There is something nervous about the man, something not quite right; he seems to quiver inwardly, like a frightened animal, and at the same time he seems morbidly vain. On his way into the bathhouse, he checks his hair with his hands, silently praising himself for the skill with which he cuts it with a razor blade. Inside, an attendant, a teenaged girl, leads him to a private room, undresses him, and helps him into a bath. This is Japan in the 1950s. At first he feels uncomfortable, he resists being touched; but as the room fills with steam and the girl’s fingers rub lather in his hair, Gimpei begins to relax. He makes small talk. He tells the girl, somehow too warmly, that her voice is beautiful. He grows carried away as he speaks, exults in the sound of her voice, finds himself almost in tears. It would make the most hardened criminal as meek as a lamb, he says. The girl, sensing something amiss, becomes frightened. She replies in a whisper which carries the trace of a shudder, and soft waves of pleasure wash over Gimpei’s body. Her voice seems to follow him, like the fragrance of flowers, as he moves.

He is secretly ashamed of his feet. They are shriveled and ugly, curled up like a monkey’s, he thinks, and he goes out of his way to tell her lies about them. He says: I grew up on a rocky coast where I used to walk barefoot, clinging to the rocks with my long toes. And yet, marveling that her beautiful hands will touch them, he gives her his feet to massage. He lets her cut his toenails. The girl, he knows, finds him sinister, and his words seem repulsive even to himself. He thinks of the women he follows on the street, and wonders, with a certain detachment, whether he will end by killing one of them. He follows them, he thinks, only because of his feet. His gruesome feet cry out, yearning for beauty, and leave him no choice, when he catches sight of some beautiful stranger, but to go after her, to trail her like someone in
thrall. At such times he even loses his grip on reality, so that recently, when a frightened woman struck him with her handbag, he came to himself with a shock, as if waking from a dream. Isn’t it terrible, he says to the bath girl, that we forever pass by strangers who, at a glance, strike some deep chord in us? We cannot speak to them, and we lose them forever, he says. But not you, he tells her. I know where you work, after all. I can find you whenever I please. A few minutes later, the massage is over. The bath girl leads Gimpei outside. He looks at the dark garden, then passes on his way.

This eerie little episode occurs at the beginning of *The Lake* (1954), by the great Japanese novelist Yasunari Kawabata, who lived from 1899 to 1972. Though he holds a high place on any list of the best Japanese writers of the twentieth century, Kawabata has not been widely read or studied in English: the first book-length critical examination of his work appeared only eight years ago, more than a quarter-century after his death, and there is still no English-language biography. There are English versions, some of them very fine, of a number of his books, but many more remain untranslated. Because everything about his novels is understated except their deep, strange, penetrating beauty, he is dismissed as a mere sensualist, or again as the purveyor of a somewhat quaintly exotic, “essentially Japanese” loveliness, like a kind of Buddhist Pater. Even Kawabata’s admirers are sometimes reduced to this tone, as when we find Donald Keene, the influential scholar of Japanese literature, writing of Kawabata’s novel *Snow Country* that it “conveys, better perhaps than any other modern Japanese novel, the special charm of the Japanese woman”—which is a bit like saying that *Crime and Punishment* conveys the “special charm” of the Russian Orthodox Church.

And yet Kawabata is an important writer—important not only in Japanese literature, but in literature. His brief, sad, fragile and unbalanced books, far from presenting mere fumes of prettiness, are continuously surprising, often intensely unsettling; at their best they are unequaled in portraying the psychic cost of aesthetic pleasure, the deadening of sympathy and sense in minds highly susceptible to beauty. For Kawabata’s characters beauty is a force that draws them out of the real world and into their own minds; it shines so fiercely in their imaginations that it blinds them to the reality around them, so that the more vividly
they perceive the beauty of the world, the less they perceive the world, the less they are able to extend love or understanding to the people in their lives, the less they are able to act. They drift into a kind of dream, and it is here that Kawabata traps us, for responding as we do to the beauty of his novels—the beauty perceived by the characters, which the sentences brightly re-create—the same dream hovers over us, and always threatens to fall. Like Nabokov, another writer of fatal beauties, Kawabata kills us with the same lure he uses to draw us in; but where Nabokov delights in telling us what he is doing to us, always leaps up to show us the poison the moment we have tasted it, Kawabata says nothing, makes no gesture, simply sits still and waits for our hearts to freeze. It is left to us to notice that the beauty that has moved us is the same power that has made the characters cold or cruel or desperate, and to examine our own smothered complicities.

Yasunari Kawabata was born in Osaka in 1899 and had one of those upbringings in which the child seems to be raised by funerals. His father died when he was two, his mother when he was three. He was sent to live with his grandparents; his grandmother died soon after. When he was ten, his only sister died. His sternly correct demeanor at services for the dead won him “master of funerals” as a boyhood nickname. His grandfather, whose illness was the subject of one of his first significant literary works (the date of composition is disputed, but Kawabata claimed to have written it in 1914), died when he was fifteen. In 1923, when he was a student at the Imperial University in Tokyo, the Great Earthquake devastated the city, and he spent days walking among the shattered streets, studying the wreckage, apparently unmoved. “I am in large measure the citizen of a ruined country,” he wrote. “I am always awake, even as I dream.” And then, of course, there was the war, during which he wrote reminiscences of his childhood, and after which he said that he would thenceforth write nothing but elegies. His manner of responding to all these tragedies can be surmised from an incident that took place in 1949. Kawabata had gone to see the destruction at Hiroshima, about which he hoped to write a novel. His deep calm as he gazed upon the ruins appeared to some observers as indifference, an impression that seemed to be confirmed when he stopped on his return journey to look at art in Kyoto. Defending himself against
the charge of callousness, he wrote: “Looking at old objects of art is not a hobby or a diversion. It is a matter of life and death.”

For all of us, he meant, but surely for himself more than most. From his adolescence on he gave himself to books, Eastern and Western alike. He read the Bible and the Buddhist scriptures. He worshipped Lady Murasaki. His enthusiasm for Joyce was so great that, after reading *Ulysses* in Japanese translation, he bought the English edition as well. While he was still a student, his experimental short story “A View of the Yasukuni Festival” (1921) came to the attention of Kan Kikuchi, the publisher who was at that time something like the patriarch of the Japanese literary world. In part through Kikuchi’s patronage, he joined a circle of ambitious young writers, some of whom, including his friend Riichi Yokomitsu, would be important figures in Japanese Modernism. Their association eventually coalesced into a new literary movement—the name translates to something like New Sensationalism—devoted to sense impressions, disjointed narratives, the interruption of traditional coherence. Kawabata’s early works, including his wonderful chronicle of Tokyo street life, *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* (1929), hurtle along on these clattering modernist tracks. But already by the mid-1920s he had begun to exhibit the quality of immense personal reserve that, despite his lifelong involvement in the business of the literary world—he founded journals, sat on committees, was for many years the president of the Japanese P.E.N. Club—made him something of a mystery to his peers. And he had begun, too, to develop the magnificently refined and ambiguous style (full of far-off, faint annihilations, like the delicate instant of lightning) in which his great works of the next four decades would be written.

Kawabata’s protagonists are usually young men (Shimamura in *Snow Country*, Kikuji in *Thousand Cranes*) who have withdrawn into aesthetic lassitude, or older men (Shingo in *The Sound of the Mountain*, Oki in *Beauty and Sadness*) whose mature reflections are clouded by memories and dreams. Their minds are full of insubstantial shapes; as their stories flow softly around them, they look at insects, flowers, landscapes, clothing, faces. They travel somewhere, frequently by train (this motif appears as early as “The Dancing Girl of Izu,” written in 1926); very often they become preoccupied with a virginal young woman, who serves as a locus for some unnamed, vaguely threatening intensity. (In *The
House of Sleeping Beauties, a late work from 1961, old men visit a strange brothel where they spend the night beside naked young girls who have been drugged into somnolence, whom the old men are forbidden to violate.) Their hearts are dull or drowsy, in the sense that Coleridge meant when he wrote that poetry excites us to artificial feelings and makes us callous to real ones. Above all the world seems not quite real to them; it trembles and recedes, like the waves in Woolf, then rushes forward to merge with their imaginations in moments of heightened beauty. But even at these moments it is diminished, for what they perceive is simply the element of their imaginations, the beauty, and not the world itself.

Consider Gimpei, the madman who menaces the bath girl in The Lake. Gimpei is at once the least typical and the most typical of Kawabata’s protagonists—he is atypical because he is insane, but then his insanity is only an exaggeration of the qualities he shares with the others: his moral weakness, his extreme perception of beauty, the sense that other people have only a phantom existence for him. Luxuriating in the sound of her voice, Gimpei hardly notices the shudder in the bath girl’s whisper; if he does notice it, it is as a connoisseur, pleased to have discovered a particular effect. Her humanity, her possession of a separate consciousness which he ought not to frighten or manipulate, scarcely occurs to him. She is little more than a beautiful object, frightening perhaps because of the power her beauty holds over him—in this she resembles the women whom he obsessively follows on the street—but not, in Gimpei’s mind, a person with feelings as real as Gimpei’s. Indeed, only when he closes his eyes and imagines her does she begin to be strongly present to him. As she massages his chest, he considers touching her and thinks that “if so much as a fingertip brushed against her,” she would slap him. “And he could actually feel the shock of being slapped. In sudden terror he tried to open his eyes, but his eyelids refused to move. They had been hit very hard. He thought he might cry, but no tears came, and his eyes ached as though they had been pricked with a hot needle.”

Or consider Shimamura in Snow Country, Kawabata’s best novel, which he published in hesitant installments between 1935 and 1947. Shimamura is not a madman, but only an idle aesthete, a minor expert on dance who, after a flirtation with the Japanese
dance-drama, has decided to write exclusively on the Western ballet. He decides this precisely because he has never seen a ballet, has seen only pictures in books, and thus the dance exists entirely within his imagination: “It was like being in love with someone he had never seen.” Shimamura travels by train to a hot spring located on the remote Japanese west coast, one of the snowiest regions in the world, where he has previously had a relationship with a geisha named Komako whom he has been unable to forget. The snow country is the quintessential Kawabata landscape: dreamlike, muted, slightly unreal. On the train Shimamura sees a young girl nursing an older man. Something intent and piercing in her face attracts his attention, and he covertly studies her by watching her reflection in his window, “as if he were watching a tableau in a dream.” The translucent features of the young girl in the glass (which Shimamura calls his “evening mirror”) and the alien landscape outside seem to blend together in a strange communion. The reflection of her face passes over a distant light shining somewhere out in the mountains, and “as it sent its small ray through the pupil of the girl’s eye, as the eye and the light were superimposed one on the other, the eye became a weirdly beautiful bit of phosphorescence on the sea of evening mountains.” The girl, Yoko, gets out at the same stop as Shimamura. At the inn in the snow country, Shimamura renews his affair with Komako, the geisha; Komako loves him, but though he is drawn to her, the cloudy aestheticism that made him lapse into a reverie over the reflection in the window dilutes her presence in his mind until he is incapable of returning her feelings. “He saw her as somehow unreal, like the woman’s face in that evening mirror.” Komako is the best character in Kawabata’s fiction; her fierce, pure, contradictory life—she drinks too much, talks incessantly, refuses to leave Shimamura’s room, refuses to come back when she does leave it, has no prospects, bites her own arm in frustration; she is only nineteen years old—pours through Shimamura’s coldness like a river through a weak dam. But he sees her only as a vague nimbus of interesting feelings. Like Yoko on the train, she seems to blend into the otherworldly landscape of the snow country: “The white in the depths of the mirror was the snow, and floating in the middle of it were the woman’s bright red cheeks.”

Both Gimpei and Shimamura, then, though in very different
ways, are the frail prisoners of their strong apprehensions of beauty; both men are so attuned to their imaginative satisfactions that the people and places around them appear to them only dimly, through a heavy aesthetic veil. What is striking about this is the way Kawabata makes his characters act like the readers of their own stories, rifling through them for poetic impressions. Their aesthetic distance from the events around them means that, like readers, they perceive rather than participate, perceive as if from the outside; they look in on their own experience as if through the intimate window of a book. And this extends not only to the world of the senses, but to moods, situations, relationships. More than any natural beauty Shimamura loves the melancholy air of “wasted effort” he feels around Komako. In *Beauty and Sadness* (1961–1963), Oki, a writer who has had an affair with a fifteen-year-old girl, writes of the way he would plan their lovemaking in advance, unknown to the girl, in order to achieve a desired effect. Kawabata makes no effort to hide the pain caused by his protagonists, either from the protagonists or from us; he simply folds it once more into their larger aesthetic perception, so that it, too, becomes something to be savored for its beauty, the way the shudder of the bath girl sends a dart of pleasure through Gimpei. Kawabata’s prose, which can seem to move coolly among exquisite, impersonal details, in fact almost always shadows closely the perspective of his protagonist; the details are the details that draw the protagonist’s attention, and the extreme spareness and indefiniteness of the sentences—the story always seems to be fading out of them, as if the plot had just breathed on the glass—suggest how much is missing, how much is canceled and annulled in the mind of a man like Shimamura. (And then, of course, the spareness is also beautiful.) Thus we read Kawabata’s fictions as if through a layer of reading that has already been done for us, in advance, by the characters: they read their own stories, selectively, and we read the stories through them. Kawabata writes with the intention not merely to arouse us, but—and this is the crucial point of difference that separates him from a mere aesthete—to arouse us with what arouses them.

But it is a terrible thing to be a reader of one’s actual life, rather than a reader of merely fictional lives, and the aesthetic withdrawal of Kawabata’s protagonists comes at a large human cost. Shimamura is moved by the landscape while he breaks
Komako’s heart; Gimpei and Oki crumple the lives of the teen-aged girls they seduce. But because they act like readers, and because, as readers looking for pleasure, we are already acting like Kawabata protagonists, we notice only the beauty of their visions and not at all, or only later, the crimes on their peripheries. It is all a fiction to us, just as the people around them are often warmly fictional to Kawabata’s protagonists, and so we allow the beauty to recruit us gently into the crimes. There is a moment in *Snow Country* when Shimamura, still lingering in the inn near the hot spring, watches autumn turn into winter by observing the insects dying in the cold. It is a weirdly lovely, mournfully radiant passage, and the note of sweet sadness Shimamura finds in the hopeless struggles of the insects is explicitly linked, later in the book, to the air of “wasted effort” that attracts him to Komako. But in the middle of the passage, he thinks fleetingly of the children he has left behind in Tokyo—and what are they, to him or to us, except an added source of melancholy sweetness?

He spent much of his time watching insects in their death agonies. Each day, as the autumn grew colder, insects died on the floor of his room. Stiff-winged insects fell on their backs and were unable to get to their feet again. A bee walked a little and collapsed, walked a little and collapsed. It was a quiet death that came with the changing of the seasons. Looking closely, however, Shimamura could see that the legs and feelers were trembling in the struggle to live. For such a tiny death, the empty eight-mat room seemed enormous.

As he picked up a dead insect to throw it out, he sometimes thought for an instant of the children he had left behind in Tokyo. A moth on the screen was still for a very long time. It too was dead, and it fell to the earth like a dead leaf. Occasionally a moth fell from the wall. Taking it up in his hand, Shimamura would wonder how to account for such beauty.

By placing us in the minds of characters who share our readerly mental habits, but do so *as if in real life*, Kawabata implicates us in the sufferings caused by his protagonists; he makes us guilty toward his secondary characters. We, too, were dreaming on the spring petals when someone nearby us was dying. (This paradox—real guilt toward unreal creations—is at the heart of reading Kawabata.) As a sequence of self-discovery, this can be chilling; it was not capriciously that this writer of beautiful descriptions claimed to adore Dostoevsky and feel no affinity for Tolstoy.

Near the end of many of Kawabata’s novels, there occurs a
moment of rupture, when the unreal aesthetic world in which the protagonist has secured himself is punctured, and reality floods in. These moments frequently coincide with the appearance of stars and celestial objects, perceived as uncanny apparitions, or occasionally (as in *Snow Country*) as overwhelming forces of mystical communion. In *Thousand Cranes*, Kikuji sees the morning star appearing and disappearing in the clouds. In *The Lake*, Gimpei sees a large star which he at first mistakes for a firefly; it leads the way to an encounter with an ugly, desperate woman whom he painfully thinks of as “reality” in contrast to his “beautiful dream.” In the astonishing conclusion to *Snow Country*, Shimamura has at last been trapped in the knowledge of his guilt toward Komako: “He stood gazing at his own coldness, so to speak . . . All of Komako came to him, but it seemed that nothing went out from him to her. He heard in his chest, like snow piling up, the sound of Komako, an echo beating against empty walls.” He walks with her through the dark village, and looking at the stars overhead he feels himself wrapped in the Milky Way, “brighter than brightest full moon.” All at once they hear a fire alarm and the shouts of distant villagers. A blaze has broken out in a crowded warehouse, crowded because a movie was being shown there; Shimamura and Komako run to the scene, where, moving among the throng, they see Yoko fall from the burning second floor. Komako runs to the girl, tries to drag her away. Shimamura pushes toward her through the crowd, but is shoved aside, and “as he caught his footing, his head fell back, and the Milky Way flowed down inside him with a roar.” These are the last words in the book. The moment is terrible and total, not a new understanding but only a sudden, violent experience; but at the end of his book Shimamura is finally made to face the reality, brighter than the brightest full moon, that he has tried to escape for so long.

But if reality, in its mysterious guises, comes for Shimamura, if it comes for Kikuji, if it even comes for Gimpei (who, however, furiously rejects it), does it come for us as well? Or is there a second ring of aestheticism around Kawabata’s novels, encompassing the first ring of the protagonists’ perspectives, from which we are unable to find any way out? For after all, the invasion of the real in these novels is for us only another aesthetic experience: the bright star, the Milky Way, are neither mystical nor actual to us, but only fresh beauties in the novels in which
they appear. And if, within the first ring, the protagonists persuade us to see the lives of the other characters as sources of aesthetic pleasure, then surely we are all along doing the same from the second ring, only with the protagonists’ lives included as well. Shimamura can see Komako’s life as a lovely wasted beauty, while we, callously joining him, see his own life in that light, too. Is it not the case, then, that the moment when Shimamura has his vision of reality is for us the moment of the greatest unreality? Is it not the case that the more we sympathize with Komako—therefore proving ourselves better than Shimamura—the more like Shimamura we really become, since all we have done is to surrender to something in our own imaginations? In his introduction to *Snow Country*, Kawabata’s best translator, Edward G. Seidensticker, writes that “the very success of the novel becomes a sort of affirmation of the humanity that is being denied”; is it not the case instead that the success of the novel is a final denial of the humanity that is tentatively, even hopelessly, being affirmed?

But we are entering a realm in which we have more wishes than certainties. Kawabata himself makes no answer. There are books, great books, which make us believe that none of this is true, that we are not alone, that our sympathy for literary characters in fact helps to bind us to others, that our susceptibility to literary beauties makes us better people in our everyday, non-literary lives. As we read Kawabata, those books whisper movingly to us; and once the roar of Kawabata fades (a roar which is also a silence, he once explained in a lecture), we are left with dim and not unconventional memories of images, characters, and feelings, and the other books seem to be right. But when, with the trace of a shudder, we take up *Snow Country* again, we do so not for the illustration of the costs but for the beauty that makes us suffer them. And find ourselves once more in the cold garden of Kawabata’s prose, in the same uncertain dream, with deadly beauties flashing through our minds—and forked tongues whispering in our ears.