

Sanshirō – Chapter 2

Natsume Sōseki – 1908

Sanshirō was impressed by many things in Tōkyō. He was impressed by the electric trains with their clanging bells. He was impressed by the great number of riders getting on and off at each stop. He was impressed by the Marunouchi district. Most of all, he was amazed to discover that Tōkyō never ended, no matter how far one ventured. Everywhere he walked were stacks of lumber and piles of stone. New houses were set back some meters from the road behind old storehouses that were half demolished and barely standing. It looked as if the entire city were being torn down. At the same time, it looked as though the entire city were rising up anew.

Sanshirō was thoroughly impressed. His amazement was no less than that of a boy off the farm who sees a town for the first time and drinks in its wondrous sights. In spite of his schooling, he gawked in amazement at all that he saw. His education had no more prepared him for this than any patent medicine would have. His confidence failed him, leaving him ill at ease.

If this intense activity was in fact the real world, then his life thus far had been fully removed from reality. He'd lived in a realm apart, and fallen asleep to boot. Even if he woke now, eager to join the fray, he had no easy means of doing so. He stood in the middle of it, with activity swirling round him, but he stood as a mere observer. His life as a student would continue on as before. The world was restless, and he watched as it stirred, but in it he had no role. His world and this reality before him were parallel tracks on a common plane, destined never to touch. This real world was surging forward, leaving him behind. This thought left him anxious.

Thus were Sanshirō's impressions as he stood in the middle of Tōkyō and watched the electric trains, the steam trains, and the bustling of people, some dressed in white and some dressed in black. At the same time, he was utterly oblivious to the undercurrent of dynamic thought coursing through academia. -- Meiji thinkers were racing to cover in forty years the ground that their Western counterparts had traversed in three hundred.

Surrounded on all sides by the tireless bustle of Tōkyō, Sanshirō's doldrums continued until a letter arrived from his mother in the country. It was the first piece of mail to reach him in Tōkyō. In it were various pieces of news and advice. They'd been blessed with a good harvest this year. He must remember to take good care of himself. He should remain vigilant - Tōkyō people are shrewd and not to be trusted. Don't worry about tuition and expenses - remittances will arrive at the end of each month. Masa Katsuta has a cousin who graduated from the university and is now in the college of science. Sanshirō should make his acquaintance and seek his guidance. The letter ended at this point, but the all-important name of the cousin had been omitted and was added in the margin: Sōhachi Nonomiya. Several other items were also added in the margins. Saku's gray horse had died suddenly of illness, and Saku was terribly distraught. Omitsu Miwata had brought him some fish, but they would have spoiled en route to Tōkyō, so the family had eaten them. And so forth.

Sanshirō looked at the letter and felt he was holding a relic from the worn and distant past. He could never have said it to his mother, but it occurred to him that he didn't have time for these things anymore.

Nevertheless, he read it through again. In short, if he were connected in any way to his own reality then his mother, though an old woman in an ancient countryside, was the connection point. There was also the woman he'd traveled with on the train. But she'd been a bolt out of the blue, not part of his reality. Their encounter had been too intense and had happened too fast to constitute a sincere connection. Sanshirō decided to follow his mother's counsel and call on Sōhachi Nonomiya.

The next day was hotter than usual. The schools were on break, so he didn't expect he'd find Nonomiya at the science college, but his mother hadn't provided an address for his lodgings. He decided to go anyway and see what he could find out, so around four in the afternoon he set out past the high school and entered through the Yayoichō gate. The road was covered in several centimeters of loose dirt, on which the tracks of clog supports, shoe soles, and straw sandal bottoms were finely impressed. There were also long straight tracks from cart and bicycle wheels. The road was unbearably stifling, but he felt greatly refreshed after entering the tree-covered grounds of the college. He tried the first door he came to and found it locked. The back door was locked too. Finally he came to the side door and gave it a push just in case. It was open. A janitor was dozing at the corner where the corridors intersected. As Sanshirō explained the reason for his visit, the man gazed out on the Ueno woods and struggled to regain his senses. Suddenly, he came to life and responded that Nonomiya might indeed be in, and he went off to check. The place was deserted. After a short while the janitor reappeared.

"He's here. Follow me," he said with a friendly tone. They turned a corner and descended down a concrete ramp. Their surroundings grew dim. It was much the same as being blinded in the bright sun, but his eyes gradually adjusted to the darkness, and he was able to see his way. It was relatively cool underground. A door to their left had been propped open, and from behind it a face appeared. The large eyes and broad forehead suggested some affiliation with Buddhism. The owner of the face was wearing a suit jacket over a cotton crepe shirt, but the jacket was stained in places. He was surprisingly tall, and his slender build seemed appropriately suited to the hot weather. With his head and back in a straight line, he extended himself forward and greeted Sanshirō with a bow.

"In here," he said and disappeared back into the room. Sanshirō approached the door and peered in. Nonomiya was already seated. "In here," he said again and gestured toward a platform built from a plank and four square legs. Sanshirō took a seat on the platform, introduced himself, and added that he was newly arrived and might need occasional counsel. Nonomiya listened quietly and nodded. His demeanor was much like that of the man who'd eaten peaches on the train. Sanshirō could think of nothing further to say. Nonomiya remained silent.

Sanshirō looked around the room. There was a large rectangular oak table in the middle, cluttered with various articles. There was an apparatus with thick wires protruding in every direction, and next to it stood a glass bowl filled with water. There were tools for filing and knives for cutting, and there was even an old necktie among the odds and ends. In the far corner of the room was a granite pedestal a meter high, and on the stone was a complicated device the size of a pickled vegetable can. Sanshirō's attention was caught by two holes on the side of the can that shone like snake eyes. Nonomiya smiled at his interest and proceeded to explain.

“I do my preparation during the day. Then at night, when traffic is still and the world is quiet, I sit in this dark cellar and peer at those shining eyes through a scope. I’m studying the pressure of light beams. I started around New Year’s, but the apparatus is touchy, so I haven’t produced the anticipated results yet. The work is quite tolerable during the summer, but winter nights are another story. Even with coat and scarf, the cold is unbearable.”

Sanshirō was duly impressed. At the same time, he struggled to imagine what pressure light beams could exert and what use there could be in measuring it. As he was pondering, Nonomiya invited him to take a look. Curious, he approached a scope that was set some meters in front of the stone pedestal and put his right eye to the eyepiece. He couldn’t discern anything. “What do you see?” “Nothing at all.” “Ah, the cap’s still on.” Nonomiya rose from his seat and removed a cover from the other end of the scope.

Now Sanshirō saw a bright center with fuzzy contours and a graduated scale. Below the scale was the number 2. “What do you see?” Nonomiya asked again. “I see the number 2.” “Keep watching,” he said, as he circled around to the apparatus and made an adjustment.

The scale began to move against the lit background. The 2 disappeared. Then a 3 appeared. Next a 4 appeared. Then 5. Finally, the progression of numbers reached 10. At this point, the scale began to move in reverse. 10 disappeared, then 9, then 8 to 7 and 7 to 6, on down to 1. “What do you think?” Satisfied with the demonstration, Sanshirō removed his eye from the scope. He didn’t care to inquire about the meaning of the numbers.

Sanshirō politely expressed his gratitude and left the cellar. As he reemerged into the outside world, the day was still burning hot. He took a deep breath despite the heat. The sun had descended toward the west and shone obliquely on a wide hill, setting brilliant fire to the windows of the engineering buildings on either side of the hilltop. The sky was transparent to its depths, and within its depths a burning tongue of pale red flame spread backward from the western edge and seemed to radiate heat directly down onto his head from above. Catching the sun’s slanting rays on his upper back, he entered the woods to his left. The trees were catching the evening sun in a similar manner, with a red glow permeating their dense green foliage. Evening cicadas were singing on the thick trunk of a keyaki tree. Sanshirō came to the edge of a small pond and crouched down on his heels.

It was wonderfully peaceful here. There was no sound of passing trains. Before leaving for Tōkyō, he had read in the local paper about a train line that was planned to pass by the university’s Red Gate entrance. Due to the university’s protestations, the line had been diverted to pass through Koishikawa instead. Sanshirō recalled this affair as he crouched at the edge of the pond. A university that won’t allow train access must truly view itself as distinct from the outside world.

When one chances to enter the university, one discovers men like Nonomiya, who spend the better part of a year buried deep in its cellars measuring light beam pressure. Nonomiya is utterly modest in his appearance. On the street, one might take him to be a junior technician from an electric lighting company. Yet remarkably, he’s happy to toil tirelessly in his underground lair in pursuit of knowledge. Even though it’s clear that the readings in his scope mean nothing to the real world outside. Nonomiya may have no intent of ever engaging

with the real world. In the end, the still air he breathes here may serve over time to reinforce his detachment. Sanshirō wondered if he too might prefer a life without distraction, remote from the living world.

He remained still and studied the pond's surface. A myriad of large trees were reflected in its depths, and deeper still was an image of the blue sky. He didn't think about electric trains, or Tōkyō, or even Japan. His thoughts were distant and far removed. After a while, a tinge of loneliness spread across his mind like a thin wisp of cloud. Then, a feeling of desolation came upon him, as he imagined himself sitting alone in Nonomiya's cellar. During his high school days in Kumamoto he'd often hiked into the Tatsuta hills, which were quieter by far. He'd napped on the athletic grounds among evening primrose and forgotten the world below. However, the complete isolation he felt in this present moment was new to him.

Maybe it was the contrast with Tōkyō and its frenetic pace. Or maybe -- Sanshirō's cheeks flushed. He remembered his encounter with the woman on the train. -- He felt that he needed to touch the real world. At the same time, he felt that the real world was too dangerous for him to approach. He decided he should return to his dorm and write his mother.

As he raised his eyes, he saw two women standing atop the rise to his left. They stood near the edge of the water, and across from where they stood was a tall and thickly-wooded slope. A gothic-style building clad in bright red brick backed the woods on the hilltop. The setting sun was casting its rays obliquely from beyond the woods and building on that far side. The women faced the direction of this evening sun. From Sanshirō's vantage in the low shadows, the rise was brilliantly lit. One of the women held a round fan to her forehead to shield her eyes. He couldn't see her face, but the colors of her kimono and sash were brilliant. He noticed her white sandal socks, and while he couldn't make out the color of the straps, he could see that she wore straw sandals. The second woman was dressed in white. She didn't carry a fan or anything else. She furrowed her brow slightly and gazed into the old trees that extended their branches over the water from high above on the opposite bank. The woman with the fan was several paces in front. The woman in white was back a step from the embankment. Their forms made an angle with Sanshirō's line of vision.

Sanshirō's only impression of the women at this point was the brilliant colors they wore. However, he lacked the sophistication to elaborate further on the colors, and he lacked the words to capture his sentiment. He could only surmise that the one in white was a nurse.

He watched them with fascination. The one in white began to move. Not with purpose, but as though her feet were guiding her. He realized that the one with the fan was also in motion. As if on cue, the two of them descended toward the water together at a leisurely pace. Sanshirō continued to watch them.

At the bottom of the slope was a stone bridge. If they didn't cross the bridge, then the path would lead them back toward the college of science. If they did cross, they'd approach him along the water's edge. They crossed the bridge.

The woman with the fan no longer held it aloft. She had a small white flower in her left hand and was smelling it as she approached. Her attention was on the flower under her nose, so she walked with her eyes cast downward. She came to a stop several meters from Sanshirō.

“What kind of tree is this?” she asked as she lifted her gaze. Above her head, a large chinquapin oak hung over the water, its luxuriant round canopy obscuring the sun’s rays.

“It’s a chinquapin oak,” the nurse answered. She spoke as though instructing a child.

“There are no acorns,” the other remarked, and she lowered her gaze. As she did so she glanced at Sanshirō. Sanshirō sensed that she’d glanced his way. Impressions of color disappeared from his head, replaced by a feeling he couldn’t describe. This new feeling closely resembled his reaction when the woman from the train had remarked that he was no ladies’ man. A wave of anxiety swept over him.

The two women passed in front of Sanshirō. The younger one, who’d been smelling the white flower, dropped it in front of him as she went by. He gazed after them as they moved away. The nurse walked ahead, with the younger one following behind. Among the bright hues, there were blades of susuki grass outlined on her sash in the base white color of the underlying fabric. She wore a single rose of pure white in her hair. In the shade under the oak branches, it shone prominently among her dark locks.

Sanshirō became listless. Finally, he murmured the word, “contradictory.” He may have been thinking of the atmosphere of the university and the young woman. Or of the colors in the young woman’s dress and the black of her pupils. Or of the way the young woman triggered thoughts in his head of the woman on the train. Or of the divergent paths before him, one of which would define his future. Or of how the things that delighted him also made him anxious. -- To this young man fresh from the country, nothing seemed rational. The world was tainted with inconsistencies.

Sanshirō picked up the fallen flower. He smelled it, but there was no particular scent. He tossed it into the pond, and it floated there. Suddenly, he heard his name called from the opposite shore. He shifted his gaze from the flower, and he saw Nonomiya’s tall figure on the other side of the stone bridge.

“You’re still here?”

Without answering, Sanshirō rose and ambled slowly. When he reached the stone bridge, he answered, “Yes.” He felt somehow awkward and detached.

Nonomiya seemed not to notice. “Nice and cool here, isn’t it?”

Sanshirō answered again with, “Yes.”

Nonomiya gazed at the waters of the pond for a moment, then began searching his pocket with his right hand. An envelope was protruding halfway from the pocket, and on it were characters penned in the feminine style. Nonomiya seemed not to find what he was digging for. His hand came out empty and he dangled it back at his side.

“The instruments aren’t cooperating today, so I can’t run experiments this evening. I thought I’d walk through Hongō on the way home. Would you like to join me?”

Sanshirō readily accepted. The two of them walked up to the top of the rise. Nonomiya paused in the place where the women had been standing earlier. He surveyed the subdued surface of the pond, contrasting it with the thick vegetation of the high slope across the way, and the building above that was visible through the branches.

“Nice view, isn’t it? The way just the corner of that building is visible. The way the trees frame it. Did you notice the design of the building? The engineering buildings are well done too, but this one is superb.”

Sanshirō was impressed by Nonomiya’s keen observation. To be honest, he had no idea which buildings he preferred. This time it was his turn to just listen quietly and nod.

“Then there’s the effect of the trees and the water. -- nothing special, but considering it’s the middle of Tōkyō -- peaceful. Only in a setting like this can scholarship flourish. The commotion of Tōkyō is becoming unbearable. This place is a sanctuary.” Speaking as they walked, he pointed out a building on his left. “That’s where faculty meetings are held. I seldom attend. My work in the cellar takes priority. The pace of progress these days is breathtaking. If you don’t keep up you’re soon left behind. It may look to others like I’m just putzing around down there, but I can assure you my mind is in a frenzy. Maybe even more frenzied than those electric trains. Even though it’s summertime, I can’t bear the thought of time lost vacationing.” As he finished, he was gazing up into the big sky. The last of the sun’s rays were fading.

Wisps of white cloud floated obliquely in the evening sky’s upper reaches. They looked as though sketched with the tip of a brush.

“Do you know what those are?” Nonomiya asked. Sanshirō looked up at the almost transparent clouds. “They’re made of snow crystals. From down here it looks like they’re hardly moving, but the winds up there are fast. Faster even than typhoon winds. -- Have you read Ruskin?”

Sanshirō, unfortunately, could not say that he had. Nonomiya simply said, “I see.” After a bit he added, “It would be interesting to paint this kind of sky. -- Maybe I’ll suggest it to Haraguchi.” Sanshirō, of course, did not know of the painter Haraguchi whom Nonomiya had mentioned.

The two of them passed in front of the bronze bust of Erwin Bälz and continued on by the side of the Karatachi temple before emerging onto the main thoroughfare where the electric trains ran. Sanshirō was asked his impression of the bronze bust, and again he struggled for an answer. The thoroughfare was bustling with activity. Trains passed through in an endless procession.

“These trains make quite a racket, don’t you think?” Sanshirō in fact found them almost frightful. However, he simply nodded in agreement with Nonomiya’s comment. Nonomiya remarked how he disliked the noise, but it didn’t seem to be bothering him in the least. “I can’t navigate the trains anymore without help from the conductor. They’ve added so many lines over these past several years. Convenience is never without complication. The same holds true for my research.” Nonomiya smiled as he said this.

It was just prior to the start of a new academic term, and there were many students about sporting brand new high school caps. Nonomiya seemed energized by their presence. “Lots of new arrivals. Young people bring

so much vitality. By the way, how old are you?” Sanshirō gave his age, just as he had written it in the inn register. “Then you’re seven years younger than me. One can accomplish just about anything in seven years. But time slips by quickly. Seven years will be gone before you know it.” Sanshirō was unsure how to reconcile Nonomiya’s statements.

Near an intersection, they found myriad book and magazine sellers on either side of the road. Several shops were thronged with people flipping through magazines. Then the people would return them to the racks and go on their way. “Everyone looks, but no one buys.” Nonomiya laughed as he too glanced through a copy of “Sun.”

On the corners of the intersection were a couple of haberdasheries. The shop on the left, on their side of the road, sold Western-made wares. The shop on the opposite side sold Japanese wares. An electric train turned between the shops and then sped on with impressive force, bells clanging as it went. It was hard to cross the road for all the congestion. Nonomiya pointed to the shop on the opposite corner. “I need to get something over there.” He weaved his way nimbly between the dinging street cars. Sanshirō followed on his heels. Nonomiya entered the shop without hesitation. As Sanshirō waited outside, he looked through the front glass and saw a display shelf lined with combs and floral hairpins. His curiosity was aroused, and he wondered what Nonomiya could be buying in such a place. Just as he decided to go in and see, Nonomiya came out dangling a ribbon that was shiny and clear like cicada wings. “Beautiful, huh?”

It occurred to Sanshirō that he should buy something for Omitsu Miwata in return for the fish. However, if he sent her something she would no doubt flatter herself that there was more to it than formal reciprocity, so he decided to refrain.

From there, they went to Masagochō, where Nonomiya treated him to Western cuisine. According to Nonomiya, it was the best Western-style restaurant in Hongō. Sanshirō was sure that it tasted Western, but that was as far as he could judge. However, he did polish off everything he was served.

After parting with Nonomiya in front of the restaurant, Sanshirō carefully made his way back to Oiwake, retracing his route and turning left at the busy intersection. He poked his head into a sandal shop on the way home, thinking to buy a pair. However, the shop girl seated under the gas lamp had powdered her face brilliant white and looked like some plastered ghoul. He quickly changed his mind and left. The rest of the way home, he reflected on the complexion of the woman he’d seen by the edge of the pond. -- Her skin was light brown, like a lightly toasted rice cake. And its texture seemed extraordinarily fine. Sanshirō made up his mind that that was his ideal.