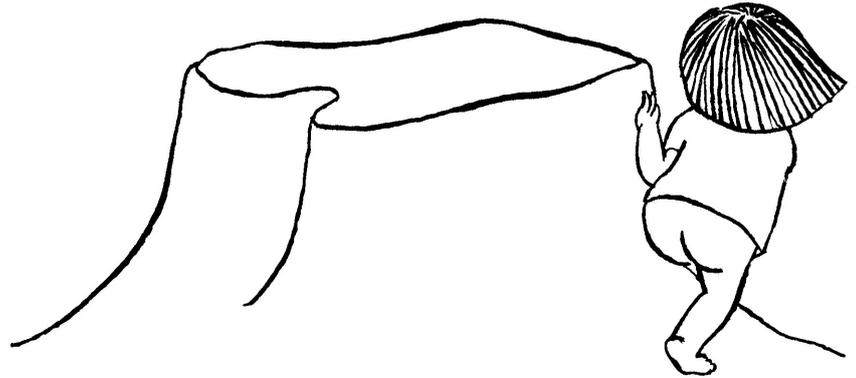


We are expecting a baby. I don't think that I will dare to talk about these stories and thoughts with him/her, so I will write them down.

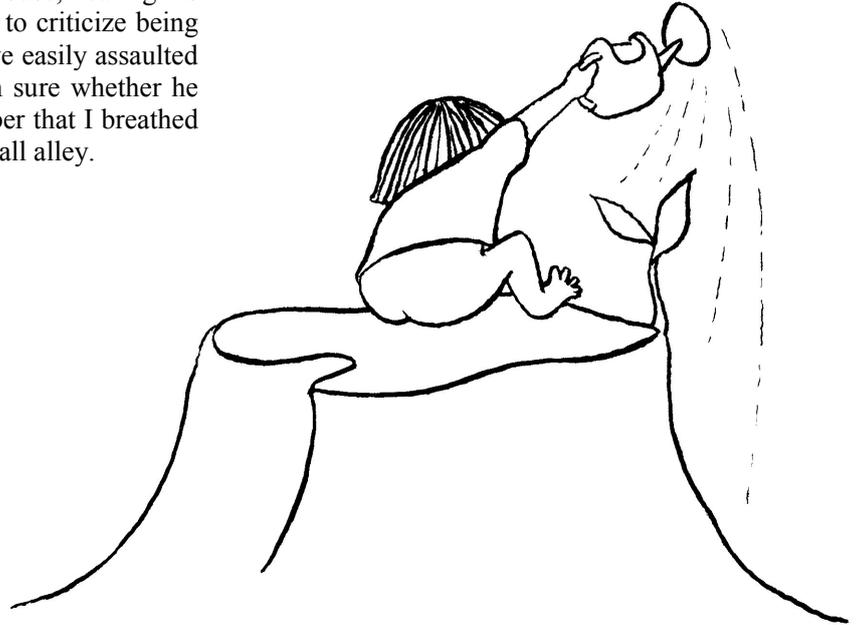
When I was living in Tokyo, I used to spend nights on the street whenever I had the chance, such as the times when I missed the last train because I was out drinking. Even the day I attended a lecture meeting in Osaka, I'd already decided to do so because I knew that I would miss the last train back to Tokyo anyway.

This was the first time for me to stroll in Osaka city by myself. I started walking around the areas devastated by the Great Hanshin Earthquake looking for a place to have meal. I found a western style restaurant and had a drink. I also found a public bath and then went in.



There was another guy in the bath and I soon realized that he was gay because of his gestures; he started to follow after me every time I changed baths.

I was uncomfortable with his eyes, so I escaped to the changing room, pretending to change baths again. As I was putting on my clothes in a hurry, I felt that he was also coming into the changing room where I was. I ran down the steps of the bathhouse, hearing his noisy and hurried footsteps behind me. I don't mean to criticize being "gay" itself, and I don't think either that he could have easily assaulted me though he was a well-built man. I was not even sure whether he intended to do something to me or not, but I remember that I breathed an internal sigh of relief only after escaping into a small alley.



Though I didn't have the feel of the place, I knew which direction to find the train station. I came to another road and started walking along it, and when I was about to come to a cross street, the same man appeared from another side of the crossing! He was pushing a bicycle instead of riding, which was weird enough, and then he started following me behind again. I tried many other ways to escape from him like entering convenience stores, pretending that I took the wrong way and so on, and then finally he seemed to have given up at a footbridge. I guess he thought it was too obvious to turn back after coming so far; he just stared at me from the footbridge.

Then, on the way to Shin-Osaka Station, I stepped into many other convenience stores to browse magazines which are sometimes the same. Finally I made up my mind to spend the night sleeping on one of the benches at the bus stop beside the station. However, it wasn't easy as any small sounds I heard frightened me. Whenever I woke up in the middle of night, I could fall asleep only after looking around to confirm that the man was not around me anymore.



There was a reason why I wanted to sleep on the streets. I was supposed to engage in activities to support children, so called street children, in the towns around Kathmandu, Nepal from the winter of that year. Preparing for that, I read through quite a few reports and booklets published by NGOs and International Organizations. Many of them introduced and emphasized various cases of physical and psychological harm that the street children suffered through being blackmailed and assaulted by the police and/or sexually harassed and raped by adults.

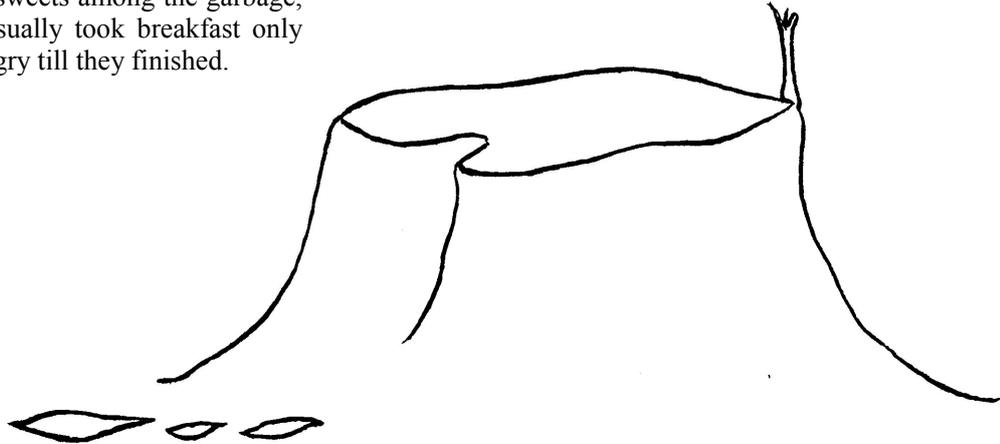
I was not satisfied with those reports actually. I'd seen many photos showing street children sleeping on the street, without any blankets, lying over one another with just their faces showing out from among the layers of human bodies. To me it looked like fun and I even got a sense of excitement from the idea. Are these really the facial expressions of kids who have been spending nights in fear?

To resolve this discrepancy, I decided to try it out by myself. I couldn't attempt it every night, but still, I came to understand it to a certain extent after trying for a while.



I stayed in Nepal from mid November 2004 to early February 2005, in Patan to be exact, not Kathumandu, where I used to meet children who collect garbage to exchange for money; I met them almost every day of the last month, which actually had nothing to do with my official assignment there.

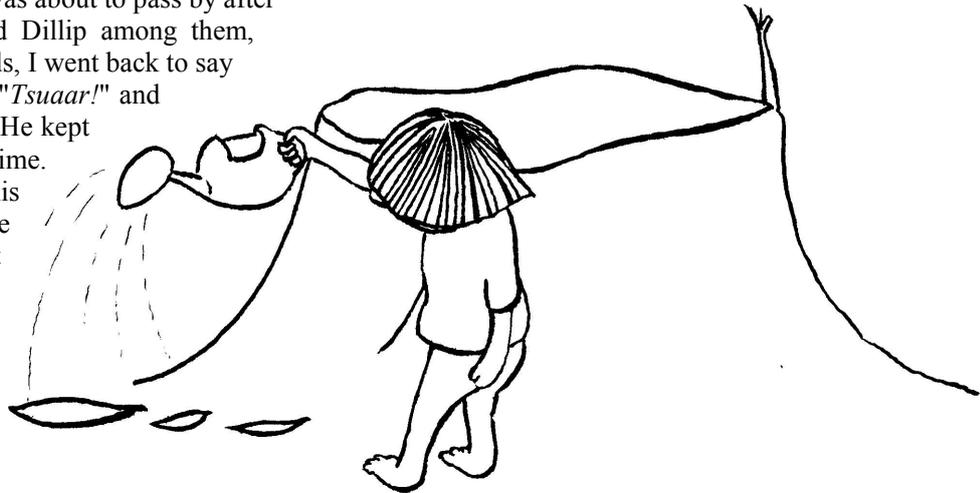
The children were up to 14-15 years old and kept a waste-collection point as their base. They always worked in a group and spent time there till garbage collection trucks came around 8:30am. They always made a fire to keep off the cold; sometimes they waited for trucks all together, but otherwise in turn. They also used to play with the bonfire, shaping plastic bottles and melting pieces of plastic, which are not worth exchanging for money anyway. They usually wore sandals, and even if their fingers were injured and infected, they just left them like that. If they found some sweets among the garbage, they would take those sweets, and they usually took breakfast only after their morning duties, so they were hungry till they finished.



The last part of their work took place in the afternoon, taking the collected garbage to the place where the garbage was separated and exchanged for money. There was a boy who hung around with the group for some other purposes, but anyway, their daily work was something like I've described. In the morning of weekdays, I spent my time just joining them around bonfires, treating them to cups of tea once in a while and sometimes visiting some of their houses on weekends. They used to call me *Tsuaar* which, I guess, is "Sir" originally. I came to be on familiar terms with about nine of them.

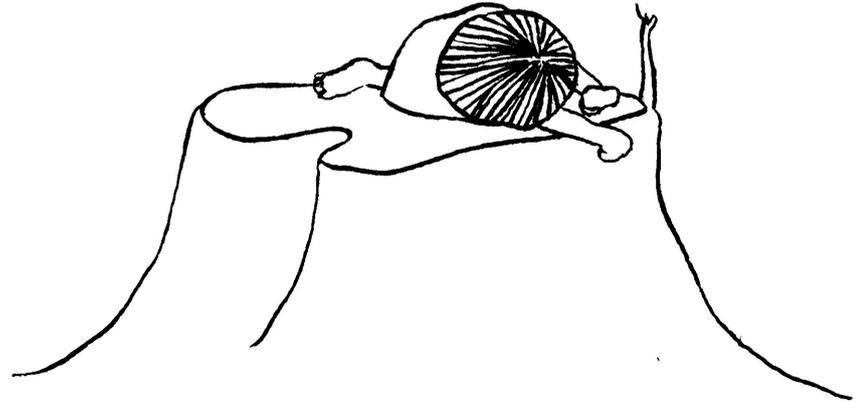
One evening, on the way back from my office, I found a group of kids gathering and shouting in front of a doughnuts caf? beside the road. I thought they were bothering the shopkeepers or customers for leftovers. Soon after finding me, one of the boys put his right hand out in front of me, meaning "give me money". I was about to pass by after calming him down, but finding Dipesh and Dillip among them, brothers who were my morning-bonfire friends, I went back to say "hi" to them. Recognizing me, they shouted "*Tsuaar!*" and Dipesh came and threw his arms around me. He kept his face buried in my clothes for some time. When the other boys found Dipesh doing this they started putting their hands on me one after another. Then you know what happened? Dipesh made them go away saying "Don't mooch from *Tsuaar!*" That was quite a surprise.

I patted Dipesh's shoulder and left there hearing them whispering from behind me about whose *Tsuaar* I am.



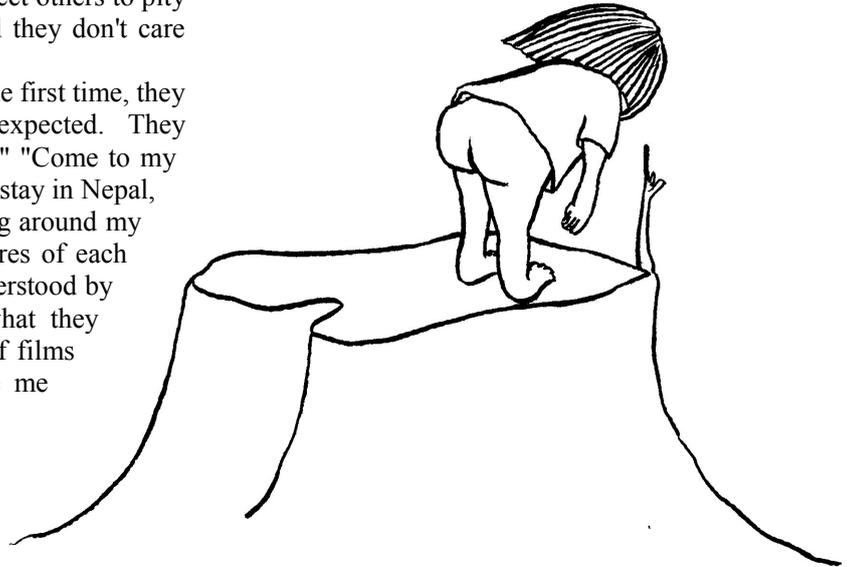
Another morning I found seven boys in the garbage spot. We sat together around a fire eating some cookies that I brought as souvenirs. Suddenly, Krishna, who always wore green jersey, shouted a Nepali word for female genitals. He was looking up at the sky, bending backwards, and spreading his arms widely.

He was the one who had tried to make me believe that a Nepali word for male genitals was the word for mouth. That was when I was learning the Nepali for different body parts from those boys, noting them down in my sketchbook. I came to realize his lie thanks to other boys' bitter smiles and I laughed. That morning, too, I couldn't stop laughing at Krishna doing a similar thing. Even after that, he kept doing funny and naughty things.



That was just a usual morning with some pedestrians passing by. Since some schoolgirls were also walking by, I looked into his face, saying "Hey!" to warn him. He quickly bent down to protect himself -- he might have thought that I was going to give him a good drubbing. But after realizing that I didn't meant to do such a thing to him, he again came close to me and threw his arms around me. They know, indeed, through their experiences, how other people regard them. They casually draw a boundary, knowing that people can't cross the line even if they are kind to them. Basically they don't expect others to pity them. Rather, they directly accept who they are, and they don't care even if others say "Street children? So what?"

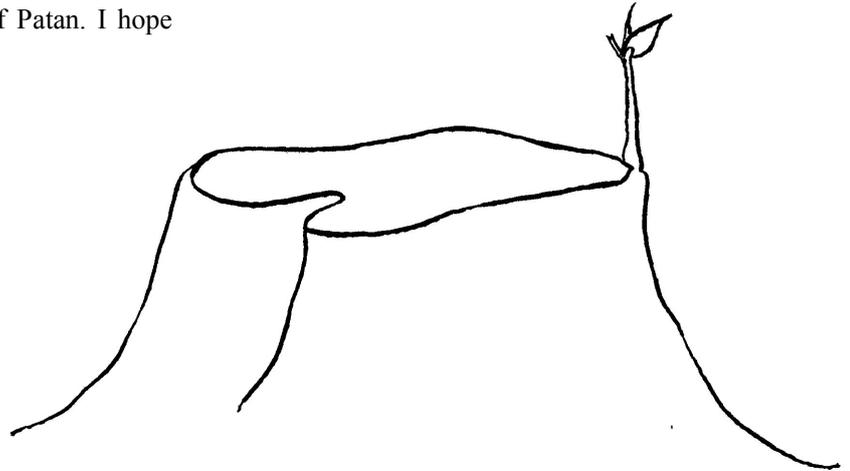
When I shared my wish to visit their homes for the first time, they exploded in exultation, which was actually unexpected. They repeatedly told me "You'll come to our house, right?" "Come to my house!" One day, when it was almost at the end of my stay in Nepal, I met them with my single-lens reflex camera dangling around my neck. They took my camera and start shooting pictures of each other. They know how they are and how they are understood by others, but they don't care about it at all; that's what they showed me with great joy. They finished two rolls of films with sweet but poor photographs, which also made me smile.



I met an old lady who couldn't speak and could only repeat "mai-mai-mai" to express her feelings. She had been that way since some accident. However, she hadn't lost her memories; in fact she was very lucid. I met this lady after visiting Nepal.

One time I also struck up a friendship with a guy whose parents were taken in and had become heavily in debt at some point. Although he himself didn't do anything wrong, his aunt seemed to always cuss him out about the matter. He already has a history of withdrawal and couldn't calm his restless mind when he had to meet his aunt; furthermore, he got rigid with fear in front of her.

I've met quite a few people having hard times and I've wondered exactly what their pains are like. I think they have much in common with those children who collect garbage in the city of Patan. I hope that they are all doing fine.



I never want to be a person who gets afraid of, feels guilty about, or gets frustrated with someone whose way of life is different from mine. Even if I fall into such feelings, I don't want to blame someone for it; if I start blaming someone, that's not from fear, guiltiness or frustration any more, but from ill-intent. I want to be a person who can take it easy, saying "Yes, that's how s/he is" even if I can't understand his or her lifestyle.

I don't want to force an identity, "my child", on our expected baby. I hope for him or her to explore life freely.

