

Postcards from Somewhere

"I am in Tokyo." At the time of this writing, I am sitting in a dorm room on a university campus in Tokyo, Japan. You are no doubt sitting in a different place. Or at least, your body is. Your mind is here, with me, on this paper, and when finished, will eventually be somewhere else

a. From wherever I (really) am, to wherever you (really) are, I'm trying to write pictures of places: physical, mental, spiritual, and otherwise. Places that I see, but also trying to capture where I am in the cartographies and hierarchies of people's minds.

There are infinite ways to find out where you are. Maps mark "You are here", and we believe them. Maps are just simplifications of an impossibly large world, train stations, department stores, airports, countries, cities always being bigger than us. Physically, but also conceptually larger: locations are things that someone else found and created and named and changed long before us. To say "I am in Japan", I am referring to that country of 377,944km², founded by long-dead people in 660 BC. Someone else called it Japan, and everyone calls it Japan, and to decide to call it "Mexico #2" or "Pencilcase Hills" wouldn't work, and then you wouldn't know where I am.

Locating yourself is a matter of knowing what's around you, and where or what you are relative to them: in or outside, above or below, between, in the middle, on the fringes. It's just a game of words and symbols, and convention will always win.

I.

In first grade, our teacher taught us the difference between “house” and “home.” A house, she said, is just the building you live in. It becomes a home when your family is there, and when you love each other. It was not correct, she said, to say that you live in a home. We live in **houses**, and we come **home** to them. A bright yellow smiley face hovers over Home.

The cornerstone of this definition is stability, because what can be more stable than blood? Home is comfort in the familiar, through ties that have existed longest and strongest.

This definition of home is hinged on a fundamental need for social bonds – that we are happiest when we have company. But conversely, if one is alone, is one not home? Some of my most depressing moments in Japan were about languishing over people who weren’t here, but simultaneously, it was only here that I found immense satisfaction in being by myself. Japan is a country that has made it acceptable to be alone. Ramen stores cater to people who eat alone: a long, slightly greasy countertop for solo diners is a key staple. At the McDonald’s I frequent, ³/₄ of the people are by themselves: some of them are there to work, like me. But some are just alone, sitting at a table, eating a meal, and *lingering*, without a book or a Nintendo to buffer the solitude.

II.

Look up Japan in your mind, and where are you? In my mind, I’m surrounded by pulsating neon lights, the ring of pachinko, the high-pitched squawk of Lolita girls, the blazing red and white sun alongside old kimonos and bowing and painfully intricate tea ceremonies. In

truth, Japan isn't as sharply self-contradicting as I made it out to be. Japan, as is any other country, is victim to stereotypes and monolithic symbols, "The Best of Japan" coming together in a simple, endlessly fascinating, fathomable concept.

In Japan, the foreigner arrives with glazed eyes, taking in what he or she knows and has eagerly anticipated in Japan. The local is done with it, nothing is new, and he or she rushes off to live his or her life. The homeland is functional, it's for school and work and just getting through the day. The new, foreign land is for watching, and thinking, and paying to let maids sit on your lap in a cafe, and everything else you would never do at home.

Here, foreigners are often treated as guests, and so are called "okyaku-san" or "okyaku-sama", the latter being the extreme polite address. We are offered the best of everything: when I did a homestay, my host mother let me stay in her young daughters' room while her whole family of four crowded into their tatami room. As a foreigner and a guest, I'm expected to partake of and admire culture from a privileged position: I should do bad calligraphy while someone else grinds the ink and stains their hands.

III.

My favorite of Japan's magic tricks is Shinjuku Station. There's no sense of keep left/keep right when you have over 40 platforms and 3.64 million pairs of feet inside. You expect madness, but instead, you get the grace of a thousand people moving together, a mass choreography. The Japanese are not a people who push, even when packed into a station. They've learned the blocking of skillfully passing each other, even as they run for the

departing train. However I, as a foreigner, still can't get into it. It's a dance I've never quite mastered: move too fast and I bump into people. Move too slow and now I'm in the way. Trying to move at their pace, my path isn't the smooth, nearly straight one of a Nihonjin. It's a crooked, jagged line, with double takes and quick turns to avoid the corner of a salaryman's briefcase or a schoolgirl's backpack.

The perfect orchestration of Shinjuku requires the purposeful stride of a Japanese person, rushing off to work or school – more institutions where they learn to work as one. Locals don't need to know which way their transfer platform is, or how to haul luggage through the world's biggest station (they simply don't), or to marvel at the sheer numbers of people passing them by. They are at home in Shinjuku Station: it's not a phenomenon worth stopping and re-examining. In this sense, a home is something stable and therefore negligible.

IV.

I came to Japan knowing nothing but a handful of throwaway Japanese phrases: *arigato gozaimasu*, *itadakimasu*, *sumimasen*, *gomen nasai*. I was completely illiterate, couldn't read a single syllable. Being unable to read anything meaningful – street signs, storefronts, bus schedules, food labels – I had to rely on my memory, dumb logic, and faith in the world around me. Being illiterate in Japan felt (and still feels) like having lost one of my senses. Perception feels incomplete: I can only discern the outlines and surfaces of things, and make guesses and inferences instead of direct connections. My interactions with store clerks, policemen, station attendants and waitstaff are childlike in their simplicity. I never know what's behind mysterious

second and third floor windows, only that they have a yellow sign or and that there's an unreadable menu out front.

I am caught between knowing and not knowing where I am. Tokyo is a city brimming with everything – food, people, money, life, death, cuteness – and I can barely take it in. Wandering around major hubs like Shinjuku or Shibuya is dizzying: illiteracy makes words disappear, all the signs become meaningless. The city becomes even more surreal, the curry restaurants and manga cafes and massage parlors turning wildly exotic and unknown.

When we don't understand a place, we make our own explanations and soothe ourselves. In a country where I didn't know half the things I needed to know, where I couldn't take in anything except by looking, I had to shut off the need to know, and the fear of not knowing, and just go out and live.

V.

Who hasn't played at being Japanese? We all have, at one time or another, bumbled out gobbledigook filled with a's and k's and ch's to imitate the sound of Japanese. In every Japanese restaurant in the world, kimono-clad waitresses will greet you with "IRRASHIMASEEEEE!" and bow. We all know what arigato means, and we think kanji is pretty (and don't know what the hell it means until we try to get a tattoo).

Without any knowledge of it, any foreign language is just a mass of sounds, with slight differences in tone, harshness, etc. Japanese is a much harsher language than our mimicry of it, the sh sound coming out like a snake's hiss, the r being somewhere in the realm of l and r and w.

And unlike the fumbling babble we spout, the Japanese intone their language precisely: high-low-high, or low-high-low, but will change depending on their intent: imperative, inquisitive, rude, polite, extra polite. Sentences are long, but they pause in the middle quite often: to think, or to enumerate things, or simply because you should.

If I visualize language, Japanese would be neat, straight rectangles. Each hard syllable is like the corner of a box, phrases coming at you quickly like an assembly line on fast forward. French is all rounded curves and swirls and arabesques. Filipino is a funny mix of curves and jags – swearing sounds sharp and rough and crisp, but a *harana* makes you think of sickly sweet syrup. English is wide, fat oblongs, the unchanging tone making me think of function and German design.

In this country, all you'll be surrounded with is neat straight rectangles of Japanese. English and German and French have crept into the language, but they come out similarly transformed into the regimented, inflexible syllables of Japanese: each consonant has to pair with a vowel, or else it doesn't work. *Sandwich* becomes *sandowichi*, and *arbeit* becomes *arubaito* (part-time job).

Spoken Japanese has no known relatives among other languages, and is proud of its linguistic isolation. Even Chinese words, from which it took written characters, are not taken as is but instead forced into a different reading in Japanese. Foreign words will always be considered loanwords, as if the Japanese fully intend to give them back someday. Even in the language, there's a sharp line between what is Japanese and what isn't.

VI.

In the complex categories of people's minds, where am I? I thought I was simply *gaijin*, foreigner, outsider, as is every non-Japanese person. However, it's not just about being an outsider: what part of outside did you come from? I can't relate to my French roommate: she complains that she hears Japanese people racing to find the seat on the bus farthest away from her. My Italian friend recalls going to a prefecture in the middle of nowhere and seeing amazed Japanese teenagers reach out and gingerly finger her blonde hair. Me, I've never been called *gaijin*, and I've never had people marvel over my (non-existent) blue eyes or take pictures with me.

I don't wish for prejudice – I only marvel at how hazily I reside in the Japanese consciousness, and yet physically exist as a cog in the Japanese system. In Japan, Filipinos are Catholic missionaries and prostitutes, engineers and entertainers, teachers and bums, scholars, waitstaff... every line of work, there's at least one Filipino in it. Perhaps that's it: we exist as workers – the cheap labor that enables the Japanese to keep being Japanese. But, in the Japanese fashion, you aren't supposed to see the inner workings (*honne*) of what's happening. You're supposed to maintain a facade (*tatema*) to show outsiders. The Japanese firmly believe that they are all Japanese – porcelain-skinned, delicate-framed, brunette Japanese, and it's only now that that *Nippon ga abunai* -- Japan is in danger -- from the tall, pasty foreigners. Those short, tan Asians – they're already here, but don't talk about it.

VII.

On September 27, 2009, Typhoon Ketsana/Ondoy hit the Philippines, and struck Manila with unforeseen, frightening force. I first saw the news on the train: I could only stare slack-jawed at the footage of Katipunan Avenue's new rivers of surging gray water. People were dying, and running around trying to fix a broken situation, and flooding the airwaves with frantic calls to family and friends, and I could only watch and read and worry with kanji homework in front of me, the blanks stoic and expectantly waiting.

Being sent here as a scholar feels like I have to carry the banner for a little island country. But I hesitate to identify as Filipino, because that makes me A Token Filipino. Like it or not, I'm one of a few Filipinos out of thousands here. I never used to mind bearing the flag: in high school, I wrote several angry essays declaring that I wanted to stay in the country, and those who didn't were traitors. Then I learned that nations were just imagined communities, that there was nothing rational behind my belief in The Filipino People (TM). And it's true: how can I say that my comfortable middle-class existence and the sampaguita kids who knock on car windows should have anything in common? In fact, declaring unity and commonality obscures the vast inequalities that exist between us.

And yet, the nation is a powerful concept, perhaps one that still resides somewhere in my sceptical consciousness. I prefer rationalism to emotional nationalism, but I look at the news footage of water sweeping away houses and their residents and then lie in bed angry and sleepless, hating myself for being here instead of there. I don't comprehend it, but somehow my distance from the concept of the country has its limits. I know the sad-sack, dismal, painfully ironic, carnivalesque Philippines is still my home, and it calls and I hear it.

Home

Home is a friendly room upstairs where we sit around a table and talk about nothing for hours, home is at the end of the smoke-filled 16-lane highway in Manila. Home is drinking endless mugs of green jasmine tea, and home is the little girls selling hair scrunchies on the street. Home is the endless cacophony of tricycles and motorcycles and buses and jeeps and pedestrians and barkers, and home is walking to the Y99 store on silent, warm, windy nights for another cheap fix. Home is the harsh, biting wind in winter, and home is the eternal smoggy, dusty sunshine in Manila. Home is a newspaper I can't read, and home is a newspaper that I can't bear to read. Home is here, and there, and wherever I can find it. Home is singular in concept but plural in reality, and I am singular, and what a pity that is.

To Those Who Move

Stasis is the state we strive for. Once we find a home, we want to stay there and we want to stay the way we are. Unavoidably, we can't. We have to leave countries because they're not ours, we have to leave schools once we finish them, we have to leave friends once they go bad. Once we've found comfort and happiness in things, leaving them feels like tearing off a limb.

Home is where we find ourselves most content with ourselves, with others, with the universe in general. When there's nothing more that we need to soothe our souls, we want things to stay in the perfect balance that they have. Home is anything: a place, an age, a time, with certain company, no company, a new life, an old one...it depends on who we are and what we need.

But inevitably, we shift. Time careens along, dragging us with it. Who we are, it changes. What we want now, it'll be different later. We move homes all the time, and just don't know it.

We are home, but not for long. We'll leave again.