

Memory is a mysterious thing: you don't remember what happened just yesterday, yet you can recall moments from childhood with perfect clarity. In memory those moments pass so languidly, perhaps because each experience was a first, making the impressions all the more vivid, whereas successive experiences into adult life merely repeat past precedent and fade into insignificance. Consider your very earliest memory: often it is a memory of seeing how far back you could remember, accompanied by childhood anxiety at finding the recollections sketchy and blurred. In this way memories always come doubled over in layers and folds.

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I see a well. We had an old well in the backyard, with a hand pump that creaked as the water came gushing out. A memory of both eye and ear. At some point, I realized that the house in which I was born and those alongside it were older than the rest of the houses across the street. Most of my old Tokyo neighborhood was firebombed during World War II. Only our block had been spared. I noticed some shop signs still bore a prewar Shitaya District address. Many houses also had copperplate fire walls from after the 1923 Tokyo Earthquake and its conflagrations. Our yard with its well didn't have much of a garden: a patch of hard ground with no plants, scarcely four meters square, bound on three sides by other houses. It peered up to a rectangle cut out of the sky. This gloomy courtyard was more like the bottom of a well. I get the distinct feeling there is still more to the memory, but whatever lies beyond leads down into murky depths.

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I was born into a family of merchants. What survived of our firebombed neighborhood was a crisscross maze of alleys. The local gangsters lurked in the corners, snaring any new kid into playing *beigoma* (spinning tops) and *menko* (picture card games). Back before television, *kami shibai* (picture card theater) was the high point of the day. The storyteller man who came around was justly famous for his delivery. The kids would buy his treats before the story began, angling for a seat close to him. My favorites were soy sauce-coated rice crackers and apricot candies. Some kids couldn't even afford the snacks at five yen apiece, and so they would look on bashfully from the outer circle. One day, however, one of these onlookers happened to have five yen to buy a cracker. I can still see the boy beaming so proudly over his purchase, as the rest of us gave him a front-row seat, just as the *kami shibai* man launched forth solemnly into the "Tale of the Golden Bat."

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Photographs also stir my memory. A snapshot taken when I was a little boy shows me crouching in a back lane, peering at a cricket. This inclination toward clinical observation has stayed with me to this day. Often I'll gaze for ages at something, no matter the subject under observation, just to create a profile of it that meets my satisfaction. When this photograph was taken, my thoughts may have gone something like this: "Cricket legs have spikes. Their wings are rough, and when rubbed together they chirp. Wow, amazing!" During my musings, an older boy appeared out of nowhere and called out, "Lookin' cute, kid, lemme take your picture." And without waiting for a yes or a no, he snapped a photo of me. Several days later, this same boy called on my mother, bearing a *carte de visite*-size print. It seems he had an eye for which child belonged in whose household. "Thought you might want to buy a photo of your cute little tyke," he told her, then scowled and threatened that if she didn't buy it, he'd burn it on the spot, negative and all. He eventually badgered my mother into buying it. She was plenty angry at the scam, but I wasn't much upset. Thinking back on the incident now, I suppose he was probably just a starving student, but I could tell he had a knack for getting by.