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PEOPLE ON THE SLOPES

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In Ebisu, there are three people I know: one former friend and two friends. They are different ages and genders, with different occupations and different ways of dressing. Their hairstyles could hardly be more different. The common ground I can think of is that they live somewhere along a slope, live with animals, and walk quickly.

As I became closer to them, we often gathered around food cooked at home, but sometimes we met outside. Small tables at chain cafés, sofas with hardly any depth. Conversations moving back and forth between private life and work. At a yakitori restaurant, we would arrive just after opening, pass behind the backs of the regulars already seated at the U-shaped counter, and settle onto backless stools, eating skewers together with the smoke wafting from the charcoal.

We had never put it into words, but for us, having little space did not mean feeling confined. We never stayed long. When a small group gathers, there is no need to raise your voice. We would place our order together, and even if there were still unfinished topics in our minds, we would leave them for next time and bring the evening to a short close. We could always meet again.

We did sometimes, though not often, take off our shoes and sit on tatami. The izakaya had a young proprietress with a bright, lively voice. Even when there were empty seats, she would answer the phone by saying, “We’re full right now, come back another time!” From her, I learned that communication is not only about stating facts plainly, and that there are such things as cheerful lies. A place does not have to be constantly full of people to feel alive. It can also embrace its own sparseness. The sensitivity with which a space holds its density, reveals something of the aesthetic of those who run the space.

Looking back through history, it has been nearly a century since beer was brewed and released from the factory in Ebisu. In the 1990s, when the factory closed and large-scale redevelopment took place, the neighbourhood must have had a particular momentum and bustle of its own. Today, however, Ebisu feels somehow calm. Perhaps because there are two centres — the area around the station rotary and Ebisu Garden Place — the flow of people dispersed. The restaurants and clothing stores that draw people to the neighbourhood are also scattered, often requiring a little walking to reach. It feels as though you have to pass through a quiet residential area before arriving at them.

Perhaps those who make a place in Ebisu, as well as those who visit it, instinctively pick up on the margins within the city and maintain a certain sense of distance. As though respecting the invisible spaces between them, they seem to move with a measured, ambiguous interval, careful not to disturb the surfaces of water that surround each urban island. We walk round the edges, take taxis, and sometimes pass through on shared bicycles.
At night, whenever I spent time with any of the three people who live in Ebisu, we would always end up at the same wine bar. A cave-like standing bar surrounded by wood, where we end the evening with just two glasses; white and orange, or red and red.

Only once, while I was with my two friends, did I happen to encounter my former friend. The coincidence unsettled me, but the calmness of my two friends, the sense of privacy that lingered in the bar, and Ebisu itself, surrounding us like a third presence, kept the moment from becoming dramatic and allowed it to settle quietly. On the way home, I felt that the two people who always walked so quickly had slowed their pace for me. Perhaps it was simply the gentle slope of Ebisu, so gradual that you barely notice it, that made them do so.

There was one more thing the three of them had in common. Whenever I left each of their homes and made my way towards Ebisu Station as the last train approached, I would always pass the same intersection. It was an unusual crossroad where the roads did not quite meet at ninety degrees. On one side was a park that had been remade several times; opposite it stood two convenience stores. The intersection was at the end of the slope. By the time I reached it, I was usually out of breath. A city where you breathe more. I try to rephrase “a city of many slopes” that way. Slopes, rises and falls. Unlike a straight, flat road with a clear view ahead, roads that cross and veer away from one another can make someone’s back suddenly disappear from sight. In Ebisu, a person’s back becomes a “presence” quickly.

I find myself wondering: what if the city spreading out around me were to become transparent? Not myself becoming invisible, but everything around me. The contours of the ground would remain, so I could continue walking, feeling the earth beneath my two feet. Sometimes the slope would be steep; sometimes it would be so gentle that I would barely register it as an incline. I would feel gravity more strongly than usual, more strongly than in other cities, and remember that I have a body. I would emerge onto a hilltop. The buildings standing along the slanting roads would be transparent. And then, as in the past, I would be able to see Mount Fuji from this high ground.

The one former friend and the two friends who live in Ebisu understood well that spending a long time together is not the only way to deepen a relationship, and that there are friendships woven through short encounters, connected intermittently over time.

They did not insist on depth, intensity, distance or frequency. What mattered was how much space to leave between things.
The people who have lived for so long along the slopes of Ebisu taught me, without words, a way of moving through the world like this.

坂の途中の人々

文・大和佳克

恵比寿には、一人の元友達と二人の友達が住んでいる。歳や性別はばらばらで仕事は違うし、着る服も違う。髪型なんてかなり違う。思い浮かぶ共通点は、坂の途中に住んでいること、動物と暮らしていること、歩くのが速いこと。

その三人と親しくなる過程では、それぞれの家で料理を囲むことが多かったけれど、ときどきは外で会った。カフェチェーンの小さなテーブルと奥行きのないソファ。私生活と仕事の話題を行き来する会話。開店直後に入った焼き鳥屋では、コの字型のカウンターについた常連の背後を通って背もたれのない椅子に座り、炭から立ちのぼる煙も一緒に串焼きを食べた。

言葉で確かめ合ったことはなかったけれど、私たちにとって居場所が狭いことは窮屈を意味しない。長居はしないから。小さく集えば大きな声を出す必要がないし、オーダーはひとつにまとめ、頭の中に話し終えていないトピックが残っていても、次に回して短く切り上げる。また会うことができるのだから。

頻度は高くないが、時折、靴を脱いで座る座敷の居酒屋に行くこともあった。そこには快活な声の若女将がいて、たとえ空席があっても「今はいっぱいなのよ、また今度ねー」と電話に答えるような店で、私は、あけすけに事実を語ることだけがコミュニケーションではないと知り、世の中には晴れやかな嘘もあることを学んだ。人がひっきりなしに訪れ、混みあう店内だけが活況を表すわけではない。まばらである様子さえも受け入れる、その密度に対する感性に、その空間を切り盛りする人の美意識が表れる。

歴史を振り返ると、恵比寿にある工場でビールが製造され発売されてから約100年が経ち、ビール工場の閉鎖、そして大規模な再開発が起きた1990年代には、この街に特有の勢いとにぎわいがあったのだろう。ただし、今、恵比寿はどことなく落ち着いている。駅ビル前のロータリーの周辺と恵比寿ガーデンプレイスという二つの中心があるからか、人いきれは分散する。人々が目的地にする食や服の店なんかも、駅からいくらか歩かないといけない地点に散らばっていて、一度、静かな住宅街を通り過ぎてから、そこにたどり着くような感じだ。

恵比寿に場所を構える人も、そこを訪れる人も、この街の隙間への意識を何気なくキャッチして、距離を保っているのかもしれない。都会の孤島を囲むそれぞれの水面に波風が立たないよう、そのあいだにある目に見えない部分を尊重するよう、適度で曖昧な間隔をあけてふるまっているように思える。私たちはその周縁を歩き、タクシーに乗り、ときにはシェアサイクルで通過していく。

夜、恵比寿に住む三人の誰と過ごすときも、最後はいつも同じワインバーに向かった。木に囲まれた穴蔵のような立ち飲みで、白とオレンジ、あるいは赤と赤の2杯で短く終わる。

たった一度だけ、二人の友達とその店に入ったら、一人の元友達と会ったことがある。その偶然に私は動揺したけれど、二人の冷静と、そのバーにただようプライバシーの感覚、すべてをとりまく第三者としての恵比寿が、その出来事を劇的な展開にはせず落ち着かせた。帰り道は、いつも早歩きの二人が歩調をゆるめて歩いてくれている気がした。気づかないほどなだらかな恵比寿の坂が、そうさせたのかもしれない。

三人の共通点はもう一つあった。私がそれぞれの家を出て、終電が近づく恵比寿駅へ向かうと、いつも同じ交差点を通り過ぎること。そこは、道が90度に交わらないいびつな十字路で、何度も造り替えられている公園と2軒のコンビニエンスストアが向かい合っている。

その交差点は、坂を登り切ったところにあった。だから、そこに着く頃、たいてい私は息を切らしていた。呼吸の数が多くなる街。「坂の多い街」をそんなふうに言い換えてみる。坂道、起伏。まっすぐで平坦な見通しのいい道に比べて、斜行しあう道は、誰かの後ろ姿がふいに見えなくなる。恵比寿は、人の背中が「気配」になるのが早い。

ふいに、この、身の回りに広がる街が透明になるとしたら？ と想像をしてみる。自分自身が透明人間になるのではなく、周りがそうなる。地面の輪郭はそこにあり続けるから、2本の足で踏みしめて歩き続けられる。ときには急で、ときには斜面だと感じないほど緩やかな坂を登っていく。いつもより、他の街よりも重力を感じて、体があることを思い出す。丘の上に出る。斜行する道に沿って建ち並ぶ建物は透明だ。すると、昔のように、この高台からは富士山が見えた。

恵比寿に住む一人の元友達と二人の友達は、よく知っていた。時間を長く過ごすことだけが関係性を深める方法ではなく、短く、それを断続的につなぎ合わせていくことで紡げる親交もあると。深さ、濃さ、奥行き、頻度に固執しない。どの程度、隙間を空けるか。恵比寿の坂の途中に長いあいだ住んでいる人たちは、言葉ではない仕方でそんな身の処し方を教えてくれた。