

The Japanese Voyage  
by Apoorba Misra '22

There are few things that don't make me anxious. Unfortunately, travelling is not one of them. Not because I constantly check and recheck my passport in the back pocket of my black bag pack that also contains two sets of clean clothes in case my suitcase is lost and not even because I constantly check and recheck the time my flight will land and the minutes it will take to run from one terminal to the next, accounting for the slow procession of long security check lines. Travelling gives me anxiety because the person that boards the plane may not be the person that gets off at the destination.

I lived in Japan during the most formative years of my life; the dreaded high school years. Today I land at the exact same airport in the exact same terminal, only this time my dad isn't there to hold my hand and take care of where to go from the airport even though the kanji that now I can tell reads "Yamanote line" was then just as foreign to him as it was to me. He just has that air of confidence, that assured me there's nothing to worry about. Today I land with only my orange-pink suitcase — which I chose for the sole purpose that it would stand out in that harrowing conveyer belt that brings along the dread of a luggage lost before the luggage itself — and my black bag pack. A camera hanging from my shoulder and my passport and phone clutched tight in my hand. I didn't really think I had it in me to make this trip but I knew I had to do it in this glorious winter of 2018 or it will never happen. So two months before this trip, I bought my ticket and submitted paperwork for the visa in the same day. And though I have made this trip many times in the past three years, today is different. Today I return to my second home after being away from it for more than a year.

So I took the Yamanote line after the Nishi kyōuji shinkansen, proud that my memory had served me well and my feet took me to the right direction before my mind could even decipher the kanji. Sitting in my train seat I looked at my fellow passengers. Some dozing off in the middle of the afternoon, some reading manga, girls putting on makeup with rouge and lipsticks strategically lying in their laps, high school students with their stiff black collars with one hand holding the phone and the other holding the train strap. I did miss this urban scenic Japanese way of non rush hour traveling. Almost like I know exactly where these people are coming from and where they will go. When I was a resident here, my friends and I used to have this game of guessing which passenger is going where and come up with absurd fictions, like the woman fixing her hair before applying lipstick, all the while changing her comfortable sandals to heels is definitely going from work to a hot date. These memories replayed in my head and I smiled to myself trying to come up with stories about these strangers but without the constant giggling of Estella or the nervous shushing from Dolma who was always nervous that people will judge, it just wasn't the same.

I got off the train in Ikebukuro at the East exit. This was my favorite exit. Traveling and commuting is so ingrained in Japanese culture that it is quite common to have a favorite station. However, Ikebukuro east exit had a special place in my heart since Spring break of 2018, only a few months before graduation. When Lita and I exited Ikebukuro East Shinjen exit instead of the East exit, we embarked on a journey that we didn't plan for. The Airbnb owner had sent a map from the East exit to the address of our new home of three days but after two hours of failed attempt to locate the correct exit, we made the mistake of settling for the East Shinjen exit. After walking in Ikebukuro for five hour, which I now know was in circles, we reached the correct address and spent day one of our trip sleeping.

Lita and I haven't talked in a while so this exit is more bittersweet than I would have imagined. Needless to say, this time I know the entirety of Ikebukuro like the back of my hand. I make my way to the bus station. Sitting at the bus stop, I can see the sunset. The mesmerizing yellow and orange bleeding into each other, I can tell it is the onset of Japanese winter. People around me look huddled up in big jackets. Scarves around necks, hands stuffed in pockets. The road side ramen stores are illuminating brighter by the second. Only in Japan can nightfall bring in more brightness than the day. Stores all around me have started emanating neon lights, coloring the roads with vibrant colors like I am seeing Tokyo through a filter.

The bus arrives right on time. One thing you can bet your life on in Japan, if it says 7:18, it will be there at 7:18. I get on the bus with a smile and a bow to the driver which he reciprocates. The mutual respect giving a sense of connectedness. In almost exactly three hours, I reach Karuizawa. The chillness in the wind and the darkness of the empty summer houses. I definitely left Tokyo. I still remember the number of the taxi service but before I dial the number, I see a face that made the trip worth it. It's my high school chemistry teacher waiting in the car in front of the station.

"I knew you'd be here by midnight so I thought a little present is due," he said with the smile that made me realize this is it. I get in the car and we start driving on the familiar roads of Karuizawa climbing up on the hilly Mishinara road. As soon as the darkness from the tall trees near the Asama volcano subsides, I see a dazzle of bright yellow lights standing out among the trees like fireflies in a meadow. I can hear the laughter and the loudness of students playing music in the cafeteria; I can feel the warmth from the residences and the rush of running to the Kamiyama Academic Center to snatch the evening snacks before the entire campus raids it. There are few things that don't make me anxious and though travelling is not one of them, I know in this moment this trip was worth it all. Because I know, I just got home.