

The Bay Road Bird

I was on one side of the road and the dead bird was on the other. I could see it clearly. Its effect on me was consuming, even at that distance. (Dead birds always affect me. I think they probably affect everybody). There was no need to cross over, no need to see it close up. There it was, a crow. It seemed more like a crow-shaped void of pure black in the mid-grey concrete of the pavement, in front of the twenty-four hour Bay Road Noodle Bar. What a place for a crow to die. Or to fall into. I prefer to imagine that birds fly until their hearts just stop, on the wing. At which point they plummet, already dead, and hit some arbitrary bit of ground. I know that's probably not how it happens but somehow I want to believe they have quick, clean ends. I don't want to imagine a sick bird or a bird that can't fly. Why would I want to imagine that?

Bay Road is a bleak strip and nobody goes there much. To be frank it's the bleakest place I know and the outskirts of this city have their fair share of bleak places. Although I should say that from the tower block where I live on top of Asahi Cliff, Bay Road looks quite beautiful. I can see its full sweep, a great arc curving around to Gemago Prefecture on the other side. By day it resembles a chalk line that cuts neatly between lush pines on one side and black volcanic rocks on the other which are always fringed with foam of the waves. At night the neon of the strip's commercial lights form a candy-speckled thread like an Easter ribbon.

To walk Bay Road is another matter. There is really nothing pleasant about it. It's a two-mile concrete corridor that has no relation to its surroundings at all. I have lived at Asahi Cliff for three years and in all that time I never had to travel that road. But two months ago I started seeing this girl, Aiko. She lives in Gemago Prefecture. I don't drive a car and no bus runs along Bay Road, not since the new highway opened inland. So I've walked the route about ten times, there and back.

Before I set off I always look out from my fifteenth floor window and see if I can see Aiko's little place in the distance. I know roughly where she lives but the far hillside is covered in apartment chaos. It looks like a snakes and ladders board. Sometimes I

imagine climbing a ladder to her window or sliding out of it, down a snake to the start of Bay Road. It bothers me that I can't make out exactly where she lives. Perhaps if I could it would make the walk easier. But I can never see it. I look but I give up and head down to begin the walk. It is a bit of a ritual, now I think about it. And as I walk that god-forsaken line I am saying to myself "Bay Road, Bay Road, this is Bay Road". I imagine the pines on one side although you can't even smell them and I imagine the black rocks of the beach on the other although you can't hear the sea. All the while there is nothing to look at but grey road and grey commercial premises. Wholesalers, plumbers' merchants, that kind of thing. Oh and the noodle bar. On Bay Road it feels very strange to be so close to beauty and not be able to see it.

Things weren't going great between Aiko and I. We both knew it. We had many things in common but sometimes what separated us made walking to her place seem like the loneliest thing in the world. Sometimes I would imagine getting to her door in such a solitary state of mind that it would hardly be worth knocking. I actually did that quite recently. I got all the way there, right to the door, right to the yellow doorbell only to come all the way back without seeing her. I knew Aiko was expecting me so when I got home I phoned her to explain. "OK. I understand." she said. It's supposed to be great when lovers understand but she understood almost too well - there was a gap that always threatened to open up. Sometimes it was as wide and as long as Bay Road. Her clear-eyed understanding made it worse, not better. Even so, something drew me to her and her to me. Sometimes it's like that between people.

This was my first attempt to reach Aiko after my aborted effort a few days before. Bay Road seemed less forgiving than ever. Dusk was coming and the bits of neon were fizzing and flickering in half-life. It's the kind of thing that makes a great scene in a movie or a photograph but being there is never really that nice. Feeling desolate is not the same as looking at an image of something desolate. And I was never very good at imagining I was in a movie or a photo. I know some people can do that and they can turn the depressing or lonely moments of their lives into something tolerable or pleasurable even. But I can't. At least I never think I can.

After twenty minutes or so I was half way there, opposite the Noodle Bar. That's when I glanced over the road and saw the dead bird. There is no good reason to ever

stop while walking that strip but the bird fixed me to the spot. I turned to face it with my toes at the edge of the kerb looking across at the black shape against the grey. The neon in the window behind threw a pool of ill-green light around the crow. What happens to dead birds? Does someone pick them up? The garbage men? The storekeepers? Are there special bird disposal people? Do you bury dead birds or just throw them out with the trash? Its black shape was formless and asymmetrical. No grace or dignity. It had none of the elegance of flight. It had none of the lively beauty that draws artists to paint them with just one or two quick strokes in the blackest ink. I have never seen a dead bird in a painting. Maybe the odd still life, but that doesn't count. It wasn't pity I felt, not for the bird or for me, or for Aiko and I. Perhaps it was because I felt that of all the places to end up dying Bay Road seemed the worst. Especially with the pines and the black rocks so nearby. It was cruel fortune to die on Bay Road. I walked onwards.

“You made it this time!” Aiko mocked, although I knew she was pleased to see me. Relieved might be a better word for it. It was clear that it had shaken her a little that last time I had come and gone without seeing her. I was relieved too. I leaned to kiss her on the cheek but she was already turning to head back into the main room. My lips brushed her for the briefest instant and her hand automatically came out to touch my side as she moved away.

Aiko was a photographer. Well, she didn't earn a living at it but she wanted to. She worked in a restaurant for money and they let her display her photos. She's got quite an eye for things although I don't quite understand what she sees in her subjects. Rain on windows, shadows on walls, wasteland at the edge of the city. She has even photographed Bay Road a few times. “It's beautiful, isn't it?” she once said, handing me three or four shots. It confused me. “The photos or Bay Road?”

“Both”

“No. I like your pictures. I don't like Bay Road.” In truth I couldn't really like the pictures much, knowing the road so well.

“It's an amazing road. Like being in a film”

“You should try walking it without a camera” I said. Immediately I felt the gap, right there. Perhaps what separated us had something to do with images, with what they were for us.

We ate rice with seaweed and drank miso soup. I told her about the dead crow in the road that was occupying my mind. I told her what I was thinking about how birds die, how artists paint them and how surely I felt that dead birds affect everyone. Aiko's eyes were wide as she listened but I could tell in her mind's eye she was seeing me and the crow on Bay Road as a photo. I could have gone on trying to describe it but I knew the more I spoke the more she would mentally convert it for herself into something else. She couldn't help it. Just as I couldn't help seeing the crow in my own confused way. I know we are supposed to celebrate how differently each of us in the world sees things, but sometimes it just hurts that we don't see things the same way. Feeling vulnerable all of a sudden I cut my description short. It snapped Aiko out of her imagination in a way that made me feel a little cruel. I took the bowls to the kitchen.

"I've finished with your camera" she declared and reached over for it on the shelf behind her. The strap was wrapped around the black case. I took it from her.

"Thanks."

Aiko had all the camera gear in the world it seemed to me, but she really got a kick out of my pocket Olympus. It's an old thing, not great quality but she did manage to get some nice shots with it, I'll admit that.

"I've put a film in it but you can shoot it." She said. I stared at the camera. Aiko never wasted film like that. She was giving it back to me as a gesture of withdrawal. Obviously she had been planning to use the camera again, probably the next day, but now she was giving it back.

I felt it was time for me to go. I got to my feet thinking of the walk home. Before I said goodbye I went to Aiko's bedroom. From her window I could see my block quite clearly across the bay, the white of it visible against the rain clouds. I could even make out which was my apartment. I had the camera in my hand and thought about taking a picture. Could I see the world like Aiko? Did I want to? I didn't know then and I don't know now.

"Take my umbrella." Aiko was handing me another black thing with a strap.

"I'll be OK. I'll be home before it rains." I knew I wouldn't be, but I wanted to reject her offer. That kind of stubborn pride was something we shared. The two of us both shuffled down the hallway. At the door Aiko kissed me on the cheek and as we pulled apart I saw she had closed her eyes. For all the stiffness and coldness of the evening I saw something kind and honest in her face. It was a glimpse of the love that comes when we

drop our guard. Suddenly I felt the deep affection we both knew was there between us but I was already leaving. "Bye, Aiko", I said without looking back.

"Bye".

Was there a crack in her voice or had I misheard? I turned around. The door was closed. I glanced at the yellow bell and half thought of ringing it. Was she sad on the other side? Or just tidying up after us? I looked at the looming clouds and felt the first drop of rain on my cheek. It was Bay Road for me.

I walked briskly, hands in pockets, elbows in, offering as little of myself to the world as possible. I concentrated on my steps so as not to think of the time spent with Aiko. Up ahead the road was lit with the neon of the noodle bar. The crow hadn't been moved. I felt the urge to cross over and take a look at it. The concrete road was slick with rain and the green light glistened all around. I crouched down in front of the bird. It was an umbrella. A broken umbrella. Black nylon, metal struts and a plastic handle. Raindrops gathered on its folds. PIT PITTER PHTT PIT. No forlorn plumage. No limp neck. An umbrella. How had I seen a crow? Why didn't I see an umbrella? Its banality mocked me a little, just like Aiko had. I stared hoping to see it for the crow it once was. I even went back across the road. Now it looked more like an umbrella than ever. How? How was this? How was I going to tell Aiko? How was I going to tell her that my story, which may have hastened the end of us, was all wrong, that it was a figment of my imagination? How should I tell her that my mind was as prone to transform things on Bay Road as hers? I pulled the camera out of my pocket. I took a picture, the black shape small in the frame. Then I crossed back and knelt down once more, my knees planted on the concrete to steady my wet shivers. I shot four, maybe five frames hoping just one might look like a crow. Even if we never spoke again, I could send her the pictures. I got ready to continue on my way home. "What are you photographing?" A voice came through the rain from down the road. It was Aiko, maybe twenty yards away. I got to my feet and watched her come towards me. "What are you photographing?" It was exactly the same tone of voice, as if she thought I hadn't heard the first time.

"The crow" I said. "It wasn't a crow. It was an umbrella." Aiko looked down and seemed plain irritated. I felt a bit pathetic. I looked down, still only half believing it wasn't a bird. Aiko bent into my field of view and picked it up. She shook it firmly, and handed it to me. "It's bent a little but it will keep you dry." Her cold pragmatism smothered any emotion.

“Thanks, but I’m wet already” I said. Immediately I wanted to retract my words. What was I going to do? Throw it back on the ground and insist it was a crow? After a pause I took the umbrella and opened it up. She was right: it was broken but it did the job. I let the camera hang from the strap on my wrist and put my other hand back in my pocket. “Why are you here, Aiko?” She shrugged and looked down again for a long while. Her hands looked white and cold. “I don’t know. I wish I hadn’t come. I wish it really had been a crow.” Rain fell more heavily now and we stood there for a moment, each under our own little shelter. “Well, bye then” she declared. I knew she had come all this way with mixed emotions and now she didn’t know what to do. The situation was awkward but it was a kind of comfort to me. At least she was here. At least Aiko came, for whatever reason, even if now she was going. She held back her umbrella a little, leaned under mine and kissed me. Her cold lips bumped my damp cheek. Then she turned and headed back. I watched the green light fade from her cream, knee-length raincoat. Then I turned the other way, toward Asahi Cliff.

When I got home I switched on the light in the main room and put on some Chopin. From my window I looked to the far hillside. It was 1 a.m. now, and the view was dark. My eyes wandered around the general area that I knew contained Aiko. And then a single light came on. It radiated warm and calm. Yes, surely that was her arriving back. Aiko always walked a little slower than I. “So that’s where she lives” I thought. Only now when it was probably over between us could I finally see her home from my home. There, at the other end of Bay Road that looks so beautiful from up here. The glow was bright as a lighthouse. I couldn’t make out the surrounding buildings. I wondered if tomorrow I would remember Aiko’s exact location. I brushed water droplets off the camera case and took out the Olympus. Holding it against the glass of the window I looked through the viewfinder. I framed it to get Aiko right in the middle. Just as my finger pressed down the button the glow in the distance vanished. As if the camera was a light switch.

David Company