



Street-haunting in Tokyo

WILLIAM BOYD

I AM IN JAPAN, in Tokyo to be precise: looking out of my hotel bedroom window, from the thirty-sixth floor of a huge tower, at this vast modern city stretching out to the horizon and beyond. I've been to Tokyo before but, up high, this near-bird's-eye view is destabilizing and denaturing. Not that there's much nature in sight. On the cluttered roofs of the skyscrapers and office blocks that I can look down on there appear to be elementary gardens, small square patches of turf and shrubs fitted between the generators, elevator engines, air-conditioning units and the window-cleaning gantries. A tiny gesture of wishful-thinking carbon-capture photosynthesis in response to the tonnes of carbon dioxide this city must spew forth. If I half close my eyes and lose focus, the colours of the glass-and-steel buildings of the city merge into a mosaic of beiges and greys, predominantly, with the odd variation of brown, pale blue and bottle green - it looks like a gigantic pebble beach, thousands of square miles in area, but the pebbles are rectangular not round.

Forty million people live in the metropolitan area of greater Tokyo, so I read, making it the largest of the world's mega-cities, and yet I know from my previous visit that, however daunting and unimaginable engaging with this city appears to be, it is actually quite straightforwardly negotiated. Tokyo works: its transport systems function, you can get from A to B without too much trouble, the denizens are charming, polite and helpful.

"The house of fiction ... has not one window, but a million", Henry James observed, and I'm here on an assignment to open one of the newer windows in the house of fiction - the podcast. I'm a great believer in diversification: if you're a writer, you write - surely - and you take all the writing opportunities presented to you if they can be fitted in and around the complex and lengthy business of inventing and composing a novel. My visit to Tokyo has come about because I've been commissioned to write and then record a short story as a podcast for an upscale hotel group. Let's call it the Alcazar Palace chain. Strangely, luxury hotels seem to have discovered fiction as a new way of beguiling their guests. Over the past couple of years, for two other hotel chains, I've given, in one case, literary talks; and, in the other, have written a short story, privately printed and bound, to be placed on the hotel rooms' bedside

tables for night-time reading. And now the podcast. The brief is simple: set your story in the city and write what you like with the only proviso being that the Alcazar Palace has to make a cameo appearance. The transaction is also simple. While you wait for inspiration to arrive, you can stay in the hotel - free of charge - in this case for five days.

Five days in Tokyo searching for inspiration for a Tokyo-based short story, with the podcast to be recorded in a London studio on return. It's impossible to resist. If you like street-haunting - as Cyril Connolly termed the practice - then Tokyo is a highly stimulating place. In some ways, it's a psycho-geographer's dream, the *dérive* is enchantingly different. In Nihonbashi, the business district, I buy some toothpicks in a shop that's been making and selling beautiful toothpicks for 300 years. In Shibuya, I watch the salarymen and women in their thousands heading for home and I marvel at the unselfconscious kitsch of Japanese teenage fashion. In Roppongi Hills, I go into a bookshop that seems to function first as a place to buy books, then, for a fee, as a restaurant and efficient dating service for like-minded readers, a kind of diffident literary Tinder. In a knife shop, I am mesmerized by a display of hundreds and hundreds of different-sized blades. Who would have thought so many things in the world need their specialist knife in order to be cut up properly? It goes without saying that I eat and drink exceptionally well. Tokyo, it seems to me, has the best cocktail bars in the world, better than New York City, and at the end of the day I can return to the hushed, darkly luminous, beautifully designed, minimalist comforts of the Alcazar Palace and ponder which one of its eight dining emporia to patronize.

How does inspiration arrive? What aleatory elements have to combine to spark the creation of a narrative or a character? I have an image in my head of the novelist as a blue whale swimming through the ocean of the human condition, mouth agape, ingesting the omnipresent krill of everyday life at random. Somehow that non-stop nourishment has to find a way of cohering and a story begin to form. However, although the Tokyo krill seems exceptionally rich, after a couple of days wandering through the city's districts, endlessly fascinating as they happen to be, taking photographs, making notes, I find that it hasn't really provided any reliable podcast material thus far; there's a bit of an inspiration-drought.

So I decide to give my Debordian meander some specific purpose. My extra-literary interest in con-

The Tokyo Photographic Art Museum, Ebisu, Tokyo

“I've been commissioned to write and then record a short story as a podcast for an upscale hotel group

William Boyd's new novel, *Trio*, will be published this October

temporary Japanese culture focuses on two art forms: ceramics and photography. A little research provides me with the information that the best place to see ceramics is a small town about two hours to the north of Tokyo called Mashiko, where there is a dedicated museum.

It might counter the inspiration shortfall to quit the giant metropolis for a day, I reckon, and so I head north for Mashiko and its pottery. It takes more than an hour to leave Tokyo behind but soon I'm in real countryside of forested hills and small hamlets of identical houses. Mashiko is the Hay-on-Wye of Japanese ceramics. Instead of second-hand bookshops, its main street is lined with several dozen bespoke ceramic retail outfits where you can buy a simple coffee mug for next to nothing or a work of art for thousands of pounds. At the centre of town, on a hill, is the Mashiko Museum of Ceramic Art.

I know it's out of season but, astonishingly, I am the only person in the entire museum. Room after room, glowing vitrine after glowing vitrine, of the most beautifully glazed, delicate and incredible pots in the world, all to myself. They are just bowls and bottles, vases and containers, but anyone who has ever tried to coil a pot or turn a pot on a potter's wheel will know how precise and demanding a skill it is. When made with this degree of exquisiteness, these modern ceramics exhibit a level of virtuosity that seems otherworldly. Perhaps this is what great ceramicists do: start with a concept of something entirely utilitarian and transfigure it into a form of perfect fragile sculpture. In Mashiko's main street, I buy a couple of small bowls, poor cousins of those in the museum, but graceful enough mementos of the process nonetheless. Perhaps art might trigger art.

In this spirit, the next day, back in the city, I travel to the Ebisu district, to the multi-floored Tokyo Photographic Art Museum. Japan can boast some of the greatest photographers of the twentieth century - Tomatsu, Kimura, Moriyama, Domon, Kamada, to name a few - and I discover a couple more here. Eiko Yamazawa (1899-1995) started out studying painting in California before switching to photography. She opened her own studio in Osaka in the early 1930s, a remarkable pioneer in the profession. Ikko Narahara (1931-2020) also studied in America - with Diane Arbus - and travelled widely. Both these photographers carried American photographic tropes back to Japan and transformed them. Or else they were looking at the United States through Japanese eyes. For example, some of the photographs in Narahara's exhibition take the over-familiar, totemic images of the buttes and mesas of Monument Valley, Utah, and artfully and remarkably manage to make the place seem fresh and strange.

Perhaps it is the example of Narahara's transforming vision that supplies the inspirational spur, but somewhere around here, at this moment of looking, the light bulb goes on above my head. As I leave the museum, night is approaching and I stand in a nearby forecourt waiting for a pre-booked taxi that never comes. Most odd. I wander out into the darkening streets of Ebisu hoping to hail a passing cab. Not a taxi in sight. Where is the nearest Metro station? I haven't a clue. Suddenly my phone says "No Service" and the traffic has radically diminished. Just for a few minutes, Tokyo's gigantic scale and strangeness seem overwhelming. It would be easy to get lost and wander these streets endlessly, I think, searching for a way home. And an idea for a story spontaneously begins to take shape. Maybe that's the trick: not effortlessly functioning Tokyo but worryingly malfunctioning Tokyo. One small casement swings open on the "vast front" of the house of fiction, as James describes it.

Eventually I manage to flag down a cruising taxi which returns me to the curated calm of the Alcazar Palace. In my room, I block out my story-podcast. A British writer comes to Tokyo for the first time on a rare assignment to interview a giant of Japanese photography - and everything goes hideously, spectacularly wrong. It might just work. ■