


"Airin-Chō" translates roughly as "The District of Neighborly Love." The name, given to a neighborhood in southern Osaka, is a grim joke to the people who live there. Airin is a desperately poor and almost completely ignored shadow in Japan's economic miracle, not even listed on maps of the city. Most of the people there are homeless, transient men who have slipped through the cracks in Japan's rigid society. Unable to enter Japan's mainstream, they live off of government handouts or day work at construction sites. Chronic alcoholism is common, and with it violence and despair. Police do not enter the area for fear of inciting riots, instead monitoring it through video cameras on tall poles. Yet as severe as the conditions there are, there is often a kind of anarchic buoyancy to the people in Airin. Forgotten and exiled within their own country, they look out for each other, knowing that the only help that will come will be from themselves.
It was bitter cold when I met Pi-chan, and people were congregating around campfires. He turned out to be one of the most gentle people I met in Airin. Effeminate and speaking in coquettish kind of singsong, he was also one of the first openly gay men I met in Japan. There is little room in Japanese society for homosexuals, and side effects of chronic alienation—such as drugs, alcohol, and crime—bring many of them to Airin. After I had talked with him for a while, he left with a well-dressed man that had been watching him at the fire. Someone later explained to me that homosexual men occasionally came down to Airin for pick-ups that wouldn’t jeopardize their surface lives.

Despite the conditions and overall hopelessness of living in Airin, many of the men there put a lot of care into maintaining their appearances. Little things like personal grooming or keeping their temporary homes tidy take on a tremendous importance. In the world outside, they are nuisances that most people would rather forget about. But in Airin these mundane rituals are vital to psychic survival—bringing a sense of control inside chaos and hope at the edge of despair.
Much more so than the United States, Japanese society is geared toward protecting its old. It has the highest longevity rate among the industrialized nations and a tradition of children caring for their parents. Still, some people fall through cracks in this system. This is especially true for men who have, through divorce or death, lost their ties to their families. Thus, in Airin, it is common to see men in their seventies or eighties, alone and trying to compete with men fifty years younger. “Because I have nowhere else to go” was the answer I usually got when I asked why they were there.

There are photographs of women everywhere in Airin: in advertisements for anything from cigarettes to stomach medicine, in discarded pornography staring blankly from trash piles, in posters the police put up to discourage drug use... But one rarely sees women in the area. Thus, women no longer seem a part of the real world for many of the men in Airin, only beautiful specters that inhabit memories or dreams. For some, women become objects of reverence, and they hang pictures of teen idols or geishas on the chain-link fences around the parks. For others, a misogyny that is already part of Japanese society becomes amplified, and they take out their rage on the images that remind them of what they can’t have.
Many of the younger men I met talked about getting out of Airin and rebuilding their lives. Some would describe grandiose dreams and plans, wealth, and families. But the hopes of the older men didn’t go much beyond the next day. Some were content where they were, others were just being realistic. Having spent ten or twenty years in Airin, it was difficult to imagine becoming a part of mainstream Japan. Whatever worlds they had left, or been cast out of, had gone on without them.

Many of the men I met in Airin were not the stereotypical drunks or vagabonds. This man was very articulate and clearly educated. Though he was vague about why he was in Airin, something had happened in his life that had just made life in the mainstream seem pointless. This was not as uncommon as one might think, and I met many people with good minds going to waste in a place where they were lost and forgotten with the rest of Airin.