

Slate

The Mystical and Poetic Japanese Landscape

By *David Rosenberg*



Taisho Lava, Stars, and Volcanic Eruption From Arimura Village, Sakurajima, Japan, 2013. The Showa crater, the most active volcano in Sakurajima, cannot usually be seen from Arimura Village unless some of the cinders soar really high. Yet, this eruption was big enough to set an observed record-high atmospheric vibration, as recorded by the Kagoshima Local Meteorological Observatory. In this great universe, the Earth is one member of the celestial body that is alive, active, and growing.

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Photographer **Takehito Miyatake** believes that nature photography is similar to Japanese poetry, or **Waka**, as both are capable of expressing the scope and possibilities of nature by showing how singular moments can lead to profound reflections.

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“Waka poetry has expressed the scope and possibilities of nature, but with the use of limited words,” Miyatake wrote via email.

Miyatake, of course, uses no words to express his vision of nature. His imagery—whether capturing the Sakurajima volcano or fireflies—illustrates the wide range of light produced across Japan, something he has been documenting for 30 years.

“I try to shoot phenomena, the wonders of the natural world that we don’t always get to witness,” he said. “I do not try to photograph simple and familiar scenes of nature.”



Bridge Over the Shimanto River, Japan, 2013.

Built and designed to accommodate the contingencies of nature, this small, low bridge is located over the Shimanto River, known as the last crystal clear river in Japan. In the early summer twilight, genji botaru fireflies fly exuberantly over the river surface. With paddy fields along the river, the sight represents an image of a countryside where people and nature coexist.

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Volcanic Lightening Stabbing the Heavens, Sakurjima, Japan, 2013.

Waiting for an eruption one winter night across the bay, I saw the sky split by a vertical bolt of volcanic lightning inside the dark flames. It was a surreal moment in which such an extraordinary sight juxtaposed with people's everyday lives—the headlights of cars hurrying home at the foot of the mountain, and fishing boats quietly floating in the water.

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Fishing Rafts on the Quiet Inland Sea at Full Moon, Uchino-umi, Japan, 2013.

The Naruto strait is known for its fierce, whirling waves, but there is a quiet inland sea called Uchino-umi just nearby. Scores of fishing rafts were highlighted by the light from the full moon.

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Miyatake traveled around Japan with a digital 4-by-5 camera to make his photographs, and, as is the case with most nature photographers, had to be very patient while waiting for stubborn volcanoes to cooperate.

“Explosions are not punctual,” he said about traveling to Sakurajima. “On some lucky occasions, the volcano would explode five times in one night but I had to stay there for two weeks without sleep to experience this moment.”

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Hime Botaru (Princess) Fireflies Flicker in the Woods, Japan, 2013.

A flight of hime botaru fireflies, or princess fireflies, flicker together in a warm, orange hued light. Locals call them golden fireflies. Although each one is only about 5 mm in size, the flight can create a spectacle that seems to come from a fairy tale world.

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That patience paid off. Recently, Miyatake was awarded the grand prize of the Nikkei National Geographic Photo Prize for his photography. A solo exhibition by Miyatake's work—his first in the United States—will be on view at **Steven Kasher Gallery** in New York City from May 28 through June 7. He said both winning the prize and showing his work in New York has been a dream come true for him, and he hopes people will both appreciate and be inspired by his work and the "mystical nature of the Japanese landscape."

"I believe there sometimes pops up something unbelievably beautiful in the natural phenomena in Japan," he added. "I am addicted by this really rare occasion."

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Eruption on Showa Crater in the Midst of Volcanic Lightning, Sakurajima, Japan, 2013.
A light snow was falling intermittently on a winter night when I saw numerous blue strips of lightning flash as if to interweave with the scarlet flames. I was entranced by the performance of primary colors that evoked thoughts of the creation of Earth.

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Beached Firefly Squid Light Up the Japanese Coast, Japan, 2013.

The hotaru ika, or firefly squid, lives 2,000 feet below the water. In spring, they come up near the surface to spawn, and some of them even wash up on the beaches. A school of squid glowing like jewels looks like a blue band trimming the water's edge.

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Left: *Flowing Waterfall Over Crystallized Magma Under the Winters Full Moon, Japan, 2013.* Magma can become crystallized into geometric patterns when cooled down slowly in the earth. The winter full moon lights up the waterfall against the wall of columnar rock formations.

Right: *Red-Hot Cinders Erupting Skyward in the Midst of a Volcanic Lighting, Sakurajima, Japan, 2013.* With the eruption, red-hot cinders are shot up skyward out of the crater and burn in reds and oranges. In the midst of these, blue bolts of volcanic lightning flash.

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Fireflies Flashing Under the Milky Way Sky, Japan, 2013.

It is said that after having found partners, fireflies return to the sky before the first light. Looking up into the sky from the vantage point of the creek, through the fluttering fireflies, I saw the Milky Way glittering above the woods with the green lights dancing in the foreground.