

Honchō 4-13-21

I get off at Shin-Nakano underground station, Marunouchi-sen, the red line.

I orientate myself briefly once above ground. The first thing that catches my eye is the corner building on the opposite side of the street. Cosmetics are now available where the stationery shop used to be. I still own paints from that former stationery shop, with its name *ETOH* printed on the price tags. I'm overcome with sadness as I realise it will never be my stationary shop again, yet at the same time I think how absurd my wish to preserve everything in this part of Tokyo is. To stop time so everything remains as I remember it from my first visit. The notion that change in a city like Tokyo makes old things disappear irretrievably. Bathhouses don't fit the idea of modern, big-city life.

I turn into *Nabeya-yokochō-dori*, the old shopping street in the district referred to as *Nabeyoko* for short. The name dates back to the Edo period. In the past you could probably still find shops selling *nabe*, a special kind of stew. Since the '70s it's been a shopping street lined with lanterns. An old tea house and a shop selling *senbei* (rice crackers) are the last witnesses of a bygone era. My supermarket *Marusho* has disappeared and given way to another, cheaper chain. *Marusho*, a typical Japanese supermarket where I spent hours enthralled by all the packaging designs and large selection of fish and seafood. Such attention to detail, even in the presentation of the most mundane goods. The old ladies of the neighbourhood chatted while hunting for deals. In front of the door stood a small cart where sweet potatoes were roasted, drawing attention to itself with a melody played at irregular intervals. And I as a silent observer. I didn't know any Japanese at that time and yet I felt I had arrived. Home. In a wonderful in-between state I move like an invisible being through this world so foreign and fascinating to me.

At the corner where there used to be a small flower shop, I turn left into the residential area. I first came to Japan more than twenty years ago and have visited this area west of Shinjuku every time since. As soon as I stand at the entrance of the underground station the memories open like a door to a parallel world. I've walked this route so many times; I know every corner of this neighbourhood. My city atlas of Tokyo documented the system of numerical codes which structure the city. There are no street names, only sequences of numbers that serve as addresses. Each page of the city atlas was a concentration of places I slowly opened up for myself; an unfolding of different levels of consciousness within the city.

Maybe that's why I always think of those two little paper cranes, so special to me as a child. A meeting with a Japanese tourist in a church in Geneva almost forty years ago. I'm in a dark interior, the nave, the pleasant darkness of the room is broken by a few rays of light. In awe of the dimensions, feeling happiness structured by the sun. A Japanese woman opens her handbag and takes out two pieces of paper, one yellow and one orange. She folds two cranes as a present for me and my sister. Two origami cranes as an indication of the outside, of another world. Inside the body everything is folded, shielded from all that is unknown, all possible prospects, far from unfolding. This surface of the paper as a concentrate.

When I travelled to Tokyo in 1999 I stayed with a friend who was there on a research grant. I was still studying and had saved up a little money, but almost nothing for a life in Tokyo even if the

'bursting' of the so-called *bubble economy* had left clear traces. I came for two months and considered every morning whether I'd use my small daily budget to buy a metro ticket or a small lunch in one of the numerous convenience stores, called *Konbinis*.

Konbinis are a world of their own, and my curiosity for their unfathomable offerings often won over, so I found myself walking around the city for weeks. I let myself drift, my city atlas always with me. Once, when I got really lost on my way to a small photo gallery, I was helped by a policeman sitting in one of those ubiquitous little police boxes. Our lack of a shared language meant he ended up accompanying me right up to the gallery and I was unable to stop him.

To this day when I land at the airport in Tokyo I slip into my Japanese self. I cross over into another version of my personality. How audacious to speak of my 'Japanese self', but this feeling of deep familiarity has been with me since the very first time I arrived in this country. The sensation of feeling at home, of somehow belonging there.

Japan smells different. Those first moments after landing that foreign smell — imprinted on my brain — is part of this transition time for me.

The aimless wandering through the city, the immersion in a crowd of people, and the associated idea of looking exactly the same, of being a part of it, although of course I will never be.

The flower shop on the corner where I turn is now a bar. How do I deal with memories? What do they do to me? I turn into a little street and recognise the familiar lines of sight. Up ahead, behind the cigarette and beer machine, is one of the old Japanese houses with a curved black wooden roof. On the right I see the liquor shop — open every day from afternoon till late at night — where the old owner sits, sometimes sleeps, in front of his TV. I bought a chestnut schnapps there once. Then comes the house where a manic collector lives, whose possessions now extend to the edge of the street, hidden behind an idiosyncratic construction of tarpaulins. A makeshift building sits in front of the main house; a concentration of accumulated life. I can make out some objects: furniture, piles of newspapers, records, old figurines.

On the next corner is the launderette. I often sat there leafing through old Mangas and drinking vending machine tea.

After graduating in 2005 I was able to go to Japan, to Tokyo, on a DAAD scholarship and live in exactly the same house I had been in before. Mr Kondo had five small rooms on the first floor he rented out to foreigners.

I lived in the corner room, just to the left at the top of the small metal staircase that led up to the first floor from Mr Kondo's front door. The steps had their own dull, metallic sound. As I write, I can hear the different rhythms of each resident climbing the stairs. The small covered forecourt in front of our entrance door on the first floor where the shoes remained. The door is always open. The smell inside the house is a mixture of tatami and the small hallway's smooth polished wooden floor. I hear someone coming up the metal stairs and wait for the latch of the door to our floor to fall back into its lock. The jingling key fobs: we all have a small bell on our room keys made to look like different creatures. Every day at 5pm a song is played somewhere in the neighbourhood. This tradition is part of disaster preparedness. In my neighbourhood it's the melody of the Westminster bells. Around this time Mr Kondo comes up to the first floor and sweeps the small hallway, pushes our mail under our doors, and cleans the toilet. On my first visit it was still a typical Japanese squat

toilet — the cistern doubling as a small hand basin — always with a fresh flower in it. Later, one of those high-tech toilets was installed. There are green plastic slippers that you must wear in the toilet, although the distance from the hall to the toilet is probably less than a metre.

We only had one shared shower on the ground floor, and since there was no proper heating in most of the apartments, going to a public bathhouse (*Sentō*) was very pleasant, especially in winter. I often went to the *Sentō*, which was a few streets away. This bathhouse has now also closed. The old bathhouses date back to the times when many houses did not have their own bathrooms because of the risk of fire. *Sentō*s usually open from around 4 pm until midnight. Separated by gender, you first wash yourself thoroughly and then relax in the hot pools. In my *Sentō* there were three different medicinal water pools and another one in the open air. Usually there were only a few older women present, and I was the only foreigner. The other women weren't just there to relax, but because they also had no bath at home. I found the atmosphere on these visits very special, characterised by wonderful female solidarity, a complicit self-esteem and the shared enjoyment of a hot bath. A moment of calm snatched from the day.

Turning left around the corner — after the street with the laundrette — there is the place where the rubbish is collected. Every day it's a different category. I've never really understood this choreography, the many subtle nuances between combustible and non-combustible rubbish. A few steps further is a house whose periphery is completely lined with water bottles, and not just the obligatory one or two. It's widely believed that filled water bottles will keep stray cats away from gardens and properties because they don't like the sun's reflections in the water. At the vending machine for hot and cold drinks I turn right past a house with a beautiful garden made of a multitude of flowerpots crammed into less than half a metre of space. The next house has a small shrine in the front garden in which, apart from lovingly arranged food, there are also toy figures, and the entire front garden is populated by a wide variety of frog figurines. I have to smile every time I see one of these eccentric creatures which seem to have a life of their own, and I know I'm almost home. Two houses further on a small path turns off to the right, maybe five or six metres long. At the very end on the right-hand side is Mr Kondo's house. An old persimmon tree in the garden, many different plants in flowerpots in front of the house. The red letterbox at the front of the always-open garden gate.

The house no longer exists.

On my last visit to the old neighbourhood I walked this familiar path as I had done so many times before and had not been prepared for the fact the house had completely disappeared. When I turned into the little path I was still hoping I might have made a mistake, that despite the almost somnambulistic certainty with which I usually find my way to this house I might have overlooked a turnoff. A clumsy attempt to escape the inevitable. But I see the old address on the new letterboxes, Honchō 4-13-21.

No house, no old garden with persimmon tree, the whole lot replaced by a new apartment building. I stand there and see how the two houses overlap. The image of the Kondo house is so present in my mind that at first my head refuses to acknowledge reality. Mr Kondo had been old, his wife had died in the winter of 2005 during my time in this house. I came back to Tokyo every two or three years after that and walked to the house every time. Once I found Mr Kondo still there; his daughter was looking after him. On another visit the house was still standing and looked the same as always. I usually came by unannounced not wanting to cause any inconvenience. When he happened to be

there we were both very happy, but just the sight of the old house was enough to satisfy my longing for this place. It was to be expected that this would all eventually be over; I knew that old houses in Japan had no value, only land.

And yet I felt as if I'd lost my home. I stood for a long time in front of the place that had once been my home, on that little path in front of the new low wall made of imitation stone.

I don't know if I'll come back. I still see the old house in my memory.

But it is fading.

The folded edges of the two origami cranes have turned white over the years.