

# Tokyo Panic Stories



Tokyo street life in pictures, poems, and prose.



by Dan Ryan





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## Introduction

Basically, and without me really realizing it, I started this book when I was 24. As I write this I'm 56 and I'll be 57 in about a month.

When I was 24 in the spring of 1988, I was living in Tokyo and working for an American technology services company in Shibuya. On weekends I'd wander around the city taking photographs of sights and people that thrilled and overwhelmed me. And during those sojourns I discovered Tokyo's destitute and homeless underclass. The photos on the opposite page are from that time.

The poverty and unrepentant boozing I encountered back then surprised me. These things shattered the image of an orderly and conformist Japan I had developed while living and working in Tokyo during the previous 14 months. I'd led a sheltered life up until that point, and like any young man who finds something new to him I thought I was the first person to discover this underside of Tokyo.

So for the rest of the spring and summer of 1988 I photographed Tokyo's homeless and poor. It was a challenge. I was attacked in Sanya, Tokyo's skid row, for shooting the photo on the bottom left of the opposite page. The men in the picture were passed out but had friends nearby who didn't like me doing what I was doing. They tried to grab and destroy my camera.

I'd found Sanya though a coworker at my job. The coworker was a Japan-based American, an ex-CIA agent from Boston, and though he didn't like me much he thought it was cute I was trying to explore Tokyo's economic underbelly. Back in the late '80s foreigners just didn't go to Sanya, an area full of cheap flop house hotels populated by day laborers and impoverished alcoholics. But I did, a few times, and photographed what I could during the summer of 1988.

But by Halloween, 1988 I had quit my job and moved back to the U.S. I wouldn't shoot another photo in Japan until I returned to Tokyo with my wife in 2008 for a 10-day vacation. In the passing 20 years I had lost or thrown away almost all of my Tokyo photographs. Doing so was an unfortunate byproduct of my own former alcohol abuses and my ongoing battles with chronic depression.

However, in the fall of 2011 I published my 20 remaining '80s Tokyo photos online and they caught the eye of a philanthropist who funded a month-long trip for me back to Tokyo in April, 2012 to continue my long-abandoned project. I went to Tokyo again for another month in September, 2013 to shoot more photos because I wasn't sure the 2012 images were good enough.

I'm still not sure, about any of it. But the result is the photo-and-poetry book you're about to read. It's the completion of a piece of passion I started in my 20s, continued in my late 40s, and am finally publishing in my mid-50s. It's an admittedly dark book. But it is also bursting with life and indomitable human spirit. And I've been living with the images and words in this book for so long that at this point whether this succeeds or is decried almost doesn't matter.

What matters most to me is at least I tried. And I hope you enjoy it.

—Dan Ryan, Brisbane, California, December, 2020



Ueno Station, May 1988



Ueno Station, May 1988

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Sanya, in Nihonzutsumi, July 1988



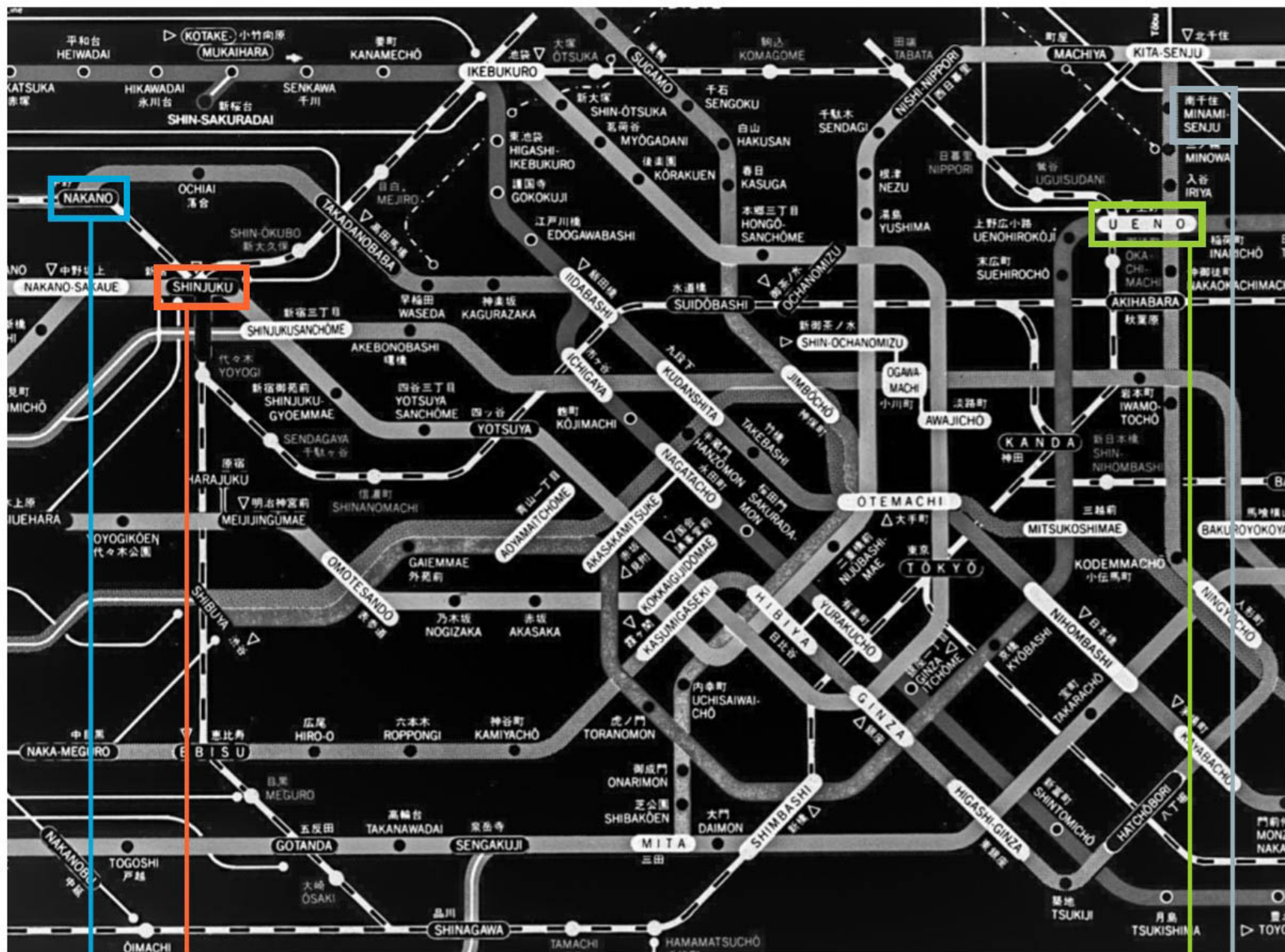
Tokyo Station, October 1988

For Michele,  
whose undying love and infinite patience have gotten me further than I'd have gotten on my own.

Note:

The text for many photographs in this book are prose-poems written to offer an impression or fictional story about the photo it accompanies. I hope you enjoy these poems, but they are not meant to be factual or literal. Other photographs are accompanied by more-or-less factual narratives

The narratives are indented, the poetry is not.



● Golden Gai, Kabukichō

● Freedom, Ajisai Park, Nakano 5-chome,

Ameyayokochō, Keisei Ueno Station, Ueno Park, Shinobazu Pond ●

Kiyokawa, Nihonzutsumi, Sanyūkai NPO, Seoul Izakaya ●





South end of Shinobazu Pond

The men I saw for you (around Ueno Park 2012)

I was 48 years old when I shot these photographs in 2012, and a lot was going through my mind. I'm nearly 57 now.

Primarily, I thought I was nuts for being out on the streets of Tokyo trying to rekindle something artistically that I'd lost touch with shortly after I moved away from the city in October, 1988 when I was 24. I was thinking about whether I could make this project work, and how much, if at all, I'd care if I couldn't.

And I was thinking, at 48, of a white American showgirl from Las Vegas who was dancing in some topflight Shinjuku topless joint in July, 1987, and how much I had wanted her to love me. But it never got beyond dinner and some handholding. If you knew the girl I ended up marrying you'd be so very glad for me the Tokyo showgirl thing didn't work out.

I also thought about the failed careers and shitty jobs I'd tried in the 24 years since I left Tokyo. I'd been a technology market research journalist, a private investigator, a public high school teacher, an office temp, and a few other things. Then there was the heart attack when I was 39, and the chronic depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and alcohol abuse that resulted from it. It has been a varied and often painful life, and I have many regrets.

But through it all I have been a photographer, it's just that now I'm trying to go pro and pay my respects to an aspect of Tokyo I've kept in my heart and my belly for over 30 years. So I begin this book with photographs of ordinary men, snoozers and daytime boozers and the kind of unnoticeable men who are always all around us and yet we never see.

I want you to see these men. Because they remind me of me, in that when they look in a mirror I'm not sure they even see themselves.



Outside Keisei Ueno Station



Next to Keisei Ueno Station

Shinobazu Pond. I thought he was going to yell at me...



Feeding birds, Shinobazu Pond



Tokyo down  
(Ajisai Park, Nakano 2012)

Even if you can't see the men...





...you can still see the mess they made.



He was just...there  
(Nakano 5-chome 2012)

I don't know what the man was doing. He was just there on a small back street doing...something that looked important. But what impressed me were his calm and obvious self-directedness. His office was the backpack tucked up against the electric streetlight pole, his desk was the paperwork in his hands.

And there was no boss around that I could see telling this fellow what to do. He seemed serene, and he radiated purpose.

But what really struck me was just him being there in the street doing his mysteries, this man and the immediate area around him seemed to me like...a portable and self-created work of art. I don't know if that makes any sense, but there it is.



A woman of Sanya  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

In Sanya, I love you. I want you near to me, so you can smell the whiskey on my breath. I wasn't born here, but will probably die here. That's okay. This piece of concrete earth and my warm cardboard are all I need. They are always here for me. You are just passing through.

Now please go away. I can't present the noh mask of my face to you anymore. I love seeing you, but I have a growing urge to kill your heart.







He scared me  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

He was calm at first, but then shot me a look that put me on edge. There were empty Ozeki One Cup jars near him. I'm pretty sure he was drunk as a bastard.

This is blurry because my hands shook as this guy suddenly got angry. It scared the shit out of me when he put up his fists. Nothing came of it. He stayed sitting on the pavement, and I walked away quickly to go bother someone else. I was glad I didn't see him again the rest of the day.



Passing in Sanya's streets  
(Kiyokawa 2012)

Please, take my picture. I hardly ever use it these days, you see. And, quite honestly, when I look at it I no longer recognize the man I see.

So, take my picture. Maybe you can do something good with it.





It seemed like a fair trade, until...  
(Minami-senju Station 2012)

At Minami-senju Station in Tokyo, this guy was drunk beyond belief and reeked of booze. But he let me take his picture. So, when he offered to take my picture, I figured it was only fair. I was worried he would drop my camera, or run off with it. But to my relief, neither thing happened.



But then there was this guy, the first man's partner, who was even more drunk. What he did, this fucking guy, was form a penis with his right thumb, then he tried to grab my crotch. Well, when that happened I grabbed my camera from the first guy and beat a hasty retreat to the trains.







The Sanya variations  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

It was raining this day in Tokyo, but I went down to Sanya anyway. “Down to Sanya.” Not an entirely accurate way to put that, because the place is northeast of where I’m staying in Nakano-ku. But going down to Sanya fits. It sounds right because it is right. Sanya is a rough place.

For example, I saw this man passed out in the gutter along the shōtengai. He reeked of cheap sake, and I could see huge flakes of dandruff in his hair. And I thought he looked a bit like William Holden, if you know who that was.

But after I took his picture I left him be to go see other things. When I'm in Sanya I walk up and down the shōtengai at least once looking for interesting, heartbreaking, or hopeful things I didn't see on previous visits.

And when I returned the passed out man was awake. He had walked down to the nearest corner, found a storm drain, and decided to add to the rain.

That's how it rolls down in Sanya: from the skies and the bladders right into the gutter.



Young ladies of a Saturday  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

It isn't all booze and gloom down in Sanya. At a street market one Saturday on the shōtengai, these young fashion goddesses were prancing and parading around like the grandest ladies of the high street.

And, you know, I'm not sure that's very far from wrong.







Just a boy in Sanya  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

He ran out of a housewares store on the shōtengai in Sanya, Tokyo. I guess his mother was in the store shopping. He was carrying on and yelling, just like a boy would be anywhere. When he stopped, turned, and saw me there in the street with him, he froze.

I think I scared him, but he stayed still long enough for me to take his picture a few times. In the neighborhood he's living in, I wonder what his little boy's brain makes of the sights, the sounds, the smells of the low, desperate men scattered about the shōtengai where, on any given day, he is just a boy.

Hell, I don't know. Maybe he doesn't think about it, can't process it.





Sister Rita of Sanya  
(Sanyukai NPO, Kiyokawa 2012)

Sister Rita Burdzy is an American of the Maryknoll Sisters, and she used to be a registered nurse at the Sanyūkai NPO free clinic down in Sanya. She was been in Sanya for a long time, taking care mostly of men who were in some way downtrodden and poverty-stricken.





And this is pretty much how these men down in Sanya felt about her, though they did seem to keep their distance a little. This didn't come across as a lack of affection, but more as a sign of deep respect.

Old samurai  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

He had cuts in his shirt. But he had a look of peace, like he'd just won a battle. And I thought "I am really lucky." Because whatever this man is now, in this life or the past three or four, I knew I was looking at the real deal.

Down in Sanya, an old samurai.



Ghost to you  
(near Keisei Ueno Station 2012)

The changes in Tokyo, have vexed me for decades. I can't see a person because people are in the way. This son of a bitch between us he's keeping me from knowing you, and you from knowing me.

So I sit, he passes, you leave. And in your memory I will be but a ghost to you.



站名	乗車	乗降	下車
1	18 28 43 58	0 23 37 51	0 23 48
2	11 23 34 44 54	0 18 31 43 54	4 23 41 53
3	4 14 24 34 44	0 18 27 38 49	18 28 39 47 59
4	2 18 28 38 48	0 21 32 43 54	18 28 39 47 59
5	14 28 43 58	0 30 41 52	1 30 48 59
6	13 28 39 48	7 19 31 42	7 19 38 49
7	0 8 25 35 45	2 14 28 38	4 33 43 53
8	10 23 34 44	4 18 27 38	4 33 43 53
9	0 8 18 28 38	2 18 31 42	1 18 27 38 49
10	0 10 21 31 41	0 8 17 27 38	0 8 21 31 41
11	0 22 32 42	0 14 25 35 45	0 17 27 37 47
12	0 22 32 42	12 31 42 53	4 18 28 38 49
13	13 23 43	0 17 28 38	0 17 28 38
14	2 29 47	4 31 49	4 31 49
15	12 31 51	8 33 51	8 33 51
16	15	16	16

所有權  
請買  
自由  
住宅情報







The duchess of Ueno Park  
(Shinobazu Pond 2012)

It was as if she was holding court, although it couldn't possibly have been that way. The man with the bow and saw had taken his place at least ten minutes before The Duchess sat down.

On a lazy Monday it was easy to think that The Duchess had taken time off from ruling her regular domain to come down to Ueno Park during Golden Week to survey how the citizens of her colonial holdings were carrying on. She even had a man in attendance. He was dressed in black, as should be all men who protect the lives and welfare of royalty.



But on this day, there were no threats towards The Duchess.



All her man appeared to be responsible for was handing his mistress a few coins to reward the bow and saw man when he was done playing his tune.



The black widow of Nakacho  
(Nakacho, Ueno 2012)

Nakacho is kind of a notorious red-light district in Ueno, Tokyo. I tend to think of it as the Kabukicho of eastern Tokyo, but that's debatable. It is just south of Shinobazu Dori, to which it runs parallel at the southern end of Shinobazu Pond in Ueno Park. I used to walk through Nakacho quite a bit when I was living near to it in the late '80s. It was like some kind of Wild West back then.

One day in April, 2012 a friend and I were walking through Nakacho at about 2:45 on a Monday afternoon. The day was bright and sunny, and Nakacho was open for business. A man in his twenties approached us and asked us if we wanted "fuck girls", which we took to mean prostitutes. Being faithful married men, we both declined the offer.

The man left us, then my friend and I chuckled as we turned around and saw an actual woman.

She was standing in front of a beer vending machine drinking a huge can of Asahi Super Dry. The sounds of a steel drum band from the amphitheater in nearby Ueno Park echoed and floated above where we stood in the street. The woman was bopping and swaying a bit to that music. The booze likely helped facilitate the swaying.

I thought this was an odd look for a woman. But what the hell, she was enjoying herself, and you can be anything you want to be in Tokyo. And for all I know, this tough-looking lady was the wealthy owner of the club for which the young man in the street was offering fuck girls.







The street eaters  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

Come, join us for a bite.



The rice tastes of asphalt, the ramen tastes of beer.



But we are the kings of rainwater tea, and we are always here.

Mr. 21st-Century Fabulous  
(near Keisei Ueno Station 2012)

Most men are born flesh, and slowly turn to metal. I  
became robotic late in life, here in the streets of Tokyo.

It seemed like an easier existence, easier than seeking  
the perfect cherry blossom, and the metal in my head  
gets me free satellite TV.

My eyeglasses are my screens. They let me see all the  
broadcasts of the world. And the broadcasts often  
prove to me that I never want to leave Japan.







The former King of Japan  
(near Keisei Ueno Station 2012)

There is gold in my fist, left over from when I was The King of Japan and rich beyond your mortal imagining. Jesus couldn't bark the orders of all his father's wrath at me. The emperor of Japan was my public face and functionary.



Where did those days go? What I did was disguise myself in desperation and dirt, and I went among my people like Henry V. The problem is, I never came back to victory. I stayed on the streets of Tokyo, hoarding anger and drinking gold from metal cans.

Metal cans are now my treasure and my legacy. Would you like to stop awhile and have a drink with a king?





Tokyo street sleeper  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

In Tokyo, seeing drunk men sleeping out in the open on cardboard or tatami mats is not a unusual. But what struck me about this man snoozing in the open air on the Sanya shōtengai were his hands in his pockets. This seemed odd and wonderful to me, as if even in his intoxicated slumber he gave a shit about looking like a regular guy.



*(I am snoozing now, so please go away. I need only cardboard, tatami, and whiskey to get me through the day. And when I wake up hung-over I'll be back to my normal play. I wonder if there are horses or boats racing today.)*



Poetic driver's license  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

You see all the cars on the road in Japan today.  
Probably in America, too. You're from America, right?  
Cars always have headlights on, even in daytime. It's  
for visibility, they say.



It's for safety, they say.

But what it looks like to me, I'll tell you what it looks like to me. I'm smiling because these days it's obvious: Everyone on the road is in a motorcade for a funeral. Their own.

And as the saying goes, they don't even know it.





The lost lunch  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

It was early on a Saturday afternoon. I don't know who ate, drank and smoked here. I don't know who left these things here. But these items were there in the gutter, by a storm drain. And if you want to know the truth, these are three of the four food groups in Sanya. I'm not certain, but if I had to guess I'd say the fourth food group is pain.





The morning of coagulated blood  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

I don't two-step for Buddha or his husband Jesus anymore, not like I ever did that much or was good at it. I eat my fingers to the bone, and sometimes ask for seconds even as parts of my skeleton digits get bleached white in the Tokyo sun. I am the greatest hero which you have never heard of, of which you never have heard, that you never heard....oh fuck it.

Grammar and semantics and semicolons, these are the reasons I find it easier to talk to cans of booze instead than humans these days. I come across as desperate and bewildered to you, don't I?

You idiot, you are spelunking these streets like you're the first one to find the dregs of humanity. The novelty of it astounds you.

We are, in fact, unionized and we have chapters in every major city on Earth. I am the crazy fruit of the tree on which those American hillbillies grow their liquor corn and under which they date high school girls from Okinawa.

And that works for me; it has for several years. So either take a drink with me or fuck off.





Tokyo face time  
(Otakibashi-dori, Shinjuku 2012)

One...

Mulling over the choices I've made in life, what it basically comes down to is: I just happened to look into your camera while you thought you secretly took a picture of me. Then we pass each other on this street in Shinjuku right after the death of all cherry blossoms and we don't speak and we don't ever see each other again...







*Two...*

I walk like a champion because this street is mine. This tree I pass every day is planted in earth which was once soaked with the innovative blood of my ancestors who died here keeping the secrets of Velcro from the Shogun's tax collectors. We are an old clan, we never married burakumin like those butchers over in Sanya.

We are a proud clan, and you need to keep out of my way.



A prayer for the Tokyo meat wagon  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

The grin of you is thumb-tacked all over the surface of my black, velvet-lined brain. You warm the death of my hope even as you hope for the warmth of my death. You come at me like a knife-wielding toddler and apologize when the blood trickling from my wounds doesn't offer you the nourishment you need.

That's okay, little street vampire. Your aim is off, your knife is dull. And you have been with me in the gutter too long. I forgive you and I love you...

...and I wish for fuck's sake that you'd pass me another beer.





I sleep the streets  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

I sleep the streets for you, I keep the coldness of your ancient city warm for you. I am the raw unknown flesh that keeps Tokyo's gutters from running red with affluent blood. I am the hope that one day you will wake me up and thank me rather than simply pity me as you pass me by and take nothing from me but my photograph.



Street king  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

I shuffle the streets of the kingdom, but I'm too tired for you right now. My job is lighting demons of mystery, but for now I've forgotten how.

The blood lancets in my cocktails remind me of human vice. The blood in my liquor gives protein, and the used pin blades are colder than ice.

I've come to meet your maker, to see if I can be undone. Or unwoven like a Persian carpet used to wrap a dead body and gun.

We are the science in the Bible. We are the angels down in hell. We are the stories on blank paper that our families never tell.

I shuffle the streets of the kingdom. This is the way it will ever be. And as I cry for you, I weep for me. Then the tears flow to the gutter and out to the sea.

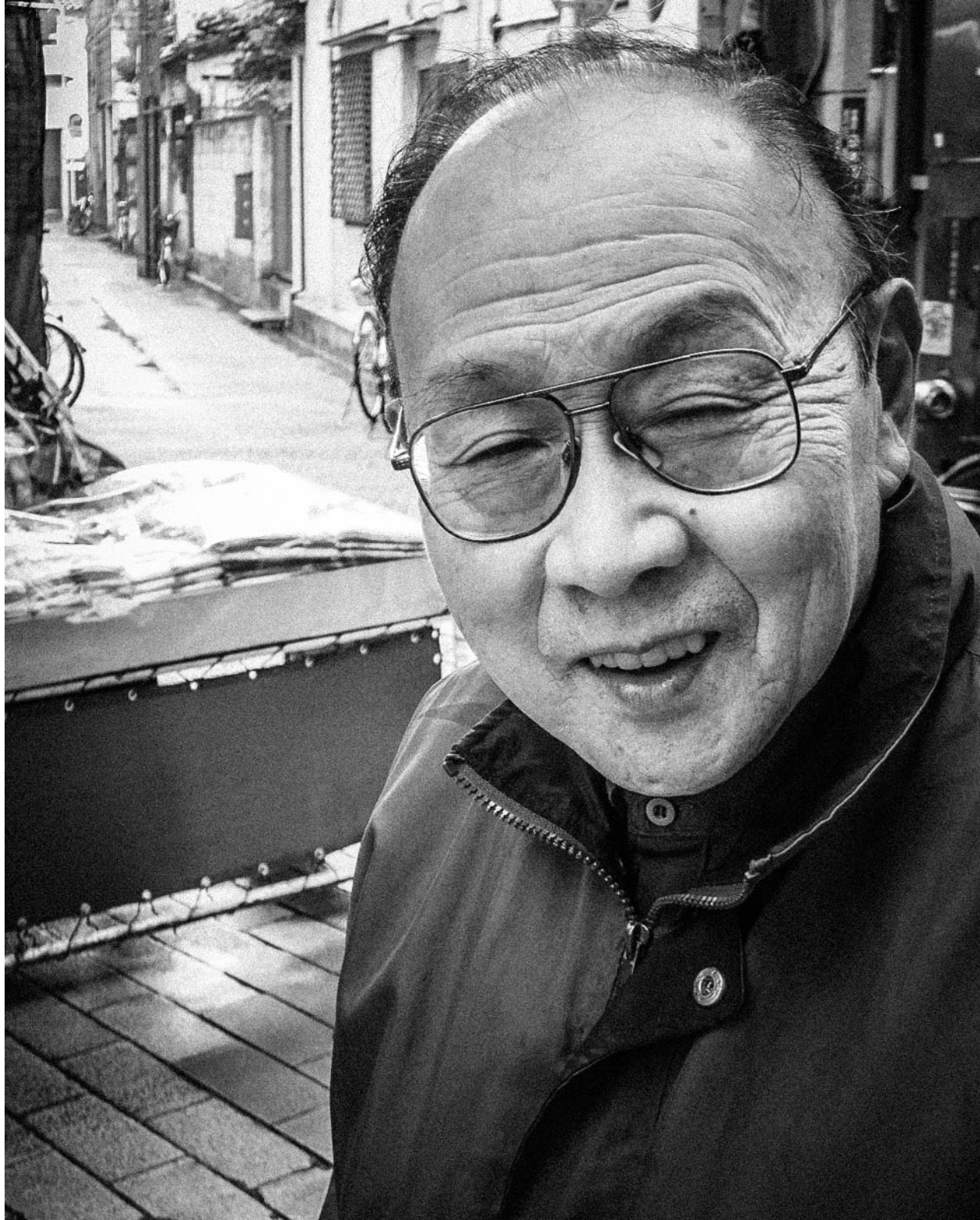




I think I fell in love  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

It was like a coy courtship. In front of his clothing store in Sanya, the old man did a little step-shuffle up to me as I stood in the street. His movements were slightly faster than my camera-filled eye could follow. He was like a mischievous pixie, zig-zagging up to me, looking me over, sizing me up. He spoke to me in Japanese beyond my limited ability. I think he wanted to sell me some clothing. Or he was asking me where I was from.

After a moment or two, I saw the smooth age in his face and watched his mouth open up into a smile. Well it was then, looking through my camera at the old man, that I think I fell in love.



All is well

(Ameyayokocho, Ueno 2012)

All is well. He saw us, but he thinks nothing bad of us. To him, we are bookies and freaks on the streets of Ueno. We are the touts of a thousand noodle-ramen shops, skipping our heels and closing our beer cans for the treasure of dusty, fragrant madrigals.

All is well. We should approach him and reeducate him. But the time would be lost, and our image would be thrashed. And the thump of his magic upon the skull of our power, would eat this planet like the things from which we fled.





Tokyo pep boy  
(Kiyokawa 2012)

Goddamn, I feel good today! Being awake usually does that for me. Don't pass me by just yet. This sentence rhymes with epiphany. There, I'm done being clever for this day.

I have gutters to polish, beer cans to love, children to forget, And an identity to wash away down these warm grey streets of Sanya.





Street boys  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

Just some boys I saw at a street fair in Sanya on the Saturday before Golden Week. They were shooting cork rifles at a table full of prizes. And they were having a hell of a good time.







The bus stop age  
(Minami-senju Station 2012)

Life doesn't thrill me anymore. I don't know if it ever did. I've forgotten more about my life than the time I've spent living it. Yet still I live it. It is better to live it. Everyone always walks by me. They walk, and I never move.



It's easier that way. I get to see what I want, and everyone else ignores me like they should.

There is a natural order to this. I am too old to fight it. You see that girl in the short skirt? I'm trying not to look at her, and I would love to stare a hole through her. I wish she would walk by me. I wish my entire life would walk by me. It would be a good thing to see again. And, like the girl, it would be a good thing to touch.



Tokyo dark side girls  
(near Shinobazu Pond 2012)

It's like the menu for a restaurant of flesh.

Where all your dreams come true, the girls dance  
lovingly on your bleached bones, and the nightmare  
never ends.



Anpanman In Sanya  
(near Minami-senju Station 2012)

Anpanman and a bunny, dangling from a bike in the rain. The bike didn't look discarded, but didn't look too well cared-for either. I imagined a happy child in the seat, riding in the sunshine with his father or mother pedaling through warm air in a better part of town.

There are families in Sanya, of course, not just destitute drunks and desperate men hiding from their families or loan sharks. But it is a hard place to casually walk in the rain. Rain doesn't seem to purge the place, even though there are reminders that children are around who have toys to make them happy.



Snack time, bird and man  
(Kiyokawa 2012)

There's a grilled beast in my hair, and I am wondering if all the Hostess Twinkies that I can find on the streets of old Edo can be fed to the beast to keep it from coming alive and eating my head.



ウロンハ  
219円



The rocker and the peace sign  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

His discolored teeth were dazzling. Her hand gesture was gorgeous. They posed for me briefly in the doorway of a Sanya hair salon. His look and his smile interested me. Her tubby frame made me think of tonkotsu ramen, and grandmothers. She might have been his mom, or an older sister. Or a lover, for all I know.

What I do know is they were beautiful, and patient, and I wished I had bought them a drink to thank them for the happy memory I took away from seeing them be upbeat in the grubbiest section of Tokyo.





Vibrant Tokyo retail  
(Nakano Broadway 2012)

*Nakano Broadway can knock you the fuck out...*

It is good here. I like it.

These steps will be my loving home for a short while. Am I waiting for my wife? I forget. The moments pass, and all I can do is stare at the floor, and glance at the skin on my legs that my cheap socks don't cover.

I am as white as any gaijin. I am as tired as any deposed emperor. I am as gone as any test subject for a drug to aid euthanasia. It is all quite good.

After I have snoozed for a bit and the spectres are done passing me, I will find the yakitori bar where the ghosts of effervescent office gods gather. And I will drink so much beer that I vomit glorious rainbows upon my tired suit and cheap shoes.

Then I'll catch a train home, sleep on my floor, and forget I was ever lonely or alive.

It is all quite good.





Screaming Jones of Westerberg  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

Danger is relative, and I have relatives who are dangerous. A cousin once told me Sanskrit is kept for lepers in a locket upon the heart of The Beast. I laughed at him and patted him on the head...





...because it was then that I knew my family is batshit crazy. That's why I hide from them and drink the dusts of Tokyo, mixed with the liquor of robotic machines. It's a hard life but it's better than dealing with the insane.

Happy Tokyo Jack  
(Sanyukai NPO, Kiyokawa 2012)

All I ever wanted to hear was the silence of Tokyo. And now I am here. It is there. And all our streams of consciousness cannot flow into a river that carries my soul to the ocean of peace.

So I grin here with you, and love those who are actually my friends. And I thank the gods of whatever religion I used to embrace that I never found anything but noise and life and bearable disgrace in a city that doesn't care if I live or die but would miss me if I left.





Concrete matsuri  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

Some days, they're annoying as bastards and blowfish. They seep down into your shoes like blood from a knee-cap bottle wound you didn't know you had.

The numbness is a pleasure. The sight of blood is a nuisance. You can't get up on such days. You lay on your back, in some warm, greasy old bag full of tasty amniotic fluid, and watch the morning tengu-dragon birds fly through sunrise in the Tokyo sky.

I used to wonder where they came from. Now I wonder where they go. It is easier to consider this when moving from one day to the next becomes an increasingly blurry adventure that I can't remember and for which I don't plan.



It's as if I wake up every morning in the same day, but the clouds have changed and the noises are different and I have a different empty can or bottle laying beside me.

Sometimes I think that maybe some invisible time traveler is watching how the world changes around me. How the flotsam that I move, eat, and sort scatters away from me in patterns he can predict with some glass math computer and complex equations for entropy. That would be nice. I wouldn't mind being studied.

I never studied much myself, nor did I ever study myself much. And it would, until the end of my joke upon the streets, give me a reason to get up for the day.



The gaslight champions—a bubble story  
(Sanyukai NPO, Kiyokawa 2012)

In the good times we'd feast on cricket thighs dipped in a sauce made of mirin and beer. We could taste life back then and hold it like the breast of a woman we might have met at a hostess club in Roppongi or Ginza. We had gabardine souls and silk bank accounts and the flames of our love for money could have burned down the Imperial Hotel.

It was good to know us back then. It would have been good to know ourselves, though we didn't. There's a line from a note I wrote back then on parchment made of Godzilla's skin. It says: Men are cheaper than water, and water is cheaper than god.

I don't agree with that, though I wrote it and can't remember when. I suppose if I had been paying attention I would have written something else.



One of my fears  
(Kiyokawa 2012)

Sometimes, gaijin tourists come through here taking pictures of me or my friends. No big deal. Half the time we're passed out. The other half the time we're asleep. And the third half of the time we don't give a shit.

I worry, though. Where do the pictures go? I think about these things, see. If they end up in a magazine, or a newspaper, or some idiot's book, a couple of things could happen. These men I used to know, men who could sharpen their tanto knives with their tongues, they might see my picture and decide to play ninja for my cold, indifferent guts.

I could deal with that. These things happen in the third half the time, deep in the Tokyo night, when babies crib-suffocate, lovers take each other's lives, and old men cough up all their organs then merge so perfectly with the concrete even their friends never knew they were there. I can deal with that.

But my family, me gone from them for years, I can't squeeze enough nightmares out of my thoughts of them. They might see my picture, and decide they don't care.

Or worse, they might see my picture and decide to come find me.







I haven't spoken that language for 1,000 years  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

Welcome to the Never-ending Tokyo Boogie-down Matsuri. We pride ourselves on its deeply disorganized nature. We humble ourselves before the gods who refuse to attend. We all lived by ourselves down in the depths of the darling sea near an island they say looks like a battleship. We found Tokyo by following the sounds of taiko. We smelled whiskey infused with the petals of plum blossom flowers. We have rocked and rolled in ways even the Devil would be embarrassed to try. We have surmounted and become champions of concrete and smudged glass.



The shiny stuff doesn't reflect us as well. We look like fat babies smoked over hibachi fires made with imported American mesquite. But here at the Never-ending Tokyo Boogie-down Matsuri you can cook in a different way, on a grapefruit- sized stone from the finest Zen garden, made so hot it can melt cattle fat and all your regrets. And a slurry of fat and regret slides down the sidewalk into the gutter with the rain.

And the Never-ending Tokyo Boogie-down Matsuri starts all over every day, because it never finishes before it begins anew again.

Money for horses and boats  
(Asakusa 2012)

You find me charming?

I am charming. Since there's no more money in my pockets all I have is this smile to share with the world. I figure there's no point in fucking around, I may as well make it a good one. I bet the boats today, but tomorrow maybe the ponies. In Japan, race horses can be considered fast food. Heh, heh, do you get that joke?

Good, good for you. For a foreigner you're not as dumb as you look. I have to go home now, sorry. I have to go home and tell my wife that my pension is still safe, but I need more of her household cash to gamble. She won't mind. It keeps me out of the house.





サラダ  
 ￥100  
 おすすめ  
 本場 ￥150  
 (大) ￥120  
 (中) ￥100  
 (小) ￥80  
 ￥120  
 ￥100  
 ￥50  
 ￥700  
 ￥4600



今、売れてい  
 ほの風で使  
 茨城県産コ  
 予約販売  
 新潟県産コシ  
 魚沼産コシヒカリ ￥3,800

日替り  
 単品 ¥100

ロースカツ  
 ￥180

カニ  
 風味揚げ  
 ￥100

野菜  
 ￥100

お弁当  
 カレーに、もう一品

各100円  
 Star  
 Cup Star  
 カレー

各50円  
 サイダー

冷レ  
 トマト ￥150  
 胡瓜1本 ￥150  
 日替り弁当 ￥350  
 さばの塩焼  
 ヒレカツ  
 ジェンボ  
 カツ丼  
 愛媛の、ポリ  
 カイカリ丼  
 日替り  
 サイド品  
 新登場 期間限定  
 とり唐キムチ丼  
 通常価格 ￥700  
 今だけ ￥600

Cheap eats in the low streets  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

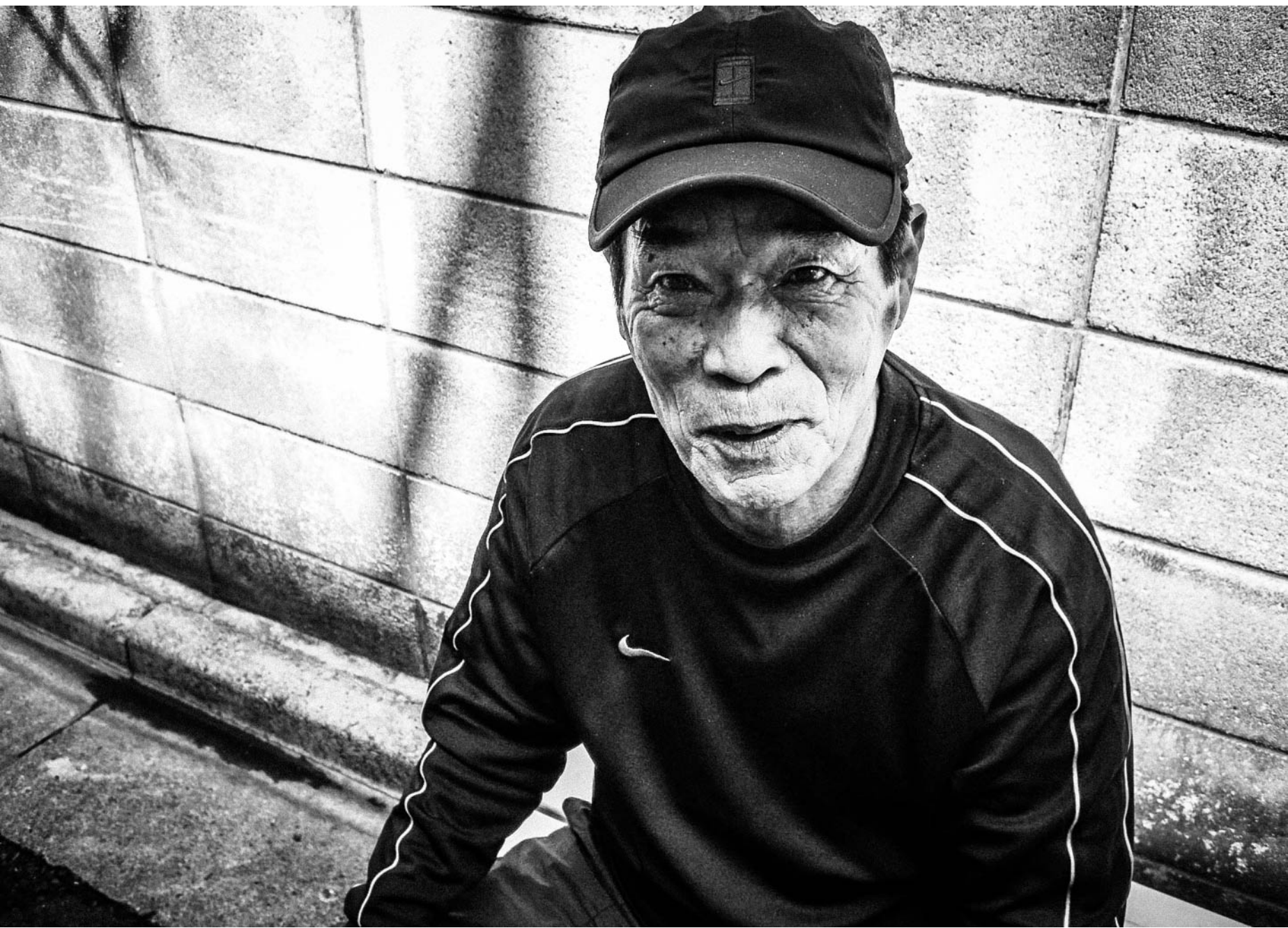
In Sanya on a Friday, I walked by and peripherally caught sight of him inside. He was just standing there, in his quiet shop. He smiled when he noticed me. I would have liked to talk to him. He seemed a pleasant young man.

He was, I think, getting ready to do the day's holy work, selling cheap food mostly to men who drink even cheaper booze. I doubt there's a god in it, though I hope the man makes a decent living. Because I think it is holy work. There's compassion in it, even though it's commerce, and from it flows a form of hope, of caring in a downtrodden neighborhood.

Of course, it could be the hope for some Sanya men is that cheap food will carry them forward with enough sustainable guts to soak up the booze of another drifting, hazy day. But it's hard to know what such men think. In Sanya you often see the remains of food and booze in the street, as if the street were a shrine and the consumables left as offerings to dark and thirsty gods.









His name was Master  
(Sanyukai NPO, Kiyokawa 2012)

I never knew this man. I was only around him long enough in Sanya to get a smile from his handsome, weathered face and to take his picture eight or ten times. Christ, I didn't even get his name at the time. Some journalist I am.

But I have since learned that he went by the name Master, that he owned a bar next door to the Sanyūkai NPO free clinic, and that he died of a brain hemorrhage in June, 2012, a month or so after I photographed him. He was a member of a group of men who shared jokes, stories, and, it seemed to me, a camaraderie and brotherhood in the street and on the benches in front of the NPO.

And it is for that reason that I know Master has been missed. Like I said, I never knew him. But that doesn't mean I can't pay a bit of tribute to a man who shared a little of himself with me, and whose digital ghost has a smile and a laugh for me every time I see his picture.



The world's greatest exit  
(Seoul Izakaya, Nihonzutsumi 2012)

I am the king of nearly all that you possess. It's ever and it's ugly and very often always a mess. Sifting through the tasty, that's me, disguising guns as flowers and hollow dreams as property. Or was it poverty, something belched unto god with a bellows?

It's hard to say, time shifts and time mellow.



And I am asleep now at this table, typing gibberish, recalling my waking life in hearses, smacking myself far away from, and into, the cradle. Drill a joyful noise into, or unto, the lord of cherry rubbish snacks, a grave disappointment to my cliché skull and its liquid heart attacks. They're all normal. I sit here and take 'em, take them for all that I'm worth. I'm not cuddly in that regard.

I work too little and I work too hard.



Sanya squatter  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

The times are running, but I am not. I have clip-cashed all my coupons for extra time and value. They are in my wallet and I don't see me spending them anytime soon.

I am crushed to know you. I am devastated that we can't be friends. I am simply passing the times of day for all the multiple dimensions I pass through before lunchtime.





I sincerely hope that we never meet again...



...and I very much look forward to seeing you here tomorrow.

Blank judgement  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

Without moving his lips he said to me: "After they're dead, you remember the worthless lives of some people because you involuntarily recall how rotten they made the world.

"I don't think I'll have that problem with you. I better not have that problem with you."

I hope he won't.



Ichuura Photo Studio  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

I saw my reflection melded into the picture of an old man in the window of an old Tokyo photo studio, and I ended up wondering about two men.

I wondered about the old man, and whether he was a good man, a kind man. Did he strafe the runways at Pearl Harbor, or lose his mother and father at Nagasaki? Or both? I sometimes wonder this about old Japanese men and make no excuses for it. I wondered if he had been as beautiful in his youth as his old face suggested. I wondered if he loved his kids and was he generous to them. Or was his picture in the window because his family thought little of him but it was Japanese custom.

And I wondered about me and how old I would get. I wonder about that often and it's probably shortening my life. I wondered if I would live longer than my father, who died in 2008 when he was only 69. And looking again at the old man's photo in the window, I wondered if the myths of some cultures true and his soul was in the picture? Had I just stolen a part of some spirit that was probably laughing at me or pissing down my back?

All the wondering was hurting my head, and I knew I would never have answers to most of my questions. So I snapped another picture to be sure I had the shot and just walked away.



# ICHIURA PHOTO STUDIO



証明写真  
受検・就職・パスポート  
プロのスタジオで

東京都知事認可 (社)東京都会区写真業協会

Est 1916



Tokyo has your back  
(Nihonzutsumi and Minami-senju Station 2012)

Stand like superhero in your own time. Pose as if your feet are the only things keeping the planet from drifting into the burning sun.

Marvel at the birds of the air, and the leaves on the ground. Choke back the tears of joy, because where they drop could make roses grow.

Be a champion, you don't need a cape, only enough frozen pizza to feed the whole world.







The gumption academy  
(Shinobazu Pond 2012)

I am tired and I shall sleep the sleep of demons free. They don't love me. They adore me. And I have never been more accepted and shunned. The thing about sleep is you don't know what's on the other side of it.

You could wake to the greatest day of your life or to the end of all your days.





And it's a toss-up, over which you will never have control. But it's fun to bet. Every night, we bet. And that's the end. And we never see it coming. And I am goddamned right and sure with that.

Hold my calls.



I'll call you yesterday  
(Kiyokawa 2012)

In the sun, gleaming, I see a strand of spider silk, connecting a telephone pole and an Asahi beer machine. There aren't too many of those beer machines left. The spider hung a single strand between the two objects. Spiders often do this. They get from one place to the other then decide to go somewhere new leaving their strands hanging like incomplete roadwork in an half-built suburb.



The spider's strand gleams in the sun, but not completely. You never see it whole. You only see part of it glint when a breath of breeze or gust of wind catches it, pushing it into the sunlight. Then the flexible fiber of the spider's construct explodes into brightness and light hanging and shining in mid-air with, it seems, no support and no gravity for the visible part.

Yeah. Shining and incomplete and impossibly suspended. Most days my life is just like that.



Urban planning time  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

I am tired of this day and playing in your houndstooth dream, reaching for vegetables that will never grow in the concrete cracks of this city, nor take root beneath all the rushing bicycle tires in Tokyo. I can get enough food from vending machines and fluids, too, for our forays into the past as we falsely remember living it.

There was a time...Jesus Buddha, I just said "There was a time..." A useless phrase; I hated saying it. There is always time and there always was and there always will be.



It is a fiction that we have done anything but waste  
what doesn't really exist.

The weeds don't keep it, the stray cats don't know it,  
and every drunken bastard here wishes it would go  
away so we could all sleep until sleep isn't sleep...

...but a way of looking down from the clouds and  
thinking: the city's grids are not the same as they were  
when we were kids.





Snappy to-fu beatniks  
(Asakusa 2012)

One...

There are so many different planets on Earth. I've seen a few and liked them. Mostly now, I just read about them in the paper. Because there is no reason to travel. You can't get good ramen on every planet on Earth.

Two...

I am looking away from you and I am looking right at you. That is the Japanese way. There is no reason to stare. I see what you do and are. You can keep staring at me after sundown. My wife will be out shopping with her friends, and I may again be wandering these streets, like I often do, dressed as a floating-world geisha.





Long-gone royalty  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

I opt, for my stellar convenience, to live somewhere between god and the streets. I am no dharma bum, I am the son of Tokugawa courtesans and the wealthiest Burakumin slaves. My family wove silks made of leather, and spry kittens from straw in the emperor's stables.

For feudal times my family wove potato fibers into tatami mats, so the lord-ladies and children could pull up their floors and boil them into a most tasty survival soup.



This was when arrows flew in the wind like cherry blossom petals, and the servants could not be sent out for meat.

Those days, they were my days; but in agony, days I never lived. They are before my time, even though I am beyond time, here in this street, with you, telling you stories of the gods I knew.

And other lies that are not exactly false.

*(Note: I traded this man these photos for the cigarette in his hand. Also, there is no historical evidence I have been able to find that tatami were made of potato and used for siege food in feudal Japan.)*



Happy for you and us  
(Ueno Park 2012)

We jumble the domino bones of peace and cry into our udon soup in the zone of happy gone memory. Sometimes we doze in the soup, wrapping ourselves in noodles warmer than ever was our mother's embrace. We can't dash your hopes, but we can help. We are useful men. We are champions you never thought to ask to take up swords and lasers at the Battle of Ueno.

That is actually a battle we fight every day.





Here in this park of children and wives, of discarded food (we fight the birds for this), and of half-gone cans of chuhai.

These taste better, actually, because they contain the backwash saliva of a thousand indifferent suburb-bound salarymen.



We are cannibals of time and men of great leisure.  
Step into our offices and we will help establish for you  
a plan to become invisible and never bother the  
emperor or his government ever again.





All the things you could ever want and never do  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

There's nothing I can tell you of nothing you don't know.  
I am a busted-down door for you, collapsed under the  
weight of cosmic law. You are the wind in which I twist  
and think. We have shoveled enough dirt together to  
have moved the entire mass of the Earth into a new  
orbit around the sun.

I am proud of what we've done. There's no mistaking it  
for something ordinary people could have achieved.  
So there it is, the end of us and the beginning of  
something new.

As I said, there's nothing I could tell you, nothing you  
can't already teach the new gods on your own.

I look forward to when they replace us and we can  
drift down to the streets of a human city, maybe Tokyo,  
and live in the bottoms of paper cups, maybe sleep on  
Styrofoam plates, and love the fact that we aren't  
responsible anymore for whether we dream of  
mankind, or mankind dreams of us.



It was happy  
(Kiyokawa 2012)

It was just a food truck. But on an overcast early spring day in Sanya, it glowed. It was god-like cheesiness. It was as if an entire amusement park had rolled down the street and parked at the curb. Well, a cheap amusement park. Not all the lights on the truck appeared to work.

But I didn't walk away easy. In Sanya I never do. My friend and I were starving, but we didn't buy hot dogs from the food truck. We found a nice mom-and-pop joint nearby, and had the best ginger pork I've ever had. But still, it was Sanya, and I felt guilty about passing the food truck by for a good part of the rest of the day.



<p>ロイヤルフィッシュ 200円</p> <p>ロイヤルフィッシュは、 北海道産の新鮮な魚を、 塩と胡椒でシンプルに仕上げた、 王道のサンドイッチ。</p> 	<p>フィッシュ&amp;ポテト 250円</p> <p>フィッシュ&amp;ポテトは、 北海道産の新鮮な魚を、 塩と胡椒でシンプルに仕上げた、 王道のサンドイッチ。</p> 
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カップ(ス)

キッズアイス  
¥180  
(コーン)  
(カップ)

栗 餅

日本の秋にも、旅びとがアツク  
呼んで下さい。そして楽しんで下さい。

くし餅がゴロゴロ、いふふいふ

クリーム

オストウリヤ産の  
本格派です。  
チーズの大好きな  
あなたに……!

さくら さくら さくら  
桜

シエラードアイス＝結露糖  
結露糖  
材料を煮てみました。

チーズのトッピング  
お好みのネットドッグに  
チーズをトッピング  
**1枚50円**

アイスのおトッピングは(カラー・スプレー)無料です。

**ナードッグ** 店長イチ押し!  
**450円**



**レギュラードッグ** 愛されて46年!  
おいらが、ミスター大食堂! **290円**

[illegible]

ERATION



Wander all your sons away from us  
(Kiyokawa 2012)

There's something my great-grandfather  
is reputed to have said when he died at 101. Loosely  
translated from late do-period Japanese, he said:

"I'm a coward when it matters, and a hero when it  
doesn't."

This may be apocryphal family history. Most family  
history is. It's blended from different sources like bad  
scotch, being as it is neither comfort nor condemnation.  
But on days like this in the chump streets...

I know how the old man felt. Yes, in this place where I  
live, I know how the old man felt.



The dreaming beast  
(Minami-senju Station 2012)

I never jumped in the Sumida River but I thought about it many times.

Not to die, but to float, float down to the sea. Where the birds go to have lunch on spring days when the trash we leave them isn't quite enough to take home to the family. The floating idea, it's all about the dream time, the closing of eyes, of being borne by Earth's amniotic fluid to the place where we all come home. It's a place we don't want to go but can't help desiring. It's instinct, like picking our teeth with a knife.

It's stupid but we do it because we've been dreaming of floating down rivers for so many thousands of years.







Happy Sanya toys  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

In places like Sanya, the beat-down spirit is so palpable you wonder why anyone bothered to leave evidence of whimsy or joy.

You're glad they did, though. But you wonder why there's still a kiddie coin ride toy sitting waiting in the street, even though it's chipped and beat-up, and looks as if no child has ridden it in years.

And you look some more, see a Kirin booze can, a trash bag, and newspapers in the cockpit of a kiddie racecar riding toy, and you remember that streets find their own uses for things.



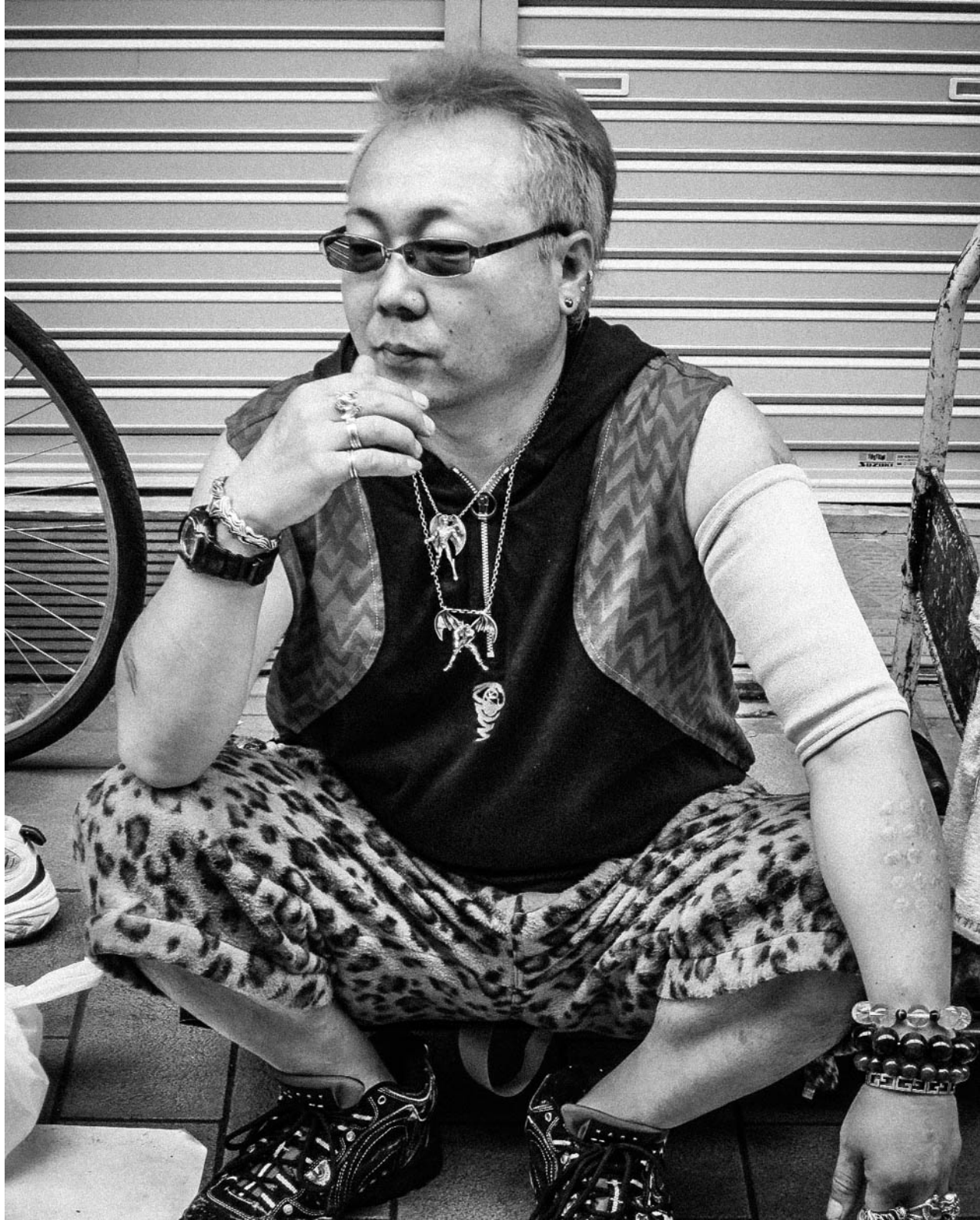




Punk rock retail  
(Nihonzutsumi 2012)

It was the first Saturday of Golden Week, at a small flea market and street fair in Sanya. It was a nice day. Lots of good stuff for sale on the street. But among the mothers and little kids and conventionally-dressed walk-a-day oldsters and salaryman dads, this guy stood out.







His business seemed good. He had stuff in which housewives and grandmothers had interest.



And in between customers, he sat quietly, patiently, seeming to think while watching this small piece of the world go by.



Taito-ku revelations  
(Kiyokawa 2012)

All the vast introduction letters of the universe, and perhaps even a carte de visite from some god won't get you anywhere in this town. What it's reduced to is an old truth:





That if we can't laugh at ourselves, we may as well cry for others. Then maybe have a snack and a drink of some substance and gusto. What the hell, it works for those bastards in America. It may as well work for us.

*An outdoor bar where customers watch televised boat races and drink liquors like Asahi Super Dry and Ozeki One Cup.*





Voices in chorus  
(Kiyokawa, near Sanyukai NPO 2012)

How many worlds on dust motes have we destroyed by washing our clothes? But gnashing your teeth you can't run from the gutters in your mind or the gutters where you sleep. I am monstrous heavy for you and the crutch that gets you by. I'm the welcome that never comes and the kiss that says goodbye. The concrete is warm, it baked all day in the sun My bare feet enjoy it But I must be careful to avoid the broken glass...



The light of gods in the foyer blinded me when I wanted to leave home. There was no sass to it, only rumors that life was better under the overpasses where the rich drive their Tokyo cars. *My head is doing that thing again, that thing I told you about, that thing where you all speak and I can't tell which is me.* I think it's time to blow this pop stand, blow it with dynamite, and go get that beer we've been talking about for all the long decades since we came here and found there's only so much shame one can bear but only if one decides to feel shame at all...

*Yeah, here we go. This will be fun.*

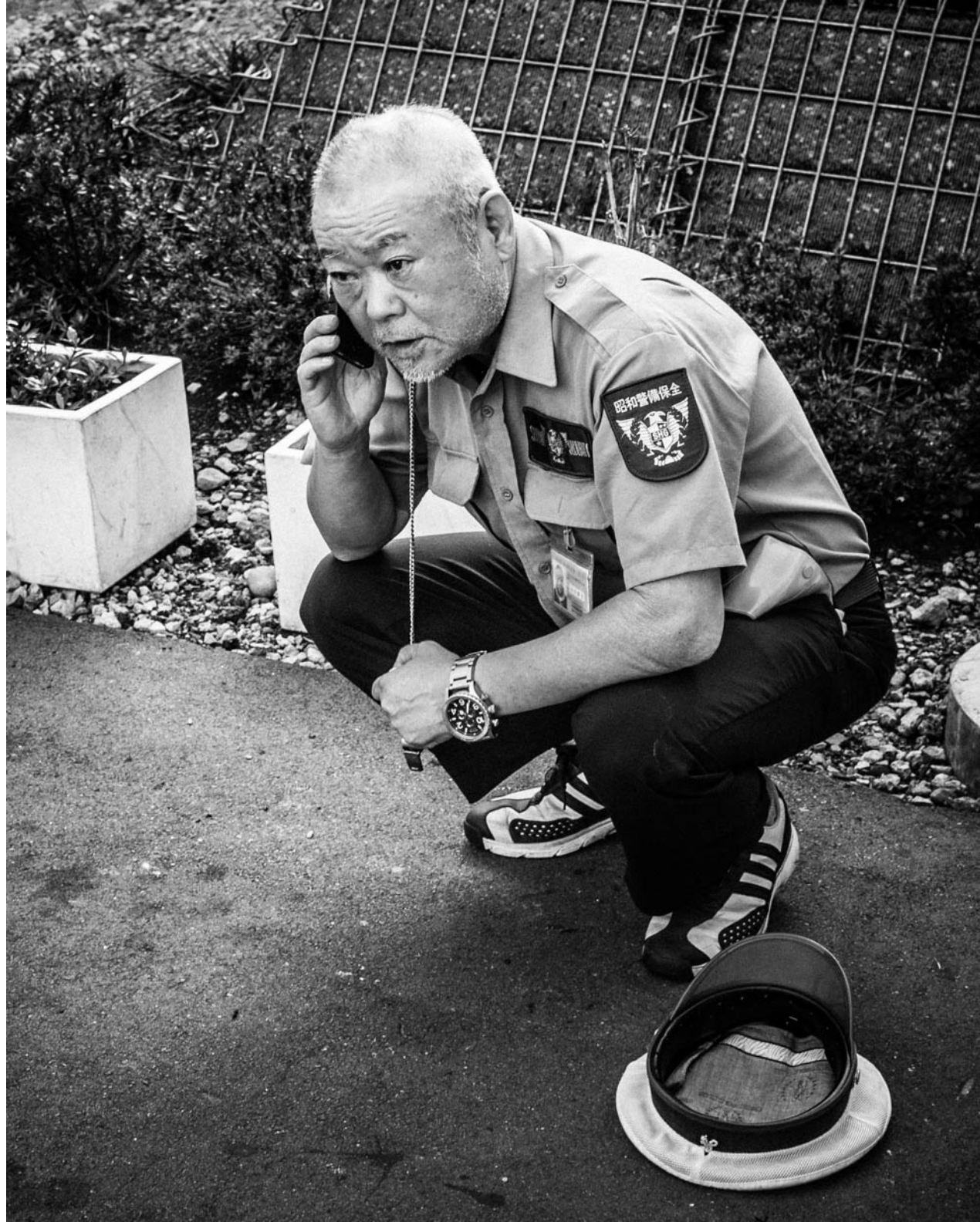




Jobbing Tokyo  
(Nakano Station 2013)

Whether it's selling used magazines and manga on the street, or taking a break from a job as a superfluous security guard, Tokyo always finds work for men.







Incredulity  
(Nakano 5-chome 2013)

You, yeah, you. What the hell are you doing here? Get outta here, you bastard. You're too close. Men are working here. It isn't safe for anyone without a helmet.

And don't you dare take my picture.

Thousand-yard stare  
(Nakano Central Park 2013)

I don't know you and you don't know me and, let's be honest, neither one of us would have it any other way.







Nakano panic story  
(Ajisai Park, Nakano 2013)

The guy was in this little park near the apartment I rent in Nakano-ku. It's called Ajisai Park. It was the middle of a Thursday afternoon, and he was obviously boozed off his ass. He didn't mind me taking his picture. I could tell he was slurring his speech, but he didn't seem angry.





A couple of days later on a Saturday, I saw this man in Hydrangea Park again. This time he was asleep, or passed out, and was apparently wearing the same clothes from two days before. I didn't know if he was becoming a new fixture in the neighborhood. But I hope he found better digs when the days got shorter and colder.



Ueno panic story  
(Ueno Station 2013)

The man was nicely-dressed and tidy, which made it all the more difficult for me to figure out what the hell he was doing, napping on cardboard near the south exit of Tokyo's Ueno Station.

If you'd like to know the truth, this old fellow was dressed better than I was at the time. But he was so close to the traffic passing in the street that he must have been, well, rather altered in some way to be able to sleep. I just couldn't figure this situation out.





Talking to wind and neon  
(near Ueno Station 2013)

I was waiting for friends in Ueno, in the street next to a big toy store called Yamashiroya. He was there, too, talking to himself or the air, I couldn't be sure. He looked rough as hell and put out his hand and made the curved finger 'OK' sign when I asked if I could take his picture. In Tokyo, the 'OK' sign means "I'd like some cash".

I thought I didn't have any coins, so I gave him four cigarettes, the remainder of the pack I had.





We were both still waiting there a few minutes later, me for my friends and he for whatever wisdom or truth he expected the breeze to blow his way. He was enjoying one of my smokes. Then I felt the ¥500 coin in my pocket and decided to give it to him. I figured he needed it more than I did.

He was happy to accept the coin, and in the moment it just seemed to make things better for both of us. So it was good we did this one more piece of business.



Back in Sanya  
(Nihonzutsumi 2013)

Sanya, south of Minami-senju Station and Meiji Dori in Tokyo, is a hard place. With a cane and two foot braces, it's probably harder for this man than most. Perhaps his feet were broken, but hopefully his spirit hasn't been.

But he did look very tired.

Language barrier  
(Seoul Izakaya, Nihonzutsumi 2013)

Early on a Sunday afternoon, the Sanya shotengai was all but lifeless. But Seoul Bar izakaya was open and doing lively business. Customers at Seoul Bar tend to be older, are very welcoming, and don't hesitate trying to get their point across even when speaking to someone with almost no Japanese. No, this man wasn't angry, just expressive.





Seoul Izakaya  
(Nihonzutsumi 2013)

If you find the right place, a small Tokyo bar can be a friendly refuge even if you really don't speak Japanese and the bar is in a rough part of town that doesn't see many foreigners. Seoul Izakaya is on the shotengai in Sanya, and I visited it five or six times while in Tokyo in 2012 and 2013.





It's a little dive where I would stop off for a Coke or a beer while shooting some of the photographs which appear throughout this book (see previously "The world's greatest exit"). Mama-san, the ethnic Korean owner, always made a place for me at one of her small tables, and her customers always threw a smile or a laugh my way.



The Kabukicho nap  
(Kabukicho, Shinjuku 2013)

You could see he was breathing, and there wasn't any blood on the ground. Maybe someone drugged the rice at his feet. A minute or so later he moved his hand to his face and scratched, providing further proof of life.



Maybe not a happy life, though. A man this young and fucked-up at midday is an unusual sight even in Kabukicho. Fortunately he was in a high-traffic area for passersby, who left him to sleep it off.



The Shinobazu shuffle  
(Ueno Park 2013)

The man played Japanese enka tunes on his guitar, with a CD player and karaoke machine for backup. The lady happily sang along and danced to the music in a more-or-less traditional Japanese manner. This how life rolls at Shinobazu Pond in Ueno Park, where on a typical day you're bound to see something atypical.









A raven of Shinjuku  
(near Kinokuniya main store 2013)

The man was dapper and having a rest while feeding a multitude of birds, not far from Kinokuniya in Shinjuku. One of the birds included this huge damn raven, feeding on leftover combini discards.

The literal money shot  
(Kiyokawa 2013)

His hair was as you see, and the nails on each of his ten fingers were about an inch long and filthy underneath. He didn't have a problem with me taking his picture, but he wanted money for it. I started to give him a ¥500 coin, but he kept saying "paper, paper" in English. I thought he meant a ¥1,000 bill, but he took the coin and kept saying "paper, paper" and was cagey as hell about anyone seeing me give him money. So I took his picture, said I didn't have "paper", and left for Minami-senju Station.

Thinking about it a short time later on the subway, I figured "paper" was probably a model release, and he was weird about the money because he didn't want the regular folks in his part of Sanya knowing he had money for booze. I'm guessing this guy is maybe a handful when he has a load on, and the neighbors don't like dealing with him when he drinks. The whole damn thing was just weird.









The most-holy lie in  
(Nihonzutsumi 2013)

It's a kind of Christian charity mission down in Sanya, and these men were asleep upon its steps at 10:30 on a Saturday morning. It was a harsh tableau. If I were more familiar with the Christian bible I'd be quoting chapters and verses specifically related to scenes of poverty and drunkenness like this. As it stands, let the pictures allow you to imagine what life is like for some of these poor bastards in this rough section of Tokyo.

Amen.









Angel face  
(Ueno Station 2013)

I found something peaceful and angelic in this man's face, even though he was sleeping on rags and cardboard right next to a hell of noise and car exhaust from a row of taxis outside the south exit of Ueno Station.



Telepathy not required  
(near Keisei Ueno Station 2013)

Next to Keisei Ueno Station, on the steps  
leading up to Ueno Park, a man whose face probably  
tells you everything you need to know.

And you can guess the rest by looking at the assortment of modest possessions on the wheeled cart he had with him.

Unhappiness personified.







Kiss of life

(Seoul Izakaya, Nihonzutsumi 2013)

The customers at Seoul Izakaya in Sanya know how to toast life, and debauch the soju and water. This man certainly did. And the KISS t-shirt enhanced the idea that he was prepared to rock and roll all night, as it were.

But he was skinny and seemed frail. The barcode strap around his wrist suggested he had recently been in the hospital, hopefully not for anything alcohol-related. Still, having been hospitalized a few times myself for catastrophic reasons, I understood the desire to drink heavily soon after being released.



Uniqlo for (invisible) men  
(near Ueno Station 2013)

The man seemed like a pile like swept-aside trash, tucked out of the way so it wouldn't get scattered too much by wind or passing human activity. He looked so frail, and it was surprising to see him asleep in a high-traffic area across Chuo Dori from Ueno Station.



The sidewalks were crowded with shoppers. A few people noticed him, but most did not. Perhaps that was his intention when he chose the spot he was in. I stayed for a while and watched as Saturday progressed the way Saturdays do when folks are out shopping in Tokyo.

Wheels going nowhere  
(Nihonzutsumi 2013)

On the shotengai in Sanya, a sad scene. I would have felt like an absolute shitheel-criminal taking the man's dignity with this picture, but I don't think he had any left.







Winter in Summer  
(Nihonzutsumi 2013)

I am no owner of clandestine property, I take my leisure in ancient streets that have been paved for centuries with blood, stone, and alcohol. All of Tokyo belongs to me except where I happen to be sitting every minute of every day in every place of my life. I can't imagine how it got this way. But I live with it, and I often imagine that it is winter and I am dreaming of summer, and I often imagine that it is summer and I am dreaming of winter.



Chuhai and corn interlude  
(Asakusa 2013)

In between what he had been doing and what he had planned for the rest of the day, a lone fellow on an empty side street spent some moments of a crowded Asakusa Sunday afternoon chewing roasted corn and sipping canned chuhai. His clothes were neat enough, but his exposed feet looked rough and battered and his bulging backpack indicated he had a more of his life within it than the typical snacks and happy snap photo gadgets carried by regular day trippers.

A lone man enjoying a quiet moment, taking a break from probably a rougher life than he wanted.





Shinjuku man  
(Shinjuku Station 2013, exit A8)

I passed though Shinjuku several times in September and October of 2013. At Shinjuku Station exit A8 this man was always there, with his street-worn feet and bundles of tattered possessions. I don't know his story, and I know I ever will, but his life seemed less than perfect.

And still people passed him by, including me. Maybe that's what he wanted. Such things are hard to know. I don't have a perfect life, so I'm not really sure what one looks like. And guessing about this man and how he was living only makes me feel ignorant and condescending.



Resting room  
(Ueno Park 2013)

They were like soldiers encamped between battles, resting within an outpost of rough comfort. Up against a lavatory these men were surviving in Ueno Park. And it wasn't a big deal. Their ritual was normalcy, and their shield a cloak of invisibility woven from the indifference of passersby. I felt like I was in the living room of all mankind.



They were some of the most peaceful-looking men I encountered taking pictures for this book in Tokyo. And though it may have been delusion or wishful thinking, I took from them a feeling of peace which lasted long after I left Ueno Park that day and went back to my vacation rental near Nakano Station.



In the dark down  
(Seoul Izakaya, Nihonzutsumi 2013)

It is four or five 'o' clock of morning. Dawn, she is coming. And I have nowhere else to dream and sleep but in these great gutters of the mighty champion Tokyo. I have loved her so long, she has loved me so bad. And I am her grand sumo champion, kicking so much ass that there is no parity to be consumed. And there is lymph fluid on my keyboard.

Holy shit.



The Sanya blur  
(Nihonzutsumi 2013)

One strives for crystal clarity, but the world isn't circuit-board mapped that way. Sometimes even slow-moving men are a curious blur passing in front of street wreckage or orderly decay. Sanya in Tokyo is a mixture of both, as this man also seemed to be. But the ironic thing about him is he looked better blurry than he did standing perfectly still.





Old men of a Sunday in Minowa  
(Minowabashi Station 2013)

Whether smoking by the train or boozing a bit at the station, these old men in Minowa were cool and relaxed and probably didn't give a damn what I thought anyway.





Getting smaller and smaller  
(Nihonzutsumi 2013)

In a small part of the big Tokyo city...



...it takes no casual intention to make yourself smaller.

And there was nothing for it but to respect her effort.





Happy times in Freedom  
(Nakano 5-chome 2013)

There's this little bar in Nakano 5-chome called Freedom. And you know, they don't mind a good laugh there...

A mystical woman of Nakano Station  
(Nakano-ku 2013)

I had just gotten off the Tozai Line after a hard day of shooting, mostly in Sanya, when I saw her. She could have been a Japanese gypsy fortune teller. All she lacked was a crystal ball, and I'm still not sure she didn't have one tucked somewhere in her robes.

She was something else, this lady, this mystically-fashionable hippie who stood confidently and patiently while I took her photograph.





The body-slam king  
(Nihonzutsumi 2013)

Yes, the leisure of holding up walls marks the important things I do since partaking of retired life in Sanya. I retired early, having made a fortune in my twenties in shochu vapors and hangover science.





I invested my wealth in degrees all Japan's great intellectuals could ever have received at Tokyo University. I am smarter than them. Yet I am unknown. But you will always find me here.

Here I am holding up walls, I am ever holding up walls.



I gave Tokyo  
(Kiyokawa, near Asakusa Horai Nursing Home 2013)

In the morning of my end days, Tokyo, I gave you everything. Thirty years in your dingy bars, surfing edamame pod skins in foamy grease and injecting the veins in your streets with flea-flowing whiskies and American peanut beers. I was a doorman once too...



...at the palace of the Emperor's gate, but got better tips at the Imperial Hotel (not the one downtown, the smaller love hotel version in Ueno.) So after all of that, I am here, under this metal children's monkey skin, taking in the sun and the exhaust of numerous Fukushima pipelines.

But I have Jinro, black tea and tinned gumption today, so I guess I just have to laugh.



Sanya's finest  
(Nihonzutsumi 2013)

I like Tokyo cops. I've have heard they can sometimes be real hard asses to foreigners, but Tokyo cops have always been helpful and kind to me. The two officers pictured here were working out of a koban on Route 464, about a block south of Meiji Dori at the entrance to a street that leads to the shotengai in Sanya. It's a rough neighborhood.



These officers must spend their shifts dealing with all manner of ragged and drunken citizens. The boozing in Sanya is a pretty constant activity. Knowing little of how the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department works, it's easy for this American TV cop drama junkie to imagine that assignment to the Sanya police station is a penalty for police force veterans or a trial by ordeal for rookies.





But I hope not, because true to my experience these two cops were friendly and accommodating. Maybe the big foolish foreigner with his camera was a break from whatever tedium goes with the job and this particular koban. I don't know.

Happy snack times  
(Seoul Izakaya, Nihonzutsumi 2013)

I come for the soju, I stay for the pictures. The entire fucking history of Japan, and of Tokyo, is in the eyes, the skins, the frosty cocktail glasses in these pictures of the lives of the people on these walls.

I like it here.





The lovely reverie  
(Kiyokawa 2013)

She was still lovely, and she knew it. But in the middle of this sunny Saturday morning in Sanya, she was passing sips of Asahi past her lips and cigarette smoke down her lungs.





The world turned for her in the company of men, at an open-air bar selling cheap sushi, shochu and beer. And the look on her face suggested to me that she could drink every man at the place under each flimsy folding table.

And she knew it.

Disgruntled song  
(Seoul Izakaya, Nihonzutsumi 2013)

This is the seriously-no-bullshit soup plate, where it all falls asunder into metal, and I don't mean angry white men playing guitars. It's peaceful, the undying here, and I'm trying to figure out how to make some art out of this monstrous tranquility.

I throw compassionate grenades, and perform brutally humane triage. I've crushed my skull for genius and I've banished my excellent demons for you. There is no distance I would not throw my combat liver over the Sea of Japan for you. I will become a great ape for the sight of you, and holler my guttural mating call down into Tokyo's darkest gutters to summon you.

There is dark growth here in my muddy extremes, and you bear the old Edo gods who once bore you, and I still think I'll start drinking before noon today.







Fatigue under construction  
(Shinjuku Station 2013)

I had a poem written about this photo and what might be going through this man's head. It started with the line "I am stranded in my own blood" and got weird after that. But I scrapped it because it didn't convey how tired this fellow looked. He looked tired in that way where you just have to sit quietly for a bit and take the time to consider which limb to move next, which finger to bend. The kind of tired that emanates from you so perceptibly some passing foreigner taking your picture can feel it.

That kind of tired.



The Big Issue  
(Takadanobaba Station 2013)

The Osamu Tezuka mural across the street from Takadanobaba Station caught my eye, but the man there selling a street magazine called The Big Issue held my attention. It's sold exclusively by Tokyo's homeless, who must provide proof of homelessness in order to do so. The Big Issue Japan Foundation oversees this magazine sales program in order to offer a "hand-up rather than a hand-out" by providing a means for Japan's homeless to have a personal source of income.



I don't know how effective this program is, but I respect the concept. I have even more respect for this lonely fellow selling magazines on Tokyo's streets, trying to rise out of whatever hole life dropped him in. Did he chose the location in front of the Tezuka mural for the quality it added to his work environment? I think whatever gives you a sense of happiness or hope when you're trying to raise yourself up makes the hard days on Tokyo's streets pass more bearably.

But I could just be projecting how I think I would feel in this man's place. Nevertheless, these are very precious photos to me.

Life, the long wall  
(Nihonzutsumi 2013)

Life along the long wall comes in inches, millimeters, and pain. I travel it every day, I love it. It supports me and makes me whole again. The long wall takes me to the past faster than it does the future. I live in them both, I can see them both, and I am not scared.

The long wall is my starship. It helps me love you faster than the speed of light.







Happy Boss Coffee  
(Shinobazu Pond 2013)

My brains are in great scarred depths, and I am nothing without the Japanese people. They are a certain kind of life to me, which is helpful, because I was born in their land. It's weird. I am of them, yet not of them. I am my own thing, and not a thing.

I am a man, your man if you'd like. And we can wander around the park, and feed the birds, watch the children go home, and make love with all our scorched breath until the sun rises again on Shinobazu Pond and we realize that, well, maybe getting drunk and staying out all night wasn't the best idea we ever had.

Ueno Park is safe  
(Shinobazu Pond 2013)

In Tokyo it is often hard to tell if someone is homeless, or merely down on both their luck and available resources. On a warm late summer day in Ueno Park, this man was sitting quietly by himself on several well-worn layers of salvaged cardboard. He wasn't drinking, nor was he carrying on in any way. But the premature and uniform silver color of his hair and the symmetrical discolorations on his pant legs suggested that he had seen more prosperous days, and that he might be spending the night on the very spot where he was sitting.

But it is good that he was in Ueno Park in September. Ueno Park is usually safe and warm in September.







There is no nothing ever  
(Nihonzutsumi 2013)

I am never full of your hounded depression. But I look  
down the streets, hoping to find you.

But often I don't.

Okay, I never do. I never find you.

But I keep looking for you, on these streets, in the home  
of my mind, in Sanya.



There is no particular madness here  
(Kiyokawa 2012)

It was just a spring day in a rundown part of Tokyo in the week before Golden Week in 2012. The patrons of this outdoor bar were rough and shabby; but they were drinking in the early afternoon sun and even in this booze- and urine-soaked Tokyo neighborhood the spring air smelled fresh and clean.

There was a dingy freedom to the scene, and an uplifting sense that even though this was low life, it was robust and vibrant life nonetheless.







Small man Japan  
(Chuo Dori, Ueno 2013)

He was leaning on a doorway frame of a building labeled ESPACE on Chuo Dori near Ueno Park. His left index finger was missing, and I wondered if his pocketed right hand was in even worse shape. He stood a few inches short of five feet.

I wondered what he stared at, and how he saw it. Even if I had known enough Japanese to ask, I would have refrained. It would have been, I think, in bad taste to violate this man's personal space and the quiet reserve and seeming disdain with which he silently stood and watched the world go by.



Let's drink Ueno  
(Shinobazu Pond 2013)

It's thirsty work, watching the world go by as it filters through Tokyo.





For your own good, and the good of your overall health, you really should leave it to the professionals.



Stuck in Nodaya  
(Nihonzutsumi 2013)

In Sanya the shotengai in Nihonzutsumi is a main focal point of liquor activity, and this Nodaya liquor store was right at the entrance of it. Nodaya is gone now, but the building looked tidy and impressive enough. But this was 10 o'clock in the morning.



Later in the day the liquor machines in front of Nodaya would fill up with coins and people frequented the store for more booze. As a consequence metal bins in front of the place filled up with empty beer cans, chuhai cans, and sake jars.



Baby•child shop  
(Nihonzutsumi 2013)

The cart caught my attention, as did the cluster of dirty bicycles on the left-hand side. To be honest, after reading what I could of the Japanese, if the place had been open and displaying its wares for children I probably wouldn't have noticed it. It would have been just another shop to me. But with these carts in front of it, loaded with debris from someone's hard, desperate life, I felt like I had stumbled across an outpost on some alien civilization's dirty, dying world.



Shinjuku shoeshine man  
(Shinjuku Station 2013)

In 2013 I took 100 photographs over the course of a month of thirteen different men on the streets of Shinjuku. Of those men, this fellow was the only one who was doing something productive and seemingly respectable. Granted, I didn't go to Shinjuku to shoot pictures of upright, normal citizens; but I want to note the respect I feel for this old guy. Sitting outside the world's busiest train station and trying to make a living shining shoes can't be an easy life.





The Kozukappara jizo still does its job and forgives the blood of 100 ghosts per day  
(near Minami-senju Station 2013)

This jizo guards over Kozukappara, one of the most notorious execution grounds from Tokyo's Edo Period. The statue caught my eye as I was leaving Minami-senju Station one hot September day on my way to photograph the living in the Kiyokawa and Nihonzutsumi sections of Sanya.

I didn't linger here long, and at the time I didn't know the significance of where I was. To me it was just an impressive statue in a Japanese graveyard. And normally I feel peaceful and calm in Japanese graveyards, but those feelings eluded me here. Perhaps it was the hot and oppressively muggy weather in Tokyo at the time. But very rarely when I am standing in a place and judging it do I feel like the place is judging me back.

I had that feeling here, and even the presence of the jizo didn't make me feel welcome.

*Centuries past  
in the streets of old Edo,  
what blood and meat was spilled then  
when swords equalized and ended  
the lives of whole nations of men.*

*The blood must be traveling still  
past the corpse-rich soils of Tokyo  
and ever downward towards  
the Earth's own living, glowing bones.*





Tokyo gone street  
(Kiyokawa 2013)

No big deal, just the passing of time and a flesh suit going for cigarettes while I hang back and watch. Normally I'm the ghost in him.





But today he left me behind so that I could watch the street.

And then when he gets back I will once again meld my ghostly membranes to his meat frame so I can make him remember who he is and we can be whole again.

Daruma street panic  
(Kiyokawa 2013)

In a generally drab part of town, in 2013 this bright Daruma artwork graced the front of a cheap business hotel along Tokyo Route 464 on the Kiyokawa side of what used to be called Sanya. This depiction of Japan's beloved good luck symbol looks over all who pass by, including the cops who look over everyone from the police station directly across the street in Nihonzutsumi.







Smoke, the prince  
(Golden Gai, Shinjuku 2013)

In passing, quiet moments, when tobacco takes you as its lover, maybe you think about all the furrows in fields you've never sown...



...all the gorgeous richness you'll never see, and you puff on a tube of leaf, it is good Tokyo leaf and came at great cost...

...but it jackhammers into you that it won't fill your belly, and maybe that's okay because it is hard to care anyway.





Shinjuku bivouac  
(near Shinjuku Central Park 2013)

It was a sweltering day in Shinjuku, the sort of day where the hot, heavy air doesn't much want to move out of your way, and seems to resent it when you push it aside to pass by. Days like this in Tokyo can suck the energy out of you, and the man obviously needed a rest.





The people passing by didn't bother him just as he wasn't bothering them, for the sidewalk was wide. There was an equilibrium in this, and a kindness which it is sometimes surprising that Tokyo is willing to provide.





Heated talk and hot air  
(Golden Gai, Shinjuku 2013)

They spoke heatedly, passionately, and didn't seem to care who heard them. Overall she didn't seem happy with him and he seemed frustrated by whatever she said. But it really didn't matter, because it was a steamy-hot September day in Shinjuku, which made all of Tokyo cranky, so nobody passing nearby paid them any attention anyway.

Well, almost nobody.

In Golden Gai  
(Shinjuku 2013)

I once tripped through these lands like a god, like the pure embodiment of all the liquor the Allies ever drank in Tokyo.

It is quiet here now, and the Americans are gone, but I know these streets. They are masters and servants to me. In the daytime, the vampires are hiding, well, most of them, even though I know where they lay.

At night they will be back here, disguised as young salarymen, and high school girls in vocational school, and tourists from Russia and France.

I will know their minds and their innocent evils, and I will keep watching until the sun and the train schedules drive them from the streets back to their lairs.





Life at the koban  
(Asakusa 2013)

All the wide happy and the scattering crowds, these are which I watch over. For I am police, I am law. It is good I do this, for there is no better humble god of justice than me when I am on duty.

In Tokyo we have guns, yes, for we are police and they are subtle extensions of sword and I see them as metals from repurposed katana beaten into tiny rocket-spitting machines. Musashi used guns. I read this once in torn manga-page literature. To me this brings honor to the idea, and grinds nothingness into fine subtlety.

For if you can kill disbelief, you can kill injustice. When this is done my work will be over, I will no longer need to be police. I would like to put myself out of a job, I would like to always go fishing in the Sumida River and hook all the gold rings the yakuza ever dropped into it. It would be a good thing to be with my son every day, to know I will never need a gun to protect him.

To never need updated training on the best American ways to shoot people in the head. But these times are not here yet. So I will guard you, and you will love me for it, and I will love you back because you give me purpose and honor.

And money.



浅草警察署 雷門交番

KAMINARIMON KOBAN

昨日の交通事故(都内)

死亡 0

負傷 13

撮影禁止

「ひっかく」が危ない!!  
ひっかくは、けがの原因になります。  
ひっかくは、けがの原因になります。  
ひっかくは、けがの原因になります。  
ひっかくは、けがの原因になります。

AED



Happy in grey shade  
(Nihonzutsumi 2013)

In Sanya there is, in fact, warmth in the shaded gutters and thermal uplift from cans of varying liquors. And if the sky is clear on a given day or not, the grey streets can take its place, and one can soar in them, as this man seemed to do in whatever happy reverie put peace and contentment on his face.







## Afterword

This book is about Tokyo street life, even though homeless folks frequently appear. And depending upon which media or Tokyo Metropolitan Government estimates one reads there are anywhere from 5,500 to 9,000 homeless people living on Tokyo's streets, most of them elderly men or men in late middle age. But the truth is no one really knows.

But because of certain social stigmas, such as the fear of bringing shame upon one's family, the homeless and poor in Japanese society tend to resist reaching out for the government assistance to which they're entitled. With that in mind I encourage you to donate to one of the small but dedicated independent non-profit organizations (NPOs) in Tokyo that tend to the needs of the destitute and homeless.

The two NPOs listed below have spent a combined 52 years providing food, shelter, and medical assistance to Tokyo's poorest citizens. Both NPOs are staffed by committed, dedicated people, some of whom I've met, who are down in the roughest streets of the city every day offering a warm human hand to those in need. To continue their good works these NPOs would benefit from your monetary donation or, if you live in Tokyo, any time or expertise you're willing to volunteer.

So do what you can when you can, and thank you for buying and reading this book.

Sanyukai NPO <https://www.sanyukai.or.jp/>  
Second Harvest Japan <http://2hj.org/english/>

***Tokyo Panic Stories***  
***by***  
***Dan Ryan***