

Hunting and Gathering Culture: Daily Life, the Seasons, and the Expatriate Experience in Philip Whalen's Japan Poems

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文化を狩り、そして摘む：フィリップ・ウェイレンの日本の詩における日常生活、季節、および海外在住者の経験

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Abstract

Written between 1966 and 1971, Philip Whalen wrote heavily autobiographical poems that chronicled his life while he lived, worked, and studied in Japan. His views about the country are deeply personal, and the poems present the perceptions and thoughts of person who has ups and downs in an alien nation. His Buddhist mindfulness provides him with an ability to comprehend the nature of things as they are in the present moment, and they are complimented by his extensive knowledge about the country's historical and cultural background. Whalen's attention to the details of daily life, the seasons, and the expatriate experience, along with thoughtful contemplation, enable the poet to overcome the difficulties of living abroad and develop a deeper understanding of Japanese society, its culture, and its people.

要 旨

1966年から1971年にかけて、フィリップ・ウェイレンは日本に居住し、働き、また勉強するかたわら、みずからの人生を記録にとどめる自伝詩を書いた。日本についての彼の見解はきわめて個人的なもので、彼の詩は外国に住むことの浮き沈みを経験する人の認識や考え方をよく表している。日本の歴史的そして文化的背景についての豊富な知識もあいまって、仏教に対する彼の関心は、時々の物事の本質を理解する能力を彼に与えている。日常生活、季節、および日本滞在経験の詳細にわたるウェイレンの観察眼は、思慮深い熟考と共に、彼が海外生活の困難を克服し、日本の社会、文化、そして国民へのより深い理解に到達することを可能にした。

I. The Japan Poems

Philip Whalen is often lumped in with the members of the Beat Generation, but although he read at the Six Gallery event in October 1955, was friendly with Ginsberg and Kerouac, and shared an aversion to conventional post-war society, he always remained on the fringe of the movement at best. If he must be pigeonholed, he more likely should be grouped with the San Francisco Renaissance poets, particularly Snyder, McClure, and Spicer. In reality, however, he does not fit neatly into either category. Whalen defies categorization; he was always an outsider who had difficulty integrating, and he was happy to be separate from any particular scene. In his twenties and thirties he moved around a lot, never settling down, writing all the while. Because he was interested in Eastern spirituality, particularly Buddhism, and since he had no deep roots anywhere, he decided to move to Japan in the mid-sixties. It is important to remember that Japan was a very different country then than it is today; it was still recovering from its defeat in World War II, still developing its high-tech, world-class economy, and it had not fully emerged as a powerful, modern society. Therefore, transitioning from California to Kyoto and living daily life presented challenges somewhat different from those of today. He functioned relatively well in Japanese society, however, Whalen was a foreigner in an extremely homogenous land. Therefore, the Japan poems need to be read from the viewpoint of those being written by an expatriate. Dale Smith notes that "it's up to each reader to define their own relationship to Whalen's poetry," so in that light this paper interprets the poems from a similar point of view: that of an American living and working in Japan. Whalen's Japan poems act as a commentary on the American poet's place in Japanese society and also record deeper feelings about the people and the culture.

He wrote about seventy poems while he was in Kyoto, and like the majority of his other work the subject matter is all over the place, moving Zen-like from one thought to the next, echoing the meditation mind. Whalen's writing is down-to-earth, and for the most part it eschews fancy poetic rhetoric. His take on Japan is deeply personal, and as a result the reader is presented with the perceptions and thoughts of a poet whose voice ranges from soaring exhilaration to distraught melancholy and from confusion to acute awareness about the society in which he has transplanted himself. Whalen's Buddhist mindfulness provides him with an uncanny ability to be completely cognizant of the nature of things as they are in the present moment, and in addition,

his extensive study of Eastern spirituality and literature compliment those perceptions with historical and cultural background. All the while his sense of humor prevails. This paper concentrates on passages that directly concern Japanese culture and the expatriate experience. By closely reading individual extracts from the Japan poems this paper will demonstrate that Whalen's attention to the minute details of daily life, the seasons, and the expatriate experience, along with thoughtful contemplation, enable the poet to overcome the difficulties of living abroad and develop a deeper understanding of Japanese society, its culture, and its people.

II. An American Abroad

From the late fifties through the mid-sixties Whalen moved around a lot, primarily in California, renting small apartments and crashing with friends until his welcome wore out. He had various part-time jobs, and while they provided financial support, they infringed on his writing time. Gary Snyder, Whalen's lifelong friend since their days together at Reed College, moved to Kyoto in 1956 to pursue studies in Zen Buddhism. The two maintained regular correspondence, with Gary telling Philip all about his experiences and what he was learning. Whalen's first sojourn in Japan was arranged by Snyder, who secured a part-time job for him teaching English at a local YMCA school. Although Whalen said that he would have preferred to live in China or India, it was an excellent opportunity for him; he needed the money and he wanted to get out of San Francisco, so he concluded that it was the perfect reason to make his first trip abroad. After scraping together transportation money, he boarded the *S.S. President Cleveland* and sailed to Kyoto in early 1966 (Allen 58). He was 42 years old. For the first few months Whalen lived with Snyder, who showed him the ropes. Whalen loved visiting the old temples and shrines, as well as the historic places around the old capital, many of which he had read about. Snyder took him hiking and introduced him to the local drinking spots and the public baths. Once Whalen was on his feet financially, he found a small apartment across town and stayed there for the remainder of his first stint in Japan. He spent his time working, visiting places of interest, and experiencing the wealth of culture that the city is famous for. He returned to California in November 1967 to work on the proofs of his forthcoming book, *On Bear's Head*.

Whalen regretted moving back to the U.S., and after a while he yearned to return to

Kyoto. He arranged to get his job back, sold his possessions to raise ticket money, and began his second stay in the former capital in late March 1969. By this time Snyder had returned to California for good, but it didn't take Whalen long to get back into the swing of things. This time he studied Buddhism more earnestly and began sitting seriously every morning. It may well have been one of the happiest times in his life. He recalled, "that was just wonderful because I could spend a lot of time writing, looking at things, and writing, reading a lot, and writing" (Meltzer 329). He settled into a routine of meditating, working — albeit as little as possible — going to temples, walking, and writing. There is almost no mention of travel to other parts of the archipelago, but all the while his affection for the old capital continued to grow. "Kyoto is the best place in the world to get loaded because it's so beautiful to see, just to look at, and walk around in" (*Off the Wall* 49). Unfortunately, the school where he was working decided to require its teachers to have advanced degrees in TEFL, and Whalen was forced out of his job. His final Japan poem, "Leaving the Capital," dated April 25, 1971, finds him "morosely resentfully hysterically packing" (*Collected Poems* 659). Soon after, he was back living in Bolinas, California. He would never return to Japan, but the experiences there would inform his career path, and he carried cherished memories of his time in Kyoto for the rest of his life.

III. Minding the Minute Particulars

A lot has been written about the extensive range of Whalen's subject matter: from historical references, literary allusions and quotations, childhood memories, scientific data, and religion, to the poet's own reflection on and interpretation of all of these disparate elements. The writing process for him is akin to the meditation mind. The often-quoted "Since You Ask Me" provides a natural starting-point from which to understand his work, "this poetry is a picture or a graph of a mind moving" (153). A dozen years later, however, he insisted that much of what he had written about the mind's workings as subject matter for poetry was "nonsense" (Allen 46). Nonetheless, the speed at which the verse shifts from image to image, the poet's associations with those images, interspersed recollections of his past, and his reflections on the concoction of all of these mixed together can be disorienting. While his scope and voice are large and encompass a Whitmanesque variety of perspectives and contradictions, it is his Blakean attention to minute particulars that registers

strongest with me.

Whalen's acute sense of observation reflects the importance that he attaches to direct experience. One of his strengths is the ability to discern intricacy in mundane situations. The act of recording details reminds the poet, and subsequently the reader, that beauty can be found all around us. Moreover, careful observation grounds him in place and reinforces the maxim that deep truths are found in particulars; the microcosm informs the macrocosm. Whalen's attention to detail also reveals some of the mysteries about Japan, its people, and the culture.

IV. The Details of Daily Life

The poet's eye for minute particulars enables him to create valuable poetry out of everyday experiences. Whalen was a huge fan of walking; a pastime that had as much to do with poverty as with his fondness for life in the slow lane. He once said, "if you live outdoors enough, and stay alone enough, and walk around enough, you tune in on the landscape and it becomes important to you; and you like places, you like the way things go together" (Schneider 17). One of the reasons Whalen loved living in Kyoto was because he could "walk all over the city at all hours of the day and night and see wonders, beautiful things" (Allen 59). In the third section of "Four Other Places, More & Less," he tallies walking times in northern Kyoto, "From home to bath to home to supper in Kita-oji: / Two hours & 15 minutes / From home to breakfast in Kita-oji and return: / One hour plus a few minutes" (652). In the Japan poems there are numerous references to hiking up mountains, walking to temples and shrines, and simply traipsing the streets of Kyoto. Correspondingly, time plays a part in another poem. "It's fun to ride the Osaka zipper / Forty-eight minutes for 65 miles / Fast asleep to Yodoyobashi branch Bank of America" details a commute, nicely juxtaposing the speeding train and the snoozing poet ("Scenes of Life at the Capital" 638). Recording timetables grounds Whalen to his surroundings. While modern readers may question their inclusion as appropriate subject matter for poetry, the details would have been vital for someone living in Japan in the sixties; a time and place with far fewer cars than California. Equally important, the train speed and travel times reflect the national obsession with punctuality.

Of personal interest are the acute perceptions that demonstrate an understanding of Japanese culture. "The War Poem for Diane Di Prima" includes a simple observation

about something utterly mundane. “The newspaper is dated / 41SHOWA 7MOON 16SUN / (This is the 41st year of the reign of SHOWA of that Divine / Emperor, Holy Offspring of the Sun Goddess)” (500). This might seem exotic to someone from the West, but the poet merely provides a literal English translation of the newspaper’s date. The meaning of the first part — “41SHOWA” — a reference to the year 1966, calculated by the number of years Emperor Showa has reigned, is explicitly included in the poem. There is no explanation, however, about what follows. “7MOON” indicates the month of July, as the Chinese character for moon also means “month,” while “16SUN” is the English equivalent of the 16th because the Chinese character for sun also connotes “day.” Hence, the date of the newspaper is July 16, 1966. Written only a few months after Whalen arrived in Kyoto, the observation demonstrates a keen eye for interesting cultural differences.

It is this ability to intermingle immediate observations with cultural phenomena that really piques my curiosity. “Eikei Soji” (492) addresses the Japanese obsession with cleanliness — *soji* means cleaning — by recording a citywide spring cleaning effort. The poem opens with the line, “May 10 the Empire has run unaccountably mad,” and then it continues to report the goings-on. “ALL / who aren’t thwacking pour water everywhere / all who aren’t pouring water ride wild through the narrow streets / . . . / . . . / All who aren’t washing or beating or riding / SUDDENLY 2 PM REBUILDING all of downtown Kyoto.” Even stores have closed to tidy up. The poem is bookended by Whalen’s thoughts, opening with his initial take on the proceedings, and closing with the lines, “at one o’clock it was an ordinary day / thinking of rain, threatening / Clouds. / Why does everyone do it all at once?” The poet poses a huge cultural question that baffles many Westerners. While U.S. history abounds with stories about the pioneer spirit and individuality, the Japanese esteem centuries-ingrained tradition, consensus, and unimaginative conformity. At times people do things together simply because it is the way they have always been done or because everyone else is doing them. Japanese society is rife with examples — 50,000 baseball fans simultaneously releasing balloons during the 7th inning stretch comes to mind — and outsiders quickly tune into this fascinating spirit of “togetherness.” Thus, the initial observation; to an American it is nuts, especially because the poet cannot find an open store in the middle of the afternoon that will sell him a notebook. The final question functions as a koan. Answering it correctly unlocks one of the many doors essential to understanding Japanese culture.

"The Trolley" (499) combines the poet's knack for observation with an allusion and a personal reflection on the scene.

We pass Hyakuman-ben (St. Giles-Without-the-Wall)

I look at the passengers' feet:

None of their shoes fit

And all are ugly.

There is no end to misery.

Whalen juxtaposes Hyakuman-ben, a busy intersection adjacent to Kyoto University with many temples nearby, and St. Giles-Without-the-Wall, a London church dedicated to the patron saint of beggars and cripples. That association blends nicely with the shoes of the passengers, who while not afflicted physically are imaginably challenged financially. Notwithstanding phenomenal progress, twenty years after the war's end Japan is still a poor country. Whalen recognizes the subtle dignity of the passengers and sees underlying beauty in the bleak scene. The poet tunes into the passengers' modesty and identifies with them. He sympathizes with the trolley riders, sharing their pain, as he also struggled to make ends meet for much of his adult life. Here, we get a glimpse of the poet's saintly compassion. Despite the inherent sadness and poverty that the ugly shoes represent, Whalen acknowledges life's difficulties and celebrates the passengers' integrity as well as the hardships they endure.

In a similar vein, Whalen uses his Buddhist sensibilities to look beyond a thing's appearance to discern its true value. In the sprawling "Scenes of Life at the Capital" there is an image of a traditional house and garden built simply from "mud, plain paper, a couple of boards and a bush and a rock, / A handful of straw" (632). In postwar America, these kinds of materials are deemed all but "worthless" for home construction, yet in a heightened sense of awareness the poet sees that the meager materials transcend time.

But set here in proportion, in specific spatial relation

An order of decorum and respect for themselves

Out of nothing at all, a house and a garden

That can't last more than ten minutes

Very quietly stays forever

The transplanted poet transcends his American roots and now gazes at the world from a different perspective. His point of view cannot help but to include the Japanese sensibilities that he has acquired. He has gained respect for a culture that utilizes

humble resources to create something seemingly so simple, yet able to endure the ages. On a deeper level the structure is a metaphor for the Japanese themselves; modesty, honor, and self-respect have enabled their society to last for millennia. This knowledge enables the poet to see beauty in the rustic simplicity of the old house and the Japanese people, and to rise above the bleak realities of his environs.

Everyday scenes and images provide Whalen with great insights. His knack for sensing true value, often hidden, derives from an ability to focus on details and ponder their deeper meaning. The poet uses this savvy to better understand Japan's society, people, and culture.

V. The Seasons: Nothing Lasts, but Nothing is Lost

The Japanese are renowned for a deep affinity with nature, and this is clearly evident from their reverence for the seasons. A heightened sense of seasonal changes permeates the culture, influencing everything from fashion to cuisine, and this is denoted by traditional celebrations that punctuate the year. The importance of the calendar cycle is especially apparent in a city as steeped in tradition as Kyoto is. Sharing this respect for the natural world, Whalen quickly picks up on the vibe, and as a result the Japan poems are full of references to the weather and the seasons.

Always sensuous, Whalen is alert to the sounds and colors of his surroundings, yet he is also able to observe his own reactions to the complexities of the country. Because he walks a lot and since Japanese buildings are not well insulated, at times he obsesses about the weather. Written in the late autumn during his first year in Japan, "The Winter" opens with a quick question and answer, and then proceeds to lament an imagined winter, "Why do I fear the winter to come / I guess I've lived without seasons much too long / I hate having to think of weather and falling down in the wet icy snow / and mud my knees all skinned, pants all soaked" (525). As someone who spent a considerable part of the fifties and sixties around San Francisco, where temperatures are seldom extreme, Kyoto's frigid winters and scorching, humid summers must have come as quite a shock. Yet the poet sees the absurdity of his manufactured fantasy and pokes fun at himself, musing:

I imagine January horrors, February no possibility of life —
All right — loom, forbode, threaten —
I've suffered the whole show four months ahead of time

Now I hope I'm free of it,
Let the coal-oil heater stink and blacken!
Yah, yah, yah! I'm tired of my imaginary winter —
Worse than the real would ever dare to be!

Self-mockery enables him to transcend the immediate cold and his concocted fear of the frigid weather to come, so that by the end of the stanza the poet concedes that make-believe is often worse than reality. In "Scenes of Life at the Capital," he complains about the weather again, this time the summer heat: "hot weather erodes my powers" (628). Passages in "Birthday Poem" echo the sentiment; the poet gripes about "summer night heat" and being "exhausted by summer" (578, 579). Hailing from the Pacific Northwest, Kyoto's severe heat and humidity must have been hard on him. Throughout the Japan poems there are similar grumblings about the weather, particularly cold spells and heat waves. Schneider notes that his "mood swings [were] tied to whether the day was bright or dark, hot or cold, dry or damp" (34). Whalen rarely excludes himself from his poetry; personal reflections and responses to the environs are integral components of his work. Rather than turn off readers, they humanize the scenes and endear the poet to us.

Complaints aside, Whalen's ability to perceive the immediate surroundings and to focus directly on experience strengthens his bond with the natural world and deepens his understanding of Japanese culture. Rather than bitching about summer, this scene celebrates a quintessential August image: "the most exciting green is rice in the paddy / Just beginning to produce ears of grain / Middle of August, shimmering subliminal green waves / And secret power-vibes" ("Scenes of Life at the Capital" 634). The image of verdant rice plants undulating in the summer breeze is distinctly Asian, and it captures the mindset of a country that has deep and complex connections with its staple food. The three words "secret power-vibes" indicate the poet's sensitivity to the importance of rice. When asked about their favorite food, a substantial percentage of Japanese reply that it is rice. This tendency may strike Americans as strange because of the grain's humble appearance, subtle flavor, and insignificance on their tables, but some of the many Japanese words for rice, including *gohan* and *meshi*, can also be translated as "meal." Rice is not a side dish. The "secret power-vibes" comment reveals the poet's awareness of Japanese culture and also hints at the Western inability to grasp how important rice truly is. The poet continues, "the rice is alive / to be eaten later or brewed into sake." Always one to enjoy a tippie, Whalen has

not forgotten that as well as a feast for the eyes and the stomach, it also nourishes the soul. The brewed beverage may well even help him combat the winter to come, and therein lies another clue to understanding the significance of rice to the Japanese. Considering the nice weather, numerous festivals, fireworks displays, and importance of the August Bon holiday, there are surprisingly few explicit references to summer. Certainly, he took part in these events. Perhaps the comments about Kyoto's stifling heat reveal more than they let on about Whalen's attitude towards summer; not entirely different from his feelings about winter.

In spite of his distaste for the cold, the poet clearly recognizes what is arguably the season's most important symbol: the beloved plum blossom. Celebrated for centuries in art and literature, the tree blossoms in late winter, providing vibrant color and hope amidst the dead landscape. During the Heian period the delicate white, red, and pink flowers were regarded even more highly than cherry blossoms. While it symbolizes winter, especially the white flowering variety, it is also a harbinger of spring, and many Japanese proclaim that the red blossoms herald imminent warmth. Well known for its plum grove of about 2,000 trees, "Scenes of Life at the Capital" closes with a meditation on the old plum tree in front of the main sanctuary at Kitano Tenmangu Shrine, "So hollow and full of holes it scarcely exists at all / But blossoms immensely before scarlet fence" (647). Whalen's keen eye for detail provides a distinct image of the venerable, gnarled tree, skillfully contrasting its advanced age with the vibrant blossoms. Indeed, in the dead of winter the flowers declare the tree's beauty and vitality, and moreover, symbolize the perseverance of the Japanese people. The poem concludes:

Another all propped up with poles and timbers
Part of it fixed with straw rope
Exploding white blossoms not only from twigs
And branches but from shattered trunk itself,
Old and ruined, all rotted and broken up
These plum trees function gorgeously
A few days every year
In a way nobody else does. (647)

Japanese gardeners go to great lengths to encourage the longevity of special trees; all over the country old trees, especially plum and cherry trees, are "propped up" and "fixed" in order to nurture and coax the yearly explosion of beauty. Whalen sees

beyond the "ruined" and "rotted" trunk, and he finishes the poem by concentrating on the tree's brilliance. Once again, the poet shows us that it is possible to capture perfection in an imperfect world. Splendor surrounds us; all we have to do is open our eyes.

Providing relief from bitterly cold winters and scorching hot summers, spring and autumn are Japan's most cherished seasons, and Whalen's poetry reflects this. The cherry blossom, or *sakura*, is Japan's most enduring image of spring, but after the ephemeral pink blossoms have wowed the country and fallen from the boughs, the real color of spring sets in and dominates the countryside. Bright yellow flowers called *nanohana*, commonly known as rapeseed and canola, sprout on riverbanks and in abandoned lots, and thrive in rural fields, often stretching to the horizon. They are planted for their beauty, oil, and tastiness. Whalen briefly hints at their importance, "yellow flowers of rape eaten as *sukimono* / (Rapeseed oil waterproof paper umbrella)" ("Scenes of Life at the Capital" 643). The poet refers to the pickled flowers, *nanohana zuke*, as "*sukimono*," rather than the correct word, *tsukemono*, but such is a peril of living abroad without having mastered the language. The paper umbrella illustrates another benefit, the plant's oil, and nicely alludes to the seasonal rain that nurtures the flowers. For Westerners with keen eyes, the endless yellow and green fields can inspire waves of emotion equivalent to those produced by the cherry blossoms, though without all of the ensuing hubbub. Alas, the lowly rapeseed flowers, though enduring and exquisite, do not command anywhere near the cultural significance, adoration, and enthusiasm that the *sakura* do.

The sanctity of the flowering cherry tree in Japanese culture is legendary; it has been celebrated in art and literature for more than a millennium for both its intrinsic beauty and its symbolism. Although the flowers only last a week or two, they create one of spring's most spectacular scenes in both the cities and the mountains up and down the country. It is believed that the traditional values of simplicity and purity are reflected in the flower's shape and delicate shade of pink. Moreover, in accordance with Buddhist beliefs, the enchanting and ephemeral beauty of the blossoms represents the transient nature of life. The blossom is also linked to samurai culture, mirroring the transitory nature of the warrior's existence and representative of drops of blood (Cargile).

The blossoms are celebrated every spring when the entire country engages in a tradition called *hanami*, literally flower-viewing, although the word almost always

refers exclusively to enjoying cherry blossoms. While *hanami* parties were once intended as an opportunity to view the flowers and contemplate the ephemeral nature of existence, these days they have a more “eat, drink, and be merry” vibe. People stake out territory under the trees early in the morning to secure the best spots, and the picnicking and revelry, often including karaoke, live music, and dancing, continues until after nightfall. Cherry blossom viewing parties are an opportunity for the usually staid Japanese to let it all hang out.

Giving the blossoms and the festivities their due, Whalen devotes the better part of three pages of “Scenes of Life at the Capital” to the country’s most beloved pastime. Even when the cherry trees do not bloom on time, come late March the people are ready to commemorate the season.

At Arashiyama the flowers are late
Everybody is here anyway, walking
Under the cherry trees. They eat and play
On the river, drink *sake* and sing. The cherries
Will be obliged to bloom
No matter what weather (644)

Whalen senses that the merrymakers and the ensuing revelry almost will the trees to bloom. He continues to present the scene, most likely a composite of all five springs that he spent in Japan. Various groups play different kinds of music, each celebrating in its own way.

Sound of drum and gong prevail
But a whole school of lady *koto* players
Best kimono and Japanese hairdo
Perform on *tatami* platform underneath falling blossoms
Black hair bright silk (645)

The poet’s attention to the kimono, traditional stringed instruments, and reed mats paints a distinctly Japanese picture; the reader can effortlessly visualize a woodblock print depicting the scene. In addition, there is some skillful juxtaposition; the women’s dark hair and colorful costumes contrast nicely with the subtle pink petals. The sheer delight that Whalen takes in the scene is more than apparent over the course of his description of the flower-viewing festivities. The merriment is infectious, and it perfectly captures the significance of the spring pastime. *Hanami* is not merely an event; it is an essential component of Japanese culture.

Just as spring holds an important place in the hearts of the Japanese, so does autumn. Throughout the Japan poems, Whalen includes autumnal references — the harvest moon, maple leaves, and plumed susuki grass — reminding him that “the spirit perishes when the season turns” (“Birthday Poem” 579). Yet he does not dwell only on bittersweet images, he also celebrates the bountiful harvest; there is mention of persimmons, fall fish, as well as pounded rice, a dual reference to the food itself and the Japanese notion that the lunar craters form what looks like a rabbit making *mochi*. “October Food” sketches a still life of *dobinmushi*: a traditional autumn soup. “Pine-tree child soaks in a teapot / Chrysanthemum perfume soup and a / Seasnail boiling in his shell, that I / May live forever” (550). The simple ingredients — a snail, chrysanthemum petals, and a matsutake mushroom, translated literally as “pine-tree child” since they often grow beneath pines, in a delicate broth — are steamed in a clay teapot and served in a very small saucer that also serves as the pot’s lid. In addition to being edible, the autumn-blooming chrysanthemum is the national flower and symbolizes the Japanese throne. Moreover, it connotes death and grief, as it is the traditional flower of funerals and bereavement. This sentiment contrasts nicely with the final line. Whalen was not a vegan while he lived in Japan, yet the line demonstrates gratitude and Buddhist respect for living creatures, especially those that feed us. It also suggests that despite the dish’s humble appearance, its textures, smells, and nourishment sufficiently sustain him. Whalen peppers the poems with autumnal images in celebration of the season’s bounty and as reverence to its importance in the Japanese psyche.

The autumnal equivalent to the cherry blossom, colorful foliage and falling leaves epitomize the season. The ancient tradition of viewing autumn colors dates back as far as that of *hanami*, however it is carried out in a more reflective manner. Ever observant, Whalen writes about the complexities of autumn. In “Birthday Poem,” he notices that by mid October the leaves still haven’t begun to change color.

Dusty and wrinkled they hang on, permanently glued
To the trees, absolutely insured against damage
Caused by possible falling. October is almost half gone;
The leaves aren’t worried (580)

Like the cherry blossoms that refuse to open, Whalen acknowledges that nature proceeds at its own pace, and that despite humanity’s technological prowess, we bend to its will, not vice versa. The stanza concludes: “the dusty green ones on the tree /

Flap quite carelessly in the breeze, who ever heard of / November?" (581). A "turn off your mind, relax, and float downstream" tone encourages us to become like the leaves and drop expectations, thereby allowing us to be in harmony with nature and existence. All things come in good time, and two stanzas later,

the season UNACCOUNTABLY changes, the leaves
all brilliantly fall, thousands at a time,
Yellow red stripey and tawny splotchly crackling
vegetable brocade foam around my ankles
(new cold makes them ache) the sun blares through
naked branches
wind blasted smoke of burning leaves. (581)

Paralleling the cherry blossoms, finally the leaves fall. Once again, Whalen presents a vivid, impressionistic image; we can practically hear the leaves crunching underfoot, feel them creep up our legs as we walk, and smell their earthy aroma. Sometimes things happen in a flash, but Whalen, ever observant, catches it all. Contrary to the "UNACCOUNTABLE" change, the poet captures the moment. Autumn is another time of the year that epitomizes the Japanese aesthetic; moments of spectacular beauty and sheer joy followed by the melancholy of being let down and a return to the monotony of daily existence. It also reinforces the notion of life's transience. Despite being a bittersweet image, we glimpse nirvana, and this enables us to continue forward; while nothing lasts, nothing is lost. Whalen listens to the world, and autumn helps him to tune into the beauty of sadness, the *wabi-sabi* of existence.

Whalen's Buddhist sensibilities and his solitude fuel a daily practice of observation and an uncanny ability to listen to the world. While plum blossoms, autumnal foliage, and *sakura* are not unique to Japan, the Japanese are keenly aware that the changing seasons mirror our lives and function as a metaphor for existence. Whalen acutely picks up on these perceptions. Therefore, the seasonal references not only connect the poet with nature, they firmly ground him in Japanese society. And while these minute instances resonate strongly with the Japanese, they are universal. All of us can tap into the beauty that surrounds us; all we need to do is open our eyes, and we too can glimpse enlightenment.

VI. The Expatriate Experience

Whalen successfully taps into many of the seasonal customs that are so integral to understanding the Japanese, but that knowledge only helps the expatriate so much. Despite immersing himself in Kyoto and Japanese culture, at times the poet finds it difficult to truly fit in. In a 1972 interview with Yves Le Pellec, Whalen commented, "Japan is so different from America, it's like being on the moon" (Allen 59). Luckily, when he first arrived he received a lot of help and advice from Snyder, who by that time had already been in Kyoto for a decade. Additionally, because he had plenty of experience living alone and in remote places, such as atop Sourdough Mountain when he was a fire lookout, solitary living was not unbearable. Still, being an expat is not without challenges; a fact that Whalen acknowledges, "the truth is that living / in remote and foreign places takes a lot of / Work, every day, no time to feel sad and friendless" ("Scenes of Life at the Capital" 633). There is no doubt he busied himself with teaching English, learning the language, studying Zen, and exploring the capital, nonetheless there were moments of uneasiness and anxiety.

While there were plenty of foreigners in Kyoto at the time, Whalen certainly stuck out, and it caused him some concern. Written between May and August 1966, not long after he arrived, "The War Poem for Diane Di Prima" documents how he is perceived by the natives. "I write from a coffee shop in conquered territory / I occupy, they call me the '*he-na-gai-jin,*' goofy-looking foreigner" (500). Well aware that Westerners, especially Americans, are still viewed suspiciously fifteen years after the U.S. occupation ended in 1952, rather than dwell on the hostile idea that he is seen as an occupier, the poet is perfectly content to be labeled "goofy." Focusing on the humor of the situation helps him to overcome the stress and isolation that are part of expatriate living. Lines in "Birthday Poem" echo the sentiment, "A year among strangers, the Japanese are all mad / they look at me, can't forgive me for being funny-looking" (571). Despite trying to fit in, Whalen resigns himself to the fact that he is an outsider, and always will be. In truth, no matter how hard an expat in Japan tries to assimilate into society, unless citizenship is acquired Westerners will always be different, and even then discrepancies in appearance, background, and modes of thinking tend to distance them. There comes a point in time for all expats in the country when these differences affect the psyche negatively and become a burden.

"Scenes of Life at the Capital," the sixty-page reflection on his time in Japan written

over a span of three years, builds upon the notion that he is an outsider. At first, the lines, "That is the funny man's house over there. / That's where the funny man lives. / Keep away," echo the playfulness mentioned above, but the tone of the final line turns darker and reveals the poet's isolation (617). Later, in a moment of desperation Whalen laments, "I didn't know what I was getting into / Until it was too late and now I am a FREAK! / O California! / A GREAT BIG FREAK / (ugh!)" (633). Feelings of being "goofy" during his first year in Japan have transformed into something much more macabre; he now sees himself as abnormal. Capitalization and spacing emphasize his pessimism. The dreary expression "ugh" conveys more than a hint of despondence, and "too late" sizzles with regret. One wonders how significantly these feelings of alienation contribute to his decision to return to the states in mid 1971.

Prophetically, he imagines his departure just a few pages later.

All the customers in here will rise and applaud
When I leave this place. They have been profoundly
Edified by the spectacle of a certified FOREIGNER
Gobbling up a pizza with his fingers
Drinking a bottle of wine without falling off his chair
A scene of life at the capital (636-37)

The first line and a half begs the question about the purpose of the applause. Is it in appreciation for entertaining the other diners or because he is leaving the restaurant? Of course, there is the broader implication of his departure from Japan. It is a commonly held belief among Japanese that foreigners living in the country will not stay indefinitely; they are viewed as temporary visitors. This attitude is another of the many perils for expats. Here is another example. Many teenage girls dream of being courted by Westerners with "long" noses, green or blue eyes, and anything-but-black hair. Some twentysomethings even dabble in dating foreigners, but for the most part this kind of behavior is seen as experimentation or part of growing up before finally settling down with a "proper" Japanese mate. Common thought is that eventually expats will — and according to some, should — "go home." Therefore, feeling out of place is par for the course. The pizza-gobbling image expands upon "The War Poem for Diane Di Prima's" mention of *gaijin*, or the more politically correct *gaiokujin*, which literally means one from outside the country. *Gaijin* has also been translated as "barbarian." The portrait of the poet guzzling wine, still thought to be exotic in the sixties, and noshing on American comfort food, greasy fingers and all, paints a

stereotypical image of an uncivilized Western male. Not only does the scene capture the poet's alienation, so do its poetics. Capitalization of "FOREIGNER" literally sets the word apart from the other text. It stands out. It is different, out of place even; akin to how the poet must have felt at times. The final line of the passage, however, suggests that there is little or no hostility on the part of Whalen. It is simply a scene of everyday life in Kyoto: one of many, no more and no less important than any another. Once again, Buddhist sensibilities balance Whalen; he rolls with the punches, accepting everything that life abroad throws in his path with humor.

None of this should be interpreted as an attack on the Japanese. The expatriate experience also sheds light on one's homeland and compatriots, and the poet pokes fun at Westerners as well. In the following lines we get Whalen's satirical take on tourists visiting the 1970 Expo in Osaka.

Americans at first imagine
Japan is extension of Cincinnati suburbs
Amazed and outraged to find everything here
In careful and complete control of people who don't
Speak English, occupied (somewhat aggressively) with
Being very Japanese. ("Scenes of Life at the Capital" 617)

Prohibited by cost, time, and technology, in the late sixties Americans had fewer opportunities to travel abroad than they do today, especially to the Far East. Clearly, the passage is written from the perspective of an expat that has experienced and understands the frustration of travelers who have trouble adapting to and overcoming the language barrier and the alien ways of doing things. Whalen comically criticizes the narrow-minded, Americentric view held by some of his compatriots at the time. Capturing the estrangement that overseas travel produces, he deflates its severity with humor. The poet's mixed emotions about how he is perceived by the Japanese are deeply personal, yet they expose one of the country's imperfections. While hardly overt, xenophobia does exist, making it tough for some foreigners to feel completely at ease. Whalen uses humor and a Buddhist mindset to overcome some of his anxiety, but he accepts that discomfort is a part of the expatriate experience.

The poet's observations about and difficulty with the language are strewn sporadically throughout the Japan poems. Being a voracious reader Whalen was well versed in Asian history, philosophy, religion, and literature; however, unlike Snyder he had no intensive training in Asian languages so he had to learn Japanese as he

went along. The inability to carry out even the simplest of daily functions due to a language barrier frustrates a majority of fresh expats, and contributes significantly to culture shock. At times inadequate language skills add to the poet's isolation and agitation. Sitting in the Shinshindo coffee shop, he is concerned by "the fact that I don't know the Japanese word for 'pepper,' which I'd like to have on top of this tomato juice I'm drinking — not that this delicious slice of lemon and its attendant handful of ice are not delightful" ("The Winter" 528). The inability to procure the pepper is a minor irritation that quickly passes. More deeply troubling is that he cannot ask for what he truly desires. While trivial, these kinds of experiences compound with others and create uneasiness. He brushes this one off, but more serious instances are sources of grief. Recalling a shopping excursion, the following lines betray embarrassment about his lack of linguistic proficiency, "I wouldn't allow myself to buy one of those things because / I couldn't remember its Japanese name and yesterday / I disgraced myself at the supermarket, calling an onion 'egg'" ("Birthday Poem" 576). In the first line, the reader does not know what Whalen is referring to, however it is clear that the language barrier and the poet's pride alter his behavior. On the other hand, confusing the words onion and egg, *tamanegi* and *tamago* respectively, is a minor blunder that is quite understandable — and forgivable. Still, the mistakes trouble Whalen, and two lines later he quotes Confucius, "KEEP NAMES AND WORDS STRAIGHT!" Whalen knows full well that misusing language can impede communication, and therefore mindfulness to even the smallest detail is of utmost importance. After all, poets work with words, and they should strive for nothing short of linguistic mastery. Japanese proficiency was difficult for Whalen to attain, though he kept at his studies.

Aside from his adventures in conversational Japanese, Whalen has some interesting notions about writing as well. He stated countless times that he much preferred writing longhand to typing. Echoing what Pound did in the *Cantos*, "Scenes of Life at the Capital" includes a few handwritten Chinese characters, called kanji in Japanese. This stylistic device comes as no surprise since Whalen studied calligraphy diligently under Lloyd Reynolds at Reed College, and he kept practicing it for most of his life. Because kanji are pictographs, Whalen enjoys playing with their meaning. He humorously translates *Daihonzan* as "Great Book Mountain," but adds "this isn't exactly what / 大本山 / means" (630). Next to the kanji, which run vertical on the page, he includes a better translation: "BIG / HEADQUARTERS / MOUNTAIN." Zen

temples in China and Japan usually have two names: the "mountain name" and the "temple name," and for those that serve as administrative and training headquarters the "mountain name" is generally *Daihonzan*, which can also be translated "Great Origin Temple" (Meibo). As Whalen indicates, the middle character, *hon*, also means "book," whimsically hinting at the studying and bookwork that take place there. For the next page he continues to dally with a few Chinese characters, cross-checking meanings in various dictionaries, yet none of it strikes me to be as fun as the previous example. Eventually, he writes, "get me out of here! Bail me / out of the WORD OCEAN" above a small drawing of himself flailing his arms in the sea (631). The poet retreats to his sense of humor when the word game becomes too much for him. As difficult and frustrating as learning kanji can be for the expatriate, Whalen acknowledges that a lot of fun can be had studying and playing word-association games with the pictographs.

Other notions about the language, however, are not as spirited. Back in the coffee shop he comments about a man reading a book, "German metaphysics translated into literary Japanese / vague to vague" (Scenes of Life at the Capital" 596). While I cannot comment about German, the Japanese language, like its culture, can be quite ambiguous. Indirectly, the poet again alludes to the Confucian maxim regarding the clarity of language. There are countless accounts of fuzzy language hampering clear comprehension among the Japanese, not to mention its source of anxiety for foreign language learners. Along with most expats in Japan, the poet had his fair share of experiences getting lost in the language, but even writing about the country in English proved challenging. Written just before he returned to the States for good, Whalen sums up his feelings about the poetry he has written in Japan. "It is impossible to write in English about Japanese / Persons, places, things" ("Science and Language" 650). Contrary to these lines, the Japan poems span about 150 pages in *Collected Poems*; he did not let this particular hurdle stand in the way of writing about the country.

Regardless of linguistic ambiguities, the language barrier, and cultural differences, Whalen managed to get by just fine during the four years that he lived in Japan. In an interview with David Meltzer he fondly recalls his time abroad. "I liked the Japanese aesthetic very much. I enjoyed living in Japanese houses in Japan and walking around through Kyoto and through the old temples and shrines and things. I miss it. It's really a wonderful place" (328). This love for the city and its culture helped him

overcome whatever problems he encountered there. More importantly though, were his strong feelings about the Japanese people.

While riding a streetcar he encounters "two ancient black-wadded-silk kimono ladies." One of them "turned to me, gave me three big crystals / Pure rock candy. I thanked her and she sat down again / Beaming love and joy across the centuries / Right through the center of the language culture barrier" ("Birthday Poem" 586). Whalen is happiest when he connects with others. Simple "kindness of strangers" moments like this endear the people to him and enable him to rise above the looks of disapproval and the freakish embarrassment that he sometimes felt.

Although he experienced many moments of isolation, he also felt kinship with the Japanese. This may have something to do with the poet's impression that Japan is a country of Buddhists. In a prose section of "The Winter," he reflects on his feelings.

There is no possible metaphor simile or plain statement which can describe my joy. I was able to walk down the street and smile at people I saw — all of us existing in compassion, wisdom and enlightenment. I'll go to Hyakumanben pretty quick and put a penny in the Buddha-box, many thanks &c. (528)

The poet expresses fuzzy warmth and gratitude about being a part of the community. At times he actually does fit into Japanese society, even if only in his mind. Conceivably, moments such as these prompted Whalen to return to Kyoto in 1969, and they kept him in the country for two more years.

The expatriate experience can be a source of anxiety and frustration, yet Whalen does not succumb to despair. In spite of the language barrier, huge cultural differences, and occasional trouble fitting in, Whalen rolls with the punches and genuinely enjoys living abroad. While he bemoans a lack of linguistic proficiency, he respects the peculiarities of the Japanese language and has fun with the intricacies of Chinese characters. Likewise, he rises above feelings of isolation and freakishness with a humorous outlook and the Buddhist conviction that deep down people are kind and sympathetic. Whalen is able to look beyond the multitude of differences, accept the situation as it is, and fully immerse himself in Japan.

VII. Hunting and Gathering Culture

Whalen left America for a variety of reasons — to have new experiences, to study Buddhism, to make money, to reunite with Snyder — but genuine intrigue with Japan

and its people inspired him to return for a second stint. He commented to Meltzer, "It's wonderful to be there and read *The Tale of Genji* on the spot, as it were. Lady Murasaki had a real eye for the look of things and for the weather" (328). Whalen joins the long lineage of writers who have sketched the city over the centuries, sharing with them a keen eye for detail, but the poet also scratches below the surface and uncovers deep insights about the Japanese and their culture. He manages this through intense observation and profound contemplation.

In total, Whalen spent about four years in Japan, all the while learning as much as possible. A single line in "Scenes of Life at the Capital" summarizes his *raison d'être*: "I am hunting and gathering culture" (629). He captures simple scenes, but also uncovers vast truths. Musing about an old woman working in the garden the poet delivers this gem: "I thought when I first saw her out there months ago she was / Some hired *o-ba-san*, one of those old ladies who do a third of the work that's done in this country" ("The Garden" 515). Later he learns that she is his landlady. Anyone who has spent a considerable amount of time in the country can attest to the strong work ethic of the Japanese, especially the senior citizens. The more someone who understands Japanese culture considers the statement, the more she realizes that older women really do hold the country together, picking up the pieces that others have discarded. This observation is more proof that Whalen perceives deep complexity in everyday situations.

As mentioned earlier, the cherry blossom is a powerful, complex symbol in Japanese culture, and the poet is fascinated by its mystique. "Scenes of Life at the Capital" devotes lines and lines to detailing the festivities that surround the flower, paying close attention to the various dramas that unfold under the blossoms. Not only does the high culture — the intricate, colorful costumes, the carefully choreographed dances, and the traditional court music — captivate him, so too do the celebrations of ordinary people: the guy with a "battery-driven electrical guitar," the drunken "beerglass & bottle grandpa," and the rowdy group being entertained by a young man performing a "tanuki prick-dance with big *sake* bottle" (644-45). Whalen knows how to have a good time, and he equally appreciates high-class and proletarian merrymaking.

In reality, the poet identifies most with those who are down-to-earth. Even the usually staid Japanese let their hair down once in a while, and here is a case where the poet fits in with them seamlessly. After describing the aforementioned dance, he exalts the tanuki; a real animal, but better known in folklore as a magical, shape-

shifting trickster akin to the fox in Western culture. "Tanuki Badger Supernatural RULES! / Traveler's reed hat, big *sake* jar, / Grinning mouth and blaring eyes / . . . / . . . / Spirit of mischief, wine and lechery" ("Scenes of Life at the Capital" 646). Whalen is in his element, and he becomes possessed by the tanuki's spirit. A few lines later he proclaims, "fat breathless popeyed manifestation / Of the Divine Spirit . . . not a bad representation / Of the present writer." Skillful juxtaposition and humor deflate the haughty display of expensive kimonos and ritualized behavior. Moreover, the self-deprecation is endearing. Whalen reveals his understanding of Japanese society by presenting both sides of the coin; while rarely spoken about, a cultural dichotomy does exist.

Japanese society is intricately structured; there are rules of language and etiquette for every time and place, and the rules change depending upon the people involved and one's relationship to them. While the people do permit themselves to shine once in a while, typically, the populace is stoic and reserved. A description of a Noh character contains deep insight essential to understanding the Japanese: "animal breathing harsh / Half stifled behind lacquer mask whose outside shows / Calm silent gentle sadness" ("Birthday Poem" 582). The image embodies the weighty notions of *honne* — one's true feelings and desires — and *tatemae* — the way one conducts herself in public. While Westerners also have public and private faces, *honne* and *tatemae* are an integral part of the social behavior of the Japanese. This behavior is exemplified by the disciplined sumo wrestler, who shows no emotion after winning or losing a bout, and by the alms-collecting Buddhist monk, who acknowledges neither those who donate nor those who do not. A "calm silent" façade is what individuals present on the exterior, yet many are "half stifled" behind the mask, keeping their thoughts to themselves and chafing at the bit. Is this not a portrait of the average Japanese "salary man," who toils thirteen hours in the office, and afterwards grudgingly goes drinking with colleagues, pretending to be having a good time? These examples manifest the Japanese spirit: what is, is, and cannot be changed; accept it and proceed with as much grace as possible. While Westerners may view this as abominable, the Japanese psyche esteems it as a point of honor, an essential element for maintaining social *wa*, or harmony. It is another example of *wabi sabi*; there is shared dignity among the sadness of conformity.

The price for these social rules is high. Since one can only rarely show her true self, there is the need to maintain the mask and also the need to release tension. *Hanami*

festivities provide this relief. "Scenes of Life at the Capital" contains the cryptic lines, "Japan is a civilization based upon / An inarticulate response to cherry blossoms" (646). The elaborate kimonos, formal court music, and traditional dancing represent the mask; reserved and dignified responses that celebrate the blossoms' ephemeral beauty and the transient nature of life. The karaoke, drunkenness, and tanuki dance, on the other hand, are stress relief techniques that commemorate living in the moment and enable the average person to momentarily forget social conventions. Whalen realizes that the revelry is an exception to the rules of social conduct; in the majority of situations one's true self should be kept cloaked. Society maintains order, or at least the semblance of order, with the mask. "It doesn't make any difference what you believe / as long as you keep on schedule, bow and smile ("The Grand Design" 518). So long as you keep your head down and follow social etiquette — that is, wear the mask — you will be able to function in Japanese society. If not, the proverb "the nail that sticks up gets hammered down" will apply, except in special cases. By presenting different sides of the cherry blossom festivities, Whalen demonstrates an acute awareness about the complexity of Japanese society. While he may not comprehend it completely, he is wise enough to realize that there is more to Japan than meets the eye.

Whalen listens to the world around him as well as to himself. His simple language, attention to minute particulars, and contemplative insights reveal sublime truths about Japanese society. Since the macrocosm reflects the microcosm, he also discerns fundamental principles about travel and the world. In "Scenes of Life at the Capital," he posits, "no matter how far we travel / We find most of the world living as quasi-civilized / Nomads among polished marble ruins of great cultures" (625). Contemporary society views past civilizations through rose-colored glasses, often striving to maintain, or recapture, the perceived glory of yore. The poet understands that despite locale, customs, and culture, people are similar, not only because we share the bond of humanity, but also because we cling to past traditions. Whalen uses this general understanding to better appreciate the Japanese, especially when cultural and linguistic differences fog his view.

The poet's senses are always open: to new sights, to different smells and sounds, and to alien ways of thinking about and approaching life. He accepts everything that Japan offers with practicality and a sense of humor. "Look into the abyss and enjoy the view. / All we see is light; all we don't see / Is dark. We know lots of other things /

With other senses" ("Scenes of Life at the Capital" 646). Along with deep contemplation, Whalen employs the senses to discover the true nature of Japan, its culture, and its people. Despite rough patches encountered by everyone traveling and living abroad, the poet gets by remarkably well and revels in the opportunities that Kyoto offers him. He gathers as many experiences as possible and filters them through his historical, linguistic, and spiritual faculties. Rather than rebel against strange ideas and traditions, he contemplates their deeper implications, and thereby not only adapts to Japanese society, but transcends most of the accompanying anxiety.

With all of this in mind, let us "revisit [the] Kitano plum blossoms" in the final stanza of "Scenes of Life at the Capital" (647). He notices the "intricate wooden" architecture of the main hall, the statue of Sugawara Michizane, the poet and scholar to whom the shrine is dedicated, as well as other particulars. Most importantly, he focuses on the big flowering tree. Through Whalen's all-seeing eyes we get a sense of what the shrine looks like, as well as much larger implications. The venerable, old tree is "ruined, all rotted and broken up," and jerry-rigged with rope and poles just to keep it upright and alive, but among the imperfections, rather because of them, the tree is magnificent. In his wisdom, Whalen sees beyond the tree; it becomes a metaphor for the country, its culture, and its people. The corollary is that to truly understand Japan one must notice not only the minute particulars, but look beyond the façade and contemplate the deeper implications as well. Upon doing so, one is sure to find something much different from and more rewarding than what lies on the surface. Just as the poet beholds the underlying charm of the aged plum tree, he recognizes that the beauty and vitality found in the traditions of ancient Japan's culture and society still exist in the present if one is mindful. For Whalen, these aesthetics supersede the downsides of living abroad and liberate him from any hold the negative aspects may have. Hunting and gathering culture nurtures a more comprehensive understanding of Japan and enables the poet to appreciate the country's true value.

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