

5<sup>th</sup> December 2020

# SNOW

**“Wondrous strange snow.”**

*William Shakespeare, A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream*

A friend suggested I read *Fifty Words for Snow* by Nancy Campbell. Interesting, I thought. So I bought the book to investigate further. The author has travelled the world exploring words for snow and has gathered a wealth of unique stories. One reviewer says: “[This book is] absolutely exquisite. Nancy Campbell tells truth and tales in the most beautiful, crystalline prose.” I couldn’t agree more. *Fifty Words for Snow* is delightful!

Mount Kilimanjaro in the Maasai region of Tanzania has three volcanic peaks. *Kibo*, “The white mountain”, is often hidden by clouds. But when the skies clear, the reason for the name is evident: the summit is capped with massive glaciers formed by centuries of snowfall. Tourists pay thousands of dollars to see snow in equatorial Africa. The Maasai people, respecting the balance of nature, worship *Eng’ai*, the divine principle that created all life on earth. *Eng’ai* and humans work together in harmony to nurture all life. The word for snow in Swahili is *theluji*, describing the snow on Kilimanjaro as the “meeting point between the human and the divine”.

But my favourite is the Latvian word, *cīrulputenis*, meaning “a blizzard of skylarks.” Skylarks, the author tells us, arrive in Latvia to breed in late February and March as heralds of spring. A “blizzard of skylarks”, therefore, is used to evoke the wonder of a surprise snowfall in springtime, “as deliriously light and silver as the notes of the skylark’s song”, or when snowflakes “beat the air as powerfully as their wings.”

The American poet, Wallace Stevens, suggests in *The Snowman* we should be “the listener, who listens in the snow”. Nancy Campbell has started me on that path. While I thought snow was something designed to make me hate the winter, it now begins to speak to me of places where the human and the divine intersect and of a springtime heralded by a “blizzard of skylarks”. Well now! As Advent unfolds, are fifty words enough for such a thing as strange and wondrous as this?

## **A prayer for today**

*Creator God, show me the wonders of life in the geometry of a snowflake, the grandeur of a mountain, the song of a skylark and the beauty of love. Amen.*

*An original reflection by © Tom Gordon*

Also available at <https://swallowsnestnet.wordpress.com>