

At the last stop

The train from Narita airport to Tokyo took us past a massing of grey buildings with grey roofs. A grey sky, low and heavy, all around. Thick bundles of electricity wires and cables crowded the streets, clumped at the houses. Gods with fierce faces glared out from walls and fences, protected from pigeons by chicken wire.

Now I look at bunched cables and wires every day, waving in the wind, without any beauty or charm. They collect in the corner of the building outside my new flat, reminding me of Tokyo. I watch those wires and think about that trip, blaming it for my new ugly one-person view. That trip exposed everything.

We had a hotel booked in Tokyo, in Jimbocho, the bookshop district. The room was a small box, and the bed with the grey bedcover took up most of the space. I burst into tears when I saw it, so distant from the beautiful room I had conjured from the name of the hotel. Cherry Blossom Time. Philip hurried me outside - It's the bookshop district! and we walked down narrow streets and poked into bookshops full of books, all in Japanese. We caught the train - feeling a momentary burst of pleasure in conquering the mysteries of ticket buying and train boarding - to Shinjuku, sat in the square and watched the crush of young people dashing back and forth with their tight black clothes and shaped and coloured hair. Small knots of young people formed, their bodies mingling. Young girls giggled, boys slouched. The light failed around us, making people into intersecting shapes and streets into hazy canyons. Neon lights on side street shop fronts flashed and flickered. The rush of people gathered, night fell, and we sought food. The streets in one direction were filled with strip joints, girlie bars and shops full of soft toys. In the other direction, department stores, poker machines and tiny noodle bars. We chose one, entering through wild western saloon bar doors, sitting at a tiny counter and eating skewers and noodles, jammed up against large Japanese men who turned their backs against us.

Back at the hotel we lay separately in the bed while backpackers laughed and beds thumped against walls.

The next day we braced ourselves and found our way back to the main train station. We found the baggage storage for our big bags. We bought tickets to Kanazawa, insanelly buoyed by our achievement. We found our platform, we bought some unidentifiable food, and the train arrived. We found our seats and sat, unpacking books and water bottles into the storage nets. The train carried us smoothly away from Tokyo and the grey, the wires, the endless untreed streets. We travelled past mountains and through tunnels, catching glimpses of towns, valleys, wooded hillsides, wide rivers full of pebbles. Small rice fields being tended by stooped men and women. Rice stalks hanging on wooden racks to dry. A jumble of houses. Everyone had done their washing. It festooned balconies in the towns, and lines next to houses in the country. Trees shaped and pruned like bonsai. We open our food boxes and find thick leaves wrapped around fragrant rice with delicious fragments of marinated chicken and fish. My hand brushes against Philip's leg when I reach down to pick up my dropped serviette, and I look up to see his smile.

But we reach Kanazawa and have to leave the comfort of the train, venturing out again into unfamiliar streets where nothing is written in English. We stand at a bus stop, watching buses come and go. We

have booked a ryokan, but we don't know how to get there. Then, a small miracle. A man approaches us. He doesn't speak any English but he looks at the printout of our booking and guides us to a bus. He gets on the bus and motions us on, then sits with us, chatting in Japanese. Then he points to our booking sheet again and points out the window. The three of us get off the bus and he leads us to the ryokan. As we're peering through the door for the owner, the man leaves us and we have to call after him, Thank you! Thank you. Um, arigatou.

The ryokan owner comes to the front door, smiles and leads us inside, up tiny stairs to a room with bamboo matting. He doesn't speak English, but his gestures are kind. He leaves us in the room. The only furniture is a low table under a window. On the table there is a thermos and two small cups. We sit cross-legged at the table on the bamboo matting and drink green tea from the thermos, lost in our own consolations.

In the cupboards are soft doonas and sheets, mats and pillows. Downstairs there is a bathroom with clogs at the door, one direction leading to the toilet and one to the bath and shower room. Do you lock the door when you use the bath or is it communal? How do you use all the showers and stools and buckets and ladles? Is it ok to use soap and shampoo in the bath? Can you wear your own shoes when you go to the toilet? Should we lay out our own mats and doonas or will someone do it for us? We go outside and find a cafe, but what is that thing that looks like a pastry? I don't know - taro? Rice? The apple turnover looks so convincing, the croissant as well, but one bite tells you that it is a simulacrum. I'm worn down by questions.

We stay in Kanazawa for three days. Gradually, the weight of not knowing anything begins to fall away. We work out how to use the little loop bus that circles the town, doing one or two loops just to see what's there. The first stop from our place is in a department store area. Then there's the market, overflowing out onto the street with stalls of fruit and vegetables, flowers and hats. After that, a series of slightly ramshackle suburbs fronted by dusty shops. Weary schoolchildren walk down the long hot streets. The bus travels through a district full of big trees with welcome shade. There is a park, a castle, an art gallery set back from the road, and then the road swings around again and we recognise the cafe with the apple turnover, the chemist where I bought nail clippers, the market with the stalls overflowing ...

Each day we go to the market, buying fruit from stalls where single nashi pears are wrapped in paper and persimmons are bought in tiny decorated boxes. We point to skewers barbecuing enticingly on a rack and are ushered into a curtained room where we sit and are presented with bowls of fish and rice and soup. We get off the loop bus in one of those dusty suburbs and visit the gold district, see a

glittering room with walls covered in gold leaf, drink tea with tiny gold flakes sprinkled on top. We go to the geisha district, where women in full traditional Japanese costume clop clop down the narrow cobbled street to do their shopping. We walk through a geisha house, with its waiting rooms and 'guest rooms', where light through the balconies and paper blinds is dimmed and dreamy. We have green tea and sweets sitting at a bench that looks onto a tiny garden filled with moss and ferns, a trickle of water splashing prettily onto rocks. We go to the palace, walk between thick stone walls into a massive open area where people are setting up for an archery contest. We go to the park, where trees have been shaped for hundreds of years into twists and gnarls, where three gardeners kneel in the moss lawns picking tiny weeds out with their precise gloved hands while a fourth rakes pine needles. There is an island - a little mound of land with a delicate sprinkling of trees - in the middle of a lake that writhes with carp, fringes around their gaping mouths. We go back to our ryokan, where some invisible person has laid out our mats and doonas and pillows, and sleep deep sleeps, our mouths touching lightly as we say goodnight. On our last day we get off at the loop bus's last stop, the Hirosaka 21st Century Museum. There is a special exhibition of modern art on display. Around a central courtyard surrounded by glass, small painted lizards lead us along a corridor to a series of rooms. One is made completely from knitting - knitted walls, knitted pagoda, knitted lampshades . The floor is covered with knitted flowers, and a knitted bath overflows with knitted water. Inside the pagoda a knitted box holds a pair of knitted shoes, waiting for Cinderella. In the next room a giant piece of material is slung from a beam, but the one piece turns out to be hundreds of tiny pieces of brightly-coloured material stitched together. From the front it is dazzling; from the back it is like a gigantic stained-glass window.

I hesitate before entering the third room. Its walls and ceiling are covered with postcards of waterfalls, while the floor is covered with some reflective material, like a sheet of mercury. People are taking off their shoes before entering so we do the same. We step onto the floor , feeling it spongy beneath our feet. At first I concentrate on the walls, looking at one postcard of waterfalls after another, avoiding the sensation of walking out into the air. Then I do it, one small step after another. I look down and I am weightless, suspended without wires, held gently between the room and the giant cavern below. I watch the world below me as people come and go, the vision wobbling as feet move the floor. I look for Philip, who had walked in with me. I search the waving floor for his feet and legs suspended below, but he is standing in the corner staring at waterfalls and through some quirk of the reflection, he has vanished.