



••• Vincent Mok

••• Vincent Mok loves many things,
••• which explains why he mistakenly
••• decided to busy himself with five fields
••• of study during his undergraduate career.
••• He considers himself genetically
••• predisposed to excessive worrying, so
••• he bakes, draws, and makes lists in order
••• to offset impending panic attacks
••• regarding his future. He hopes that he
••• will finally have free time after graduating
••• in April 2013, but he's not sure that
••• he knows how to properly relax. He's
••• currently obsessed with cats, Mexican
••• chocolate, and drag queens. He's
••• odd, and he likes to think that this trait
••• makes him endearing.
•••



The Land of Magical Crossroads

Zen and the Art of Not Dying at an Intersection

If Times Square were compressed into a smaller section of sidewalks cramped with perpetual human crowds, it would be called “Shibuya Crossing.” Unlike its American counterpart, with its menacing neon under the stormy Manhattan sky, the heart of Shibuya smiles warmly with electronic banners and giant screens of vibrant colors. It’s probably a cultural thing—something to do with how the Japanese politely make themselves scarce around each other instead of the bald-faced way that American pedestrians wish everyone else were annihilated from their path. Even the structures look more welcoming: squatter and more open-faced than the lean, stern towers of New York. And whereas Times Square is known for its flashy billboards, Shibuya is famous for its scramble crossing.

Of course, being pretty doesn’t mean that Shibuya isn’t dangerous. Peril looms as the four human corners of the intersection, each an anxious mass of tight muscle fibers, consider how to attack: a diagonal cut across the intersection or a swift, angular curve or maybe a direct strike forward? *Which route is fastest? Most efficient? Safe—*

You’re caught mid-thought as the light beckons you to step forward. Behind you, you can already hear the quick pattering of seasoned city crosswalkers. You step off the sidewalk, chin up, and pray that the huge swelling of movement—heading directly towards you—will not carry your broken body to concrete shores like a helpless beach ball on a giant wave. The crowd nears. You near. No one shows signs of moving out of the way, and in your mind, you can already see the bloody, bony trail that your crushed body will leave on the asphalt. Who knew that the Japanese could be so cruel?

The woman in the suit is right in front of your face now, and you prepare yourself for impact.

Yet nothing happens.

Every pedestrian evades each other with neither a word nor an unnecessary movement. Breathlessly and gracefully, they simply flit about like it’s the most natural thing in the world, converging together and pulling apart seamlessly. No trail of conflict, broken noses, or even

the vaguest impression of bumped shoulders. The Japanese, with their advanced technology, actually embed a telekinetic communication chip into every citizen's brain so that they can transmit information without saying a word. *That* has to be it.

And before you know it, you end up on the other side. You check your limbs, pat down your pockets, feel your face. No part of you has been maimed, you aren't missing any chunks of flesh, and your clothes are all intact.

Japan, the land of magical crossroads.

This Is I

"Hi. My name is Gasbag McSnively, and I'm here to give you a mundane reason for why I'm here."

We smiled with empty warmth at the speaker. And by "we," I most certainly mean "everyone except for me."

I was sitting by the windows, staring down at the expanse of trees outside. Those must've been the trees of the park that surrounded the center where we were staying. This was where we students and the staff members would find ourselves for the next month and a half. I began to wonder if I'd regret joining this program, considering how my experiences of interacting with the other people in the group had thus far been less than exciting: "My name is Joe, and I'm just an ordinary Joe."

Except I was in Japan, so the generic iteration of what was considered ordinary required recalibration: "My name is Johnny, but I am known as 'Kawaii Monster.' And I'm here because I just *adore* Japan, and I'm excited to buy the entire collection of *Naruto* in Japanese here."

Or so I had expected.

But so far, they had surprised me. They dressed like normal people, spoke like normal people, and didn't drop references to Japanese culture in casual conversation: "I'm Alice, and I'm an advertising major, so I'm studying abroad to observe advertising in Japan and see how it's different from America's." Pretty tame by any standards.

I guess they were regular people, though with a semi-guilty look of lying as they played down their real reasons for being in Japan. Well, *most* of them seemed like regular people, at least. I could still pinpoint a few anomalies: the one who spoke softly and said that he wanted to pack

his suitcase back with cute figurines, the ones with multiple piercings and hair dyed in unnatural colors, and the one who bowed stiffly with utter seriousness and said in halting Japanese, “*Pleased to meet you.*” He was a white guy, of course.

It’s not that I dislike icebreakers. In fact, I find them useful. Maybe you think that they’re painfully trite and that no one remembers each other anyways—What’s the point? Alas, my friend, there is one, and you’ve missed it even though you just mentioned it. They unite everyone in the solidarity of awkwardness and even give people a topic for conversation. (“Man, I hate icebreakers. This is dumb. Oh, my name’s Terry, by the way. I’m an theater major.”) Brilliant, right? See, whoever came up with icebreakers was actually a genius.

Still, I didn’t care to talk about how silly I found these introductions. But that didn’t stop me from having to greet the class anyways.

I smiled placidly. I got up with an affect of nonchalance and cleared my throat with my best car-salesman-at-a-party-who-tries-to-sell-his-merchandise-without-being-obvious-though-everyone-actually-sees-what’s-happening voice. *How ambitious.*

“Hi. My name is Vincent Mok, and I’m here to get every one of you in at least one embarrassing photo. I’ve already nailed a few.” I sat down to laughter and winked at someone whose eyes were still painted with half-slumber. Original without stepping into the realm of weirdness—my self-introduction was a winner.

I turned back towards the window just in time to notice rain beginning to pelt the trees.

I Scream. You Scream. We All Somehow Find Ourselves Crying.

The flight to Japan was not ideal.

This is because I hate flying—I always have. I blame a lot of different things for this.

First of all, the smell of metallic seats and bottled air reminds me of vacuum-sealed goods and ionization. It’s like I’m being trapped in a room full of crackling electricity. I wonder if it’s just a side-effect of flight or if they have fancy air ionizers on board, but, considering how we only get a meager pack of peanuts and a one-ply napkin these days, I somehow doubt that it’s the latter.

Secondly, we have the air sickness. I've wasted a countless number of their thankfully complimentary bags: Delta, United, American, JetBlue, Southwest. Before takeoff, they always nestled neatly in the flap facing me. Crisp, waxy, and a deep blue that became increasingly softened and wrinkled as I wrought them in my cold, persistent hands during flight. I would always offer them to the air stewardesses, the poor things, when the bags became unpleasantly warm and swollen like boils. My track record: over one bag per flight on average, even counting the one- and two-hour connecting flights.

Third: the airplane food and scary bathrooms whose toilets threaten to suck out my soul when I flush. But these are really just minor inconveniences in the grand scope of things, and I really shouldn't complain about them. Even if everyone else does.

But then there's the air pressure and turbulence during flight. I feel my ears threaten to burst inwards as the pressure pushes against my brain, and *I'm going to die. I'm going to fucking die, and this plane is making all of these weird dips, and the seatbelt sign is on, but people are still in the walkways, and I wonder if they'll hit the ceiling if the plane starts falling, and maybe they'll end up leaving dents, and fuck, and shit fucking shit and having shit-babies.*

Then there's the ever-present sense of imminent doom in what feels like a packed sardine can—a distinctly un-sexy death. Now, don't

"I'm going to die. I'm going to fucking die, and this plane is making all of these weird dips, and the seatbelt sign is on, but people are still in the walkways, and I wonder if they'll hit the ceiling if the plane starts falling, and maybe they'll end up leaving dents, and fuck, and shit fucking shit and having shit-babies."

get me wrong. Claustrophobia never really bothers me—I don't mind cramped elevators and rush-hour transportation. It's just the weird instances of confinement—the ones that happen only in movies and, for some reason, *my* life—that really freak me out and leave me feeling constricted. This includes dim hallways (bonus points for flickering lights) and empty train cars. Stor-

age closets with oddly shaped bundles and too many shadows and *squee-squee-squeeeeeaking* shelves in the wind. (*Just why, exactly, is there suddenly a draft in here?*) And giant, metal tubes filled with people who silently scream and plot the murder of their neighbors in psychotic episodes. (Read: tubes that are thrown 36,000 feet above the ground at skin-deteriorating speeds that would as quickly send me into G-LOC as they would make me wish that I *could* pass out instead of watching the scene unfold as I plummet towards the earth, sobbing uncontrollably.) (Read: planes.)

But worst of all, there are the people. Oh, the people. Oh, the neighboring passenger whose hand falls into my lap when he dozes off, muttering vague threats of pushing me into the trunk of a car. Oh, the other neighbor who falls asleep with her hand on the armrest and blocks my path to the lavatory even though I've been holding it in for the past few hours because I didn't want to wake her up. Oh, the babies with wet burps and sharp hiccups, with red faces that tell me just how much they also hate this ordeal. Oh, the children who start weeping midway because they miss the security of the earth making contact with their feet. Oh, the adults who sigh endlessly, looking at their watches for the fourth time in an hour and wishing that they could have room to stretch, walk, or even fart without other people so close—*too close*—to them.

And so I am grateful every time I land successfully at my destination. I have once again successfully managed to exit the aircraft without maiming the fellow passengers who have been invading my personal space.

Reverent Distance

I had already been in Japan five days earlier than the other students because I had stayed with my dad, who happened to be on a business trip in Tokyo. I had enjoyed my freedom from the compulsions of mandatory small talk and group activity. The lone traveler in Japan talked to no one, and no one talked to him in return. I was undetected, and the solitude had fit me perfectly.

When people talk about the joys of solitude, it's not that they want everyone else to die so that they can live in a world alone: King Shit Eater the First, the last ruler of mankind before he met his demise by eating feces out of starving desperation. It's more like everyone

minds his or her own business, and the people that you encounter out of necessity—cashiers and waiters, grocery baggers and receptionists—treat you with reverent distance. No friends ask about your breakup with the jackass that you’ve been polyamorously seeing (*I guess I’ve still got Jake, but Tom was so good in bed and had the most gorgeous sex eyes*), no mother asks if you’ve called the doctor for her yet (*Yes, Ma. I’m getting to it*), and no coworker wants to talk about the pet tarantula that you hate so much (*Why, yes... Being tickled by Tarance sounds... lovely*). When you’re alone, it’s all about you. All about your wellbeing, your feelings, and the meandering thoughts that have been back-logged in your mind—and, really, why *shouldn’t* it all be about you?

Tokyo affords this self-awareness that stems from having space. In fact, Tokyo is all about that. For a city so populated, it’s easy to make it through the weekend without ever having to make eye contact with more than five people a day.

It’s pure bliss.

Freshman Convocation

Before I left for Japan, I had gone through a weird stage of panic: What if I go to Japan, and my friends ignore me once I return? *What if I’m alone when I get back? On other days, it was better: Everything’s going to be fine. So dramatic. Geez. At times, it was worse: Screw everyone. No one spends time with me anyways. I’ll be successful and awesome someday, and they’ll regret having spurned me.*

Now that I was studying abroad, I found myself in a similar predicament again. Even after introductions and class distributions, I only had acquaintances, and I began questioning the distance I was keeping from everyone. True, I wanted to keep observing so as to avoid socializing with the Japan-o-philes. (Because I definitely was in a position to judge them. Right?) But then again, I had already figured out which ones would get along swimmingly with me, and the lone-wolf routine was getting stale and tiring. *But I don’t need anyone...*

As I fluctuated between loneliness and antisocial angst, I kept to my routine: wake up and get ready, eat, attend class, go to the supermarket to buy lunch and dinner, do homework, and relax in the commons by night. Expeditions in Tokyo had to wait for the weekends, lest I find my

motivation broken early on and leave my grades to suffer unsalvageably. *It's easier to care about things that you can directly influence. People let you down too easily.*

"You're such a grandfather," my friend noted over Skype.

"No. I'm being cautious. And you shouldn't talk, Ms. I-Went-to-Dublin-but-Was-Miserable-and-Homesick-the-Whole-Time."

"Wow. Low blow. But you're still trying to cover up something deeper."

I had no witty riposte. I swallowed her words and thought for a moment. Meanwhile, a group of seven girls gathered in the common room.

"We're heading to Harajuku to go window-shopping. It's exciting. None of us have been there before, but I'm excited." She said this to no one in particular, but, seeing as I was the only not-going-to-Harajuku person in the room, I imagine that she had directed that to me. But without a direct address, I wasn't going to acknowledge it. *Rude.*

But it didn't matter because another girl capitalized on this opportunity to speak. "I mean, it can't be that hard. It's apparently just, like, 20 minutes away."

"Well, I think Amber knows where she's going. And so does Jessica."

They had doe-eyed looks of lost wonder and a view of the infinite expanse of possibility that lay before them. Maybe one would score a Japanese boyfriend, or they could meet a celebrity, or they might get asked to be in pictures—a rather common occurrence. They squealed and giggled and clutched each other, mentally reassuring themselves that they could do anything as long as they stayed together.

What was this? Freshman year of college all over again?

I rolled my eyes, fervently deciding against socializing, and whispered over Skype, "Do you hear them?"

Tourist Crises

I don't believe in acting like too much of a tourist, and I hate giant groups of them because *any* member's blunders and cultural insensitivity can reflect poorly on me. And I will have none of that. I chose to wander by myself instead, seeking out random pedestrians in order to

get local advice and to practice my Japanese. I mean, that's why I was in Japan anyways.

"Excuse me. Um, I'd like to humbly request your help." I internally winced as I heard these words, spoken in an awful American-English-tinted accent, escape my mouth.

"Yes?" Eyes wide with shock at my Japanese, either because she also thought it sounded awful or because she understood the paradox of my existence: an Asian who, it turns out, is not a native Japanese but can both speak with proper hesitation noises and use humble-polite vocabulary to ask for directions despite being a shy student studying abroad. All of this information must have jumped across the synapses of her nervous system within a few milliseconds, which meant that she was still reeling from the sudden influx of information while trying to come up with a suitable, inoffensive, Japanese reaction. No wonder every local had the same half-concealed look of confusion when I spoke for the first time. *"What could it be?"*

"It's that I'd like to get to Harajuku." I spoke slowly, purposely so that she had time to reorient herself. It's this way, isn't it?"

"Ah, yes." There it was—the sweet smile that signaled that her brain had figured everything out. *"Just keep going straight for a while, and turn to the left when you hit the junction. It'll soon be on your right after you take that left."*

"Ah. Thank you very much," I smiled, but the sincerity froze before it could reach my eyes. *Wait. Was I supposed to thank her with the past tense or the present tense? Did I get it wrong? Dumb, dumb, dumb!*

"No, no," the Japanese way to politely shrug off any recognition that they've done anything exceptionally kind for someone else. (*"It's just the natural thing to do, you silly tourist. Good luck on your journeys."*)

Language Transcendental

Japanese culture requires you to delicately balance politeness and distance when acting and speaking. Everything from how you ask for a favor to bowing your goodbyes to someone is a tense power play. Each party must understand the context of the interaction and act accordingly. It's like a dance where one misstep leads to a giant wardrobe

malfunction in the middle of a crowded ballroom, and you really, *really*, really want to avoid something as embarrassing as that; this is Japan, after all.

I love the constant tension of the language, the feeling of permanently walking on eggshells and breaking a few hundred of them every time I open my mouth. It's challenging and humbling and refreshing and humiliating.

I suspect that it doesn't bother me too much because I'm a non-native speaker, which gives me the advantage of claiming that I didn't know that I was calling the opposite conversationalist a hamster with a pickaxe for a heart. But I appreciate the preset conditions of a first encounter, where each party speaks with thoughtfulness and care.

"I love the constant tension of the language, the feeling of permanently walking on eggshells and breaking a few hundred of them every time I open my mouth."

It means that I, as a tourist, never have to deal with familiarity and the blathering impositions of others' trivialities. *Reverent distance*.

Instead, Japanese is a language of subtlety and care, meaning that people are generally polite and agreeable out of cultural expectations. This also means that there are multiple ways to call someone a bastard without ever using the word. The Japanese tongue: cynicism meets respect.

Of Gays, Gazing, and Geishas

I turned 21 in Japan. More specifically, I turned 21 while dancing in a club in Japan. And if we really want all of the nitty-gritty details, I suppose I was clubbing in a gay bar in the gay district of Tokyo. And it was a Thursday-night-become-Friday-morning, and the entire place smelled of darkness and smoke and of cigarettes and whispers.

Of course, I had guilt-tripped one of the people from the program, Alice, into accompanying me rather than letting me go alone to the gay section in one of the most reserved Asian countries I can imagine. After all, feeling like a foreigner was bad enough, and the Japanese

had been nothing but grace and hospitality to me. So a sudden display of showy, gay, Asian *gaijin* tendencies seemed like an unfair thanks for all of their goodness.

Alice and I had gotten lost at first, and my hand-drawn map was quickly becoming a tattered piece of pulp as the rain continued its assault.

“Ugggh, what. Are you sure it’s the right way?”

“Yes, Alice. We were just here a little bit ago,” pointing to a nonexistent mark on the map. “And we need to go here,” a vague stab in the general direction of somewhere. I had studied Google Maps for half an hour, and I was sure that I knew where we were going. I think. “It definitely looked a lot easier online, but we passed the station and the *konbini* like it told us to.”

“Okay, okay. Fine. Let’s keep going, then.”

We eventually got to Arty Farty, the gay bar that our friends had recommended to us, but only after peering into its neighboring specialty shops and taking photos of funny signs and posters that had been translated into pseudo-English. Arty Farty was apparently *the* place to find gay foreigners—a surprising fact, given its almost impossibly ludicrous name. Then again, maybe that was the precise reason for its expat and tourist popularity. Who said that Japanese humor isn’t universal?

On the dance floor of the bar were skinny gays, plump gays, bitchy gays that gave Alice and me a quick and disapproving once-over, too-cool-for-dancing gays leaning against the wall, older gays who talked to each other in pairs by the bar, and the women who draped themselves across various gays. (“Fruit flies,” a friend had said in an effort to avoid the more offensive “fag hag.”) It all looked familiar—even the one gay who sat alone on a stool halfway between the dance floor and the bar, fingers sweeping across his phone screen. I don’t know what I had expected—a bamboo rocking fountain and drag queens dressed like geishas?

“Let’s just get our drink and dance, Alice.” We scoped out the dance floor. Pretty desolate since most of the people were just milling around on this Thursday night. A group of three gays and a woman were dancing, utilizing the platforms, small steps, and—*jackpot*—poles. Anxious to move, I downed the rest of my sweet drink and stepped away from the wall. Alice eyed the way I began to dance and laughed.

“Ohhhh, my gaw. What are you doing?” But she was laughing, so I beckoned her over. She set her glass down on a ledge. “I warn you—I can’t dance.”

“Nonsense.” I pulled her towards me.

“Whahaha. Make that money!” I could have sworn that she was going to slap my butt sometime soon. “Whooooo!”

Meanwhile, my eyes kept flitting towards the seated gay, and I could see his pupils darting back and forth from me to his phone. He was cute. I feigned nonchalance.

Alice’s Adventures in Vincentland

After a few weeks of battling continual dips between loneliness and unsociability, I had finally pushed aside some of my pride and began cozying up to Alice. It’s probably because I knew that she would be the kind of friend I needed—cheerful and patient enough to offset my surly attitude. But I know that it was actually because I could sense that she, like me, housed an undeniably impatient cynicism.

I think it also helped that my broken gaydar, which often fails at identifying covert gays but pinpoints fag hags with utter accuracy, blared ABBA’s “Dancing Queen” as soon as I laid eyes on her. Alice, the fag hag. Wait. I meant to say, “fruit fly.”

When I invest in friends, I pour myself almost entirely into them with hopes that they won’t fail me. I found myself studying with Alice, eating with her, going to the supermarket with her, heading over to different wards of Tokyo with her. My brain went into overdrive, cautioning me against the possibility of disillusionment, but I snapped back: *I’m being careful! I won’t get too close.*

As I drew closer to her, I also raised my walls slightly higher for fear that she, too, might fail me. But my barricades seemed unnecessary because she only chatted benignly, offering conversation and a listening ear. Neither prying nor pushing, just as I prefer.

Flirting in Japanese

Gay culture in Japan is difficult to consider. East Asia is, after all, reputed for its conservative views and reserved sensibilities. Then

again, Japan's infamy for hanky-panky also raises questions about why gay talk is generally avoided while marine animals have been historically depicted in kinky paintings—Google this with care, as you can never unsee it.

I can't remember what played as my birthday passed. It was either "Call Me Maybe" or "We Are Young," or it was something between the two. It didn't matter. I just wanted to dance—American power ballads, Japanese sugar pop, Western bubble-gum lyrics, whatever. I only wanted to dance.

And I wanted to do so with the guy on the stool.

But I was closed off, and I didn't know if Japanese protocol is the same as American protocol in gay bars. Are *flirting and body language the same in every language*? I wanted to know how his shoulders moved and how his sides would feel against my palms while we danced, and I suspected he did too. Or at least his furtive looks seemed to suggest it.

"Go on, already. Go ask."

"What?" Alice's sudden words had baffled me

"Go ask him to dance. Duh." Fruit flies have great instincts sometimes.

"No... What are you talking about?" In addition to being surly, I am stubborn beyond control.

"He looks like he'd like to dance," she said, playing along with my feigned innocence. "Why don't you ask him?"

"I can't," I said, hoping that it sounded less pathetic to her than it did to me.

And it was true. Because I also don't believe in short relationships. My program abroad would be ending in three days, and it wouldn't work. Yes, I wanted to know what he smelled like and whether or not his hands were soft and if he liked sake but hated beer like me. But of course, it wasn't practical and wouldn't be long-term. Alice pleaded some more, knowing that I just need to be pushed.

"Go do it. Just do it."

"Well..." I bit my lip.

"Just go."

"I can't. I just—I just can't."

"Can't? You just *won't*."

“Okay, okay. Fine! I *want* to, but I’m too shy. There. Happy?”

“Well, you’ll regret it if you do-on’t,” she half-sang.

I could feel her starting to break down my defenses. It was true. The worst that could happen was a moment of awkward refusal by a stranger in a strange land. But it wouldn’t matter because I’d never encounter him again.

I looked back up. Too late. He was no longer on the stool. I looked towards the bathrooms. Nope. The poles. Nope. The door. Ah... There he was.

As he neared the doorway, I saw him look at me, abandoning the covert looks and turning his entire head to me this time. I imagined how it would feel to be a person who had spent his past hour and a half on the stool, looking at his phone and waiting for someone to ask him onto the dance floor. Someone who had desperately wanted a friend but was painfully shy and fearful that people would disappoint him. Familiar territory.

I wanted to run after him and apologize with profuse Japanese bowing, but my feet wouldn’t move. He turned towards the exit and walked out. Dancing started to feel depressing.

Alice left soon as well, and I was dancing on my own, eyes closed, feeling the rhythm of the music in my body. Still, I felt awkward and foolish. And no one else was on the dance floor. *Alice, you wench. How dare you leave me on my own? These people probably think I’m a spaz.*

I suddenly felt a pair of hands on my shoulders. I opened my eyes and readied a witty remark about abandoning poor, little, old me in a Japanese gay bar. *Wench, it’s my birthday.*

I might have looked panicked, but I was still moving my body in the dim light. I imagined that he didn’t notice. *Oh. You’re not Alice.* I think I saw him smile drunkenly at me as he held onto my shoulders and danced, so I assumed that he hadn’t perceived the surprise in my eyes. But it only made sense for me to move with him, so I wrapped my arms around his neck. *This is what I wanted, isn’t it?*

Commodore Perry’s Silent Film

Japan was once a crossroads. In 1853, Commodore Perry forced

Japan to abandon isolationism. The move was forceful and meddlesome in a stereotypically American way.

“Japan, Japan, let me in.”

“Not by hairs of your white-man chin.”

“Then I’ll huff, and I’ll puff, and I’ll show you my maritime power, ohoho,” laughing at his own euphemisms. “We have bigger and better firearms, dammit.”

“Oh. White man win. We give up.”

And then a lot of high-speed bowing accompanied by tinny circus music as the scene continues to unfold in black-and-white film.

The subsequent invasion of global trade led to the death of Japan’s contemporary culture—massive Westernization and the downfall of the shogunate. Still, Japan is now known for its technology and the avant-garde culture of its youth, and nobody holds resentment for the past.

One of my dad’s Japanese co-workers—third co-worker once removed—explained it to me. “It is because... aah... Japanese, we look forward to America. And we learn. Even after the atomic bomb, we... are not angry. We think, *We have much to learn.*”

I have only admiration for the way Japan accepts and promotes change. But it might also be jealousy.

Running on Wet Pavement

Alice, I need you.

My encounter with the guy on the dance floor had been awkward, since I had expected it to be either Alice or, if the heavens were smiling upon me, the guy formerly on the stool. But it was one of the slightly older, I-came-here-with-my-posse gays. And I found myself suddenly thrust into his group by the bar, my arm around his neck and my hand on his chest.

His mouth moved, but I was baffled. I assessed the situation: the booming music, the fast words, and his Japanese version of what is known as the “gay lisp.” There was no way that I was going to understand him, and I found myself okay with that.

But hadn’t I wanted to dance with someone?

No, not quite. I just wanted to dance with Alice and the person

on the stool. Alice because she was like a mom who strokes her son's forehead when he cries about how no one plays with him during recess. Like a good friend who knows that her friend was once hurt and needs time for his loneliness to heal. And the guy on the stool? He was cute, but I liked that he seemed shy. Like he would be attentive and careful with me.

Like Alice was.

And that's why I was now running along the streets of Shinjuku, trying to find her.

Alice, I need you.

A man stopped me on the street. He held up a sign, but I wanted to get by.

"Sorry. I don't speak Japanese," I lied.

He blocked my way earnestly. "Sex. Japanese girl. Sex."

What? I backed up, wide-eyed. "Oh. Sorry. I'm not... No."

I didn't want sex or anything so trite and base. I hadn't even thought of that when I saw the guy on the stool. I had wanted to dance intimately, feel like I was special and safe, and see if we could talk about something transcendental. Like the future. Like ourselves.

So I had wanted intimacy but not sex. Or perhaps the semblance of intimacy: the complete sacrifice of two people during sex, only without sex itself.

Friendship? Was that the right word?

I kept running, and the sky kept crying. I wiped the rain from my eyes. My feet were wet, but I had only one thought: Alice, I need you.

There and Back Again: Travels to Narita

The train ride towards Tokyo looks like this: rice paddy, random trees, rock wall, forest, sunlight, fields. It's just like the scenery from a Miyazaki film, and it suddenly makes sense why his magical settings seem so real—the landscape is so charming that you believe *anything* can happen. You smile to yourself, thinking of how you couldn't have been more pleasantly surprised by anything other than this rustic charm of Japan, and you focus your eyes once more, and—

What happened? Your eyelids close, open, close, open, close,

open. Blink again and again, trying to figure out if the image before you is real: concrete housing complexes stretching out infinitely ahead, kids on bicycles, caricature trucks with cargo, paved roads connecting to the horizon. *Where are the rice paddies?* Think. Wonder how long it's been like this: *Did I fall asleep?* It couldn't have been, seeing as the school-girls down the train car are still huddled over cell phones and the elderly woman in front of you is still looking straight ahead, past your shoulders and into the moving expanse of houses behind you. You ignore your suspicions of narcolepsy because you're curious about how you got into this town with its urban-but-still-rural feel. You watch in a cycle of renewed fascination and interruptions of confusion like a bird that pecks at hard bread, drops it, and then goes at it with the same intensity of wonder as before.

And before you know it, it happens again—sprawling suburbia suddenly shifted into concrete and windows without you noticing. Once again, you're speechless, but you know you didn't fall asleep. So how did you abruptly find yourself amidst highways and steel wires and giant skyscrapers and automotive industry? You vow to pay more attention next time, but you never will be able to find that instant where the scenery changes despite trying many, many times.

Dammit, you will later think as you once more wander past the moment of transition, the moment of immeasurable change that passes by as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

This shift from the urban to the suburban to the rural happens, in reverse, as the people from our program headed off to Narita airport. But we weren't going go by train. We bused, so it was less of a solitary ride full of people and more of a somber bus ride after a senior's class trip.

We had just left the *sayonara* party, where we students had sobbed our farewell to our host families, friends we'd made, and some of the program coordinators. I hadn't realized how much I'd miss Tokyo and the people that I had—more than I expected to—gotten to know.

"I've used all of my tissues," I half-sniveled, half-shuddered as I shared the last clean sheet with my bus-mate. Alice took it, said it was fine. Out of everyone in my program, I was glad that she was the one sitting next to me.

I had found her, as we promised over the phone, at one of the big

intersections in Shinjuku after running away from the man who wanted to sell me his employees' sex. Shinjuku's crosswalks, though they lack the fame of Shibuya's, are often as frenzied and usually more aggressive. But at 1:30 in the morning, there wasn't much of its usual savage rush.

Still, I had witnessed the magical weaving of people multiple times during my trips to Shinjuku. People gather on either side, and, as the light signals for them to walk, they face each other without hesitation. They just walk, trusting that they will make it past the opposing wave of bodies. (Trusting whom? The gods? Themselves? Each other?) They don't know how to fear accidental contact, or the fear at least never manifests itself on any face. They simply merge together and put all apart wordlessly, flawlessly without ever touching each other. I, too, had made it through Japan's crossings many times and never walked into another pedestrian. But as I thought about my love for Japan's reverent distance and the space it afforded, I couldn't help but be glad that I had managed, even if only accidentally and only a few days before my program ended, to brush shoulders with someone along the way and realize that I had established connection with another human—someone who accepted apologies for my clumsiness, who danced though she wasn't good at it, who silently listened, and who simply and often imperceptibly stayed with me.