Beyond Dualism in ‘Snow Crossing’ (Yukiwatari)

Whereas the previous chapter shows how ‘Donguri’ satirises notions of conceit and pride in order to signify the ideal of a less individuated self, this chapter explores how ‘Yukiwatari’ uses a symbolic exchange between two different groups of children, human and animal, to push beyond dualistic views of the universe. The exchange occurs when two children go out to play in the snow. When they meet a fox cub, they cross into a different setting, an extraordinary space and time where ‘anything is possible’, offering a heterocosm for the ‘crossing’ of the title. This heterotopia functions as the bridge between the two worlds, the real and the imaginary. They interact together in a symbolic breaking down of the divisions between humans and nature, the climax exemplifying the merging of all dualities in a kind of transcendent cosmic moment. Like the fluctuating light of the lamp in Kenji’s poem, ‘The Phenomenon of I’, the concept of exchange is itself transient, inherently signifying the notion of the integrated yet impermanent existence of all things, including self, in time and space.

‘Yukiwatari’ is one of the few tales published while Kenji was still alive, and the only one for which he received a small fee. It first appeared in the journal Aikoku Fujin (Patriotic Woman) in two parts, in December 1921 and January 1922. Kenji made repeated corrections after this publication and now most productions, including the picture books discussed here, adopt the last revised version. The story is taught in primary school at about grade five. It is still being published in illustrated form, showing its continuing receptivity for modern audiences.

All of Kenji’s tales are, in one way or another, about transcending dualism, but ‘Yukiwatari’ in particular constructs a set of dualistic relationships that are gradually broken down. It accesses traditional folklore to establish these binaries and suggest the conventional view of ‘this world’ (kono yo), indicating the problematic ‘othering’ that occurs among beings in the material world, thus cultural differences to be transcended. As Hirasawa suggests, the tale signals the strangeness of any one particular world to another. It works towards reconciling these relationships through a set of intercultural negotiations, demonstrating the positive potential of dialogue and mutual trust.

As indicated in Chapter 3, dualism is not only about false attachment to ego but also about attachment to any fixed notion of identity or existence. Buddhist thought sees all duality, separation, division and individuation as illusion. The highest level of enlightenment brings the knowledge of the empty nature of all phenomena. All forms of substantialism, including self, are empty of the independent identity they appear to have. Whereas the ultimate reality beyond duality is absolute emptiness however, this does not mean it is empty of...
existence. Interdependent ‘emptiness’ means there is everything in nothing. It is neither negative nor nihilistic: in its emptiness it is also ‘full’. This involves a state of ‘thusness’ or ‘suchness’, with the self (and everything else) as impermanent and subject to change. In Buddhist thought, all conventional, everyday phenomena are only what they are because of their fluid relationships to everything else. The negotiations in ‘Yukiwatari’ work towards this kind of positive expression of cosmic unity amongst all sentient beings.

**STORY SYNOPSIS**

The first part, ‘Konzaburō the Fox Cub’, begins when a brother (Shirō) and sister (Kanko) go out to play together one morning when the fields are frozen solid enough to walk over, giving them rare access to the forest. As they “kick, kick, tap, tap” out onto the hardened snow, Shirō and Kanko chant a folk ditty about offering a bride to a fox. Part 1’s eponymous young fox cub comes out of the forest singing that he doesn’t need a bride. He offers them kibidango (millet dumplings) and in return Shirō offers him some mochi (rice cake). Shirō’s sister is hiding behind him, murmuring that fox dumplings are made from rabbit’s droppings. Konzaburō objects good-humouredly, explaining that drunkard or cowardly humans often grossly exaggerate about fox tricks. He recounts a recent experience with one such human, Jimbē, who sang drunkenly in front of his house all night. Konzaburō then encourages them to try his own home made dumplings. Shirō and Kanko politely decline saying they’ve just eaten, but suggest: “Perhaps next time.” Delighted at the prospect, Konzaburō gives them tickets to a slide show that will be scheduled for the next night that the snow is hard enough to cross. The children ask for some tickets for their older brothers, but Konzaburō replies that, as their brothers are over eleven, they are too old to be admitted. All three sing and dance their way deeper into the woods where, after trying together to summon a deer whose faint ‘peep’ they think they can just catch, Konzaburō hastens them out of the forest so that they can reach home before the snow melts. The initial union is sealed with their promise to meet again.

In the second part, ‘The Slide Show at the Fox Primary School’, when Shirō reminds Kanko about the slide show, she reacts with a yelp of delight that alerts their older brothers. They express an interest in going, but Shirō shows them the tickets that refer to the age limit. Following a farming tradition of giving offerings to fox deities, the brothers send the children off with home made rice cakes (mochi), gently warning them not to look into the eyes of an (adult) fox (for fear of bewitchment). As the children arrive at the forest the foxes usher them into a clearing where some fox cubs are playing and tossing chestnuts around. One tiny cub is reaching for the stars from atop another fox’s shoulders.

Konzaburō is the Master of Ceremony and in the first half of the slide show, he screens two photographs. Titled “Alcohol Prohibited,” these represent human gluttony and show two inebriated (human) adults, Taemon and Seisaku, eating some dung-filled dumplings that have been disguised as buns or noodles. At interval Shirō and Kanko are offered of two plates of dumplings that look suspiciously like those in the slides. Tentatively, they plunge in. To the foxes’ delight, they find them unexpectedly delicious and eat them all. The second half of the show screens two drawings of foxes in the act of thieving (from humans). The first is of Konbe caught in a snare, and the second is of Konsuke, his tail alight with fire as he steals a grilled fish. At the end of this show, Konzaburō formally thanks the children for their attendance and the fox cubs press farewell gifts of acorns and chestnuts into Shirō and Kanko’s pockets before they set off across the snow. As they near home, Shirō and Kanko encounter three black silhouettes. They are relieved to realise that it is only their older brothers coming across the snow plain to meet them.

Several binaries and tensions signal the uneasy social negotiations between these two sets of youngsters. Firstly, in Japanese folklore, foxes have a reputation as mischievous tricksters with magical powers and the ability to change into human shape (usually women). As Goff points out, however, they