

At the Hot Spring

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

It is cool here. While Tokyo days might not yet dictate the need for an overcoat, in these higher, farther places of Japan's interior the chill mountain breath warns that bright days are soon to pass and the long winter is soon to follow.

On the slopes and passes of Nagano, leaves take the gold and crimson of autumn early; the creatures of the forested mountainsides and valleys hurry to prepare themselves for the white ordeal ahead. Squirrels cache their treasures of nuts and seeds. Bears, fat from the rich diet of summer, seek out deep dens where they will dream long un-speaking fantasies of springs and summers to come.

I sit on an angled chunk of stone jutting from the side of this narrow valley, above a whispering creek that hurries down from some higher, farther place, gliding over its path of rounded bottom stones with clear, cold caress, intent to rush on and on, away from the white death that will lock it unmoving in its path. It rushes and I listen.

There is a noise behind me; something moves. No, some things move. . . . I turn and watch as a troop of *nihonzaru*—native Japanese monkeys—emerges from the tree-covered slope. Their leader, a robust and jaunty old male, heads straight for a rock-lined pool of hot mineral water.

This is a land of hot springs and its inhabitants, both human and simian, love a good long soak, especially when the weather turns cold. The monkeys one by one enter the pool and sit or squat, each submerged to the chin. Some take a few sips of the hot mineral brew. Rambunctious infants splash and play; adults groom each other or sit quietly in what seems to be contemplation. One

appears fascinated with the water's surface, passing his hands up and down through it time after time, watching as the shiny clear membrane unfailingly closes over his fingers.

I feel a kinship; I once sat in the bathtub and did the same, trying my best to leave a hole in the water for at least a discernible instant. My mother would laugh and tease me, but I struggled on, secure in the knowledge that mere mothers could never understand such things. Decades have passed since I made my last attempt, but as I watch this creature do as I once did, I feel the years slip away.

Thickening gray clouds march across the sky. The sun is falling westward and the air is growing chill. Small fine snowflakes drift down to die instantly, silently, in the steaming water. The monkey continues his attempts at making a hole in the surface and sees nothing else. He is oblivious to me, to the other monkeys grooming and playing, to the tendrils of steam flicking back and forth with each little cat's-paw of breeze, to the snowflakes coming down.

I rise and begin walking back to the rustic inn a short ways down the valley. The monkey pays no attention. He looks up at the other monkeys for just a moment, then goes back to his all-consuming intellectual task. He is more human than he can ever know.

Michael E. Stanley, born in California in 1947, studied cultural anthropology and archaeology, and is a photographer based in Japan since 1979.

