

The Earth Trembles

Andrea Ballatore, 20/03/2011

I get off at Meiji-Jungumae, one of the hundreds of access points to Tokyo's massive public transport network. The subway station lies at the intersection between two wide busy avenues, surrounded by ample broad pavements and the shiny show windows that characterise the overcrowded district of Shibuya. I step into a souvenir shop, and while I browse a display full of dangling Hello Kitty key rings, I feel a long vibration through the floor, the kind that you normally feel above an underground train in big cities.

The phenomenon lasts a bit too long, and I say to myself that it must be a very long train passing at full speed just a few meters under my feet. The vibration intensifies, and the key rings start swaying. The other customers exchange quick glances and say something in Japanese. We all head for the exit, while the vibration starts shaking the floor. Once outside, I get the feeling that events are unfolding in slow-motion. The traffic freezes in a few moments, and hundreds of people tentatively move towards the middle of the road, looking upwards as if they are waiting for an air strike.

The shocks intensify all of a sudden. The asphalt moves horizontally, in powerful and rapid elliptical trajectories, taking us by surprise. Some people fall down, others scream, while most of us manage to stand and struggle to keep our balance, looking up at the tops of the buildings. The vibration affects all visible objects, including six-storey office blocks, condominiums, blue road signs, traffic lights, double-glazed windows, well looked-after bushes, clean pavements and fences. The urban furniture gets shaken by an invisible energy storm, generating a loud and disquieting rattling noise.

The shocks reach my chest, arms and head through my legs. A stream of adrenaline kicks in, my heart beat soars and my chest feels inflated like a balloon about to burst. My heart beat rumbles in my skull. I give quick glances to the others, spotting nothing but sheer terror. I feel suspended amidst a powerless and defenceless humanity. My fear of the possible death that lurks in the tremors is matched by that of those around me, despite the thousands of drills they have experienced since playschool.

Around Meiji-Jungumae there are none of the skyscrapers, suspended motorways, railways and electric wires that dominate other areas of the metropolis. From where I stand, I can't see buildings taller than five or six storeys. They all tremble and rattle. I look at them working out imaginary exit strategies in case they start crumbling. Some windows break, relatively quietly, without exploding on us. On the fifth floor of a building, a bookcase is thrown against a window, shatters it and then gets stuck, while some books fly towards the pavement, tracked by hundreds of transfixed eyes.

As the shocks continue, I observe the asphalt moving quickly. I suddenly remember that I'm standing on a multi-layer city, which hides deep underground structures hosting train stations, offices, restaurants and supermarkets. While the buildings tremble like bricks made of jelly, images of tunnels collapsing under thousands of tons of concrete and steel crowd into my mind. I think of abysses swallowing all that exists in the depths of the Earth.

After an infinite amount of time - which amounts to 2 minutes, I'll later realise - the rapid sequence of pre-mortem thoughts fades and I perceive that the shocks are losing intensity. Some people talk, and I don't need to speak Japanese to understand that they're saying that

the worst must be over.

I notice a smartly-dressed man with Northern European features, standing next to a flower bed. I move with unsteady steps towards him, and I ask him whether he speaks English. "I am English", he replies. I ask him what's going on. "I don't know. I've been working here as an architect for years and I'd never seen anything like that." Then he points his finger at the glass-and-steel building that we're standing in front of. "I designed that. If it fell on me, at least I knew who to blame". I laugh out loud, refraining from hugging him. It's hard to believe, but we are all alive.