloominess, absolute cleanliness and a silence so complete that one can hear the drone of a mosquito. I very much enjoy listening to the sounds of gently drizzling rain during my encounter with such a toilet.

This is especially true in the Kanto region, where the toilets feature a narrow window at floor level for sweeping out the dirt; through this, one can all the more intimately hear the sound of raindrops trickling from the leaves and the eaves, washing the bases of the stone lanterns, moistening the moss of the stepping stones and permeating the earth. It is truly the most appropriate place to listen to the chirping of birds and insects, to appreciate moonlit nights, to contemplate the pathos of things as the seasons go through their changes; surely haiku poets from time immemorial have been blessed with countless ideas while occupying this space.

It is, therefore, clear that of all the many aspects of Japanese architecture, the toilet is the apex of refinement. Our ancestors, who saw poetry in everything around them, took what could be considered the most unclean place in the house and instead

made it an area of elegance and taste, a place that we nostalgically associate with the traditional aesthetics of natural beauty. Compared to Westerners, who treat the toilet as an unclean space from the start and find it difficult to even discuss such matters in public, we are far wiser in understanding the spirit of elegance. If I must bring up negative factors, I would say that the distance from the main rooms makes night visits less than convenient, and can sometimes lead to catching colds in the winter—though, as Ryokuu Saito once said, "elegance is ice cold," and having the temperature the same as outdoors actually feels pleasant, unlike the clammy steam heat of a Western-style bathroom in a hotel, which I very much dislike.

Incidentally, while anyone who appreciates the *sukiya* style of architecture would agree that the Japanese-style toilet is the pinnacle of all toilets, it is not easy for a normal household to maintain a state of cleanliness at the same level as that of temples, with their spacious grounds, limited number of residents and abundance of helping hands to keep the place clean. Regardless of how often the floor is wiped, or how strict the house rules of cleanliness, dirt will stand out, especially on simple wooden floors or tatami mats. So eventually it is just less trouble and more economic to slap up some tile, stick in a toilet and a water tank for hygiene's sake and forget all about elegance and traditional aesthetics. There, surrounded on all sides by the bright expanse of white walls, it would be hard to reach the spiritual level of what Soseki called "physiological joy."

As every nook and cranny is bathed in pure white, there

would be no doubt as to its sanitary aspects. But it certainly isn't necessary to call so much attention to this. Just as it would be inexcusable for even the most beautiful, alabaster-complexioned woman to expose her buttocks and legs in public, it is very rude to illuminate this destination of our bodily products, since highlighting the parts we can see only provokes us into thinking about the parts that we cannot. In any event, the line between what is clean and what is unclean is better left indistinct; this is a place that should be lit by only the dimmest rays of light.

I had modern facilities installed when I built my own home. Though I managed to avoid using any tile at all, and had the flooring done in camphor wood to maintain a Japanese style, I ran into a problem with the actual toilets. As everyone knows, flush toilets are made of white porcelain and come with shiny metal handles. What I really wanted were toilets, both men's and women's, made of wood. The finest ones are lacquered, but even the unfinished wooden ones take on a dark hue after months and years of use that—along with the attraction of the grain—actually soothes the nerves, in some strange way.

The finest example of all is the wooden urinal in the shape of a morning glory, which is stuffed with leaves of cedar; not only is it pleasing to the eye, but it is ideal for dampening any sound during use. Even if I was unable to enjoy such luxurious trappings, I thought that at least I could have my ideal toilet bowl equipped with a flush mechanism. I learned, however, that this would require a special order, and would not only mean increased man-hours for installation, but would cost an arm

and a leg, so in the end I abandoned the idea. Of course, I don't object to the conveniences of civilization—like lighting, heating or toilet design—but I did wonder why they aren't made to be more adaptable in respect to our customs and tastes.

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**A different course**

The once-forgotten softness and the warmth of paper has recently been rediscovered, as can be attested to by the popularity of electric paper lanterns in the style of old oil lamps—proof that paper has been recognized as a far better match with the traditional Japanese home than glass. But nothing of a similar style is available when it comes to toilets and stoves. My invention of putting electric charcoal in a sunken hearth was the best solution for heating, but even this simple product is not being commercially made (there are shabby electric hibachi available but, heating wise, they are no better than a traditional charcoal hibachi), so for a mass-produced heating system, we have nothing to turn to but awkward, Western-style stoves.

Still, to make such a fuss about the trivial details of life's necessities is a luxury. Some people say that the struggle with harsh climes and starvation is hardly the venue for a discussion on matters of style. And it is true that no matter how much false courage and stoicism one can call upon, "a snowy day is going to be cold," and when a convenient warming device is staring

one in the face, it is probably not the best occasion to argue about elegance or the lack of it; the desire to quickly bathe in its beneficial warmth will be undeniable.

This, however, is when I always think about how different things might be if the East had developed its own scientific civilization, completely independent of the West. For example, if we had our own brand of physics, of chemistry, and if technology and industry were based on these concepts, wouldn't we have developed differently, and wouldn't that have resulted in a wide variety of daily appliances, medicine, and arts and crafts that would harmonize more closely with our national character? We might even discover that the very nature and performance of physics, chemistry and the atom differ in form from what we have been taught. I myself have no understanding of scientific principles, so this is just me giving free and absent-minded rein to my own imagination. But even if just the invention of practical items had followed original directions, we could have expected extensive impact—not only in life's basic necessities, of course, but even in politics, religion, the arts, industry and other areas. It's easy to jump to the thought that the East might have broken through to a new universe of technological advancement.

To give one simple example, I once wrote an article for the magazine *Bungei Shunju* comparing the fountain pen and the writing brush, in which I said that if a Japanese or Chinese person had invented the fountain pen, the tip would most definitely have been a brush. And the ink would not be blue, but

black India ink that would seep out of the handle into the tip. Western-style paper would be a problem, so it would be necessary to mass-produce paper of a quality equal to that used for Japanese calligraphy. If the paper and the pen and the ink had developed in this way, we probably would now have a more powerful affection for *kanji* and *kana*, which means we likely wouldn't be experiencing the recent popularity of the present fountain pen and ink, let alone the discussion about replacing our traditional syllabary with the Roman alphabet. And that's not all. Our ideology and our literature might not have mimicked Western thought to the degree it has—even to the point where we might have discovered original, new universes. Thought about from this angle, even something so trivial as our writing materials have had an infinitely huge effect on things.

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**A novelist's daydreams**

I know that these thoughts of mine are nothing but the flighty daydreams of a novelist, and that we have come so far today that it's impossible to return to earlier times. To wish for the impossible at this stage is nothing but grumbling for the sake of grumbling, but still, there's nothing that can stop me from reflecting on how disadvantaged we are compared to Westerners. You see, Westerners were able to proceed step by step in a logical direction to reach where they are today, while we—having suddenly collided with a technologically superior civilization—

have had to deal with changing the direction of a path we have been on for several thousand years of development, resulting in any number of breakdowns and inconveniences.

It's very possible that, left to our own devices, there would have been little progress in the design of objects we've been using for the last five hundred years. After all, in the countryside of China and India, people's lives have changed little since the time of Buddha and Confucius. In any case, our direction suited us. We were making some small amount of progress, no matter how sluggish, and would have come up with versions of trains, airplanes and radio that were not borrowed from elsewhere.

To put this simply, just look at the differences in the use of lighting and color in American films compared to those of Germany and France. Putting aside the style of acting and the script, there is something different in the national character that comes out in the cinematography. This happens even though they use the same equipment, the same film and the same chemicals, so if we had our own native style of photography, how much more appropriate it would be in capturing our facial features and complexion, our climate and the natural landscape.

Our traditional music is emotionally reserved, and loses most of its appeal when recorded and amplified. In conversation, we speak softly and use few words, instead placing more importance on the silent spaces between them. Contrarily, if we must adapt to match the needs of machines, the art becomes distorted. Because Westerners originally developed the tech-

nology themselves, of course, everything conforms with their arts. On all these points, it is clear that we are at a disadvantage.

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I've heard that the Chinese were the first to invent paper. To tell the truth, for us, Western-style paper is only a daily necessity with no emotional attachment, but the texture of Japanese *washi* paper or the *karakami* paper used for the *fusuma* sliding doors gives us a kind of warm feeling—a calming of the mind. Although both Western and Japanese style paper may be called white, the "whiteness" is very different. Western paper reflects light, Japanese paper absorbs it, like the surface of soft, freshly fallen snow. It is supple to the touch, and makes no sound at all when folded or crumpled. It is as silent and as moist as a tree leaf. On the whole, we don't feel that calming effect from Western paper.

**On paper, tin and dirt**

For tableware, Westerners use silver, steel or nickel, materials that emit a brilliant shine when polished. But we are not so fond of such glittering objects. Though we sometimes use silver for tea kettles, sake decanters and cups, we don't polish them. Instead, we find delight as they age, as the luster fades and the surface clouds from tarnishing. Every household has experienced a time when the master has had to scold a maid who unwittingly polished a silver bowl just as it finally gained an elegant patina.

These days, tableware used for Chinese cuisine is generally made of tin, and I believe the Chinese probably love the faded tones that these dishes take on as they age. They don't look or feel particularly good when they are new, seeming more like aluminum, but they wouldn't be acceptable to the Chinese unless they took on a certain sophistication as the years pass. Even the engraved poetry on the surface becomes perfectly fitting as it tarnishes. In the hands of the Chinese, even a flimsy, shiny, light metal like tin takes on the aura of unglazed pottery so deep, in fact, that it develops its own profound dignity.

The Chinese also love jade. Isn't it true that only Easterners would have such a fascination with a gemstone that features such a strange diluted murkiness, a dull light glimmering from its furthest recesses as if the air of many centuries was trapped within? We don't know ourselves where this attraction comes from, since jade has neither the rich hues of rubies and emeralds nor the radiance of diamonds, but that dull surface is exactly what we'd expect from a Chinese stone—being a product of the country's long history of civilization. Gazing at its cloudy façade, we can only nod in appreciation of how the Chinese discovered the unusual tone and color to be not at all odd, but quite to their taste.

Quartz crystals from Chile are a recent popular import, but compared to Japanese crystal, these Chilean crystals are far too transparent. We get more pleasure from Koshu crystal, which has been around since ancient times, because while it is transparent, one can also see a faint cloudiness, which gives

it a more dignified appearance, or even opaque stripes called a "grass-blade pattern." The same goes for glass when made by Chinese hands: Qianlong-period glass is much closer in feel to jade or agate than it is to Western-style glass. Although the glass manufacturing process was long known in the East, it never developed as it did in the West. Pottery, however, made huge advances, reflecting a close relationship with our national character. We don't hate shiny things unconditionally, we just prefer deeper, darker hues over the shallow and bright. Whether it is natural stone or a man-made product, we like its sheen of antiquity to remind us of its age, which frequently means it has been dulled by impurities.

This "sheen of antiquity" that we hear so much about is, in reality, just dirt. The Chinese word 手沢 (*shutaku*) and the Japanese word なれ (*nare*) both describe the effect that comes from long years of use, in which the caress of a hand in the same place smooths the surface as the oil from the skin permeates the ceramics. It is this that creates the sheen—so in other words, yes, it's just dirt.

If it's true, as I said earlier, that "elegance is ice cold," I think it is also fair to add the maxim that "elegance is filthy." In any case, the elegance that we find so much pleasure in is, to some extent, unclean, and we can't deny that there's an element of the unsanitary. Unlike Westerners, who try to remove even the slightest vestige of tarnish, Easterners seem to find it important to preserve and—somehow—beautify it.

It would be easy here to accuse me of making excuses for

the dirt found in our society, but our acceptance comes from an appreciation of the wear and tear of daily use, the grime of lamp soot, the damage inflicted by the elements. We love the color tones and the sheen that remind us of such natural phenomena and the passing of time. Living in a house amidst such everyday goods puts our hearts at peace and soothes our nerves.

I also believe that—at least in Japan—the color of hospital walls, surgical gowns and medical equipment should not always be a shiny white and that darker, softer tones would be a better choice. A treatment room featuring traditional earth walls and a tatami floor where patients were able to lie down while receiving health care would definitely lessen the anxiety that patients often feel. One of the reasons we all hate going to the dentist is the irritating grind of the drill, but another cause is the fear that comes from being surrounded by shiny glass and metal machines.

Once, at a time when I was suffering from neurosis, I was told of a dentist who had just returned from the United States and boasted of having all the latest equipment. But hearing that only made my hair stand on end. Instead, I chose to visit an old-fashioned dental office in a traditional Japanese house that time had left behind, one that would have looked right at home in any small country town. Of course, medical equipment that has been ravaged by time has its own problems, but if Japan had been able to develop its own style of modern medicine, the instruments and equipment would

more likely be harmonious with a Japanese-style room. This is just another example of something that we've lost by simply borrowing technology.

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**Candlelight and lacquerware**

There is a well-known restaurant in Kyoto called Waranjiya, which was famous until recently for using traditional candles rather than electric lights. I visited this spring for the first time in a while to find they had replaced the candles with electric light bulbs placed inside paper lanterns. I asked when this change had occurred and was told that the decision was made last year after too many customers had complained that the lighting was too dark. However, the staff could, he told me, arrange candlelight for anyone who preferred the old style of lighting. Since I had gone out of my way to come here to enjoy such a tradition, I accepted their offer. It was then that I first began to realize that the beauty of Japanese lacquerware is only truly manifested in dim half-light.

The room at Waranjiya was a tearoom of only four-and-a-half tatami mats, and the ceilings and the post of the *tokonoma* alcove reflected a black luster, so it would have felt dim even if lit by light bulbs in lanterns. But by the light of the candle it was particularly dark, and gazing at the trays and bowls caught in the shadows cast by the light of the flickering wick and discovering the charm of the rich and boggy depths of their lacquerware

finish was a completely new experience. I realized that it was not by chance that after discovering lacquer, our ancestors learned to love the texture and tone of items painted with the material.

According to my Indian friend, Sabharwal, ceramic tableware is still frowned upon in India, where lacquerware is much preferred. We, however, use lacquerware only for trays and soup bowls, while using ceramics for almost everything else. In fact, other than for the tea ceremony and other formal rituals, lacquerware is thought to be unsophisticated and somewhat tasteless—one result, I think, of the emphasis on making everything brighter, thanks to the new developments in lighting and illumination. And it's true that if we didn't accept darkness as a part of our lifestyle, then it would be difficult for anyone to appreciate the exquisite beauty of lacquerware.

Today, one can find examples of white lacquer, but lacquerware has traditionally been black, brown or red, the result of applying many layers to create a dark surface—which was inevitable considering the darkness of the surroundings. When I see a lacquer box, a small desk or some shelves decorated with the shiny gold or silver flecks of *makie*, they look far too gaudy and unsettling, even vulgar; but put them in a pitch-black void, and then illuminate them, not with the sun or an electric light, but with the light of a solitary votive candle, and suddenly what was once garish becomes an object of great depth, refinement and dignity.

From ancient times, craftsmen have always had this dark environment in mind as they applied layer upon layer of lacquer

and makie, searching for the best effects that could be seen in meager light. Their luxurious use of gold lacquer always took into account the way the piece would emerge out of the gloom and the appearance of the reflected lamplight on its surface. In other words, gold lacquerware was never meant to be viewed all at once under direct light, but rather to be seen in bits and pieces, a little at a time, as if softly lit from within. The most gorgeous patterns were mostly to be hidden in darkness, to draw out inexpressible feelings and unconscious emotions. In the dim light of a candlelit room, even the most impatient person can be lured into a meditative state, as the reflected light in the glossy lacquer surface flickers with the arrival of each occasional breeze.

Without the lacquerware in the gloomy room, how diminished would be the dream world of mysterious illumination that is created by the candle or lamp, as the fluttering glow beats the pulse of the night? Indeed, the light is seen indistinctly, delicately quivering here and there like slender liquid streams that flow across the tatami and empty into still pools, weaving a design that lacquers the very night itself. Perhaps ceramics are not bad as tableware, but they don't have the depth, the shadows that are inherent in lacquerware. Ceramics are heavy and cold to the touch; they are not conducive to serving hot food as they quickly conduct heat, and make a great clatter when used. Lacquerware is light, soft to the touch and almost silent during use.

I know of nothing more perfect than the sensation of warmth and the weight of the liquid when I pick up a bowl of clear

*suimono* broth. It is almost like holding a plump newborn baby in your hands. There are perfectly good reasons why we still prefer lacquerware for suimono. First, when the lid is removed, a Chinaware bowl will reveal the contents and the colors of the dish inside to everyone. The wonderful feeling that comes from using lacquerware takes place in the moment between removing the lid and soundlessly bringing the bowl to your lips. It is a time to gaze at the contents that have settled silently in the deep, dark recesses of the bottom of the bowl, and appreciate how the color of the lacquer matches that of the broth. It is impossible to distinguish what is there in the darkness, but one feels the slow liquid movement of the broth in the bowl, sees the slight beads of moisture at the bowl's edge, then notices the steam rising as it carries the aroma—offering a faint hint of the taste before the soup even enters the mouth. What a difference between this and the Western style of serving soup in a pallid shallow bowl. It is a moment of mystery, a hint of Zen.

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**Bowls of broth**

Whenever I sit in front of a bowl of suimono, the hum of the bowl penetrates the deepest recesses of my ear like the sound of a distant insect. As I savor the idea of what I'm about to eat, I am captivated, on the brink of a meditative state. My experience must be similar to that of a tea master, when the sound of a boiling tea kettle recalls the wind blowing through

the pines of Onoe as he enters the selfless state of mind necessary for the ceremony. It is said that Japanese cuisine is something to be viewed rather than eaten, but I believe it goes beyond that. It should be meditated upon. It is the music of silence, a composition by the ensemble of lacquered bowl and darkness, interrupted only by the light of a flickering candle.

In Natsume Soseki's novel, *Pillow of Grass*, he praises the color of the Japanese *yokan*, a gelatine dessert made of sweet bean paste. Isn't this also something conducive to meditation? Similar in appearance to the luminosity of jade, with its cloudy surface and translucent depths dreamily soaking up the sunlight, there is certainly nothing in Western confectionery that can compare to yokan's complexity and color tone. The simplicity and superficiality of Western cakes and candies doesn't even come close. It particularly calls for meditation when it is served on a lacquerware dish, as one can barely differentiate between the color tones of the surface of the yokan and darkness in which it is submerged. Putting a smooth, cool piece in the mouth is like plucking a sweet fragment from the room's darkness to dissolve upon the tongue, as even an average yokan takes on an indescribable depth of flavor.

Other countries very likely attempt to harmonize their cuisines with the color of the tableware and the color of the walls, but to dine on Japanese food in a bright place on white tableware diminishes one's appetite by half. To ponder the color of our everyday breakfast staple of red miso soup, for example, is to understand its origins in the dim interiors of the houses of

the past. I attended a tea ceremony once where miso soup was served, and that muddy, red clay-colored soup that I'd always eaten without a thought took on a most appetizing complexion and depth when viewed in the black lacquerware bowl under the unsteady light of a flickering candle. The same can be said of soy sauce. For sashimi, pickles and boiled greens, the people of the Kansai area use a dark soy sauce called *tamari*—a glossy, viscous liquid that imbues a wealth of shadows, a superb harmony in its darkness. Likewise, the color tones of paler dishes, like light-brown miso, tofu, *kamaboko* fish cakes, taro root and whitefish, can never truly come alive in brightly lit surroundings.

And then, of course, there's the rice. A shiny, black-lacquered rice box placed in a darkened part of the room is not only an item of beauty, but can remarkably stimulate the appetite. As the lid is promptly lifted and warm steam rises from the pure white mound of freshly cooked rice in its black container, each and every grain glistens like a pearl. It is a sight that all Japanese appreciate for the blessings of this food passed down over the ages. Our cuisine has always been based on shadows, inseparable from darkness.

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**The enigma of shadows**

While I am a complete layman when it comes to architecture, I've heard that the beauty of the West's Gothic cathedrals is considered to reside in the way they are constructed to reach toward the heavens with their tapering spires. On the contrary,

Japanese temples are constructed by raising massive tiled roofs with large overhanging eaves, creating deep spacious shadows in which the rest of the temple structure stands. This style is seen not only with temples, but in traditional buildings from palaces to ordinary people's homes; the first thing to strike the eye on approach are large tiled or thatched roofs and, floating under the eaves, a deep darkness. Even at midday, the space below the eaves is cave-like, rendering the entrance, doors, windows, walls and pillars almost invisible.

What is equally true of the grand architecture of such temples as Kyoto's Chion-in and Honganji and some farmer's house in the countryside is that, if you compare the traditional buildings from the eaves up and the eaves down, the roofs are what communicate the feeling of weight, height and area more than the structure itself. Indeed, to build a Japanese home, we first open an umbrella to create shade over the location, and in the dim light of that shadow we construct our house. It's not that Western homes lack roofs, of course, but their main purpose is to shut out the moisture that comes from rain and dew rather than to shield the structure from the sunlight. From the exterior of a Western home, one can tell that an attempt has been made to minimize the interior shadows as much as possible while maximizing the amount that is exposed to light. And if the Japanese style of roof can be compared to an umbrella, the Western roof can be compared to a hat—a small, newsboy style of cap at that, with as small a visor as possible to permit the sunlight to reach far beneath the eaves.

There may be a number of reasons why the eaves of Japanese houses are made so deep—including the climate, the environment and the materials used in construction. Despite the fact that Japanese must have known that brighter rooms would be more convenient than dim ones, not using materials like bricks, glass or cement, for example, meant that it was necessary to build deep eaves as protection from horizontal wind and rainstorms. But what we know as beauty grows out of life's practicalities, and before long our ancestors unwittingly began to find beauty in the shadows, eventually coming to expect it. In fact, the beauty of a tatami room was born out of the complexity of the shades found within. When Westerners see such a room they are often stunned by the simplicity, the ashen walls absent of ornamentation. They may feel let down by the effect, but that is only because they've failed to grasp the enigma of shadows. Beyond the main rooms, so protected from the sun's rays, we even extend the eaves and put an *engawa* porch area to keep daylight ever more distant from the interior, which is further protected by the *shoji* doors, allowing only the dimmest reflection of light to steal in from the garden.

The key element behind the beauty of the *zashiki* tatami room is nothing more than this indirect, subdued illumination. We purposely make the walls of soil and sand to let the frail, melancholic, ephemeral light saturate the solemn composure of their earthy tones. Places like the storehouse, kitchen and hallways may be done in a more lustrous plaster, but the walls of the zashiki are almost always done in this earthy, sandy fin-

ish. More luster would surely destroy the soft, gentle charm that comes from the feeble light. We will forever find great pleasure watching the intimate scene of the end of the day's natural light clinging stubbornly to the last moments of life on a dusky wall. For us, this faint light and gloom is far superior to any ornamentation, and because we never tire of contemplating this fragile sight, of course, we finish the walls in monochromatic earthy tones of sandy plaster so as not to disturb it.

While the color of the walls is different in every zashiki, the variance is so slight as to be negligible. It is not so much a difference in color but in shade, so that the variation seems to exist only in the mood of the viewer. Moreover, because of that faint variance in the walls, the shadows of each room take on a hue of their own.

Then there is the alcove known as the *tokonoma*, with its hanging scroll and decorative flower arrangement. The scroll and flowers themselves, however, serve not so much to ornament but to add depth to the shadows. The mounting of the scroll is extremely important, since we attach great value to the harmony between the scroll and the walls of the tokonoma. While the content of the calligraphy or painting and the skill of the artist are equally important, if the mounting is poor, detracting from its rapport with the wall, even a masterpiece will lose its value as a hanging scroll. On the other hand, proper mounting on even an average scroll will bring great harmony to the room, giving life to the art and dramatically improving the zashiki's appearance.

From where does that harmony come in the case of an unex-

ceptional piece of art or calligraphy? It's inevitably in the aged look of the artist's paper, the ink and the mounting fabric; it is this look of antiquity that creates the appropriate equilibrium between the darkness of the tokonoma and the room. We have often visited the famous temples of Kyoto and Nara, where treasured scrolls are hung in the alcoves of the innermost recesses, to find those rooms so very gloomy even at midday that it is difficult to make out the image. While listening to the guide's explanation, we try to follow the invisible strokes of ink, and imagine a splendid piece of art, but the faded old scroll and the dim confines of the alcove conspire in their obscurity. Rather than being a distraction, however, the indistinctness of the image is a perfect fit. The picture offers another refined surface for receiving the weak unsteady light, the same role that is played by the sandy surface of the plastered walls. Here, age and patina are of extreme importance. Contemporary works, even ink paintings or pastels, can—without the most extremely careful selection—utterly destroy the shadowy environs of the tokonoma alcove.

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**An uncanny silence**

If a Japanese zashiki were to be compared to a *sumie* ink painting, then the shoji paper doors would be the faintest regions of ink wash and the tokonoma would represent the parts where the ink was at its densest. Every time I look upon a tokonama, I am struck by the deep understanding of the mysteries of shadow

and the ingenious usage of light and shade. The tokonoma's appeal doesn't come from any particular contrivance. The simple features of the wood and the walls come together to form a space set back from the room, and dim light is absorbed into the recess, giving form to indistinct nooks and crannies. Still, when we gaze upon the darkness that fills the space behind the tokonoma's lintel, around the flower arrangement or under the shelves, even though we know it is nothing but shadow, we get the impression that it is in this space alone that we can be totally submerged in silence, as if gifted by the darkness with an immutable and eternal tranquility.

I think when Westerners speak of the "mysteries of the Orient" they are very likely referring to the uncanny silence of these spaces. After all, as young children even we felt chills and an unconscious foreboding when we looked into the depths of the inner rooms' alcoves where daylight had never penetrated. But whence that mystery? In the end, it is the magic of shadow that is the key to unlocking the puzzle. If you ignore all the darkness created by the nooks and crannies, the tokonoma simply becomes an empty space. The genius of our ancestors lies in their decision to shield this space of "nothingness" from light specifically to create a world of shadow, its subtle profundity far surpassing that of any kind of wall painting or ornamentation.

While that may sound like a simple technique, it is in no way easy to do. It's not hard to imagine the painful attention that was given to each and every invisible detail: the location of the window in the shelving recess next to the alcove, for example,

or the depth of the crossbeam and the height of the tokonoma floor. But for me, of particular interest is the dim light coming through the shoji of the *shoin*, or study alcove. There is where I halt and completely forget the passage of time. Originally, the study alcove, as its name suggests, was a space with a window meant for reading; over time it has come to refer to a source of illumination for the tokonoma, though in most cases, rather than lighting the space, it works instead to temper any natural light entering from the side, filtering it through the shoji. And, to be sure, it is a cold and lonesome hue of backlight that shines on the rear of the paper panels. Any sunlight from the garden that has struggled to make its way under the eaves and down the long corridors has, by this time, lost its complexion and power to illuminate, and is capable of little more than drawing attention to the pale whiteness of the shoji.

I often pause to gaze at the surface of the paper, which while transferring light has no feeling of radiance. In fact, the distance from the garden of the zashiki in the large temples dilutes the daylight to such a degree that its pale appearance is almost always the same regardless of season—or whether it is fair weather or foul, morning, noon or night. What appear to be permanent shadows occupy the nooks created by the wooden frames of each panel of the shoji doors, as if the dust that has gathered there has been indelibly ingrained into the paper itself.

I find myself looking in wonder at this dreamlike glow, and a murky haze appears before my eyes as I feel my eyesight weakening. The light reflecting off the dim white paper lacks

the power to disperse the dense blackness of the tokonoma; the darkness repels the light, creating a world of confusion with no divide between light and darkness. Have you not, upon entering such a zashiki, felt a certain meaningful gravity that comes from encountering the fragile light within, so different in character to the normal sunlight outside? Have you not experienced a fear of the eternal, a feeling that you might lose all awareness of time for months and years, and come out to find yourself very old, with a head of white hair?

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**Reflections in darkness**

Readers will surely have seen, when they enter the deep interiors of large traditional Japanese structures where sunlight never penetrates, how the gold leaf of certain doors and folding screens somehow captures the very edge of light from the distant garden, and they will have felt the dream-like trance induced by its reflection. To me, there is no more melancholy beauty than the sight of that frail golden glow emerging from the gloom, like a sunset on the distant horizon. I have walked past such a sight, only to return again and again, for as one moves away, the gold on the paper's surface glows even brighter. Not in a busy flickering, dazzling way, but steadily over time, like the changing complexion of a giant's face. As one moves away, we suddenly discover that what was initially the rather dull reflection of the gold leaf begins to gleam as if

on fire, and we are faced with the mystery of how so much light is able to be found in these dark reaches.

Now I understand why the ancients gilded the statues of Buddha in gold flake and the nobles papered the walls of their homes with it. Living in brightly lit homes, it is hard for us to truly understand the beauty of gold. But for our ancestors, living in darkness, it was not just an enchantment with the metal, but a choice that had practical value as a reflector in a room with limited light. In other words, they saw the use of gold and gold flake not as a luxury, but as a way to compensate for the lack of light. What seems to be their strange fixation on gold is explained by the fact that silver and other metals lose their luster, while gold retains its ability to illuminate the darkness with its brilliance for a very long time.

Earlier, I wrote that lacquerware decorated with gold was meant for viewing in dark places. It's now known that the same motive was behind our ancestors' use of gold thread in textiles. The gold brocade of monks' stoles is the best example. Today, the main buildings of most local temples are well lit in order to appeal to the masses, and such garments will appear vain and garish, of little virtue regardless of the high priest's character. But if one attends a Buddhist rite at one of the historic temples that follow the traditional style, one will notice how well the gold harmonizes with the wrinkled skin of the elderly priest in the flickering light of the candle offerings, and how it brings solemnity to the occasion. As with lacquerware, most of the gaudy pattern is concealed in the darkness, and the gleam of the gold and silver

threads appears only now and then, in brief, fleeting moments.

I may be the only person who feels this way, but I believe that nothing goes better with Japanese skin tones than the costumes of Noh theater. Most of the costumes are simply dazzling, dripping in gold and silver, and although the actors do not have their faces done in white powder makeup like Kabuki actors, every time I attend Noh I find myself admiring how the Japanese complexion is portrayed with such charm, the tanned brown skin with a trace of red so characteristic of Japanese, the ivory-white face tinged with amber. The gold and silver woven and embroidered in the elaborate costumes is most becoming, but the forest green or persimmon of the hunting robes of the nobility, the short, formal *suikan* robes and ceremonial hemp robes of the Muromachi Period, and the plain white of the quilted silk are particularly attractive alongside the Japanese complexion. This combination is set off to particular advantage when the actor is a handsome young man with skin of a delicate texture and the kind of complexion that comes with all the glow of youth, though its seductive quality is, naturally, different from that of a woman.

It is easy to comprehend why the feudal lords of the past were overcome by the beauty of their favorite youths. The splendor of the Kabuki costumes used in historical dramas and dances is equal to those of the Noh theater, and Kabuki is thought to have far greater sex appeal, but the more familiar one becomes with them, the more one realizes that the opposite is true. I won't disagree—at first glance Kabuki appears

more erotic, more visually striking. But with the bright Western stage lighting of today's Kabuki, those gaudy colors are apt to fall into the realm of the vulgar and the tiresome.

If this is true regarding the costumes, it is even more so with the make-up. While the Kabuki actor's face may have a temporary beauty, it is, after all, a face that has been invented, with none of the natural allure of unadorned flesh. On stage, the Noh actor's face, neck and hands are free of make-up. The look that captivates us is the very essence of the man, and our eyes are not deceived. With Noh actors, there is never the disillusionment one feels upon seeing the faces of those Kabuki actors who play the parts of women or handsome men after they've removed their makeup. Instead, we are awed at how the actors—whose skin has the same coloring as ours—look so spectacular in that ostentatious attire of the feudal era, clothing that would seem at first glance to be completely unflattering.

I once saw the actor Iwao Kongo play the part of the emperor's consort Yohiki in the Noh play, *Kotei*, and I'll never forget the beauty of his hands just peeking out from the cuffs of his sleeves. I found myself frequently looking at my own hands where they lay resting on my lap. The beauty of his hands was in the subtle movements of his palm, reaching from his wrist to his fingertips. It was a technique that he must have consciously employed, but even so, the color of his skin seemed to glow from inside with a flushed brilliance whose origins I found impossible to fathom. After all, in most respects his hands were those of an average Japanese, no different in color and luster than the

ones that lay upon my lap. Two or three times I compared his hands with my own. While Kongo's hands had taken on a mysterious beauty up on stage, mine remained plain, old hands.

It is not only in Kongo's case that this happens. With Noh, very little of the body is visible outside the costume: only the face, a bit of the neck and the hands from the wrist—and when wearing a mask in a role such as Yohiki's, even the face is hidden. Yet, oddly, those few areas make a huge impression. The experience with Kongo had a particularly strong impact on me, but it is also true of most Noh actors, who charm us with the attraction of hands that we wouldn't give even a glance if we were to see them in contemporary clothing.

I'm not just talking about young actors or handsome ones. I do not imagine, for example, ever finding myself attracted to the lips of an average man. But at the Noh theater, their deep red coloring and moist nature take on a far more pervasive sensuality than the painted lips of a woman. This may result from the actor's habit of licking his lips to keep them moist during the chanting, but that's not all of it.

The red tone of a child actor's flushed cheeks, too, are a truly vivid sight. In my experience, this is particularly so when they are seen in combination with costumes that are mostly green. While this is, of course, the case for actors with fair skin tones, the reddish tinge is most strikingly beautiful on the face of dark-skinned actors. On a fair-skinned child, the red and white offer too much of a contrast, and the dark, somber tones of the Noh costume have too strong an effect. The red is less conspicuous on

the skin of a dark-skinned child, and the costume and face beautifully complement the other. This perfect combination of the subdued, tasteful browns and greens with the skin of the yellow race appears to great advantage in this refreshing public display.

I don't know of any other examples where beauty is created in this way, but if the Noh theater were to use modern stage lighting like Kabuki, the whole aesthetic beauty would be absolutely shattered in the harsh glare of the lights. It is essential for the Noh stage to maintain the darkness of its ancient traditions, so the older the theater building is, the better. The stage floor should have a natural luster, the posts and the panel at the back of the stage should appear shiny black, the darkness that stretches from the rafters to the edge of the eaves should hang over the actors like a huge temple bell suspended overhead. This is the most suitable place for a performance. From that perspective, while Noh's recent ventures into auditoriums and public concert halls are fine as far as it goes, most of its distinctive characteristics disappear in such venues.

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**Shadows on the stage**

The darkness that Noh is cloaked in and the beauty that is born from it create a peculiar shadowy world that we can only see on the stage. Long ago, however, this world was not far removed from everyday life. Back then, the darkness of the Noh stage was the same as the darkness that came with typical resi-

dential architecture, and the pattern and coloring of the costumes—while perhaps more garish—were generally similar to the clothing worn by the nobles and lords of the day. Imagining how much more beautiful the people were back then, especially considering the extravagant attire of the warriors of the Sengoku and Momoyama periods, is an ecstatic feeling. It was a manifestation of the beauty of the male form at its finest. What gallant yet somber figures these ancient warriors must have been as they made their way, rain soaked and windblown, from battlefield to battlefield, the strong bones of their bronze, ruddy faces set off by the earthy tones and lustrous embroidery of full samurai finery emblazoned with their family crests.

Perhaps all Noh aficionados have to some extent found enjoyment in associations like these, envisioning how the colorful world of the stage actually existed at one time. Such nostalgia for the old days adds an allure beyond the drama as it is performed. On the other hand, Kabuki is, in the end, a world of fiction that has nothing to do with the essential nature of beauty. This is not only true regarding male beauty, but even more so in relation to female beauty. We don't believe that women ever appeared as we see them portrayed today on the Kabuki stage. It may be true that the female roles of Noh, portrayed by masked actors, are far from realistic, but in Kabuki drama there is not the slightest hint of reality in the female roles. This is largely the result of the brightly lit Kabuki stage, so it is possible that the female

roles may have appeared more realistic in the age before modern lighting facilities, when the stage was dimly lit by candles and lanterns.

There are those who say that Kabuki actors of today don't have the feminine qualities of past generations, but this isn't necessarily the fault of the actors' talents or looks. If actors of old had to appear under the dazzling bright lighting of today, surely their harsh masculine lines would be highlighted rather than concealed as they once were behind the more suitable darkness of the stages of old. I became keenly aware of this when I saw the actor Baiko at the end of his career in the role of the young lover, Okaru, and was struck by how the unnecessary, excessive lighting had destroyed the beauty of Kabuki.

An expert from Osaka once told me that long after electricity was introduced in the Meiji Period, the Bunraku puppet theater had continued to use lamps for stage lighting—a style far more richly poignant. I had always felt that the puppets of Bunraku appeared much more realistic than the actors playing female roles in a Kabuki drama, so a chill came over me when I imagined the exceptional beauty of those venerable stages of the past: how the faint illumination from the lamps would have erased the puppets' wooden characteristics and muted the gleam of the white pigment on their faces, lending an incredible ethereal quality to the scene.

**The woman of old**

It is well known that the female puppets of the Bunraku theater consist of only a face and hands. What would be the trunk and legs are hidden within a long kimono, into which the puppeteers insert their hands to manipulate the puppet, creating a sense of mobility. I think this resembles the reality of the day, since women in the past only existed publicly above the collar and beyond the hem of the kimono, the rest being entirely shrouded. At that time, women of the middle and upper classes rarely left their homes, and when they did they would avoid exposure to the eyes of the public by concealing themselves in the dark interiors of their palanquins. Usually they would spend all hours of the day and night inside one room of their dark residences—their bodies hidden in the gloom, their faces the only indication of their existence.

The men back then dressed far more flamboyantly than today, but not the women. The wives and daughters of merchants in town dressed in a remarkably plain manner. In a sense, their clothing was itself a part of the darkness, a link between the face and the hidden darkness of the body. The style of makeup back then, including the blackening of the teeth, one might think, was also meant to fill everything but the white of the face with that darkness, even going so far as to include the oral cavity. It is no longer possible to see examples of this ideal of beauty outside a visit to a special place like Sumiya, the elite house of pleasure in Shimabara. But I remember when I was very young, watching my mother sewing in the

dim light from the garden in the back room of our house in Nihonbashi, and when I think of her face I can imagine to some extent the manner of the women of years ago. This would have been in the 1880s, when most of the old Tokyo-style townhouses were still quite dark and gloomy.

At that time, most of the elderly women, including my mother, my aunt and other relatives, still blackened their teeth. I don't exactly remember what my mother wore around the house every day, but she would inevitably don an earthy gray kimono with a finely detailed pattern when she went out. She was quite short, less than five feet tall, a normal height for women back then. And while I have somewhat fuzzy recollections of her face, the backs of her hands and her feet, I have no memory of the rest of her physique. It's almost as if the women of her day had little in the way of bodies at all.

If my thoughts of her are prompted by anything it would be the Chugu-ji temple's statue of the Kannon Goddess of Mercy, which I believe depicts the prototypical Japanese female form as it was in the past. Paper-thin breasts on a chest that is flat as a board above a narrow waist; the line of the spine, lower back, and buttocks perfectly straight with no dips or swells; the torso so out of balance in comparison with the face, hands and feet and with so little substance that it seems more like a stumpy pole than a body of flesh—these features mark the general female form of old. There are some of these figures around even today, like the dowager of an old traditional household or some geisha, and when I see them I'm reminded of the trunk of

a wooden doll. In truth, they are just poles on which clothing may be hung and nothing more, a staff upon which layers of clothing are stacked to create substance, and when the clothing is removed, like a doll, only the unshapely core is left.

At the time, though, that was enough. For those women living in darkness, no body was necessary. All that was needed was a pale white face. It must be difficult for those who celebrate the physical beauty of the radiant modern woman to appreciate the ghostly beauty of the woman of the past. Some might even believe the latter is not true beauty, but rather a deception created by the dim light. But as I've stated before, we Easterners can, through the proper placement of shadows, create beauty in the most unremarkable of places.

An old song goes like this: "Gather and tie up brushwood and you can build a cottage; unbound, it returns to being a field." This is a reflection of our way of thinking: beauty lies not in the object itself, but in the pattern of the shadows created by each object, the light and the darkness. A lightbulb luminescent in the darkness may emit a certain brilliance, but a precious jewel seen under broad daylight loses its appeal. I believe beauty cannot exist without shadow, and our ancestors saw women as having an inextricable relationship with darkness. Like lacquerware decorated with gold and mother of pearl, the female form was submerged as much as possible in darkness, hidden within the recesses of the long sleeves and long skirt of the kimono, with the face as the one and only prominent feature.

Ah, I see. Perhaps that asymmetrical, flat body is unattract-

ive compared to that of the Western woman. But our thoughts do not reach to places we cannot see, and that which we cannot see does not exist. For those who go out of their way to look for the unattractive, it is like turning a one hundred-watt bulb toward a teahouse tokonoma—all the beauty that resides there will be driven away.

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But why is this tendency to pursue beauty in the depths of shadow so strong among Easterners? After all, the West also experienced ages without electricity, natural gas or petroleum.

**Beauty in the dark**

Yet, in my limited knowledge there is nothing in their culture about an inclination for finding joy in shadows.

From long ago, for example, Japanese ghosts were noted for having no feet, but while Western ghosts have feet, their whole bodies appear transparent. As this minor point illustrates, our fantasies exist in pitch-black darkness, while even the Western spirits are clear as glass. The colors of traditionally crafted goods for our daily use are a conglomeration of darkness, while the favored colors in the West are layers of the sun's rays. We love silver and copperware for their propensity to take on a patina, while Westerners see such surfaces as unclean and unhygienic, instead polishing them to a glossy finish. They avoid making nooks in rooms where shadows could lurk and paint their ceilings and walls in pastel colors.

We create wooded gardens with thick shrubbery; they prefer broad flat expanses of lawn.

So what are the causes of such discrepancies in taste? After much thought, I've come to believe that Easterners pursue satisfaction within the environment in which we were placed, and make a show of finding contentment with the present conditions. We don't feel discontent with darkness, but resign ourselves to it. If there is little light, then there is little light—so we turn instead to contemplate the darkness and discover the beauty that is to be found there.

The desire to improve their environment never ceases with enterprising Westerners. From candles to lamps, from lamps to gaslight, from gaslight to electricity, the Westerner is on a constant quest for brightness, taking pains to eliminate even the slightest trace of shadow. That is likely where the discrepancy in our character lies. But I would also like to consider the difference in the color of our skin. Japanese have long believed that a lighter shade of skin was more precious, more beautiful than dark, but there is a difference between our white skin and that of Caucasians. If you look closely at individuals, you will find Japanese who are whiter than Caucasians and Caucasians who are darker than Japanese, but the manner of whiteness and darkness differs.

I used to live in the Yamate area of Yokohama, and would often join foreigners from the nearby settlement in various modes of entertainment—including events at banquets and dance halls—at all times of the day and night. Up close, their

skin didn't seem so white, but from afar, the difference between their skin and that of the Japanese was striking. Though there were Japanese ladies whose evening dress was the equal to theirs, and whose skin was arguably whiter, in surveying the entire room I could clearly see the distinction, even if one Japanese woman was mingling with the Westerners on her own.

No matter how white the skin of the Japanese woman, I perceived a slight cloudiness to it. While they were just like Westerners in the way they applied makeup, covering every exposed area of their bodies with thick powder—including their backs and arms all the way up to the armpit—they could never erase the darkness that remained pooled under the skin's surface. It was as obvious as the sediment at the bottom of a pool of crystal clear water seen from above. There were nooks that seemed to collect a darkening dust, especially in the spaces between the fingers, around the nose, in the nape of the neck and along the spine. Even if the surface of a Westerner's skin was murky, there was a brightness in its depths, and nowhere on their body were such drab shadows visible. Running from the top of their heads to their fingertips was an uncontaminated white. If a Japanese penetrated one of their gatherings, it was like the thin stain of an ink spot on a sheet of white paper, and even to us the intruder appeared as an eyesore, and left us feeling ill at ease.

Seen from this perspective, one can appreciate the psychology that led to the white race's ostracism of non-whites in the past. Among the white people were anxious types bothered even by the small stain that one or two people of color might

bring to a social gathering. I don't know much about the situation today, but during the Civil War in the U.S., when the most violent persecution of blacks took place, there was great hatred and contempt directed not only against blacks, but against any mixed race. Those with the slightest taint of black blood—be it half or one-third or one-fourth or one-eighth or one-sixteenth or one-thirty-second—were tracked down and persecuted. The trackers' relentless eyes wouldn't miss the slightest hint of color lurking under the surface of the pure white skin—challenging even those who might look white, at first glance, but had a black ancestor two or three generations back.

All of this is meant to illustrate just how deep the relationship is between shadows and we of the yellow race. Everyone wants to show themselves to the best advantage, so we use clouded hues for the articles of our daily necessities and feel natural submerging ourselves in dark environs. Our ancestors may not have been aware of the shadow upon their skin, nor of the existence of an even whiter race, but they did possess a natural feel for color that gave birth to this predilection.

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**The world of shadows**

Our ancestors exerted their influence over the bright outside world from top to bottom and in all directions, first creating a world of shadow, then confining woman to its dark interior, assured of her status as the palest in the world. If whiteness of skin was the ultimate mark of feminine beauty, then what they

did was inevitable, and far be it from me to second guess their conclusion. As the color of Caucasian hair is light, so the color of our hair is black—a fact of nature that illuminated for us the very laws of darkness which our ancestors intuitively used to create contrast, making our yellow faces seem white. Weren't tooth blackening, which I mentioned earlier, and the ancient practice of shaving eyebrows simply a means of enhancing this contrast by making the face more prominent?

What I find most admirable though is the iridescent emerald lipstick. It's rarely seen these days even on the geisha of Kyoto's Gion district, but surely it is impossible to untangle the mystery of its appeal without imagining its crimson appearance in the dim light of a fluttering candle. The women of old would purposely paint over their red lips in that greenish black color, and frame themselves with ornaments inlayed with mother of pearl, stealing any hint of ruddiness from their voluptuous faces. I can imagine no visage more white than that of a young girl in the flickering shadows of a lantern, the gleam of teeth the color of black lacquer occasionally glimpsed from between her will-o'-the-wisp-like lips when she smiles. If only in this illusionary scene that I paint in my mind, her face is far whiter than that of any Caucasian woman. For while the white of Caucasians is transparent, obvious and rather mundane, hers is otherworldly. It is, perhaps, a whiteness that does not even exist—but is only a prank played by the darkness and light, limited to that place and time. But that's good enough for us; we could not wish for anything more.

Here I'd like to touch on the other half of this facial whiteness—the shade of darkness that surrounds and defines it.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to take a guest from Tokyo to the Sumiya house of pleasure in Shimabara, where I glimpsed a certain darkness that I will never forget. It was in a spacious zashiki called the Matsunoma, or "Pine Room," later destroyed in a fire. The size of the room, which was only illuminated by the light from one candle, gave far more depth to the darkness than would be experienced in a smaller one. When I entered, a middle-aged waitress, eyebrows shaved and teeth blackened, was kneeling next to a candlestick in front of a large partition screen. The illuminated world was limited to a space of about two tatami mats, and the darkness behind the screen seemed to descend from the heights of the ceiling, a dense monotone of shadow that hung down from above. The faltering light from the candle was unable to pierce its thickness, repulsed as if it had hit a solid black wall.

Have any of my readers seen this shade of darkness illuminated by candlelight? It was a substance somehow different than that, say, of the darkness one might experience on the road at night. It looked to me as if it were made up of minute specks of ash, each individual particle glittering with all the radiance of a rainbow, threatening to penetrate my eyeballs, and I began, unconsciously, to blink.

These days, smaller formal rooms are the trend—just ten, eight or six mats—so even if a candle is used, one cannot experience that particular shade of darkness in such confines. But in the old palaces and the brothel quarters, the ceilings were high, the corridors were long and wide and the tatami-matted

zashiki were so vast that they were regularly partitioned off for use. The darkness would always enshroud those interiors like a fog—leaving the high-class court ladies of those days totally immersed, submerged in those ashy black depths.

I once wrote in my collection of essays, *Ishoanzuihitsu*, of how the people of today, long accustomed to the bright gleam of electric light, have forgotten the existence of such darkness. That visible darkness of the interior created a mood of something fluttering, shimmering, hallucinatory—often more frightening than the darkness outside. It was a darkness populated by mountain demons and *yokai*—and wasn't the woman veiled behind thick curtains and endless layers of dividing screens and sliding doors one of their kind? Surely the darkness enveloped her, suffusing every opening: her collar, the cuffs of her sleeves, the hem of her kimono. Or maybe it was the reverse, the darkness emerging from her mouth with its blackened teeth and from the ends of her black hair, spat out like a thread from a spider.

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**A cool breeze in total darkness**

Several years ago, upon his return from Paris, the novelist Musoan Takebayashi remarked that he found Tokyo and Osaka exceptionally bright compared to cities in Europe. Even in the center of the Champs Elysees, there were houses still lit by lamps, whereas you would have to go to the most remote mountainous reaches of Japan to find such a place. It's very likely that out of all the countries in the world, Japan and

the United States are the most wasteful with electric lighting, he noted, because Japan wants to imitate America in every way. That was four or five years ago, before the fad for neon signs took off, so he'll be even more startled the next time he returns.

I heard a story from Yamamoto, president of Kaizo Publishing, about his experience accompanying Albert Einstein on a trip to the Kyoto area. They were on the train in the vicinity of Ishiyama, and the professor, looking out the window at the scenery, said "Ah, how wasteful." When he was asked about it, he pointed to all the electric lights on the lampposts everywhere that were still lit at midday. Yamamoto's comment was that "Einstein was being overly sensitive because he's Jewish," but it's true that Japan shows little restraint with its use of electricity compared to European countries.

I have another interesting story that has to do with the Ishiyama area. Earlier this fall, I struggled to come up with a good place for moon viewing before finally settling on Ishiyama Temple. The day before the night of the full moon, an article in the newspaper reported that, for the pleasure of the moon-viewing public, the temple was installing loudspeakers in the forest so they could serenade visitors with a recording of "Moonlight Sonata." Upon reading this, I immediately canceled my trip. I was troubled by the idea of loudspeakers, but with that mindset, I feared they would undoubtedly decorate the mountain with illuminations in an attempt to create a lively atmosphere. I remember another ruined moon viewing one year, when I made plans to rent a boat on the night of the full moon and float on the pond of Suma Temple. The party assembled with our lacquered

boxes of food and we set out, only to find that the pond had been encircled by a gaudy display of multi-colored lights, leaving us to only imagine the view of the moon.

In recent years, we've become numbed by our fascination with the electric light, and unexpectedly have become impervious to the negative aspects of excessive lighting. Maybe two minds can be had regarding the situation with moon-viewing, but teahouses, restaurants, inns and hotels definitely consume far too much electricity. While some illumination may be required to attract customers, turning on the illumination in summertime, when it is still light, is not only useless, but it generates heat. This has often perplexed me in the summer, when it is cool outdoors but ridiculously hot inside, almost invariably because there are either too many lights or they are too strong. Turn them off as an experiment and the room quickly cools off. Yet, incredibly, neither the proprietors nor the customers seem to realize this. It is logical that while rooms should be brightly lit in the winter, the lights should be somewhat dimmer during the summer. Not only will it feel cooler, but the lights won't attract insects. Yet people still turn on lots of lights—then, because it gets hot, switch on the fan. Just thinking about it gets me steamed up. The heat in a Japanese room is bearable because it quickly disperses, but there is poor ventilation in Western-style hotels and the beds, walls and ceilings absorb and reflect the heat from all directions, rendering it intolerable.

One unfortunate example is the lobby of the Miyako Hotel in Kyoto, as anyone who has visited there on a summer evening

would agree. It sits on a hill facing north, offering a sweeping view of Mt. Hiei, Nioigatake, the pagoda of Kurodani Temple, ample forests and the green expanse of Higashiyama—and because the vista should feel so refreshing, it ends up being all the more disappointing. One heads there on a summer evening with thoughts of being immersed in an exhilarating mood, graced by purple mountains and crystal clear streams, yearning for the cool breeze at the lookout. Instead, one is met with the sight of a white ceiling studded here and there with huge opal glass fixtures and the hot blaze of garish lighting. Because of the recent trend of low ceilings in Western-style buildings, it's as if balls of fire are spinning just above one's head—and the word "hot" cannot do justice to the sensation. The closer to the ceiling, the hotter it gets, and we start to roast, starting from the head to the back of the neck and all the way down the body. Moreover, while just one of those fireballs would be more than enough to illuminate the spacious area, there are three or four of them shining down from the ceiling in addition to innumerable smaller lights running along the walls and columns, with no purpose for the lot of them other than to eradicate any hint of darkness from every nook and cranny.

Not a shred of shadow remains, and the white walls, red columns, and the garish, mosaic-patterned floor penetrate one's eyes like a freshly printed lithograph. It is all positively sweltering. Entering the room from the corridor, the difference in temperature is clearly obvious, and even if some cool night air manages to make its way into the room, it is quickly

transformed into a hot breeze, and nothing changes. I have frequently stayed at the hotel, and have fond memories, so my advice is meant to be kind-hearted. But really, to have such a strategic location for scenic views, an optimum place to enjoy the summer breezes, and to have it all destroyed by the electric lighting is a total waste. Not only Japanese, but Westerners too, despite their preference for bright places, cannot help but be dumbfounded by that heat, and would instantly recognize the difference that could be made simply by reducing the lighting.

This is only one example, of course, and the problem is hardly limited to that hotel. While the indirect lighting at the Imperial Hotel is acceptable, even that could be turned down a bit in the summertime. The style of interior lighting these days has nothing to do with being able to read or write or sew, but is an expense paid solely to erase the shadows from every corner of the room, a way of thinking that is incompatible with the concept of beauty we find in the traditional Japanese room.

For an average household, it is financially sound to economize on electricity, but buildings in the service industries tend to use far too much lighting—from the front gate to the entrance hall, corridors, stairs and garden—making everything from the rooms to the bottom of the stones of the garden seem shallow and superficial. I suppose lights can help one keep warm in the wintertime, but no matter how much one wants to escape to a secluded resort on a hot summer evening, at most inns these days one will confront the same sad situation found at the Miyako. I've discovered that the best solution is to stay home, open

the shutters on all four sides, and stretch out under a mosquito net where I can enjoy the cool breeze in total darkness.

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**Final grumblings**

I recently read an article in a British paper or magazine about some older women griping about how they had looked after their elders when they were young, while the young women of today seem to only care about themselves and treat older people as if they were filthy and unapproachable. They were lamenting how the character of young people today is so different from the past, and while I found it admirable that older people in other countries shared some of my feelings, it's a fact that as humans age they are always going to believe that things were better in prior days. The elders of the last century yearned for the era of two centuries ago; those of two centuries ago longed for that of three centuries ago—the conclusion being that those of any era will not be satisfied with the present.

This is especially true given the rapid rate of civilization's progress and the special circumstances of our country, as the changes that have taken place since the Meiji Restoration for us are probably equivalent to changes over the previous three to five hundred years in the West. It's strange to find myself at an age where my thoughts mimic those of the elderly, but it certainly seems as if all the modern conveniences are designed solely for young people, creating a society that is less and less

compassionate to those of advanced age. Now that we have to wait for a signal at a crosswalk, for example, older people are no longer able to freely walk the streets. The situation is palatable for those with the status to be able to zip around in their cars, but on my occasional trips to Osaka, I turn into a complete bundle of nerves just trying to cross the street. With the introduction of traffic lights, it is now easy to see the signal in the center of the intersection, but it's quite difficult to make out the red and green blinking lights of a signal stuck in the open space on the side of the road where no one would expect it. And at some of the larger intersections it is hard to tell which signal is intended for which direction of traffic. When traffic officers began to appear on the streets of Kyoto, I thought it was the end of the world. If one wants to experience the mood of a classical Japanese town these days, one must go to such out-of-the-way places as Nishinomiya, Kai, Wakayama or Fukuyama.

It's the same with food: in the big cities it takes a lot of effort to track down dishes that will please the palate of the more elderly. Not long ago, I was interviewed by a newspaper reporter, who asked if I knew of any unusual, appetizing dishes. I explained to him how the people living in the deep valleys of Yoshino make their favorite dish of persimmon-leaf sushi, and I'll share the recipe here. Cook 1800ml of rice, adding 180ml of saké to the pot just when the water comes to a boil. Let it cool completely, then cover your hands with salt before firmly kneading the rice into sushi-sized pieces. It is important at this stage to keep the hands free of any moisture; the secret is to use

only the salt for molding the rice. Thin slices of salted salmon are placed on top of the rice, which is then wrapped in persimmon leaves, with the top surface of the leaf facing the rice.

The finished sushi should be wiped with a dry cloth to remove any remaining moisture before being placed in a sushi tub or rice container, making sure there are no gaps around the edges. A lid that fits just inside the container is then put on top of the sushi, and a heavy stone is placed on the lid. If left overnight, it will be ready to eat from the next morning. It is most delicious when eaten that day, but it will be fine eating for the next two or three days. It is eaten sprinkled with vinegar and garnished with a sprig of knotweed. A friend of mine taught me the recipe after he found it delicious on a trip to Yoshino, and it can be made anywhere there are persimmon trees and the right kind of salted salmon is available. The only things one must not ever forget are to get rid of any moisture and to let the rice cool completely before molding; I tried making it at home and it was, indeed, delicious. It's impossible to describe how the oil of the fish and the salt that permeates the rice complements the tender, raw fleshiness of the salmon. I find this style of sushi much more agreeable to my tongue than Tokyo-style sushi (which has its own particular taste) and spent this past summer eating little else.

I greatly admire the destitute mountain folk for discovering this way of eating salted salmon but after inquiring more deeply into regional cuisines, it has become clear to me that the palates of the people in rural areas are far more developed than

those of city people and that they enjoy luxuries that we can hardly fathom.

As we age, we gradually lean toward washing our hands of the city life in exchange for secluded rural life. But as country villages put up electric lamps and other modern accoutrements and become more and more like Kyoto every year, finding true peace of mind is becoming impossible. Though some say that as civilization progresses, the transition of transportation systems to the skies and underground will leave the streets quiet once again, I know that the times will just give birth to new inventions to torture the elderly. Eventually, they'll have to retire from society and huddle in their homes, eating home-cooked snacks while drinking saké and listening to the radio—with no place left for them outside their own doors.

But lest one think that these admonishments come only from the mouths of old people, that's not entirely true. I was slightly encouraged when I read the column "Vox Populi Vox Dei" in a recent Osaka edition of the *Asahi* newspaper, in which the author wrote about his exasperation at how municipal authorities cut a gash through a forest and levelled a mountain in order to build an access road to Minoo Park. To rob us of even the shadows from trees in the deep forest is a heartless business. At this rate, all the most beautiful places of Nara, Kyoto and the outskirts of Osaka will be shorn of all their foliage for the convenience of the mass public.

But all this is just more of my grumbling. I am well aware of the many benefits that have come with the times, and regard-

less of what I say, Japan is already so far down the path of Western civilization that the only thing the country can do is push forward, leaving us old folk behind. But as long as our skin color doesn't change, we must resign ourselves to taking eternal responsibility for the losses that are charged to us. My reason for writing this has been my hope that a path remains, perhaps in the areas of literature or the fine arts, that compensates for those losses. I would evoke the already lost world of shadows—at least in literature's domain. I would deepen the eaves of the temple of literature, darken its walls and push all things ostentatious into the darkness, stripping all unnecessary decorations from the interior. It doesn't have to be done everywhere, even one house will do.

What form will it take? We just have to turn off the lights and see.

# Translator's Notes

SOME YEARS AGO, I was persuaded to join a few friends in renting an old house on Sagami Bay, southwest of Tokyo. It had been used for many years by surfers, beachcombers and other escape artists seeking a weekend respite from city life, and they had managed to leave a record of their stay by painting posts and beams, covering the tatami floors in once plush but now threadbare maroon carpet and furnishing the rooms with discarded office chairs, battered metal lamps and aged pin-up posters.

***Gregory Starr***
*Akiya, 2017*

I had no interest in the house itself other than stretching out for a few hours after some sun and swimming. But one day with nothing to do, I started pulling a few slats from a boarded-up side of the house to find a wall of windows, the glass done in the rippled style of the late 19th century. It was evening and the setting sun reflected through the uneven panes onto a wooden toilet doorway that somehow had escaped the efforts of my predecessors to leave their mark. For a moment, before the light faded, the wood turned a rich red-brown, the grain highlighted to almost three-dimensional effect.

Entranced, I began to spend my weekends fixing the wall and cleaning the windows. When the wall was repaired, I tore up the worn carpet and restored the tatami floors. After the new tatami was installed, I spent months removing the paint

from the floors, posts and beams, returning the wood to its natural finish. I replaced the fluorescent tubes with soft lighting, bought an antique cupboard for the kitchen. I sanded and sanded, and stumbled across architectural details like the sunken storage area in the kitchen floor and the low window in the toilet [*see pages 20 and 86*]. I smoothed the runners of the sliding *shoji* doors, ripped out a maze of jerry-rigged electric wiring and then I sanded some more.

And sometime during this project, I stumbled across a beautiful book by Junichiro Tanizaki in which he explained, in great detail, exactly what I was experiencing in my quest to uncover the ethereal beauty that lay hidden in this rather nondescript house. Resting between long sessions of woodwork, I read and reread *In Praise of Shadows*.

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This collection of essays originally appeared more than a few decades after the house I reformed, rebuilt and now live in was constructed by the local carpenter of this little fishing village. And while there are passages that reek of the extraordinary times in which he was writing about the clash of Western and Eastern cultures—including some misogynistic and borderline racist opinions that likely carried little of the shock value that might accompany them today—I believe that most of his ideas on the Japanese aesthetic are not as distant as the years might suggest. I have imagined the poignant scene of my front room

at the turn of the century, for example, when the interior oil lamps lacked the power to dissipate the shadows cast by the full moon on the floorboards of the *engawa*. I have watched highly stressed people slowly dissolve in the shoji-filtered light of the zashiki, eventually surrendering to the magnetic pull of the tatami floor and sinking into a mindful state. And I have found much spiritual exuberance in the work of artisans young and old who look towards traditional approaches and processes to find value in their work.

What I learned in reforming the house, from the joinery of the wood to the depth of the darkness of the tokonoma alcove, is what I've tried to bring to this translation. The intimacy and passion in Tanizaki's message resonates all the more in this age of surface transparency and instant gratification. While his sentences are long and complex, often repetitive in a stream-of-consciousness style (which I've taken the liberty to break up at times) this only emphasizes the depths of his convictions. I dare anyone not to commiserate with him as he rails against the mindset that no longer values the pleasure and enjoyment that can be found in darkness and silence.

I can only echo his sentiment, and hope that readers will sometimes take the opportunity to dim the lights that have diminished much of the subtlety of their surroundings and soak themselves in the beauty of shadow. What it has to offer is more than worthy of praise.