

# When West Marries East



best of profane eating and sacrilegious drinking ceremonies to forget about past year's accumulated distresses behind us in the traditional Japanese way, at least one of the remarkable results visible in mid winter to my eye is a clear blue sky, brisk but not biting cold and rice paddies dryly waiting for the sun's shallow angled rays lower, everything rests; quietly gray in the long shadows of late afternoon.

It is then that Japan feels home, I blend in with the graying society. In fact in my attempt to fit in height wise I shrunk by 1 cm per 10 years! And for those who like me inadvertently reflect on the past, live on memories of days gone by, there are plenty of documentaries picturing a future of scientific marvels: the deepest trenches of earth's crust contain life -Japanese scientists' video camera captured a scale worm, a sea cucumber on the bottom of the Marianas Trench in the Philippine Sea; experiments about to prove the dark matter of the universe -the countdown to particle acceleration begins at Cern in the 27-kilometre circular tunnel under the Swiss-French border; puzzling land formations on Mars's equator called the Medusa Fossae Formation could be huge glacier-like deposits of frozen water, a really cool idea to invite and trust Venus in bed. Autism and mapping brain functions of the disabled few with memory capacity equal to super computers, this confederation of networks - frontal, limbic, temporal and cerebellar - orchestrated social cognition, from the analysis of gaze direction and facial expression to the deciphering of beliefs, attitudes, and intentions, to conclude what I've always believed: my nervous system needs rewiring.

## HALF THE WAY GONE, MY SECOND LEASE ON LIFE

I am far more fascinated by the form of emptiness than by the emptiness of form. No matter how hard I've been trying to cut through this dualism in ZaZen sessions, the fact of the matter is that the drive to label psychic phenomena with icons, visions anchored in a distant past is a fatal attraction. Subsequent battles have barely been won, wars still raging. I guess nature has its ways and whatever ways, they've been untamable so far. No steel or concrete, no religion or democracy has straightened out our living environment. Perhaps in another couple of hundred years we can arrive at taking pride in having alleviated basic suffering. Meanwhile we remain divided over the methods delivering the 'Promised Land'. Whether on earth or in the hereafter we need tangible results. And the discovery that nothing has changed under the sun since 9/11 was rather stunning.

When I was a 5<sup>th</sup> grader, an odd 11 year-old or so, I drove my bicycle at top speed so close into a group of peers before breaking that I was severely reprimanded. What in the world did I think I was doing, scaring the shit out of people? Today I realized that history repeats itself. Telling a colleague about the side effects of my treatment of the nasty HCV (the potentially lethal Hepatitis C virus) was equally scaring her and pleasurable to me; I got away with it without reprimand all right, but the two days of punishing reflections on the unwittingly spontaneity were more than I had bargained for.

Did I want attention, being so full of self-pity and no one seems to care? Not just ostriches will bury their head in the ground, assuming that because it cannot see, it cannot be seen. An interesting way to avoid the problem this is, turning their face away from danger, from the bad, the ugly and the unfortunate.

Where has the beauty of the blue planet gone? Pachinko parlors blast church choir music out of their doors and carillon bells play at the roof of department stores. Do I believe in the 'shop until you drop' and being in the seventh heaven forever hereafter? I'm not sure if being attracted to the beauty of our digital planet is particularly characteristic for Japan, I've made out that here the tendency of looking the other direction when something is embarrassingly repulsive is part of the culture. Is Japan an ostrich culture or what?

On my commuter train I spot a fashionable French tourist punk couple, provokingly eye catching, though obviously everybody turns a blind eye to her sitting saddled on his lap. Dressed in pinkish red, top to toe: high red Converse sneakers with the tip covered in glitter and laid-in plastic half precious stones, laces half way tied up, the sides bend open with the tongue sticking out. Her hair in red dyed strands, a red ribbon bow looped a tuft of hair and in between all the shades of red, reddish and redder even still her mini-skirt over red nylons and no mistake the blouse in pink to match the boobs. Smoodging, huddling and cuddling in the center of their world. Talking about ostriches...

Is the American dream still worth dreaming when the voice of democracy in Iraq is heard loud and clear - bi-sectarian genocide, when blood diamonds remain stained even after the Kimberly white wash, when the Dow Jones scores a historical record high while life expectancy in the developing world is at a record low? It is damned difficult to trust that things eventually come your way as a result of benevolent actions and not to expect any return to output. Patience in this world of instant messaging is the mother of all cold shoulders. Wish there were a junkyard of second hand reckoning, thunderbolts of them striking at the major obstacles of logic and analytical reasoning. Why not return to tribal life of the Matis Brazilian Amazon highlanders where counting is as simple as 1,2,3 and many for all the rest. A Shangri-La where picking lice is a favorite pass time and major source of not gene-manipulated animal protein. I wonder if strive and competition are an integral part of the culture there and if power is a natural gift used to benefit rather than distort. How do you explain that not only in Japanese history and culture inter-family marriage was believed to lead to pure offspring? How many centuries of denial did it take for grasping that deformed and disabled new-borns were the high risk factor of such practiced false believes? The Christian Church can take credit for ending the practice in the Polynesian archipelago, though through equally false believes scientifically speaking. Does the aim justify the means then?

This winter is hardly justifiable when considering the overall state of affairs. Of all the world benchmarks set in the previous years can you name some that have been met? Drinkable water for everyone? Food not starvation for the millions? Prevailing Peace?

The only one that comes to my mind is technology, chip design, the node 45nm; Technology for Grandma. Predicted since the first Intel 286 CPU in 1991 was that the processing power and capacity would exponentially double every 3 years. Now we have a prototype of chip the size of a white blood cell with dimensions worthy of Nanotechnology, so blissful you might start your stopwatch to clock its downfall.

Last when I talked with a business associate from New Zealand over dinner, I couldn't agree with him more about the times when monstrous machines spewed punched paper for other monstrous machines to print out accounts; they didn't last...

I do take pride that I've been with the pioneers learning Turbo Pascal programming back in 1984 and being email communication capable back in 1993 with MS-DOS version 6.22, and Windows 3.1, my first website uploaded in 1998. The hippy movement was only 2w, world wide, and left deep imprints on society and so did the pioneers of the 3w, www, financed and innovated by porn however... Now I know for a fact that I'm out, I'm getting too old for this shit. What's the use of candlelight and eyeglasses to the wise owl pretending a bookworm, when it cannot read the divine signs telling us that earth can do without us but we cannot do without earth?

We tried dropping out in the 60s counter culture; we sought refuge in communities with religious or pastoral orientation after letting it rock-and-roll, drug and group sex scenes, putatively happy scenes. And still we need to draw attention to ourselves. Not getting any or worse getting used to have it all the time and not just a little but more than plenty of it, we get more and more hysterical and run amok the moment we are sidelined, marginalized, self-centered foreign language teachers and bloggers alike, not to forget the diehard leaders in reclusive self deception. The waning of an era I guess, civilizations' worst moods: perambulations from optimism to doubt, to fear, to denial, to terrorism. Am I drawing a portrait of a self destructive product of dysfunctional childhood again, a psychological cripple who is somehow able to translate the prodding of circling around in his inner universe with a thin layer of upper consciousness into writing? All-style-and-no-substance, or was it the other way around?

I gave my thoughts free play again, ending up entangled.



Seasons sound no different on the trains, not during the short winters or the long summers, nor at the sudden clearly defined changes in between, the announcements of stops and stations to the monotonous tunes of religious chanting are now interspaced with American English. Much to my irritation the pronunciation of Japanese proper nouns is distorted with emphasis on the wrong vowels. Why is it that we EFL teachers (English as a foreign language) are insisting on having our Japanese students pronounce

English correctly while the Americans bend the rules to their own convenience? Why do they [the Americans] arrogantly keep lecturing us about global standards when they are the only ones that do not conform to the world standard of A4, A3, B4 and B5 for letter/copy paper? I put my earphones in and listen to the 12 Chinese Girls Band on my

Hewlett Packard, the old fashion way. iPod and Windows Vista are out to crank up the atmosphere with torrents of satellite accessible information. Past Point Pleasant there is an ominous mass of steely blues and grays.

#### THE DIFFERENCE IS THE COINCIDENCE THAT HUMBLER

On the way out of the local clinic I noticed a newspaper clipping with the title 'Veteran Doctor - 77 years old' on the billboard. Usually I get a kind of irritated by Japanese loan words from English because of the distorted meaning attributed them. I came to think of it as Japanese, that helped to smile the shameful headshake away; think of it as Japanese in the Kata Kana way (transliteration of foreign words) and then it is Japanese remotely connected to the language of origin, like pan -Portuguese and Japanese for bread. However none of such reasoning needed to come to defense of my host country when I saw the doctor's picture was the one whose consultation room I had just left.

I got on my wife's Mama Chari (term used for bicycles with baskets that allow mothers to go shopping with kids -Chari being Korean, literary translated as wheel). In front of the clinic a wrinkle faced old woman in a gardener's outfit started small talk with: "What a beautiful day!" in Japanese. "It feels like spring in March" she said and continued talking about the early spring season, the flowers, without once hesitating or questioning if I spoke Japanese at all. Probably the sound of my hum hum expressing I was agreeable did it. But then she suddenly switched to fluent English, talked about everything between heaven and earth, told me that she was 77 year old! I listened and listened but in the pause at the top of breathing in, I couldn't help asking her hesitantly if she had lived overseas hinting at an explanation for this fluent English. "Oh, no" she was quickly to say. She had worked over 50 years on Yokota Ki-chi, the American Air Force base here.

"No nothing with computers or so" she continued without lowering her head. Her appearance confirmed that she had been in the manual labor force. She recounted her outset as a cleaning staff, moving up to gardener, a laundry maid, and finally a house servant cook and house mistress for the children of the 'striped' ones. And the money was so good: 360 Yen to the Dollar back then. Higher officers could afford Japanese staff in numbers exceeding their family members. She was proud to have been able to provide her own family with an income above average during many years after the Second World War. Indeed, she had no self-identity denial or doubt about where she belonged. Americans were different and military was even more a race apart. They like different things all according where in the US they came from. Southerners liked corn in all varieties and dishes. New Yorkers had their own favorite food and were not particularly keen on trying what she had learned to prepare from the southerners. She didn't mention the difference in accent though. With the obvious question, but sounding absolutely natural and spontaneous in extension to the topic of conversation she asked where in the US I was from, and was a bit puzzled with my Yoroppa answer in Japanese. Most Japanese -even of my generation, don't know the English Belgium and use the Flemish België albeit with a modified pronunciation to suit Japanese. So after explaining in Japanese that although I was born in Belgium I carried a Danish nationality she blurred out somehow.

How often have I pronounced België the Japanese way with a one-dimensional feeling that translates no more than the spelling of the 6 letters, just like Denmark actually means no more than a period during which I lived my religious madness to the full.

In fact, what depth does Japan carry and what does it mean to me other than a geographical location in Asia? Whereas my wife with her rock solid sense of being Japanese down deep in her DNA flirts with other of her oriental traits, what do I have of traits that could pin me down to a definable ID? European to name one, definitely! Possibly, a Mondrian minimalist at the outskirts of the boondocks, still belittling lowland denizens from the foothills of Tama Tokyo.

Many Japanese will most likely start a conversation in English with the question 'Where are you from?' followed by a standard set of questions some of which most Westerners feel uncomfortable to start with -if not feeling they're intruding questions; how long have you been in Japan, how old are you, are you married, do you have children - stopping short before asking: what car you drive ergo "Are you rich?". The same inane mulling questions: what's your favorite Japanese food, can you use chopsticks ... after which they exhausted limited supplies of English.

I have likewise rehearsed a number of short-circuit answers in Japanese, such as: "guess where I'm from", naughty as I am, and more nasty: "I don't remember how long I've been in Japan, was it since last week, last month, last year?", and if I really want to pull their leg: "I'm not sure, probably a long trail of children along parts of the silk road", while goading them to confront lingering questions about morality and mortality, but all of that was not applicable to her. She begged farewell with a bright satisfied smile and so did I. That was it. 77 a lucky number, double happiness, a Chinese omen of which the coincidence was only too obvious. It remained with me throughout the day, fodder for further speculations and suspicions of superstitions coming up soon.

Cherry trees started blossoming early in Japan this year 2007. Competing with the Plum blossoms for flagging the first mark on spring I guess.

Trends in the free world trade of this globalization era could be. Tokyo metropolis in the Kanto area is always closely observing nature out of step with other parts of the country. Stretching more than 3000 km from the Russian disputed Sakhalin tip in the north west to the most south eastern islands close to Taiwan, one dare not even generalize the kind of seasonal changes on mainland Japan, the 4 islands between 31° and 45° north latitude, comprising of eight regional divisions, the whole archipelago no bigger than the size of California.



When my wife Nongkie started her HCV treatment early spring, one of the steps in the procedures was to undergo a psychiatric evaluation. Not just because it is the suicide season (30.000 a year!). The known side effects of the heavy medication are not just physical ones, so back up in psychiatry with a shrink is

warranted. As Nongkie has a bridge-over-troubled-waters past she had little difficulty of passing evaluation. In fact when Nongkie was in her 3-week induction at the hospital the psychiatric came to see her and told her frankly: "You are actually the first patient in this category" and confined her she didn't know much about it. Nongkie was quick enough to comfort the lady doctor; that she need not worry about it: she had first hand experience from seeing her husband through the 6 months, so she could inform the doctor if needed. You will appreciate that visiting Nongkie in the hospital had its advantages; listening to her stories brought much needed laughter, evaporating the debacles of the workday.

During this Friday morning's class I tried to re-invent the bookish absent-minded academic and if they'd let me crack jokes, students would have choked in laughter. Unfortunately they kept me in check, holding me to live up to the image of their esteem, their belief I'm a walking encyclopedia. The question was brought up how come the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> month as commonly referred to in numerals in Japanese language were called September and October, Septa and Octo, 7 and 8 in Latin.

I wished I had been better versed in Latin profanity. What does a holy man on sandals say when hitting his big toe on the stairs to the gate of boarding in the airport? F\*ck Me or F\*ck You; in Latin or in Sanskrit? The hymn 'Dies Irea, Dies Illa', played in my head; memories of singing it as a choir boy returned, and with it life in boarding school. Had it not been for Pope Gregory XIII who by Papal Bull Inter Gravissimas decreed on 24 February 1582 that from then on the Gregorian calendar was in vogue we'd still be in the dark middle ages. Shocked that he also appointed his illegitimate son Giacomo to become a powerful feudatory? He who ultimately plunged his temporal dominions into a state bordering upon anarchy? Wish I knew more shocking news about the clergy of Medieval Japan to illustrate the grades of shock. Shock is so commonly used in Japanese I wonder how people make it through the day with so many shocks, better even, how they survive a week of shock treats. They also challenge everything. Imagine being at a dinner party and among all the exotic dishes gorgeously displayed, one is a good starter I feel.

'Spicy Seafood Salad'. Then someone helpful hands me an appropriate dish and says: Please challenge! What do you mean? Challenge salad? When I was about to ask how they survive so many shocks a day I understood that 'shock' is no more than a mild surprise and 'challenge' just about the equivalent of try. Now I have a few more odds and ends to tie up. Traps for teachers: Overhearing a Japanese language teacher with a small group of visiting Chinese students while they were looking at the lunch menu at the restaurant's door, I understood that the Kanji wasn't the problem. Obviously Chinese have that advantage -over us barbarian western mortals- with Chinese characters. They had it difficult with the meaning of Ramen written in Hiragana! Puzzling however was that the teacher explained in English that Ramen is a sort of spaghetti soup! All Chinese would know the word noodle soup... You would stretch a point in a native speaker's favor when they take to broken English to ease communications with Japanese, but what about the bilingual English teacher explaining Blog is the contraction of Web and Log. Illustrating Log is like Log house, a loan word that many Japanese are familiar with apparently. Although in my opinion Log is foremost associated with the Log of a ship's



captain, a collection of daily reports and notes, just like you hear the captain of the Enterprise state in every episode of Startrek. But oh beware! Using Japanese in a business English class: Upon a student's question what the difference is between an estimate and a quotation I answer: "They are quite different". Mitsumori or estimate refers to an approximate value of something whereas quotation is intrinsically quoting or repeating a famous person's saying or writing. That may be so a student responds, but both terms in the dictionary refer to the financial meaning and quotation means a price offer or Inyo in Japanese. Blown out of the water, how embarrassing!

#### BRIEF ENCOUNTERS LASTING PLEASURABLE HOURS

Coinciding with the Chinese New Year, the spring like wit and beauty, can break through the most unpromising of disguises. The cycle of 3 days cold and 4 days warm weather rhythmically returning, spasms of death and orgasm, is the season when you see the first trickle of tourists. Japanese Cherry blossoms are surely as well advertised abroad as here, but one wouldn't expect to see tourists in places where business men lay out blue plastic sheets in preparation for the evening Bacchus under the blossoming trees of a park in the Sky Scraper District where I work. You will have noticed that most of this news plays out on trains or between train commutes; the next episode is no different.



The man, a 40-year old something, looked lost in the middle of Ikebukuro station. Standing there with a Tokyo railroad map obviously disoriented, was he looking for the exit perhaps? There are more 10 in every N-S-E-W direction, so understandably the question 'can I help you' would not be misplaced. Only that I asked him over his shoulder from behind, was an awkward approach. Shinjuku was enough a reply to understand he was not a native English speaker.

"190 Yen?" "No, a 150 will do" I replied. "I thought 190 everywhere; I'm from Georgia" he added quickly. Instantly Yamazumi san came to mind, but before I could mention I had a Japanese friend working there for Médecins Sans Frontières, he added: "That's Russia, former USSR", making sure there was no confusion about geography. He asked: "How long the train?" while we went buying the ticket. I was not sure how many carriages the train had, but could tell him not to worry about the next train: every 3 min. No, to Shinjuku! Right; 4 stops, that would be some 10 min. I reiterated, gesturing him to follow me. Pointing at the bilingual board overhead the ticket vending machines, the next hurdle: even though there is a touch screen button 'English' now, switching written and voice generated instructions on screen, the place to insert money was not obvious to him. Do as the Romans in Rome do -it flashed through my mind, look around to see what other people do. But then again, groping women on crowded trains wouldn't be advisable. On the way to the ticket gate he explained he had traveled all over the world, New York, Australia but Japan was his first time. I reckon that even seasoned travelers must find it mind boggling to get around in Japan. "What platform?" he asked straggling behind me as I was trying to keep in the mainstream flow of commuters. "Platform 6" I said pointing at the green Yamanote line board, navigating towards the escalator. When we got on the train on platform 5 there was no time to explain that both 5 or 6 were OK this Friday evening rush hour. I had 2

stops to repeat he had to get off the fourth stop plus that the exit he wanted was at the back of the train. "What music do you like?" he asked. I hesitated. To be on the safe side as with my students of English I said: "Classic for a certain period of time". Couldn't really admit that I like Mogwai, the Pink Floyd Punks of the 90s and the 12 Chinese Girls Band too, but I quickly added, "Rock too!" "Jazz?" the short man -of small stature to me- fished in reduced English. Again I hesitated -I'm not all that keen on Jazz, but taking an inquisitive look at this non charismatic humble fellow, he generously presented me with a CD; the jacket cover picture immediately revealed it was his. Fusion he proclaimed in ways that reminded of mine earlier on. Indeed, Classic and Rock and ... Jazz. I perused the back cover and noted the URL of his website. Temur, his first name felt easier to overcome than his surname Kvitelashvili. Damned, all these foreign names. I had just come out of an afternoon meeting with a New Zealand High School Principal by the Polish name Rosanowski. Was it not difficult enough to remember some 80 Japanese names of the people I work with a year? But I was impressed, thinking gosh man, how would I promote the service package I was offering? Distributing it in Power Point on a CD to random passersby? I even got his name card and pocket size calendar 2007 before getting off the train. I begged my farewell in gratitude, would have done the hat thing if I had worn one. Once home I told my wife the story. She was more interested in listening to the music than in my reflections on the encounter. I booted the computer for more information about him on the website. No kidding, it gave a good look into Temur's life as a pro musician performing around the world, albeit commented in bad English... free downloads of MP3 sound tracks. For a moment I considered rewriting the English and emailing it in reciprocity, when Nongkie called: "dinner is ready". In reciprocity for the satisfaction of a 5 dish small Japanese dinner, I did the dishes, while listening to the fusion for the third time still reflecting on professional teacher hazards and traps that technology set us, ignorant micro analytical people up for.

#### GOOD ADVICE TO MYSELF

There are elections everywhere around the world these days. Have we in the G-rated world been walled in Disneyland after all? What a spectacle in Japan! Colorful as can be, exotic even, with politicians all dressed up for the political theatre. Headscarves in war hero movie style, a tenant entourage with calligraphy brushed banners cross-chest, -not fixed on bamboo sticks to their back, as would have been in the Edo era or the époque of Samurai warlords. Ready to cut the ribbon to the labyrinth from where there is no way out, except in disgrace after disclosure of financial embarrassment or politically incorrect statements. A few non-starters? Cumin' up soon!

In Japan, news on white and blue-collar crime scandals seems never short in supply. The abundance of power thirsty arch rivals are keeping their unscrupulous faces up as long as they're in the lime light, and then when the game is over, the gaffe highlighted, bow deeply and apologize for having damaged public trust when missing a couple of billion or trillion yen in juggling with other peoples money or deeply offending women's lib activists by talking about women 'kodomo wo ukikai' as 'child making machines' that need to turn the tide of declining birthrates. The biological irony is that men, not women, are really the baby making machine. After they drop off the genetic packet, they are biologically speaking, unnecessary. And with sperm banks even more so.

Polled women's response? 1 million Yen is not enough an incentive to produce a second child. They'll do it for 10 million! Hard working people like me collecting the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table and you too perhaps who want to have your piece of the pie, feel divided over the long term benefits of going along mainstream consumerism, if not pioneering its course or going against the grain. Ultimately, whatever the choice, all is possible in this rich part of the world these days. We do have a free choice or believe so at least, don't we? I for one am bound to living my dream with this lovely lady who has that entertaining walk of life without much ado. Love of my life in more than one way. The only way to become older together is by living, my father distinctly said. The distinguished ecologist proclaimed social unrest in Europe 10 years before ethnic minorities went at the throats of the establishment and predicted natural disasters in Europe to proportions people must have half believed his was a fanatic gone gaga. Are we indeed living on borrowed time or as Al Gore depicts in his presentation 'An Inconvenient Truth'? have we just got a second lease on life expectancy on earth? Domsday scenarios? No thank you, we're faithful Cybernetics, our money making god machine with AI (or artificial intelligence).

There is an after-life after the dot.com wise men assure us. So, what is the use of candle and eyeglasses to the wise owl when it can't read the divine signs telling us that earth can do without us but we cannot do without earth?

#### EARLY SUMMER HAS ITS SURPRISES

With some cold spells in May disrupting the natural flow of the season's average number of suicidal jumps under the trains and burned out salary men (Japanese for office workers) getting on the trains still seeking to level out their frustrations on easy targets like women who are slowly getting tired of passively accepting being groped. We have now the first two carriages of early commuter trains reserved for women only...! Inbound trains are announced in a man's voice, outbound trains in a woman's. Chauvinist interpretation of going to work and returning home? I feel it's convenient when running to the station to catch a train coming in. I can save my breath hearing a woman's voice. It's still too early to put the long underpants and long undershirt with winter clothes away. That I do when temperatures don't fall below 20° C anymore. You're probably right when thinking I am acclimatized. Integrated? Japonised?

I hesitated for a moment; the man in front of me didn't move an inch when I clearly gave sign I had to get off the train. I moved my briefcase to the outer side of my leg, moved up front to my seat, looked up to detect if it had been registered... Hardened hateful eyes stared back; provokingly hanging there in the hand grips so close to the seat that I had to stand up from, I would have to forcefully make my way out, but the train was far from crowded to allow such behaviour. At times I do as Japanese commuters do in Tokyo, pushing and working my elbows with the words Sumimasen, Orimasu! (sorry I got to get off). There was no way to escape violent confrontation it seemed. The image of butting my head into his flashed, a bloody nose, passengers trying to keep bloodhounds from further going at each others throats. But it didn't get that far. Ducking under his arm, reining in my elbow and slipping out sideways I felt it was an achievement not even to brush his ribs with my shoulder. Looking back in triumph before getting off, I saw indeed the missed opportunity and disdain on his face.

Cycling allows me to get away from it all. It is then that I take in all the greenery of the environment I live in. After all, I chose for living out here and commute to work. Mejiro the upscale downtown neighborhood where I spent two years in my wife's parental home was great but the weekend too short for coming out to Fussa for a cycling trip. The yearly shine-up of the one road racer I still had less time consuming now. With all spokes shining in the sun, I took off. Along the road of old I recognized the slide show of years gone by backward. I feel young again. I push it to the limits. Then 3 km before Oku-tama Lake, a flat. I had no spare tubeless tires under the saddle. Only once in the last 10 years had a tire punctured, what the heck, I had an aerosol bomb to inflate it. Unfortunately, the whole air emptied as soon as it went in. I turned the bicycle upside down to see what the problem was and oh my, oh my, a rift through half way around, no way. Then two cracks in the frame caught my eye, one in the seat tube and one in the down tube, both at the bottom bracket bearing. While considering my self lucky with my misfortune, I imagined going downhill at top speed and the frame disintegrating; I could have broken my neck. Metal fatigue, time for the racer to go, not me, was my conclusion!



#### THE RAINY SEASON

The dour, overcast sky gives the bleak moorland along the Tama River patched with homeless makeshift dwellings a chilling sense of foreboding. Either I must have become noise resistant from 15 years on commuter trains or also seriously hearing impaired.

The drizzle sounded like a buzz in my ears.

Has this dull season when the sky is covered in all shades of gray gotten to me?

To the abysmal edge of the world of colorless boredom? For some reason or another I opened the door to a corrupted mind, inviting all the friends of mind poison in; now besides finding myself judgmental and opinionated, emotions that were previously only know to me as concepts in philosophical books manifest themselves in uncontrolled ways. I discover likes and dislikes in proportions of yellow hatred and must have the object of my desire if it were the last thing to get in this life. Grudges take root, thoughts on accusations and revenge, ample examples of lamentable work and worship.

Time had come to book tickets to Europe. We were surely not the only one's to return to 'Furusato' the hometown drag that Japanese revere. Obon time at the height of August heat is every year a dreaded rush to break out of the commuter's routines or 24/7 measured segments of life from cradle to grave. Our mileage may vary; mine seems to shorten year after year. Full payment for a flight 3 months ahead? Never heard of, but then there are so many new unheard of's these days, mostly inconvenient truths to borrow Al Gore's coinage. Was KLM in financial trouble? We had seen Sabena go under after tying up with Swiss Air. Luckily we flew with the SABENA (Such A Bloody Experience Never Again) airlines a last and only time. Swiss Air never got such an uplifting acronym but went down without it anyway. I got to know that an air ticket to Bogota had to be paid 6 months in advance and settled for the 3 months.

Forced cold turkey from commercially induced cigarette smoking addiction was less of an unsettling experience than expected. Amsterdam Airport welcomed with a quarantine respite for the last surviving smokers, a nice break before the next leg of the journey this

get-away from the shop-until-you-drop heaven was. Who would have expected a home coming with a language rusty after 30 years out of daily usage and only partly out of order so uneventful? No black hole to emerge from, no laps in time to leap from, all and everything as real as can be. But oh yea beware, the first I caught myself doing was to slip out of my home slippers when entering my sister's home from the patio. Then there was the obnoxiously returning of the 'thank you' at times when things could go without saying. Most noteworthy was the total lack of interest in what was on TV. Though manifold the channels available at my 'real' home, watching the way of the white clouds was immensely more exciting. At home skies are a bit boring comparing to the magnificently entertaining sky light shows here in Belgium.

In Japan my favorite program is 35.000 km travel by rail road in China. On a 3-month journey zigzag around the country a Japanese backpacker takes you to the most far out places in the Yunnan and Shichuan provinces, across the Tanggula Pass, at 5,072 m above sea level the world's highest rail track on the Qinghai-Xizang railway or Beijing-Lhasa rute, meeting people old and young most casually. Despite having a whole TV crew and an interpreter at his disposition, the whole comes over so naturally, so heart warming, so humbly human. I am almost moved to tears when seeing through this wide window on the world away from home, away from the daily routines and hardships, away from it all. Here I am, out of my isolation, out of my self imposed exile, retreat from the West in search for achievements in the East, the tight rope balancing clown making fun of his exemplary way of performing a pitch perfect downfall without safety net.



Cross word puzzles have never caught on with me, but then there was no way around the challenge my mother posed at her age of 84, so I joined her. That was no picnic, I assure you. Puzzling rather, these Swedish crossword types.

After lunch we went for a walk. This Antwerp suburban neighborhood had been pretentiously parceled out and developed over the years. But like in so many European city centers the natives moved out to the green zones to more comfortable homes and immigrants were all too eager to invade the decaying old houses in station neighborhoods. Commuting is affordable for the affluent, not so for the immigrant gathering the crumbs that fall from the rich men's table. Obviously they don't feel home any more than the other original dinner hunters in their own country. In city quarters they can squat among themselves, while the remaining minority moves further and further away from the city center to feel back home in the wetlands. Unfortunately now almost drained from ground water at least they escape the returning city floods.

Nearing the older part of this township, we came to a road junction, big flower boxes cordoned off a cobble stone square out of angle. Horse carriages would have had no difficulty navigating this irregular intersection: the farmhouse with a postbox slot in its wall suggested that this small domain in its heydays had doubled as post office. Looking down the other adjunct street I saw a shop signboard and could decipher 'Shoemaker' from the paint peeled off letters. That was worth checking out. Shoe repair would already have been outdated and a mister minute is something you only find in railroad stations in Japan, but a real shoemaker in such a half urbanized neighborhood?

The show window did not have anything as a far cry from hand made shoes, only dusty advertisements for products for leather treatment at a first glimpse. Peeking in I saw

pretty weird machinery, and all I could figure out was machinery for sewing. My wife Nongkie hesitantly followed when I entered the shop. The man in the back did not immediately come to the counter. The machine he sat at was not in motion. He asked pretty much disinterested what he could help with. Could be that we had interrupted him in reading the newspaper during his lunch break. I told him bluntly that the sign board shoemaker had attracted me to come over. He needn't more and quickly said: "Yes, all kinds of order made shoes" pointing at a couple on the shelf. For a moment I thought understanding, orthopedic shoes. Again he must have read the confusion in my eyes because he stood up and showed off a pair that could have been made for a man who had liked the Charleston and had died before picking up his order. Standing there in front of his shelves I realized the man was a dwarf! He was not dwelling on my pensive mood, but continued explaining the machinery was for horse reins, bridles, girths and other gear for equestrian horse riding in the nearby horse stable. I felt obliged and when I thought of buying a small leather purse, in a way of sponsoring the underprivileged, he suddenly shifted for a skillful salesman. Too bad we had forgotten to take any money with us on our stroll through the neighborhood... Not at all thrown off guard he assured us that the shop was open again the day after since the next day was August 15, a national holiday.

LATER THAT DAY...

The food many will ask here in Japan, how was it to have the entire range of home made dishes, specialties and delicacies? Indeed, breakfast out of the horn of plenty is about the most impressive. The massive selection of cheeses and hams for one thing, then the jams beyond imaginable combinations as apricot/carrots unknown here, but most of all the bread was far more than filling farina. My wife Nongkie has greatly enhanced my Western style dishes in her cooking over the years, so I wasn't carried away to the 7th heaven, the highest heaven of the Jews, and there they don't serve 'Riz à l'Amand' as in the Christian one anyway, forget about the golden teaspoons...

When seeing the preparations for mother's day, we realized that this was a serious undertaking to bring us onto the bandwagon to obesity. While here were plenty of opportunities to chat up people of our age group and above, I took to the Danish department while my wife tried to get Flemish people tell her ghost stories. She had brought an illustrated book 'Ghost stories' and what most drew attention was the Umbrella Ghost. Apparently telling ghost stories was not so much of a pass time than it

is in Japan.

The one that my sister came up with the 'Bokkerijders' or buck riders was the one that most relatives seem to remember. The story

(my adaption) goes:

Once upon a time, long before electricity lit up our homes, streets and towns, it was scary roaming out into the pitch dark night when the sky was cloudy. Even on moon lit nights the shadows of trees and bushes were often seen as shapes of living creatures.



People stayed indoors after sunset and only went out when necessity was called for. Travel or just getting back home was unsafe. You could easily lose your way or worse be killed by bandits. Of course rich people had horses and guardsmen, but poor peasants had only dogs and some had bucks to help them pull chariots. The really rich had carriages pulled by one or two horses. They took Hackney carriages or had a Brougham.



Such a coach was covered for wind and rain, and for travel by night it had lanterns fueled with kerosene or paraffin oil. Fixed on both sides of the perch, driver's seat where the coachman sat, they shone just enough for the horses and the coachman to see the road ahead. Still, speeding could be deadly then too. One night, such a coachman took his master home in his carriage after a banquet and plenty of wine. All guests had heard the master shouting at the butler when leaving the banquet. He was a grudging old man and his humble servant had gotten used to his master's bad moods. The

old man was very upset about the way his Top hat, his suede gloves, silk scarf and cane were handed to him at the door. He shouted "Home on the double" and spurred his coachman like the devil was on his heels. The horses must have felt it too, because they sped as fast as the carriage could go. The wheels kept well in the track away from the castle and through the forest. But then, the master in the back had an outburst of anger again, the coachman turned his head for a split second just when they came out of the forest and onto the sandy road through the heath wasteland. Then he completely panicked when seeing buck riders just in front of his horses. He pulled the reins forcefully, the horses reared in terror. All lost control over the carriage. It tipped; it cracked and rolled over with horses and everything. The master broke his neck; the coachman was knocked unconscious with many broken bones and the horses ran on pulling the pole broken off the front axle wheel pair. And the broken lanterns set all on fire. It could be seen from far and wide. People came too late to put the fire out but found the horsemen's last words 'Buck Riders' written in the sand. After that a lot of fatal accidents with carriages at night were said to be the work of the buck riders who were ghosts of vagabonds the local believed. Until one day a young lad who had survived a crash was able to tell the rest of the story. The young lad had been hiding under the perch for the long ride back to his village. As a stowaway on ships he had curled in a ball under the raised bench at the front for the driver, keeping his eyes closed for dirt and dust.

Only when he heard the coachman screaming at the top of his voice: Buck Riders! did he open his eyes. All he saw was the shadow of the horses' ears and the coachman's shadow in between. When he tried to tell the people rushing to put the fire of the burning carriage out that the buck riders were in fact only shadows the coachman had seen nobody believed him.

For those whose stomach hasn't churned yet, let's pick up where we left off:

A full course of custard filled Choux-Crème pastry, whipped cream topped cakes in all shapes and layers, Apple pies and other fruit tarts, our Japanese fruit jelly, the hors d'œuvres would last us till early evening departure for the city's Rubens Market.



For every time I've been back to that part of the world where I had been born accidentally, as if I were in the position of free first choice, a new experience. It's never too late to learn about Antwerp, the city where I was raised yet not well trimmed when I dropped out of its Rubens environment.



and alive. They may sell and jeans at the open drunk with much of the

As if I look well cropped now, at least I know that on August 15, mother's day there, the merchants and maidens of his paintings can be seen fully dressed more contemporary goods like burgers market yet the Belgian beer is still same gulps as in the yonder yesterdays.

You would expect that relations between laborers and aristocracy have improved since, but to hear and see what craftsmen in house construction produce in pride leaves no doubt on me: that's not the case. And to new house owners as my sister and husband it undoubtedly leaves worse sentiments about the state of affairs the EU is in now with its open markets. We had certainly expected to be guests at their home two years earlier when standing on the land they had just bought then.

For us they're all adding up to the one conclusion: how nice is it back home in Japan where they can build one-family houses in 6 months time, make trains run on time and where they also almost make most people run on schedule.

Contrary to the excitement of many first experiences, taking the European version of the Shinkansen was rather a dull one. First of all seeing the old rusty red Thalys approaching felt like it was coming out of the EU long after its collapse, you know the kind of doom's day scenario. In the seemingly fleeing-for-safe-haven overload of people maneuvering their mega suitcases through the narrow aisle seeking reserved seats but mistaking the carriage number there is this young woman nose-pierce and all that goes with it, unmistakable Dutch accent in English, hopelessly blocking passage, helplessly looking around for a helping hand with her overweight suitcase in line with her burly body caught my eyes. Lifting weights above 1 liter jugs of beer is not my specialty but despite my own discomfort -my ankle joint had already protested against my demands- I jumped to her help. Mostly to stop the multi-lingual announcement that the train could not leave before all passengers were boarded and urging passengers to get seated. I am an easy target when it comes to helping out wryly slipped from the corner of my mouth.

What was supposed to be a TGV (Train à Grande Vitesse) was in fact the rail road workers worst stopper. Every time I felt we were building up speed the red flags must have gone up in the air, signaling another cigarette break. Belgium is a small country roughly the size of Kyushu where my wife Nongkie's family originated from. I imagine that a Shinkansen arriving at Belgium's borders at full throttle would have to immediately start the breaks if it had to stop before the border at the other end; less than a 100 km on its N-S diagonal.

Once into Germany spirits noticeably rose, lightness befell us. The grayness of the Wallonia lifted and hilly green landscapes dotted with clean albeit plastic painted facades of houses rolled by in quick succession. Before long we reached Koln where my cousin

would come to pick us up. He had visited us the year before and long before that, other god forgotten homes like Copenhagen. More than just courtesy returned, we were anxious to catch up, never met his grown up children. Cologne was living up to our expectations, medieval, at its core the Cathedral and surrounding open air museum, this city at the Rhine offered ample insight of what living western style was all about.

Art Deco pubs, parasol covered eating tables in back yards, vines up the walls and other sights made us feel outlandish foreigners like real tourists.

The one-hour ride in his diesel powered Volvo at one point reaching a top speed of 220 km per hour was great, just like watching a movie from the living room coach. His pentacle shaped house in futuristic architecture another example that life can be wonderful no matter where you live as long as you have money.

Did we see more than just the price tag on every interior design item? Certainly! Small items like the CD rack filling a corner were simply ingenious, Japanese in its way of being creative with space as was the grand piano centrally placed between living and dining room. With the fire place's mantel piece chalked white, the simplicity of furniture all the black and white it was a spacious marvel dotted with colors. The garden rounded the angles of the house beautifully under the outdoor spot lights. The lawn not mowed just too neatly and plenty of flowers not too cultivated on the rubble stone terraced partitions, a garden that was well on the way to compliment the house and its interior design. Our host was certainly excused when he left us to ourselves to go cooking. Being a seasoned traveler himself he must have known how traveler stomachs can rumble between half full from the journey and half empty from the arrival. As passers by, we watched him in the kitchen while seeing his grown up children put elegant covers on the table. We had been introduced to them one by one as they came home and what would be a better occasion to get acquainted than over dinner? When all had taken place at the table and the cook had taken off his apron, the toast was called upon. Although one would assume that with red meat red wine was served, but the fine white wine was all the palate needed for appetitive. The plates with oven baked sliced potatoes would certainly balance the sirloin steak. The more questionable was where the huge amounts of pale green lettuce would go, until tasted. I do not recall any lettuce tasting that well with so little dressing. And there must be found a new name for the steak served, superior to a Sirloin, possibly the Japanese "Kokyu Gyu" could do. My wife shyly obliged saying she was not quite raised in this cuisine. In fact in her parental home red meat steaks were never served, they had only chopsticks and Chinese spoons for cutlery. We enjoyed the dinner immensely.

A spacious twin bed guestroom welcomed us to a well deserved good night's sleep. Following day our host took us for another comfortable ride in his Volvo. The road up and down the hills, winding through consecutively forest, grassland and farmland was really entertaining enough to allow pauses between conversations. For us coming from the land of rice shitters the greenery in mid summer was remarkably different. Cows and cattle were not as much part of the landscape as they were in Belgium. Sauerland is an old industrial region. The availability of iron ore and the abundance of wood and water allowed iron production long



before the Ruhr area industrialization and the mining of its coal took place. Today there are only a few remains of this early heavy industry; wire production is still important and a lot of small factories still occupies the old industrial sites. Sauerland is a very popular tourist area especially for Dutch people. The forests and picturesque small cities are attractive for hikers and outdoor sports because of their good air quality.

The old farming machinery open air exhibition was indeed a huge undertaking it showed from the top of the hill. The road down was already having a line of cars queuing at the gate of the make shift parking. Multiple football fields in length and width it covered a whole hill side. On relatively dry grassland the organizers had nevertheless track covers piled up at the entrance. I do not know whether they relied on TV or other media for the weather forecast, perhaps on some orally transmitted wisdom of god-fearing farmers, perhaps it was just included in the budget to be spent. We moved in a fairly fast pace onto the field and even had free choice of where would be most convenient to park. In Japan there would be at least two uniform clad security guards to see each vehicle through the maneuvering, professionally waving red flickering sticks to taxi it onto its designated space to finally bow after the conventional air traffic sign of crossed arms indicates you can turn the engine off. Stefan took a big umbrella out of the trunk affirmative of European changeable weather. I got excited seeing equestrian riders in full black and red parade costume on the exhibition ground and hurried to take the first in a series of pictures that would illustrate the event to those back home in Japan. After the show opening, next on the programme was harvesting the old fashioned way. While the first horse pulling the cutter bar had difficulty with mowing the still wet clover, the one behind pulling the rotary swather had it equally difficult. Whatever the cause, the not yet dry stalks, the out of practice farmers or the badly attuned machinery, it was convincing enough that farming in the days before the tractor was hard work and life close to nature full of hardship.



Nobody minded only two rows of the whole field got half done and the show went on. Kids could take a ride on a two horse pulled cart, adults a close look at tractors spanning 50 years of history. I wondered why no tractors from before the Second World War were on display, not that the ones of the early 50s were a boring sight. Some of those museum pieces still had the Porsche, Primus, Eicher or Ursus engine running! I took a shot of my wife with her eyes wide from

the novelty of this tractor show. Standing there in front of the back wheel of a new mammoth tractor she looked even tinier against the background of the tire, the wheel 2 m+ in diameter! I got an on-site insight to bear on returning floods in Europe being no surprise. I could see in reality that plowing the earth with such a designer machine, cabin as comfortable as a computer desk can be, turning the earth half a meter deep was a piece of cake. In the wake, the loosening up of soil to that depth, prone to water erosion of the uncontrollable downpours just like my father and so many other environmentalists and ecologists have tried in vain to show politicians the scientific proof: the sediment of soil washes into brooks, tributaries and rivers makes water levels rise and banks that were build 100 years ago overflow. But whatever the problem, there is always a

technological solution, never mind the other unforeseen problem it causes, there is always a technological solution to solve that one too. Meanwhile we can just marvel at the new technologies, no one wants to turn the clock back to pastoral utopia. A taste of this heaven on earth was readily available in the festival's tent. Multi layered cream chocolate cakes, apricot and apple pies and everything in between were not in short supply, constantly shelved out on long tables, coffee and tea poured from pots in the same abundance. Bacchus would have gone erratic were he invited to a feast without yeast brew flowing, but for most of us there it was in tune with the gone-by melodies the live brass band playing. Refueled we strolled through the market of stalls. Many of them had items for households, wooden utensils for kitchen and bathroom, hand crafted decorative objects, play toys for kids in natural materials. Some stalls had earthenware, ceramic cups, pottery and big jars. And to literary cap the event Nongkie picked a splendid Mayser hat at a stall that made her look like a Vogue cover page girl.

My cousin must surely have been thinking of digitalizing her in her new look while I haggled the price down to 30 Euro. At the first hay stacked trailer we passed he put us in front and took a snapshot of us that became the most exquisite shot of the past 10 years. Loaded with that superb souvenir, this was our U-turn. Our host saw us off at the station, leaving us with the best of memories of our flash visit.

I am so glad to return with Nongkie to the land where no stories are told about Lot's wife, transformed into a salt pillar after looking back on a world of decadent pleasure, where adoring golden statues were taught heretical, Hedonism the work of the devil. I still feel an itch of the residue, guilty of the sin of pleasure, the original sin, before proven guilty by research or knowledge. Pondering around my own navel, I may be stepping out of my venue again when saying belief -faith in religion/god is not rational, it is potentially deadly; you cannot say something is true because you hope something is true. Being arbitrary brought up in a particular religion, historically at the whim of the clergy and parents under their spell, frightening children out of their wits with hell (five of them in Buddhism) might as well be judged child abuse. Who does not wish to join 'Give Peace a Chance' and 'Imagine', a digital planet with no heaven above us and no hell below us? Why is peace so difficult to achieve? The focus is on promoting peace whether that person is religious or atheist. How come we use an 'Outspoken atheist' but not an outspoken Christian? We are agnostic about the tooth fairies and the little dwarfs of Snowwhite and we can't disprove Chinese dragons. Why do gods in monotheistic religions conceal themselves so adequately, deliberately conceal themselves as if they didn't exist, isn't that what cowardice implies? Too many questions of a fool for an intelligent person to answer, yet, did invisible Islam become visible after 9/11/2001? Islamism invading the West, is the contention that Islam after all made it into Europe after being driven out of Spain in the 13<sup>th</sup> century? Is any ideology, a believe in a holy book polite fiction?, political correctness, rational naivety? By and large, religion should entirely retreat to the individual sphere. Some Religious Truths:

| Taoism       |
|--------------|
| Shit happens |

| Confucianism                     |
|----------------------------------|
| Confucius say,<br>"Shit happens" |

| Buddhism                                  |
|---|
| If shit happens,<br>it is not really shit |

|                                      |                                  |  |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| Zen Buddhism                         | Hinduism                         | Islam                                    |
| What is the sound of shit happening? | This shit happened before        | If shit happens, it is the will of Allah |
| Protestantism                        | Catholicism                      | Judaism                                  |
| Let shit happen to someone else      | If shit happens, you deserved it | Why does shit always happen to us?       |

Arriving back in Japan life starts in a world of smells, French fries on the platform of Haijima station hits my smell sensors unpleasantly. Have the days of rusty rails and roaming rats forever gone with the construction of the brand new, last minute shopping mall arcading over the station? I tell Nongkie we shouldn't go too long on a holiday; everything might change so much in the meantime we can't find our way back home again. Getting out of the next station walking the green mile to my final home in the boondocks, the first smell that hits my nostrils is the scent of the brackish Belgian sea coast, whereas the pacific ocean, the Tokyo Bay is actually more than a mere 55 km from here. Not having fully recovered from the blow, the next hit: the scent of temple incense as if it were my nesting pigeonhole. I read about the reverse culture shock, and experienced it according the book. Seeing Europeans there as entirely alien, out of proportions physically, barbarian bristled faces and with exceptions of medieval cruel nobility notwithstanding, the spoken language reflecting the underlying stream of perception and reproduction of the reasoning encapsulated in wont, drills if you like. It all appears in the Japanese version now. Aversion to the spoken language reflecting the underlying stream of perception and reproduction of the reasoning, encapsulated in wont of the Japanese version.

Americans troubled faith in the future, continental Europeans having the strongest sense of the past, Japanese put their faith in collective judgment and wisdom of tradition. The way things are done, not the way things are questioned. In times of crisis they call all swing together and act as one. Americans talk about happiness, Brits talk transcendently of enjoyment. The Japanese tend to take the ups-and-downs of fortune and misfortune -not to mention the weather- with the serenity of time temperate vision, in contrast to resilience often attributed to urban dwellers of mega cities in western cultures.

“TO EVEN BE ABLE TO TIE THE DEVIL TO A PILLOW” IS IT NOT THE SAME AS “TO YAWN AGAINST THE OVEN?” FROM NETHERLANDISH PROVERBS, PIETER BRUEGHEL THE ELDER, 1559

Just before traveling to Europe to attend my family gathering on the occasion of mother's day, I bumped into the Bonze at Ushihama, my station. He quite understandably asked how I was doing after such a long absence from ZaZen, to which I replied that I had successfully completed treatment for HCV, and was ready to join ZaZen Kai in September. I got to know that he was on his way to Kamakura, which explained his traditional outfit. One station later I got off still pondering about what he had said was the occasion for his call on Kencho-ji, the head temple of the Rinzai-school of Za-Zen.

When finally September had come and I just made it on time for the meditation session, much to my apprehension the Bonze started the session with telling everybody, new and veteran meditation practitioners that I had returned from a long leave of absence and recovery from a potentially deadly liver virus, stressing the importance of taking good care of one's health in Buddhist context, the Four Noble Truths; elaborating on impermanence: how difficult it is to obtain human birth with all faculties and how easy it is to lose. To me it sounded like I had come back from the beyond. Yet victory over obstacles as numb limbs after only sitting 20 min. had still to be won. I returned to where I had left off, seeking refuge from thoughts racing as if they wanted to stay ahead of a Tsunami that was going to turn worlds upside down. When restlessness affects one physically can one just stand up and walk away from an unruly mind? Familiar feelings of going totally insane, all reason overriding madness could be seen in my rolling eyes I imagined, the kind of being possessed by feverish demons. Thrown into an abysmal cold and dark universe but still desiring to flamboyantly shine until close to extinction when realizing a first 7 year cycle of suffering has set in. Imprisoned in a capsule containing the total sum of past experiences and stored memories only, expelled to exile into an alien sphere. Thirsty for new impressions, new input to feed the narcissistic addiction, whether born with the mirroring mind quality or in the gods' image, or just victimized by the entertaining thought of playing the second fiddle in life. Had I not been condemned as the rotten apple in the basket and destined for the gallows? Whatever the fact of the matter, ZaZen Mind is Beginners Mind I contemplated. So here I am, balming the stigmas of believing that there is divinity behind everything, that my agnostic aura is the root of all evil, that my past unwholesome actions translate into disastrous influences on other people's lives, that I will be held accountable for participating in world events even as a spectator of all the bad news on TV and in the papers. I haven't understood a jota about love and compassion, and the alpha and omega of impermanence is the ultimate unknown to me. All I hear is the buzzing silence in my ears, the cold turkey of the sound pollution to which I'm exposed in my daily commuting life. When riding the breath into a dark blue moonless sky this autumn evening a slow moment of sudden radiant happiness arises. In the calm of well being that overwhelms me, I wonder where is the absence of notion of the contrary? This must be the peace of mind beyond question. Who's it is doesn't matter anymore, this is where I wish to be with all of you good people. It is indeed simple if we don't make it complicated.

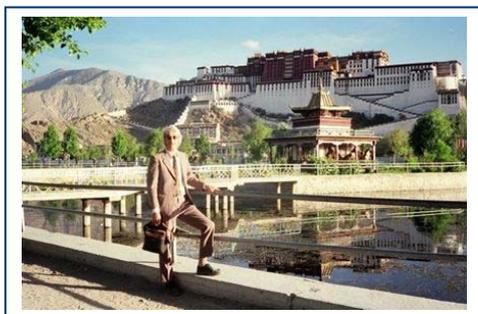
Contemplating the aftermath of such beneficial Saturday evening Za-Zen, Monday morning on the train to work I habitually start working on writing down what goes through my mind. I am rock-solid confident. It's a warm beautiful autumn day.

More often than not I fail to explain how we get what we got in life, but I'm never in doubt about where to change trains, so is it worth endlessly babbling about it? After all I can not deny what I've been given, a body and mind conditioned by its nature. "But we can't just leave it there now can we?" I ask myself.

I need to prove myself worthy; in judgmental self evaluation of job performance, driven by urges to achieve recognition, can I not just move on without leaving a trace?

The Chinese proverb may say that a picture can tell more than a 1000 words, but I got to say in more than a 1000 words what a picture of us happy 2 does not show.

Is it now that I finally have reached the age and status of a decently married man that I discover myself with nagging nostalgia? "Who can say where the day flows, when your love grows? Only time!" I can tell: the music of Enya. I am grateful to my father for sharing his discovery with me. Whether I can return the nostalgic emotions that the 12 Chinese Girls Band bring about, melodies generally associated with horny cats' calling and yowling I doubt. Their Chinese fusion music is a far cry from that to me, making me long for the times when everything was still embryo secure, feeling as close to homesick as China can be. When was last time such deceivingly grotesque image overwhelmed me? Oh yes, that was in Nepal when circumambulating Swayambu Nath.



Damn it, how could I feel having been born there? Overlooking the Katmandu valley from my cave in 1989, where did the vision arise from, a vision of warfare with bomber jets dropping heavy loads on the place? Fireballs sky high, I could have sworn the black snow on the Himalayan range had blown over from the Arabs. Two years later there was such a thing: Operation Desert Storm. I guess I had enough hallucinogenic stuff

in my time. Coming out of Tibet the year before, wasn't it time to keep running, away from it all? Find Zen? Find the love of my life? And look what I found. Japan my home country? No, but I could say I made my home in Japan, and that gives a whole new meaning to life! Living in Asia offers such a wide angle on world views, on the West and the East, here and there and in between. Soon I'll be travelling to Angkor Wat, 35 years it has been since I first wished to see it and believe it, the evils of colonialism and the limits of enlightenment, with my own eyes. To hear the Khmer birds still crying foul over the atrocities buried beneath, to smell the disparity between heavenly incense and soil soaked with blood, to taste the staple food to survive, to touch the kids lice infested hair, to drink 'Angkor Wat Beer' digitalize my piece of the pie and shit through the same hole. Some of you may have clicked on the appetizers that I set up on my website calendar. And for those who have more patience: What is the good of a beautiful plate when there is nothing on it yet? Let me picture then the start of a grand day out, albeit not the Wallace and Gromit trip to the moon that was made of cheese.



And when you're gone on a 3 day trip researching the historical role your ancestors played in Kyushu at the change of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, and when I'm on my own and do not see or talk to anyone because I'm filled with your presence within, it is then that I ride in spheres of your love; along Tama river and its mountain ranges, steep valleys up to Mt Takao, and there I feel all the small and big things that are inseparable from you. A lone rider

along the roads of old, having one destination: YOU!

Gerrit Slembrouck, Valentine 2008, <http://www.ne.jp/asahi/clover/multi-lingual>