

Nailing Down Time in Space

Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. That's where the most important things come from, where you yourself came from, and where you will go. ¹



The dark interiors of the house in Gokayama; the man in front of the kettle, the smoke and sooty rafters. We climb up ladders, floor by floor in the house built of wood and rope. They used to breed silk worms here, weave threads. Far into the Modern Era, life went on as in the Middle Ages. The attic of the house which carries the shape of two praying hands is full of rusty tools (here one can look out over the snow-capped mountains).



For me, reading is a tentative act. An exploration that allows our astonishment for the unexpected connections to seep forth. Reading and writing as a slow continuous movement, an analogy for the transformation process we find ourselves in. Translation, escape, displacement. How does time connect to space and what seeps through these structures?



The first room on my trip: a hotel room on the sixteenth floor in a medium-sized Japanese city (in Hokkaido, the northern island). Like an eye or camera, it looks out over the city network, reflecting itself in skyscrapers and construction sites. I can think in this room, with its space and transparency.

Other rooms: during a trip to Italy you photograph the newspaper on the bar in front of us. The picture of the baby in the suitcase fascinates you: it lies curled up as though in a second womb, as the author of the article points out. A second birth could have been offered that child, if his mother had succeeded in getting him passed airport security.



Security. Atomic energy as strength, power, control. This is how it was presented in Japan after World War II, and is still presented by those who have something to gain from the industry. The country's first encounter with atomic energy: the bombing of Hiroshima on the morning of August 6, 1945.

I look at the clock that stopped at 8:15. The clothes worn by the schoolchildren, the water bottles, bags, glasses, locks of hair. Carefully lined up in display cases, the objects speak for themselves, taking the role of history's witnesses. The intense light of the atomic explosion created photographic imprints of people and objects on buildings and facades. It double-exposed X-ray film in the hospital cupboards.



In 1974 you move from north to south to continue your medical studies. From a dorm room in Umeå to a one-room flat without a bathroom in Gothenburg. You move in with him, and persuade the university to let you start your fifth semester here. Despite the lack of space, they let you enrol, and your parents lend you a suitcase. There is only one existing photograph from this temporary residency, and it shows you lost in thought.

Georges Perec was obsessed with remembering, even the most insignificant things. To preserve, collect, keep, to nail down time in space, in written form. In 1974, he recorded every meal he ate, a list that later became poetry. This obsession with remembering could have had to do with the fact that, as a child, he was forced to forget: his parents who died in the war, his name, his nationality, his language. The Polish-sounding *Peretz* was changed to the French-sounding *Perec*. Who do we become in the absence of ourselves?

In *W, or the Memory of Childhood* he writes, “I do not know whether I have anything to say, I know that I am saying nothing; I do not know if what I might have to say is unsaid because it is unsayable (the unsayable is not buried inside writing, it is what prompted it in the first place); I know that what I say is blank, is neutral, is a sign, once and for all, of a once-and-for-all annihilation.”²



Radioactivity spreads through space, through time. It seeps in and has come to stay, despite the devastation in the wake of the bombs, the resistance movements and the high risk of earthquakes. Five years after Fukushima, two hundred kilometres from the place where the reactors suffered a meltdown, we are still wondering: What is in the water we drink, or in the beautiful snow that for once is falling over the capital?

The English expression, “to fall in love”, has no equivalent in Swedish. “Att falla för någon” is not good enough. But I’m falling for you. Every day I fall a little. To fall in love with someone is to fall in love with the city where it all takes place, I think to myself. Regarding Tokyo, you have written that the city reminds us of the rational constituting merely one system among others:

"The streets of this city have no names. There is of course a written address, but it has only a postal value, it refers to a plan (by districts and by blocks, in no way geometric), knowledge of which is accessible to the postman, not to the visitor: the largest city in the world is practically unclassified, the spaces which compose it in detail are unnamed."³



I read: "The inside of a nuclear power plant is divided into two sections: the non-contaminated area (Area A), regarded as a radiation-free zone, and the contamination control area which is a highly irradiated zone. This area is further divided into two sections: Area B (the secondary control area) which has a low level of contamination, and the Area C (the primary control area). In order to enter Area C, workers pass through an air-locked double steel door. The corridor before this door is called Matsuno Roka (Pine Corridor) by the workers. This name comes from the traditional Kabuki story *Chushingura* and indicates that once you enter this corridor, you are in an area of great danger."⁴



The impressions from my journey are blending with the words and images of others: fragments of a film from 1983; a travelogue describing moments of anticipation, snatches of sleep, the sense of a state of emergency. The insignificant and banal as the only thing that still matters.



1974

The oil crisis of the previous year leads to the rationing of goods. In Japan there is talk of toilet paper becoming scarce, and people start hoarding the product, but it turns out to be just a rumour.

Arms race. India conducts its first successful nuclear bomb test and becomes the world's sixth nuclear power. At Japanese nuclear power plants the working conditions deteriorate, and subcontracted workers, at times referred to as "nuclear power plant gypsies"ⁱ, receive higher doses of radiation than company employees.

The anime series "Space Battleship Yamato" is aired on television for the first time. This marks the beginning of an era where cartoons are not only used to shape the public opinion, but also as a tool for resistance.

Harry Martinson is awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. Regarding his poem Aniara, Martinsson writes: "Aniara can be described as a fantasy product written by time itself. It is therefore in some sense an anonymous creation. It deals with our common concern for the future of the world, our sorrow and disappointment, but also with our attempts to create respites and, with the help of our imagination, delay or postpone inevitable courses of events."⁶



¹ Rebecca Solnit, *Gå vilse: En fälthandbok*, trans. Sofia Lindelöf (Göteborg: Bokförlaget Daidalos, 2012), 10. Original work, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, published 2005.

² Georges Perec, *W eller minnet av barndomen*, trans. Sture Pyk (Stockholm: Modernista, 2014), 57. Original work, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, published 1975.

³ Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 33. Original work, *L'Empire des Signes*, published 1970.

⁴ Yuki Tanaka, "Nuclear Power Plant Gypsies in High-Tech Society", in Joe Moore (ed.), *The Other Japan: Conflict, Compromise, and Resistance Since 1945*, (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 259–261.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Harry Martinson, *Aniara*, (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 1992 [1956]), 5.