

Megalopolis mindscapes

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ISLE OF DREAMS, by Keizo Hino. Translated by Charles De Wolf. Dalkey Archive, 2010, 168 pp., £11.99 (paper)

In Donald Richie's short novel "Tokyo Nights," two characters discuss authenticity:

"Nothing is original — ever. Things seem to be changing but they are always the same."

"Like Tokyo," said Hiroshi.

"We dote on the new, not sensing the old . . ."

In "Isle of Dreams," 50-year-old construction worker and widower Shozo Sakai enjoys his lunchtime walks in the canyons between Tokyo's tall office buildings. To him, these glass, steel, and concrete edifices are things of reverberation and presence, reflecting each other while creating depths from surface, made real by his image of them as multiple-exposure photographs, the solidification of the peripheral. On one of his walks, this architectural sensitivity triggers a hallucination transporting Shozo back to his postwar student days and his visits to the Soviet Cultural Center that stood in the present space.

What has protruded into his everyday life? Tokyo — a perpetually changing dream in which memory, history, and "reality" elide, dislocate, and/or drift.

On his days off, Shozo takes buses around the city looking for and then exploring any buildings that interest him.

On one such journey, he finds himself on Harumi Island with thousands of schoolchildren attending a Comiket-like event. Looking back at the Tokyo skyline, he sees the city in flame — either a vision of the future or a flashback. As he is leaving, a mysterious woman motorcyclist nearly runs him down. He begins to feel "quite alien to the world he had previously known and experienced" and is drawn to the artificial island, part of the force transforming the megalopolis.

On a trip to Odaiba, he has another hallucination; this time, a violent and sexual response to a piece of red kimono material among the garbage, this, in turn, causes a psychosexual memory conjuring a nightmarish black ship.

One Sunday, at a refuse dump on Odaiba, Shozo rescues the mysterious young woman (Yoko Hayashi) injured in a speed-tribe motorcycle duel. He takes her to hospital where she warns him he will never get back to his original self. When she disappears, Shozo tracks her down and finds another woman, an equally mysterious mannequin designer, who warns him against looking for Yoko.

Shozo's obsessions multiply — buildings, reclaimed land, refuse dumps, mannequins, the two women (doubles?).

His addiction to the interstices "(b)etween nature and artifice, between day and night, between reality and fantasy" grows and he is drawn deeper into the young women's world. With Yoko, he visits an off-limits island, an old battery dating to the time of Commodore Perry's Black Ships. What appears a very Freudian semi-paradise, with historical ruins surrounded by primeval forest, soon transmogrifies through a fungal unconscious into a horrorscape of dead herons.

Plutarch wrote of Heraclitus' river, "So sharp and so swift its change; it scatters and brings together again . . . even while it is being formed it fails, it approaches, and it is gone. Hence becoming never ends in being, for the process never leaves off, or is stayed."

Tokyo, like J. G. Ballard's London or Steve Erickson's Los Angeles, is an ever-evolving, expanding narrative in which demolished buildings shimmer ghostlike in the memories of the skyscrapers that now inhabit their space.

The city generates its own reality, its own myths, a place and space where refuse dumps, plastic bags, discarded pantyhose have their own life, their own story to tell; the islands in the bay seeping time, slipping time, a megalopolis of irretrievable history birthed by the very things it discards.

An eerie, contemplative novel, full of hallucinations and history, obsession and possession, the urban surreality of "Isle of Dreams" is part eco-slipstream part-Japanese ghost story.