

In the Shadow of the Beeches

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley





The forest is silent. Its eerie mantle of quiet is broken only by my own heavy footfalls and rough breathing as I hike up the spine of a tree-blanketed ridge on this spring morning. Occasionally a sudden gentle gust ruffles the boughs overhead and the galaxy of young green leaves flutters for a moment, drawing new patterns of nacreous light and thin shadows on the carpet of dead leaves below. Thick trunks of aged *buna* (beech) trees rise straight up from the forest floor, seeming to support the sky above them. In the shaded hollows, wide patches of hard-packed granular snow remain, slowly melting into the ground. I remove my pack and find myself a seat on the protruding edge of a sun-warmed black rock outcrop. My clothes and boots are wet from my struggle up a steep snow-covered slope; little wisps of steam begin to rise from me. I take a drink from my canteen and savor the chill silence.

Each century of Japan's long history has seen more and more of the archipelago's original forest cover cut away. The low, level areas were of course turned into farmland; the more accessible mountain slopes gradually have been sheared of their ancient forests and then planted with *sugi* (Japanese cedar) in huge monospecific stands. In the farther mountain fastnesses, relative inaccessibility has insured survival for the few remaining stands of primeval forest. Here in the mountains of Nagano Prefecture, less than half a day's drive from Tokyo, I sit

alone in a pure, still world that seems light-years away from modern Japan.

But all is not as serene as it might appear. Roads have been put in, roads leading back into the forest, roads that will allow the great trees to be "harvested" and the slopes to be "developed." Gossip in the nearby towns says that part of this forest was to be sacrificed for a ski resort; the remainder was to be turned into a "*supootsu rin*" (sports forest). No one seems to have even the barest clue as to what a "*supootsu rin*" is. A golf course among the trees on a 30-degree slope? A manicured parklike landscape masquerading as "nature?" A canted, slanted baseball diamond? Perhaps the question is academic, as the current economic downturn has apparently dampened the exploiters' enthusiasm; for the moment the plans are on hold.

Once this kind of forest teemed with wildlife: bear and deer and boar and *kamoshika*, a goaty-antelopey creature with wonderful soft fur. There were monkeys, too. Now most are gone, hunted out, driven out, starved out. The forest broods like some great sad empty house.

Returning the canteen to its holder, I shoulder my pack and continue up the slope, wondering how it will end.

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