

It was hard to tell whether she was being sarcastic or envious.

"It's because I know I won't really lose a thing even if I walk away from twenty-six years of marriage," Yuko said with a grin.

Rather than smile back, Mika turned abruptly away.

Yuko dropped her eyes to the table. She saw that the triangle of sunshine had shifted, and her finger was now covered in shade.

SIXTEEN YEARS LATER,
IN THE SAME PLACE



Hideo Furukawa

Translated by Michael Emmerich

How do you convey what roof tiles are like to someone from a culture without roof tiles? Sure, you can give a dictionary explanation—say they're molded from clay, dried, fired in a kiln, and put on the roof of your house. They come in various shapes: slabs laid down in rows; half cylinders you use to cover the seams. You assume they must have originated in China and then made their way to Japan. One thousand, four hundred years ago, someone brought back roof tiles to Japan as a new "technique," and ever since they've been a standard element in the traditional Japanese house. In other words, they're just up there, on buildings. And now here they are in a pile on the ground at my feet. A miniature mountain

at the edge of the garden, covered by a plastic sheet. Damn. Who'd have thought I'd ever find myself looking *down* at roof tiles? And outside the front door, a giant tile with a face on it, some sort of beast, specially fired—tiles like this are placed at the eaves as decorations. It looks like a sort of adorable dragon. Maybe if I said it's like a gargoyle in Gothic architecture, that would help people imagine what I'm talking about.

The beast looks like it's guarding the door to my parents' house, or maybe like it's looking for protection, for shelter, and our home is the shelter it's running to.

Our home. The house where I grew up. I haven't been back for ages—a whole year? I open the door, call in, Hello? I'm back! My wife: Hello! My mother and sister-in-law come out to welcome us, grinning. As I step up from the doorway into the vestibule, my eyes are drawn to an indentation in the floor, but it doesn't stop there. Two of the four walls in the entry are . . . how to put this . . . *gone*. Just *gone*. "What the . . . ?" I think, in a vocal sort of way. "Look at this, it's . . . this is awful," I'm saying. Posts exposed everywhere, beams overhead, half lost in shadows because they were never meant to be seen. My mother and my wife are talking now, exchanging greetings. "Isn't it?" my sister-in-law answers me. "And look at this, and this. And over here, too." There is a touch of excitement in her voice. This was the kind of thing you'd want to share, I could see that. Right after the quake, she says, the sky was visible through the roof. I realize with a shock that I can picture it. I knew the town authorities had declared the house "half destroyed," and my parents had told me over the phone about the fallen walls, but it had never occurred to me that it would look like *this*, that here in a still-habitable house there might be gaping holes, emptiness. Not just one wall, but two, *gone*.

"If the vestibule had collapsed they would've counted it as 'totally destroyed,' and then we would have been eligible for compensation," my sister-in-law says.

"Seriously?" is all I can manage. *Too bad*. Maybe that's what I ought to have said? My sister-in-law starts telling me about the neighbors' houses, the damage they suffered. She has a lot she wants to talk about.

So do my mother and my father. My father has problems with his legs, so I go in to talk with him in one of the Japanese-style rooms. He is really grinning, too. But hold on, what's this business about "one of the Japanese-style rooms"? If a house in Japan has Japanese-style tiles on the roof, it's obviously got to be "Japanese architecture," yet the vestibule with the two missing walls has an unmistakably Western feel, and in fact the house doesn't have all that many rooms with tatami floors. These are the Japanese-style rooms, and my father is in one of them. My wife and I kneel, talk with my father, mother, and sister-in-law, formally marking the fact of our return, our being together, and then my wife and I go over to the Buddhist altar. We light incense and pray before my grandmother's photograph. Next we stand and go over to pray at the small Shinto altar, clapping three times. Sometimes I get mixed up. You're not supposed to clap at a Buddhist altar, but as I'm remembering my grandmother, as my emotions get the better of me, I catch myself starting to clap. I realize now that it may be a little odd how we've made both Buddhism and Shinto part of our lives.

My father, my wife, and I each have a beer. It's between ten and eleven in the morning. My wife and I are staying until evening.

It is our wedding anniversary this day—this day in May 2011. Ordinarily we do something to celebrate the occasion,

but the previous year I was away, on a fairly long trip to Mexico City, working on a project for a magazine, and so our fifteenth anniversary had passed without our marking it. This is our sixteenth anniversary. What to do? I suggested we spend a night in the hotel where we were married.

We live in Tokyo now, but we had the wedding in the town where I was born.

My hometown is about two hundred kilometers from Tokyo as the crow flies.

"Sounds good," my wife had said. We'd had this conversation toward the end of April. On May 15, TEPCO said it had determined that sixteen hours after the earthquake, Reactor 1 at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant had a core meltdown. On May 24, the company said its data indicated that the cores of Reactors 2 and 3 had melted down, too. It had all happened months ago. And once a reactor core melts down, it doesn't melt back up.

So what are we supposed to do?

I spoke with my father over the phone late in March. My hometown is in Fukushima Prefecture, and it had experienced shocks that registered just under 6 on the Richter scale. The quake knocked over the gravestone where the names of our ancestors were carved, along with the vases and incense holders and all the rest. My father said he wanted to have the grave repaired. "Leave the dead alone for a while, they'll understand," I said. "First, the living should take care of the living." My family was going to need cash; any money they spent should go to the living. And yet . . . and yet. Our ancestors were buried in that graveyard—lots of them, there in that soil, in that town. People are cremated now, of course, so it's only their ashes that are buried, but until fairly recently

our ancestors' bodies had gone into the ground there. And come to think of it . . . it wasn't like the dead could take shelter anywhere else. The graveyard was their shelter. Forever. Damn.

After we have a few beers, my wife and my mother and I take a walk around the property. My sister-in-law returns to her farmwork. The *kura* storehouse has been seriously damaged. There are greenhouses on the hill behind the house, glass and plastic; they don't look too bad. I feel relieved to see that. The small shrine to the family god is still standing. "That's what you think. It was in pieces, all over the ground!" my mother says. "Your brother rebuilt it." My brother is working, so we haven't seen him yet.

The family god. All the dead of the Furukawa "house" merged, became a single, collective ancestral deity. Wouldn't make much sense to people who think Buddhism is the only religion in Japan, I suppose.

From a Buddhist perspective, our ancestors are in the graveyard.

From a Shinto perspective, they're here behind the house, in the shrine.

But about my brother's work. And about the farmwork my sister-in-law is doing, and all those greenhouses we've just inspected. My father had started a shiitake farm, and now my brother has taken it over. Most of my childhood memories are of the woods, overgrown and dark, with lines of logs planted with shiitake spores. There were wild bamboo partridges, and I once saw a gorgeous pheasant. I'd watch squirrels bickering with crows in the trees, shudder at the sight of the giant slugs, enjoy the cruel game of plucking the thin legs off tall spiders. There was a canal, and a gloomy well.

Last year, my brother stopped growing shiitake on natural logs outside and switched to sawdust blocks that he plants with spores in the greenhouses. This decision turned out to have been fortuitous when, one day in April—April 2011, of course—shiitake grown in Fukushima using “open-air cultivation methods” (meaning logs in the woods) were banned in a dozen cities, towns, and villages after radioactive cesium was found in samples of the mushrooms. The fact that my family had escaped the ban put my mind at ease, at least for the time being—though at the same time, I felt bad for the other shiitake farmers.

Even if my family’s business had been spared, the results of the sampling indicated that radioactive fallout was covering the woods. My own memories have been polluted.

My wife and I walk alone in another area with more greenhouses.

“Look, tomatoes!” my wife exclaims.

Later, my sister-in-law tells us they have started growing cherry tomatoes “as a test.” It hurts a little to hear those words.

About a month earlier, my sister-in-law’s father had died quite suddenly. Since we’ve been away so long, we obviously haven’t had a chance to burn incense for him. So my sister-in-law, my wife, and I go to my sister-in-law’s parents’ house. It is still early in the afternoon. My sister-in-law has gotten to a stopping place in her work. By now I’ve consumed quite a few beers.

My sister-in-law’s father’s photograph stands on the altar. For the second time this day, my wife and I place our palms together to pray. I pray deeply.

Then we have tea. We talk with my sister-in-law’s family.

“What’ll you do with the paddies this year?” I ask.

“We’re going ahead with them, same as always.”

“You’re going to plant them?”

“That’s the plan.”

“But what if they prohibit rice planting?” The soil was polluted by radioactive fallout, after all; there would be more inspections, rulings by the prefectural and national governments.

“Even if they do, we don’t have any choice.”

Sometimes my sister-in-law answers my questions, sometimes it’s someone else from the family. Every so often my wife asks a question, too.

“Paddies go bad if you don’t plant them.”

“You have to till the soil, flood it, grow the rice.”

“Otherwise the land goes bad?”

“That’s right. It wouldn’t be of any use for farming.”

“It doesn’t matter whether we can claim compensation from TEPCO later. Either way, we have to plant the paddies.”

Even knowing they might never harvest the rice, or be able to sell it.

Wow. That hadn’t occurred to me.

“The thing is, most of us around here, we like farming.”

“Farming’s hard, of course.”

“Caring for living things, harvesting them—”

“It’s not easy, but we like it.”

“So no one’s going to tell us to stop, to abandon our land.”

Of course not, they agree. They sound bright, energetic. Strong. I hear the pride in their voices. My wife and I say good-bye; just outside the gate we stop and look at the field across the street. The owners are growing vegetables. A woman in farm-

ing clothes is tending to them. A white cat lies close by, licking its stomach—the family pet, presumably. The cat seems to be keeping an eye on the woman as it cleans itself. Afternoon sun spills down over everything.

Damn, this place is beautiful.

My sister-in-law drives us back to the house—my family's house. Finally I am able to see my brother. He's nine years older than me. We open beers and say *kampai*, though my brother has a bottle of sake waiting (1.8 liters) that he's saved specially to welcome my wife and me. "Happy anniversary!" he says. My sister-in-law, my mother, and my father join us around the table. It's covered with plates of salted cucumbers, stewed vegetables, cherry tomatoes from the garden, and bonito sashimi. We each have a single-serving package of sushi from the grocery store, too. One of the family's two cats wanders in and gets a few little scraps of sashimi. I'd heard how panicked the cats were on the day of the earthquake: one didn't come home until the next morning, and then it just hid under the *kotatsu*, trembling. The *kotatsu* was still in use on March 11, because winter hadn't quite ended.

After that, there is a cake with "Happy 15th Anniversary!" written on it in chocolate. The cake is a surprise. I realize that during one of my calls I'd said we'd be coming back because it was our fifteenth anniversary, so the mistake in the number is my fault. Not that it matters. In the evening, my nephew drops by. My brother and his wife's first son. Then my sister comes by, too. She's six years older than me and lives with her husband about ten kilometers away from here.

they have a strawberry farm. Their strawberries are very, very good. They have rice paddies, too.

"Is your husband going to plant the paddies?" I ask.

"I assume so," my sister replies. "He says he doesn't care what they say, he'll grow enough for us to eat. It won't kill us."

One resident of Fukushima Prefecture has committed suicide, driven to despair by what the fallout was doing to the crops—or rather by the damage being done by rumors even before the fallout could have an effect. That was in late March. That news hurt. Especially since the name of the area where my sister and her husband live was mentioned in the reports.

"Yeah, he was a friend of ours," my sister says.

I remember the mood then, in late March, when it seemed Fukushima might be abandoned, cut off as if it were no longer even part of Japan.

I'm pretty drunk by the time my sister-in-law drives us to the hotel. Our hotel. It is in town, and the feeling there is nothing like it is in the countryside where my family lives. I have all kinds of memories of the bustling area around the train station from my junior high and high school days, so even though I am tipsy I suggest that we go out for ramen. We wander the nighttime streets. A few drops of rain begin to fall. We don't have umbrellas. Whatever, who cares. It's a shock to see scars of the earthquake everywhere we look, even now, after all these months. An arcade that used to be home to the biggest bookstore in northeastern Japan has been taken over by seedy massage parlors and bars. That's a shock, too. Here and there we see posters that proclaim "Fukushima

Forever!" and "We Don't Give Up in Fukushima!" The cityscape shines, trembling, glistening in the rain.

We end up not having ramen, after all.

We go back to the hotel and immediately shower, first my wife, then me. Common sense. Because our exposure to the rain carries with it the danger of exposure to radioactivity. Then we sleep. Sixteen years since we were married. Sixteen years later, in the same place. Congratulations, dear. Congratulations to you, too.

Thank you.

The next morning, it's pouring. We check out of the hotel and get a taxi outside the lobby.

"Where are you from?" the driver asks.

"Tokyo," I say.

"Welcome to the Radioactive City."

Just then, I remember something. It could have come to me anytime, but it comes to me now. It's something I've read in the paper about an article in the British journal *Nature*: it could take anywhere from several dozen years to a century for Reactor 1 at the Fukushima Daiichi plant to be fully decommissioned. If it takes only thirty or forty years, I might still be alive when it happens. My wife, too. But if it takes a century? It strikes me, as I lean back in the cab, that I'm not going to be here then, and neither will my wife, nor the driver. No, it doesn't just strike me. I *understand*. None of us will be here then.

The wipers sweep the rain aside.

THE CROWS AND THE GIRL



Brother & Sister Nishioka

Translated by Alfred Birnbaum

THE CHARM



Kiyoshi Shigematsu

Translated by Jeffrey Hunter

The town that Machiko spent part of her girlhood in was devoured by the ocean.

It was Friday afternoon. Just as she was putting the Girls' Day dolls—which she had lazily left out for a week after the holiday—back into their wooden boxes until it was time to display them again next year, she felt a tremendous shaking, more powerful than any she'd ever experienced.

Later she learned that it had been magnitude 9.0. It was certainly frightening, with the entire apartment building swaying from side to side, but the moment she switched on the television, her concerns about possible damage in Tokyo disappeared.

A map of Japan was on the screen. It showed numbers indicating the quake's magnitude, clustered around the Tohoku

area, and moments later, reports on tsunamis appeared. The coastal areas where a "Giant Tsunami Warning" was in effect were outlined in red. The red covered the entire Pacific coastline, from Kanto through Tohoku and up to Hokkaido. The announcer said that some areas were expected to be hit by tsunamis more than three meters high. Of course she had seen "Tsunami Alert" and "Tsunami Warning," but in her nearly fifty years, this was her first "Giant Tsunami Warning."

The predicted height of the tsunami honestly didn't register with her, but her gaze as she watched the TV was drawn to a single point on the map.

The town she'd lived in was in the red zone. She had spent her fourth grade—from April of one year to March of the next—in a town by the seashore, where her father's company had transferred him. The town had a large harbor, filled with fishing boats, and you could hear the cries of seagulls throughout the town, from morning to night.

Please don't let a tsunami hit. These tsunami warnings were usually just a matter of form, really, and later you'd laugh and say, "Well, *that* was a lot of fuss over nothing, wasn't it?" The warning would be called off, the map of Japan would disappear from the TV screen, the program that had been interrupted would pick up where it had left off, and life would go on as usual. She prayed that would be the case again this time.

But the tsunami did hit the town, just as had been warned. Unlike the warning, however, it was not three meters in height. A wall of water over ten meters tall swept over the town, washing several kilometers inland.

The actual event was shown on TV several days later. It had been shot from the roof of the building housing the local

fishermen's association. A large fishing boat moored in the harbor had ridden the wave as it swept over the seawall and sped down a street alongside the building. Cars were carried away. The roofs and pillars and walls of homes crushed by the wave were thrown inland with unimaginable force, and then pulled out to sea as the wave withdrew. The video didn't show it, but hundreds of people were also engulfed in the wave.

You could hear the shouts and moans of the young man who was holding the camera. After the wave had swept through the town and was receding in an overpowering vortex to the sea, his moans changed to sobs. Toward the end, perhaps because he was weeping, the camera shook violently. As the lens whipped around, it caught a momentary glimpse of the sky. The heavy gray clouds over the northern town were still the color of winter.

Nearly forty years had passed since Machiko had lived there. Her family had moved around a lot when she was a girl. Each time her father, who worked in the seafood industry, was transferred to a new post, the entire family pulled up stakes and went with him. As a matter of course, each time they moved she transferred to a new school. Nowadays a man on temporary assignment would probably live on his own in an apartment, leaving his family behind and his children in school, but in those days the family stayed together under one roof, no matter what.

Having transferred to so many new schools, she was quite used to saying goodbye to her classmates and, having experienced so many farewells, she easily forgot them.

The same had been true of her friends in this town. While she had continued to exchange New Year's cards with a few

of them up through junior high, over time their connection faded naturally, and she had no contact with any of them now. In fact, she couldn't even remember them. So when she heard the report that 754 people were killed or missing, she couldn't picture the face of even a single old school friend.

"I wonder if there's something wrong with me," she said to her husband and children, in a fretful, apologetic tone.

"What do you expect?" her husband said. "It was so long ago. We had a boy who transferred into my fourth-grade class and left after a year, too. I never saw him again, and I certainly don't remember his face, either."

"If it bothers you so much, Mom, why don't you make a donation to the rescue effort or send some relief supplies?"

Picking up on these words of her university-age daughter, her son, who was in his second year at junior high and had just discovered sarcasm, added with a laugh, "Yeah, Mom, send money or some supplies. As a volunteer, you'd just get in the way."

What her husband said was reasonable, her daughter's suggestion was eminently practical, and her son's offhandedness, though it annoyed her as it was intended to, had some truth to it, she had to admit. She understood this, and even accepted it on an intellectual level, but somehow it didn't sit right with her emotionally.

She sent in a donation and mailed packages of relief goods, but the feeling that she hadn't done what was required of her—or what she needed to do—nagged at her. When she thought of the people who had lost their lives, their family members, their homes and belongings, she felt guilty going on with her comfortable, carefree life in Tokyo as if nothing had happened. She felt a need to apologize to someone, to say,

Forgive me. I'm sorry. The fact that she had no idea to whom she could make that apology only made it harder to bear.

Her depression intensified as life in Tokyo began to return to normal—after those first days of staying glued to the TV screen to keep up with the steady flow of reports, then the uproar over the hoarding of mineral water and other supplies, and finally the confusion caused by the rolling blackouts due to the crippled nuclear power plants. In March, her daughter commented that she didn't seem herself, and her son asked her if she was dieting; by April, they were both very worried about her—her daughter suggesting that she might be genuinely ill, and her son commenting on her dramatic weight loss.

Her husband told her that since the earthquake, many were suffering from lethargy and depression. He had read it on an Internet news site. "They identify very strongly with the victims. . . . I feel the same way," he said. "Every morning I examine the list of the dead in the paper, looking for those about our age or who have a family like ours. I think about the dead, and the bitterness and grief of the survivors, and I feel their pain almost like it was my own, while the fact that my life goes on pretty much as it was before the earthquake gives me an indescribable feeling of . . . I don't know . . . shame. People at work ask me to go out drinking like we used to do, but since the disaster it just doesn't feel right going out and having a drink."

"Yes, but maybe that's just what you need, to go out and forget about things," replied Machiko. She made a half-hearted attempt at banter, but she understood how he felt. And for her, there was the additional fact that she had actually lived in a town—though only for one year—that had

been devastated by the tsunami. Maybe some of her former classmates were among the dead or missing. It was all the more frustrating and distressing because she had no way of confirming this.

"It's been a terrible shock for everyone, so it's only natural to feel depressed. They say it's better not to dwell on it too much."

"I suppose."

"And, you know, like they say, time heals all wounds. In a few weeks, the TV will go back to its usual mindless variety shows, and we'll forget about the people in the disaster areas. That's how it always goes."

That was true. But somehow, Machiko felt, it mustn't be allowed to be true this time. And at any rate, she was unable to shake off her funk.

"You know, I'm thinking that when things settle down a little bit, I'd like to go there."

"As a volunteer?"

"Not really. I just want to walk around. I want to walk through the town, and if I happen to meet one of my old schoolmates—"

"What would you do?"

Machiko thought about this for a while and just shook her head. "I honestly don't know."

Her husband looked at her with an exasperated expression and sighed. But he didn't tell her not to go.

Machiko got in touch with her mother, who lived in the countryside, and asked her to send photograph albums from when Machiko was a girl.

Unlike today, people weren't constantly snapping photos in those days. There were only about twenty photos from her year there. Most of them were of her family. The only photo of her classmates was one of the entire class soon after she had transferred there.

Perhaps because they all had such stiff, formal expressions, or because it was taken so soon after she had started at a new school, she found it difficult to match the faces with the very faint memories that she retained of her friends there.

She pointed to them one at a time and tried to remember who they were. She couldn't remember the full name of a single one. The first name of one, the last of another, the nickname of a third. Not surprisingly, when she tried comparing these fragmentary memories with the names of evacuation shelter residents listed by the city hall, or the names of the dead and missing from the newspapers, there were no matches.

But it was impossible that none of her thirty-eight classmates had been affected by the disaster. Several must have had their homes washed away, several must have lost loved ones, and perhaps several were themselves no longer of this world.

The clothes and hairstyles of the children in the photograph were unfashionable and unsophisticated. To be honest, they looked shabby, even poor. Machiko stood out. She was quite clearly a city girl.

"Didn't they pick on you because you came from Tokyo?" asked her son.

"No, not at all. They were all very nice to me. They were accepting and kind, and I taught them the games that were popular in Tokyo in those days."

"Games?"

"Well, charms, mostly. Fourth-grade girls like that sort of thing."

"Hmmm."

Her son didn't seem to understand what she was talking about, but her daughter, standing close enough to hear, smiled and nodded.

In fact, Machiko had taught her classmates quite a number of charms.

A charm for getting over nervousness, a charm for avoiding having your teacher call on you when you didn't know the answer, a charm for finding something you'd lost, a charm for making up with a friend . . . Some of the charms Machiko had learned from older girls at her school in Tokyo, and a few she had invented on her own, in response to the needs of her new classmates.

"So you lied to them? That's terrible!"

"It sounds like you deceived them because you thought they were hicks and wouldn't know any better!"

"No, that's just how charms are," said Machiko, overriding her children's protests.

May we meet again, no matter how far away from each other we end up.

It seemed to her she had invented a charm to that effect, too. But she had forgotten the all-important content.

Rearranging her schedule at her part-time job, Machiko was finally able to find the time for a three-day trip just after the weeklong May holiday.

She filled the station wagon with water, food, and what-

ever relief supplies she could think of, made a reservation at a business hotel outside the town and far enough inland that it was untouched by the disaster, and set out alone from Tokyo.

What was she intending to do? She still had no answer to that question.

She left before dawn and headed north. She got on the expressway and, after passing through the city and suburbs and the scenery changed to open countryside, she realized, very belatedly, that this was the first overnight trip she had taken on her own since she had gotten married twenty-four years ago.

The day was just coming to an end when she arrived at the familiar town—though it had changed so radically that it was no longer familiar to her in the least.

The area near the harbor was a burned-out field. After the tsunami had torn the houses off their foundations, fires broke out and burned for three days and nights. There were many more fishing boats still washed up on land than she had expected. The framing of the refrigerated seafood warehouse had withstood the wave, but the contents had been washed outside by the force of the water. An overpowering stench of rotting fish filled the air as flocks of gulls picked away at the putrefying flesh.

The entire town, however, was not destroyed.

The town was sited at a place where the mountains came down to the sea, so part of it was elevated, inching up the mountain slope. The lower area, close to the water, was known to the locals as the flats, while the area rising up the mountain slope was called the heights.

Machiko had lived in the flats. When she was a girl, that had been the main part of the city, and the heights was little more than terraced vegetable plots, orchards, and a sprinkling of old farmhouses in the traditional style. Kids living in the flats used to ascend the steep roads and paths leading up the mountainside after school with the feeling of going on a field trip or embarking on an adventure; there was also a large, untamed "nature park" in the higher area that offered a wonderful view of the harbor.

But now the heights was very densely developed. The land had been terraced, and rows of houses climbed up the slope. The town hall had been transferred there from the flats several years ago, and in fact the center of town seemed to have moved to this upland section.

While all that remained of the flats was fleets of bulldozers, dump trucks, and Self-Defense Forces vehicles engaged in cleanup and rebuilding, the heights was largely untouched by the earthquake and tsunami. No fires had broken out there, and life went on as it had before the disaster. Boys' Day carp banners were flying in the May breeze.

In that single moment on that single day, the town had been cruelly split apart into two realms—a realm of darkness and a realm of light. Some of the families living in the flats may have been wiped out, while others managed to flee to safety. Though the homes of those in the heights escaped destruction, some families had lost relatives and friends, while others did not. The arbitrariness of it was tragic and bitter.

Machiko drove through the lower part of the town. Not only were all the homes gone, but almost anything that might have enabled her to remember the way it was. She looked at the address signs on the electricity poles, but either the names

had been changed or she couldn't place them in the geography of her memory.

Her old school was now an evacuation center. The students had been shifted to a school in the heights, and each classroom was now the temporary home of about ten families. The gymnasium was a distribution center for relief supplies, and its walls had become a giant message board, plastered with notes inquiring about missing family members or giving the temporary addresses where families whose homes had been destroyed were now staying.

Machiko used a corner of the wall.

Before leaving Tokyo, she had scanned her class photo and printed out numerous copies. She clipped them together, hung them on the wall, and added a note of her own.

To the Members of Home Room No. 1, Fourth
Grade, 1972, Municipal Elementary School No. 2

Having heard that many people lost all their photo albums in the tsunami, I brought this photo of our class. Please feel free to take a copy.

I am Machiko Harada, a member of the class. My maiden name is Yamamoto. I live in Tokyo now with my husband and two children. I'm seated second from the left in the front row. I transferred into the class from Tokyo in April, at the beginning of the school year, and in the following March, at the end of the school year, my family moved to Sapporo, so I transferred there. My classmates used to call me "Machi." Do you remember me?

When I saw the terrible destruction, I felt I had to do something, so I've come from Tokyo. If any of my former classmates reads this note and remembers who I am, could you please give me a call at the cell phone number below?

After attaching the letter to the wall, she felt suddenly anxious. When she had let her children read the letter, they were scathing:

"I think some people could find it insensitive."

"You haven't suffered anything as a result of the disaster, but some of those in the evacuation center are certain to have lost family members, so you really shouldn't write about your own family in Tokyo."

Her husband defended her, saying, "Let her do it as she pleases." Then he followed it up with the clincher: "She's not going to hear from anyone, anyway."

But as a matter of fact, at the time Machiko was confident her idea would be a success. She was convinced that any of her former classmates who read the letter would be equally nostalgic about their past. Now that she had put her note up on the gymnasium wall, however, that unfounded confidence seemed to reverse itself, transforming into an equally groundless anxiety.

That night she stayed awake until late in the business hotel, but her cell phone never rang.

Early the next morning she went back into the town. But there was nothing for her to do, other than to drive aimlessly through the piles of debris and rubble. She could sign up as a

volunteer at the town hall, but for a woman approaching fifty with no special skills or training to volunteer for a single day seemed far worse than the bother that her son had chided her for being; it was insensitive to the point of offensiveness.

She drove around town several times. Her cell phone still did not ring.

As she neared the harbor, there were many puddles in the streets. She encountered a woman and her children cleaning up the rubble of their home and scraping away the mud with a shovel. Just like Machiko's own family, there was an older daughter and a younger son. They were about the same age as her own children, in fact. Maybe the father wasn't there because he was at work. Or maybe . . .

She drove past the house and stopped the car. Perhaps there was something she could do to help. But when she had turned off the engine and undone her seat belt, she suddenly felt a great heaviness in her heart. She sighed. After murmuring, "More a bother than a help," she no longer felt the energy to get out of the car.

She had no idea whether they would actually take offense; she just decided on her own that they would. In fact, though she might not have been much practical help, the mother and her children may have been glad just to have someone offer.

But no—no, they wouldn't. Something was wrong about it. Something was deeply inappropriate. She started the engine again and drove off. She accelerated rapidly on the dusty road, its blacktop paving torn off by the tsunami. She was glad she hadn't gotten out of the car. She should have realized earlier that there are some times when a woman shouldn't meddle, even with the best of intentions.

She passed the boundary of downtown and got onto the

highway. Heading for a city farther inland, that hadn't been harmed by the tsunami, she accelerated again. She seemed to be turning her back on this town of her girlhood, to be fleeing.

What am I doing?

She had no idea.

You're too old for this nonsense.

No, it was precisely because of her age that she was flourishing so gracelessly.

The cell phone had still not rung.

Rather than feeling bad about it, she found herself relieved.

She drove for a long, long time, until evening. She drove around and around her old town, in circles.

Whenever she saw a convenience store, she would stop, get out of the car, and put money in the collection box for contributions to help those afflicted by the disaster that was invariably sitting next to the register. Her contributions were like excuses, she thought, like apologies.

To whom? For what?

Here she was, and it was no different from when she lay wallowing in depression back in Tokyo.

She drove back to the town at evening, as if to say goodbye. She went to the old "nature park" on the mountainside, to bring her trip to a close by looking out over the town.

When she was a girl, it was an almost untouched wild space, bordered on three sides by woods. The woods had now been completely replaced with houses, and the sign over the entrance read "Children's Park."

The excellence of the view of the town and the ocean,

however, remained unchanged. The swings faced the sea. She remembered swinging on them, soaring higher and higher until a giddy, uncontrollable thrill rose in her chest and she felt as if her momentum would send her flying through the bottomless, open sky before her. Seeing that the swings were still in the same place, she thought that today's elementary school students must gulp with that same giddy thrill, when suddenly she experienced a flash of recall.

"Yes, yes!" she almost said aloud.

A forgotten memory suddenly came back to her. For the first time since returning here, she remembered, clearly, the face of one of her friends.

She was playing in the park with Keiko, her best friend, soon after she had learned that at the end of the school year she would be moving and transferring to a new school.

Graduation was approaching quickly; not many days were left before they'd have to say goodbye. Keiko was very sad that Machiko was leaving, and she asked her to teach her a charm that would enable her to be reunited with a friend who had moved away.

Machiko didn't know a charm for that. But to please Keiko, and because she fervently wanted to believe in such a charm herself, she invented one on the spur of the moment:

There were two swings in the park. They had to sit on the swings and push off, timing their arcs so that as one swung forward, the other swung backward, higher and higher. After they had each swung thirty times, the charm started. When your swing flew forward, you called out the other's name. You repeated this ten times. Then you swung in this alter-

nating rhythm ten more times, calling out when you wanted to meet. Throughout all of this, you could not look at your friend's face. You were to look straight ahead and say when you would meet—as quickly as you could, before the swing went backward again.

It was a fine charm, Machiko thought, even if she had just come up with it on the spot. The parts about not looking at your friend and speaking as quickly as possible were exactly the special touches you looked for in a charm.

"Everyone in Tokyo is doing it"—that little white lie was the perfect finishing touch. Keiko accepted it unquestioningly, and she immediately said, "Let's do it. Let's do it now!" and they climbed on the swings.

Keiko was very trusting, thought Machiko with a wry smile as she sat there on the bench and took the class photo out of her purse. There she was: second row, fourth from the right. Diagonally behind their homeroom teacher. *She's this one, with the face of a country girl;* as Machiko lightly brought her finger to the face of the girl with the bangs and straight shoulder-length hair, she felt a tiny bit better.

What was the day they had set for their reunion? She didn't remember. Probably something like "summer vacation." Or, unable to wait for summer, had they set it for the Golden Week string of holidays in May? Whatever it had been, the charm had not worked. Machiko moved away the day after graduation and never saw Keiko again.

I wonder how Keiko is? I hope she got married, left this town, and is living happily with her family in a place far from the destruction here. Not just Keiko. *Everyone. Everyone. Everyone. Everyone.* Looking at her class photo, her eyes and fingers going over each of her classmates, she prayed with all her heart that everyone had survived.

But praying isn't enough. I'm going to swing. I'm going to believe the charm. Maybe this time it will work.

She rose from the bench and walked toward the swings.

Just then two elementary school girls came into the park. Their book bags strapped to their backs, they were probably stopping to play on the way home.

"We're in luck! They're free!" cried one happily.

"Let's hurry!" shouted the other, and they ran hand in hand to the swings.

I wonder what grade they're in, thought Machiko. They look like fourth or fifth graders. They seemed a little old for swings, but maybe it was because they were country girls, more innocent than girls their age in Tokyo. She smiled at the thought. She sat back down on the bench, relinquishing the swings to them.

The girls both immediately stood up on the seats, looked at each other as if coordinating some kind of prearranged plan, and began swinging.

Forward, back, forward, back, forward, back . . . The two swings were moving forward in an alternating rhythm. "One, two, three . . ." Each girl counted her swings as she went forward. When they reached thirty, they began shouting out each other's name.

"Eri-chan!"

"Haruka-chan!"

"Eri-chan!"

"Haruka-chan!"

"Eri-chan!"

"Haruka-chan!"

"Eri-chan!"

"Haruka-chan!"

The girls called the names out quickly, ten times each.

Then they each took turns shouting, again as quickly as they could, the same phrase, alternating as each swung forward, ten times:

"Summer vacation!"

"Summer vacation!"

"Summer vacation!"

"Summer vacation!"

Machiko rose from the bench and stared at the girls in astonishment.

They were both fourth-grade students at Municipal Elementary School No. 2. They were best friends. All the members of both their families were safe, but their homes, in the flats, had been carried away by the tsunami and their neighborhoods burned in the fires that followed. They were presently living in an evacuation center and attending school in the heights, but one of them would soon be moving away with her family to stay with relatives outside the town. They would be separated.

But they wanted to see each other again.

They wanted to play together again.

When Machiko asked about the charm they had just made, the girl who was leaving said that a sixth grader had taught it to her, and the girl who was staying behind added proudly that it was a tradition that had been passed down for many, many years at Municipal Elementary School No. 2.

"Yes, a tradition. My father went to Municipal Elementary School No. 2, and he said they had that charm from his time there. No other school knows it; it's just ours."

"The sixth grader said that it's very powerful."

"It can make miracles happen."

"So I know I'll see Eri-chan again."

"Yes, for sure. We'll see each other again."

Keiko had taught it to one of her friends. *Yes, that must be it.* And then that friend had taught it to another, and it had spread to younger students, eventually becoming a school tradition, being passed on from generation to generation. . . .

"Hey, lady, are you crying?"

"Why? Did I say something wrong?"

"She's really crying."

"I'm sorry! Why?"

Machiko understood. The one she had wanted to meet most of all in the town was herself—herself from long ago. And now everything was all right. *She was still there.* Here was the proof that she had lived here.

The heavy feeling in her chest quietly evaporated. At last she felt that she could weep for someone. "You don't have to suffer under that pall of depression, unable to remember anyone's face"—someone in her mind, someone whose face she couldn't see, seemed to be speaking to her and softly patting her back.

After the two girls had left the park and the tracks of her tears had dried, her cell phone rang.

It must be Keiko—but the moment she thought that, she knew it was too neat.

It was a man. It was one of the boys in her class. He said his name was Hasegawa. He had just seen the photograph in the gymnasium. It filled him with nostalgia, and it made him very happy, he said.

Hasegawa . . . Hasegawa . . . Hasegawa . . . With the photograph in hand, Machiko searched her memory, but to no avail. He spoke to her with a degree of formality that seemed to indicate that he didn't actually remember her, either.

Maybe if she asked him to tell her where he was in the photo, she'd remember him.

Machiko lifted her gaze from the photograph and looked toward the devastated plain of the town. She focused on it. She felt tears rising in her eyes again.

"You came all the way from Tokyo because of the photograph?"

"Yes, well . . ."

"And where are you now?"

After blinking forcefully and shaking the tears from her eyes, Machiko said, "I'm sorry. I'm already back in Tokyo."

"Oh, I see. I'm sorry I didn't notice your message earlier, since you'd traveled all that way."

"I'll come again," she replied with a decisiveness that surprised her. And pleased her.

Hasegawa seemed equally pleased by her reply. "Yes, certainly. Please come again," he said in a voice suddenly garbled with emotion.

"We're all having a hard time right now, and my family has been living in an evacuation center since the quake. My mother is still missing. . . . But please come again next spring. . . . Or if you can't make it, then the year after or the year after that, when everyone is back on their feet and the town is rebuilt. We'll have a reunion."

Yes, she replied. But it wasn't enough. As she said it, she bowed deeply in the direction of the town she loved and remembered.

She ended the call and stood on the seat of one of the swings.

How many years had it been since she'd been on a swing? She hadn't been to a park since her son had gone off to elementary school, so it must be nearly a decade. And considerably more since she had stood up on a swing seat—maybe two decades.

The seat was much less stable than she had anticipated, and the chains shook as she twisted them. But the swing moved slowly. At first the arc was small, but slowly she gained momentum.

Her charm would start with "Everyone" ten times.

Then "Next spring" ten times.

She bent her knees, then straightened them again, using the recoil to power the swing.

In front of her, the town she remembered so fondly began to sway.

one might think, Miss Sato pulled the box down over her and crouched to her knees.

The blue faded from inside the box, everything went black. Pitch black. And at last Miss Sato cried. She cried for her solitary existence and memories of when her parents were still alive. She cried thinking about all the hamsters who'd expired one after the next for the sake of humans and the fate of her box that was soon to be cut up.

Then, strangely enough, after what seemed like ages, when Miss Sato had cried herself dry, the Milky Way and distant stars twinkled into view, now fleeting farther and farther away. There was nothing anywhere around. She reached out, but her arms and legs touched no box. She was a lone speck, adrift in vast, dark space.

Yet even now as she strained her eyes, Miss Sato discerned the emptiness was filled with faint flickering entities. Presences longing to be born, she realized, precisely because there was a void. She couldn't make out what they were, baby boxes or embryonic stars, but that hardly mattered. Her own body now gone, Miss Sato slowly began to understand that in dematerializing she had become space itself looking on as beings came to birth from nothingness.

Everything existed within the box. That gut feeling was her last and ultimate awareness.

Citizens reported the abandoned blue box on the embankment, and a staffer came to collect it that very day. When they cut up the box, nobody noticed the single drop of water that dripped from inside. No one knew that in a far, far corner of the cosmos a galaxy had been born.

DREAM FROM A FISHERMAN'S BOAT



Barry Yourgrau

A man, perhaps you might call him a philosopher of an offhand informal type, rents a fisherman's little boat. He wants a break from the duress of the world, even though it's not yet summer (the traditional season of such maneuvers) but spring.

He goes drifting in the watery world somewhere south of Tokyo, off Kanagawa. In the boat's tiny stern, wrapped in his blanket, he sleeps snoring in the open, under the frosty stars. He wakes with the dawn. He smiles groggily. He toasts the sun rising from its floating pallet, and drinks. He refills his sake bowl, and toasts again, and sets to refill.

In his hazy drunkenness he feels a wave suddenly lift his little craft. Suddenly but gently, humpbacked, like a careful dolphin.

His sake bowl with its lotus decoration tumbles off its perch. The man blinks at it rolling about. A bad omen.

He swings around muzzily and gazes after the low, soft-shouldered wave as it pulses away shoreward, like a slight billow in a sheet. On the horizon beyond, the gleaming white wedge of Lotus Mountain pokes glistening into the cloudy sky of the new day.

In the boat the man rubs his unshaven chin, ominous-hearted. He thinks of a fearsome harbor wave: how, out in the open water, it seems nothing; a bump. Until it reaches the shore and explodes with the fury of a gorilla whale, in an orgy of terrifying destruction.

The man shivers. With a cowardly glimpse landward—a philosopher safely off in his floating world—he pulls his blanket around him and stumbles down the step into the boat's dark, cramped sleeping hatch. He sets his head on the rough pillow and draws his blanket up above his nose and seeks refuge from his foreboding in the maternal embrace of sleep, which here smells of fish.

His snores don't intimidate his fears.

In the man's dream, which gently rocks, side to side, the ghost of the poet of the ages is on the narrow road to the deep north. He wears a T-shirt with the silk-screened image of a spectral banana tree, an appealingly modest self-mockery of his name. The poet's ghost has paused in the neighborhood of Sendai, on the coast of Miyagi Prefecture. He is sitting in the mud. Beside him hunches a native son on Sendai, an actor known for his way with mayhem and destruction—but as a battler with honor and dignity, in a world devoid of these.

The actor is dressed in the style of his roles in famous yakuza chronicles, a lean, upright, fierce tough guy. Now "Shozo Hirono" (his name in scenarios) and the ghostly poet slump together shoulder to shoulder, weeping drunkenly amid the mud and devastation, sake bottles lying emptied beside them.

Through this gray landscape of disaster plod ghosts in puffy white outfits. But they aren't ghosts; they're hazard workers. They trudge among the muddy, gummy fissures and cracks that widen inexorably in the traumatized earth. Poisonous steam rises into the stunned air, like a toxic bonsai version of the eternal Milky Way. "I will be just as eternal," this little poisoned version boasts and threatens.

Here and there, a bizarre sight, vending machines lie on their muddied sides. Their inset speakers still dispense assurances to all, in voices broadcast from faraway by little craven cowards.

"Everything is okay, all is fine and safe, nothing for anyone's concern," assure the disembodied voices from their broken vending machines.

The poet's ghost and the fake yakuza shake their drunken heads "no," cursing and blubbing.

The moans of the sleeper on his bobbing boat join in.

Then the dream on the boat whirls.

A giant wave thunders along, like a strange beast with a raging waterfall for a head and the twisting, coiling body of a serpent-dragon. On its tumultuous neck perches the grand old painter, feverishly dashing off sketches of the views of Lotus Mountain as they flash by—as the giant wave surges and writhes around Lotus Mountain, as if to knock it down,

to pound it back into the island earth. Cars tumble past the old painter's flapping sleeve, shorn roofs and chimneys spin and tilt. Thirty-six, one hundred—a thousand glimpses of the besieged glistening white-capped pyramid the old painter is trying in frenzy to render. But his brush is long dry, his ink bowl long blown across him, his pages long scattered in the mayhem. He scratches and stabs his sketches on the withered flesh of his thigh with the wooden heel of his brush. The wave's howling froth tears at gray wisps on his old head, and he cackles, like a senile madman, silly and ridiculous—like an artist whose great art has been engulfed and overwhelmed. The giant wave's foam drenches him, slings itself on him like spittle from the foaming lips of a rabid giant.

Thundering along, the grand old painter suddenly flaps out a scrawny straining arm. His wrinkled face becomes a mask riven by anguish, as if constructed from the fissured and desolated landscape below. He flutters a withered hand in wild desperation at the besieged Lotus Mountain careening here, there, in his foam-blinded sight. His howls of grief are lost in the desolate thunder of the wave.

But they pierce the dreamer in his sleep.

He jolts awake, gasping in the boat's dark hatch.

"Lotus Mountain—" he blurts, his heart hammering.

Is it still there? He must go see, he must check, like a dutiful son. But he stays where he is, paralyzed. Or rather, inert. Lacking courage in his floating world.

He falls back again on his pillow, drawing the dim blanket around him, in his bobbing hideaway which smells of fish.

When his dream resumes, there is a small family sitting huddled on the cold, bare, muddy ground. They are a father, a

mother, a young girl who is the daughter, and a younger boy who is the son. Under her weariness the girl has a bright charming intelligence, so you can imagine that in an animation movie fable by a great animation director—a poet of childhood, of its pains, its trials, its tribulations—the girl would play the plucky heroine. But now she just cries quiet, hopeless tears with the rest of her family as they prepare a meal. The meal is only rice. They have fashioned it into a small conical pyramid in their midst. In a way it resembles a child's model of Lotus Mountain. The water supply is not safe now, so they have boiled the rice in their tears.

With bare fingers they begin nourishing themselves, as best they can, scooping from the white pyramid of rice, eating the glistening grains.

This is the dream that a man has, who fancied himself a philosopher of life of a minor, easygoing sort, down in the hatch of a rented fisherman's boat, afloat on the world of a Japanese sea.

HIYORIYAMA



Kazumi Saeki

Translated by Jeffrey Hunter

Beppu was just coming out of the gymnasium. Standing in the schoolyard, I raised my hand in greeting. He saw me immediately and came over.

Izawa had told me that Beppu and his family had lost their home in the tsunami, but were safe and staying at this elementary school turned into an evacuation center. When Izawa found Beppu here, he said, they hugged each other and wept; but Beppu and I were both composed now, maybe because of the presence of the reporter who had given me a ride to the center in his emergency vehicle. It was toward evening, and the smell of pork broth being cooked by Self-Defense Forces personnel floated in the air.

Quite different from his usual “smooth cool” look—he was a fan of Eikichi Yazawa and Tom Waits—Beppu was

somberly dressed in jeans and a gray-and-black-checked work shirt. His hair, instead of being combed back and heavily pomaded, was lank and lusterless, and his chin had a salt-and-pepper stubble, but I was relieved to see him looking better than I'd expected. It was just a week since the catastrophe struck.

"They're all donations, these clothes," he said with a shrug, gesturing dismissively. Even so, I could see a red T-shirt peeking out from under the shirt. I smiled.

"I'm glad everyone in your family is safe," I said. "I was really worried when I heard your house had been hit. Izawa was volunteering with the meals, and he just happened to see your name on the list for this center. He's the one who let me know."

"Yeah. I guess he didn't think I was still alive, and when he saw me, he started bawling. I couldn't help myself, and I started, too."

As if to deflect attention from his slightly embarrassed admission, he urged me to come inside, acting as if he were inviting me into his own home.

I hesitated, not wanting to disturb the other evacuation center residents, but he just walked ahead, saying, "Come on, come on in," including the reporter in his invitation.

"But weren't you stepping outside for something?" I asked.

Using his index and middle finger, Beppu mimed smoking a cigarette.

We removed our shoes and carried them with us into the gymnasium. The floor was covered with blankets, and the large room packed with people. The reporter asked how many there were, and Beppu replied that there were about three hundred. The walls of the gymnasium, as well as those

of the school building and the hallways, were plastered with notices about missing persons.

The gymnasium was chilly. With the supply-line cutoffs following the disaster, there was a shortage of heating oil. There were warnings on TV to beware of hypothermia, and here many of the elderly evacuees were tightly wrapped in blankets.

"This is my house now," Beppu said, indicating the boundaries of a space toward the front of the gym, in the middle of a row close to the stage.

Aisles in a checkerboard layout allowed us to reach his area. When I expressed my surprise at this, he said, "Yeah, it's funny, isn't it? Even in a place like this, people make these neat walkways, dividing the space into sections. See, I'm District One, Parcel Three. People have to mark off their space, you know," he explained with a wry smile.

Each person was allotted the space of one tatami. Since there were six in Beppu's family, they had an area of about six tatami covered with blankets. I recognized his youngest son, an elementary school student, lying on his side and playing a Pokémon card game, but the rest of the family was elsewhere.

"Please, come on in," Beppu said, with more than a touch of irony.

We sat down on a camel-colored blanket in one corner.

"Now, where's that tea? Or would you prefer coffee?" asked Beppu, crouching in front of us.

"There's no need for that kind of thing at a time like this," I said, shaking my head and waving my hand emphatically in protest.

"Don't be silly. You took the trouble to come visit me. I can't send you off without at least a cup of tea," he said with

humorously theatrical exaggeration. He exited his "house" and headed toward the stage. There were several benches, with cardboard boxes of food supplies and thermoses of hot water.

As I sipped the half mug of instant coffee he had given me, I noticed a copy of *Selections of Tang Poetry* on the blanket. Beppu enjoyed literature, and he had run a cram school for elementary and junior high school students in his house. I taught a writing course after I moved back from the city to my hometown here fifteen years ago. I had been supporting myself doing double duty as an electrician and a writer, but I came down with asbestos poisoning. Beppu was one of my students, and we became occasional drinking buddies. Izawa was another of my students.

"I thought it might bring me a little peace of mind. I had a friend bring it to me," Beppu said.

"So 'The realm is in ruins, but the hills and rivers remain'?" I asked, delivering the only line from a Dufu poem I knew by heart. I sighed and thought, no, the realm is in ruins—and so are the hills and rivers. I had just come from visiting, with the reporter, the little harbor town where Beppu's house once stood. The Self-Defense Forces and police were still looking for the dead, and only emergency vehicles were allowed entrance.

Beppu nodded silently.

The reporter, his single-lens reflex camera hanging from his neck, began to walk around the evacuation center.

It seems a miracle that I'm even here now. Sometimes I wonder why. I wake up in the morning, right? I think, am I dead? No, I'm alive.

But somehow, you know, I still don't feel alive. It's like . . . it's like I'm just pretending to be alive. . . .

I was alone at home when the earthquake hit. The kids were at school, and my wife was at the community center, at a thank-you party for the teacher of our oldest daughter. She graduated from junior high this spring.

Anyway, it was the strongest earthquake I've ever felt. The Miyagi Prefecture offshore earthquake a few years earlier was a hiccup compared with it. The shaking was incredible, and it just went on and on. To be honest, I thought the house was going to come down around me.

When the shaking finally stopped, I tried to clean up a little. The dressers and bookshelves had all toppled over, the kitchen cupboard doors had flown open and all the plates and dishes were on the floor, in pieces. A complete mess. I was trying to put things in order when the giant aftershocks began, one after another, but I wanted to get the broken china and glass swept up before the kids came home.

Then the sushi chef from the restaurant next door came and said I needed to get out of there. Why would I want to do that, I asked, and he said that there might be a tsunami and I should go to an evacuation center, just in case. Yeah sure, I said, just like last year. You remember, Shigezaki-san, I was going to go drinking with you that Sunday at the end of February last year, but then there was the earthquake in Chile and I canceled at the last minute because they were saying we should head to the evacuation center in case there was a tsunami? It's going to be the same again, I thought—sitting for hours in the evacuation center in the community center, and then nothing happens, and you end up going home again. I wanted to get the house cleaned up, so I said no, I was staying.

My wife had taken the car, anyway, and I had no way to get there. And there hadn't been any tsunami warning. Now of course I know that with no electricity they couldn't sound it.

But the sushi chef said he'd drive me in his car, and he was very insistent. That's when I remembered that my wife had called me before the earthquake to say that she'd left her cell phone at home, and she asked me to drop it off for her when I had a moment. There was nothing at all strange or different about the sea at that time. We started driving to the evacuation center, but along the way there was a big traffic jam. Nobody was moving, so I said let's get out and walk. Just then I happened to look back the way we'd come, and I saw, at the far end of the road, the straight horizontal line of an incredibly huge, tall, black wave coming toward us. At first I thought, no, it can't be—a tsunami. Now I was really worried. I told the chef to just leave the car where it was, and we started running for our lives, toward a junior high school that was another designated emergency evacuation center. It was a little farther from the tsunami than the one we were going to.

Just as I was about to pass through the school gateway, I tripped over something and hit the dirt. The tsunami was right behind me, and it was a very close call.

At that point Beppu, who had been talking in a jovial tone, as if sharing a funny story, laughed.

Although I worried it was inappropriate, I laughed too. "You played soccer in high school," I said. "You must be a good runner."

"Not anymore. This was more than five hundred meters. My heart was pounding, and my legs felt like they were going

to fall off. . . . You know, you probably think that a tsunami comes down on you from above, don't you?"

I nodded, recalling a scene from a surfing film, where the crest of a wave, looking like a shark's mouth full of sharp teeth, was engulfing a person from above.

"That's not what happens. It comes right after you while you're running away from it, licking your heels, then pulls the ground beneath your feet away. You get knocked off balance, you fall backwards, then the next surge gets you."

Beppu suddenly fell silent, as if actually remembering the scene he was describing.

When I awoke on March 13, two days after the earthquake, which measured magnitude 9.0, I stood, as I always do after I get up, by the living room window and looked out to sea. After a moment, I rubbed my eyes and looked again.

I've lived on the ground floor of this apartment building, which sits on top of a hill about one hundred meters high, for thirteen years. This morning something was different.

The red-and-white-banded chimney of the waste incinerator plant stood, as always, a little to the left of the apartment building. The fact that no smoke had risen from it since the earthquake, when normally it burned every day except during the New Year's holiday, was not what I noticed. What I noticed, when my eyes finally focused, was that the forest along the coast had only one . . . two . . . just a handful of pines. It looked like a scene of the African savanna that you see in television programs or photographs.

I had never paid much attention to it before, but that stretch of land used to be filled with green rows of thickly

planted pines that had hugged the sandy shore, and the sea glittering beyond them. Now the line of pines looked like a comb with most of its teeth broken. I guess that's how it is, I thought; you don't notice things until they're gone.

The sea loomed, and because the pines were gone, it seemed bigger, somehow. On both sides of the river separating us from the next town were several ponds that hadn't been there before, dully reflecting the sunlight.

That area used to be . . . houses! It came to me in a flash. Those ponds used to be houses!

The electricity had been off since the earthquake, so we didn't have TV, and the only news reports we could get were from an emergency radio that you had to crank to charge. Since the quake we'd been completely occupied putting the house back in order and going for water, since the water and sewer were out. There hadn't been time to gaze out the window.

A chill ran down my spine. I had heard on the radio that the coastal areas had been hit by the tsunami and hundreds were killed, but it hadn't really sunk in. Now I was seeing incontrovertible evidence that the horror had actually happened. I hurried to the bedroom to wake my wife.

Electricity was restored three days later. We watched the images that played over and over on TV, and I realized that if I had seen this immediately after the disaster, the scenes of people and cars and houses being swallowed and swept away by the wall of water, I wouldn't have been able to bear it.

Then came the scenes of explosions at the nuclear plants in neighboring Fukushima Prefecture. In front of our window, we could see Self-Defense Forces helicopters constantly

flying back and forth, fire and rescue sirens wailed nonstop. We were filled with anxiety.

"Look. You can see real good from here," said Beppu to his daughter, pointing toward the sea. "See the big bridge right in front of the ocean? It's to the right of that."

"Oh, there. Oh. There's nothing there," his daughter, wearing her junior high school uniform, murmured.

Five days after we had met in the evacuation center, Beppu called to say that he was going to check the posted exam results for his eldest daughter. She had taken the entrance exam for the high school at the foot of the hill where our apartment stood, and he wondered if he might stop by.

Of course, I replied, and less than ten minutes later he arrived in a car driven by one of his friends. I asked how his daughter had done, but without answering, Beppu walked toward the living room window. From behind, he looked equally as if he could be making a proud display of a happy result or trying to compose himself before announcing bad news.

We were still experiencing powerful aftershocks, so we'd laid our stereo speakers and floor lamps flat on the floor. The electricity was back, but we remained without water or gas, so fifteen plastic bottles of drinking water and two twenty-liter polyethylene containers of water for cooking were also lined up on the floor. There were also two cardboard boxes of emergency rations—rice, dried bread, canned foods. These were the emergency rations that we'd put together prior to the earthquake, having been told there was a ninety-nine percent chance of a major earthquake hitting the area within three decades.

We boiled water on a propane-cylinder burner on the table.

"Beppu, enough suspense! How did she do?" my wife demanded, pouring the tea as we sat around the little *kotatsu*. Six years younger than me, she's the same age as Beppu and is considerably less formal with him.

"You tell them," Beppu said to his daughter.

Blushing and smiling, she made a little V sign with her fingers—almost out of sight, below the edge of the table.

"Well, that's wonderful!" said my wife happily.

"She was the only one in her class to pass the exam for this school," added Beppu, more than a touch of pride in his voice.

"That's just great . . ." I said, stumbling. "I'm sorry, I'm afraid I've forgotten your name."

"Nozomi. With the kanji for 'hope' and 'ocean.'"

"Right, Nozomi. You came up with that name, didn't you, Beppu?"

Beppu thrust out his chin, pleased. He'd brought Nozomi to our house on several occasions, and she seemed to be his favorite.

"Just a minute," said my wife, as if remembering something, and she went to the kitchen, returning in a moment with some milk tea and pound cake.

"Let's celebrate," she said, smiling. "It's a cake a friend in Tokyo sent us in the emergency."

Nozomi softly brushed aside her bangs as she ate.

"Here, you can have mine, too," said Beppu, handing her his plate.

*

I spent the night the tsunami hit with Nozomi.

When I reached the junior high school serving as an emergency evacuation center, it was full of evacuees, and the front stairs to the second floor were crowded with elderly people in wheelchairs from a retirement home. I couldn't get up that way, and just about then water started rushing into the entryway. I looked around, remembering an emergency stairwell in a corner and ran toward it. I may have been saved because this was my old school, and I knew it so well.

I got to the second floor, but the water kept rising, so I went up to the third floor, and finally to the stairway landing that led to the roof. I spent the night on the landing. It was cold, and snow was falling lightly. The windows were broken, everyone was wet, and we were all shivering. When the water retreated a bit, I gathered up classroom curtains and uniforms from the soccer club and handed them out to people, to help fight off the cold. Then, at some point, I noticed my daughter was with me.

Our three kids in elementary school spent the night at their school, my wife stayed at the community center, and my daughter and I were at the junior high. I was worried about the others. I sat in a daze, unable to speak, just staring at the floor in the dark. Then in the middle of the night Nozomi said, "Look, Dad, the stars are so pretty." Who cares about the stars at a time like this, I thought, but I looked up and saw the sky filled with stars. Everything around us was dark, and the stars were the only illumination. The earth had been transformed into a hellish realm, but the stars still sparkled, unchanged. . . .

*

"They really were beautiful."

My wife and I nodded.

I'll never forget the beauty of the stars that night, when all the electricity in the town was off. There was a quarter moon, too.

One afternoon a little more than a month after the quake, Beppu came by with a car. Some sake made three days before the disaster had been miraculously discovered amid the rubble of the sake brewery, which had been swept out to sea by the tsunami.

"The chief brewer is one of my students. He came all the way to the evacuation center to let me know," Beppu explained. And as alcohol wasn't allowed at the evacuation center, he asked me to join him for a drink. The buttons on his blue shirt were open to reveal a flashy T-shirt with a likeness of Kiyoshiro Imawano, Japan's "King of Rock."

"Where did you get the car?" I asked.

"An old high school friend whose company transferred him to Tokyo this spring lent it to me while he's away."

Beppu was the kind of guy who had a lot of friends and an in with everyone.

His own car, which had been carried away by the tsunami, was a compact, but this was a seven-passenger station wagon, and he had a hard time maneuvering it on the winding road down the hill from my house. Along the way there were fallen cement-block walls and collapsed shoulders. The old inn that once stood on the opposite side had been completely destroyed, and one lane was blocked off to traffic.

"Did you feel that big aftershock the other day?" asked

Beppu when we got onto the highway. Although the road appeared flat at first, the quakes had caused numerous gaps in the pavement, which was wildly uneven, and the car jolted violently.

"Yeah, it was a big one," I replied, grabbing on to the handle above the window to steady myself. "I don't know, it really . . . got to me somehow."

Thinking that the aftershocks had pretty much subsided, we'd gotten the furniture and bookshelves back in place and put things away. Then we had another quake, intensity 6, magnitude 7.4, almost a replay of March 11. It was deeply disturbing, as if the rug had been pulled out from under us all over again.

Many of the buildings that had somehow survived the first quake were half or completely destroyed by the new one. The earth beneath our apartment building had sunk fifteen centimeters in the first quake. The second one dropped it another ten centimeters, exposing the water pipes and creating large fissures between the foundation and the ground, where rats had taken up residence. The only positive thing was that there wasn't another tsunami.

"It was the middle of the night, too. Whenever there's an aftershock, the backboard of the basketball hoop at the evacuation center rattles."

"Oh, yeah, the one that folds up into the ceiling," I said.

Well, it just happens to be right over where my family sleeps.

Whenever it starts rattling, I hug the kids to keep them from being afraid. It must have happened dozens of times already.

But that night, it wasn't rattling, it was banging and shaking so much I was afraid it might fall down on us at any minute. To make things worse, the electricity was out, so it was pitch-black. I half stood up, covering the kids with my body in case the thing fell. Men were shouting, "It's a big one!" and women were screaming.

Then suddenly the generator kicked in and the lights went on—right over my head.

Everyone had their little heaters going that night and the gym was steaming hot, so I was sleeping in my underwear. So there I was, in my underwear, in the spotlight! I'm going to be ribbed about that for a long time.

"Wow, this area is a total mess. Looks like it's been completely untouched since the quake."

"Yeah, you're right."

On the way to get the sake, we drove through the residential area across the river from where Beppu's house had been. It was the same stretch of shore that I had looked at from the living room window, where all the pine trees had been washed away.

I knew a lot of people who had lived here. Someone told me about a woman who watched as her husband got carried away by the tsunami before her very eyes, as he was trying to put the car in the parking lot of the evacuation center. That first day I visited Beppu at the evacuation center, I drove through here with the reporter, and today, a month later, it was still pretty much the same, although the water had receded a bit.

Flattened cars were scattered across a vast, salt-caked tidal swamp. Any cars that still retained their shape were either

marked with a white X—meaning that the emergency crews had searched them and found that they were either empty or their occupants were safe—or a red X, meaning that the occupants were dead. I saw a decorative gold spoon on the ground; pine trees torn up by the roots; adult videos; a dictionary of agronomy; framed photographs of family members, generations back; a box of onions that had sprouted long green shoots; cushions; bedding; a chair in the middle of an open field, as if someone had been sitting there until a moment ago.

Daily life had been swept away.

"Not a great year for flower viewing, is it?" said Beppu, looking down at blossoms on a branch of a cherry tree that had been mowed down along with the pines.

All right, we're here. That's where the sushi restaurant used to be, and this was my house. You remember going to his place with me, don't you, Shigezaki-san? Must have been about thirteen years ago, I guess. There was a little boy who wanted us to play toy trains with him, remember? The chef's son. He's a university student now. Last year he entered the mathematics department of a national university, which means he's smart. The sushi chef is insisting that he's going to reopen his restaurant here, but I wonder. The city is saying they aren't going to permit rebuilding near the shore.

Me? Well, my wife and kids are saying that they don't want to come back here to live. To be honest, I don't know what I'll do.

It's all gone, isn't it, except for the foundation. This was the entryway, and my classroom was there, right after you

entered. The blackboard was here, and the students' desks were here. The house was in the back, and my room was on the second floor.

All that survived was this one big platter for serving sashimi. It's strange to say this, but it's also kind of a relief to have it all gone like this. I'd been feeling a little stuck lately, like I was at a dead end, going nowhere.

Surprised by that statement, I looked into Beppu's eyes. But I couldn't discern his real feelings.

"Want to go to Hiyoriyama?" he asked suddenly.

About two hundred meters farther back from the sea was a small man-made hill. The houses that had once surrounded it were all gone, but the hill had withstood the tsunami.

Beppu coughed several times as we walked toward it.

Right after the tsunami, everything was wet from the seawater, and there were few asbestos or other particles in the air, but now things had dried out, and the air felt heavy with asbestos dust. Bulldozers were rumbling around noisily, pushing the debris into piles. The cleanup effort was moving forward at a quick pace, and in a little more than a month, a great deal of the debris had been cleared away, creating an expanding vacant space. We called it debris, but these were the things that surrounded us, the objects that supported and sustained our lives; no matter how many times I witnessed it, it was hard to bear watching it all treated as garbage.

"You know, I never dream about things before the earthquake. Only what happened after. It's not that I have nightmares about the tsunami or anything like, but . . ."

"Now that you mention it, it's the same with me," I said.

"Really? You, too? I don't . . . it's like everything around me is changing so much, and I have no control over it. I find it hard to think clearly. I wish I could at least somehow stop time from slipping away along with everything else," said Beppu softly.

At Hiyoriyama, we found one big pine tree still standing in the middle of the back of the hill. The cherry trees and the little shrine, about a meter square, that had stood on the hill-top were gone, but the pine remained stubbornly anchored in place.

"Someone who witnessed the tsunami, and survived to tell it, said that the wave washed right over the top of this tree."

The pine was about ten meters tall.

Thirteen years before, I had climbed this hill with Beppu when I was writing an article for a magazine. According to the information I'd gathered at the time, there are more than eighty places in Japan called Hiyoriyama—"Weather Watching Hill." They're near harbors to the open sea, and none of them is taller than a hundred meters. In the old days, there were specialists, experienced weather watchers, who used to ascend the hill, observe the movement of the clouds and the wind direction, and predict the weather. They probably also watched the tides and the flight of birds. And they also were the first to see signs of an approaching tsunami after an earthquake.

I recalled that there was a stone memorial with an inscription about tsunami at the foot of the path and looked around for it.

It was still there, toppled sideways, on the other side of the hill. Beppu and I read the inscription on the large,

2.5-meter-tall stone aloud, working out the antiquated syntax together.

**MONUMENT TO THE EARTHQUAKE AND TSUNAMI:
BEWARE OF TSUNAMI FOLLOWING EARTHQUAKES**

A powerful earthquake was suddenly felt at 2:30 a.m. on March 3, 1933, followed forty minutes later by a giant wave accompanied by a mighty roar. The wall of water was ten feet tall, forcing its way up the Natori River and flooding the area from Enko in the west to Teizanbori and Hiroura Inlet in the south. More than twenty homes were inundated and several thirty-ton-class motorized fishing boats moored on the banks of the Natori River were washed ashore into farmers' fields at Yanagihara. Though many smaller boats were destroyed, fortunately there was no loss of human or animal life. The damage was much greater in the inland counties of Mono, Oshika, and Motoyoshi, as well as Iwate and Aomori prefectures, due to the fact that the earthquake's point of origin was in the ocean approximately one hundred fifty leagues east-northeast of Mount Kinka and the full force of the tsunami was blocked by the Oshika Peninsula, so that only smaller waves reached the shore here. . . .

When we reached the part "fortunately there was no loss of human or animal life," Beppu commented bitterly, "It's all happened before, you see. And they made this monument, even though no one was killed."

Standing atop this man-made Hiyoriyama, just six meters in height, we had an unforgivingly open, 360-degree view.

The last time I was here, the hill was surrounded by homes, and you couldn't see the ocean. Now I was confronted with a vista of dunes stretching into the endless distance and white waves washing up against the shoreline. To the south, I couldn't see as far as the nuclear power facilities in the neighboring prefecture, but the chimneys of the geothermal power-generating facilities were visible; and to the north I could see the petrochemical complex of the industrial port and the peninsula behind it. One reason may have been because all the coastal trees had been washed away.

Beppu motioned me to look behind us, and in the distance we saw the three television towers rising from the hill where my apartment building stood. We used to watch the fireworks they set off down here every summer. It suddenly occurred to me that in a way I also lived on a Weather Watching Hill.

At the top of Hiyoriyama were handmade memorials to the victims of the disaster, with words and messages written on scraps and slats of wood painted white. An elderly woman, her hands clasped together, was praying.

"Let's go to where the sake brewery used to be. Izawa has volunteered to wash the bottles, so he'll probably be there, too."

As we made our way back to the car, Beppu told this story:

"Wataru overheard some of us adults at the evacuation center talking about 'this world' and 'the other world.' Know what he said?"

"Wataru—he's your youngest?" I asked, remembering the boy playing with his Pokémon cards.

"Yes. He said, 'So, Dad, what world are we in?' He doesn't talk about it, but he must have seen a lot of people being washed away."

What world is this, I asked myself, between this one and the other?

force of this ten-year wave stuns us: surfers, forecasters, and the surfing judge, all gaping.

Everyone is transfixed, no one says a word—it's like being at a movie, overwhelmed not only by the quantity of water but also by the thunderous, even majestic roar of the wave, filling in our silence.

I'm wondering whether this might be as far as we get, if we will just stand here, unmoving, to the end, watching the monstrous wave, when I hear a voice.

One surfer breaks from the group and dashes into the surf. Another follows, then a third. They're paddling toward the wave.

The dragon responds by revealing more and more of itself, spreading its wings to strike at these pathetic humans.

The surfers try to ride and slide from the crest into a superlong ride. They all go down.

That doesn't stop other surfers from running into the sea, boards in hand, slapping them down into the water.

It's about time, I suppose, for me to paddle out, try to get to the top of the wave.

I may fail again, but at least with three hundred people watching how I go down, something of use may come bobbing up somewhere, somehow.

And whatever that is, it will bring us one step closer to the breakthrough we're all waiting for.

Maybe then we can make a Friday unlike any other just like every other.

I know we can do it. Here I go.

LITTLE EUCALYPTUS LEAVES



Ryu Murakami

Translated by Ralph McCarthy

In late summer 2011, Typhoon No. 12 hit Japan, causing disastrous flooding and landslides in the Kansai and Chugoku regions and even affecting, in a small way, my home in Yokohama. The winds were nothing compared with what harder-hit areas experienced but strong enough to topple the eucalyptus I had planted in our garden two years ago. The young tree, which had grown about four meters tall, was snapped just above the roots, and in its fall crushed our plum and olive trees, even reaching our cable TV antenna on the fence.

I'm not one to putter in the garden, but I had to do something about the tree stretched out across the yard. I had no tools, however, so I went to the local home-and-garden center. The store had a variety of chain saws on dis-

play. They made me think of Jason in *Friday the 13th*, and they looked like they'd be perfect for dismembering trees, but since I could think of no other use for such a thing, I decided it'd be wasteful to buy one. I ended up purchasing a regular pruning saw and an axe.

I started by whacking off the smaller branches with the axe and used the saw on the larger ones, and eventually I reduced the tree to a limbless trunk about thirty centimeters in diameter. I sawed what was left into logs about fifty centimeters long, split them, and stacked them on the terrace. Eucalyptus trees grow fast, so the wood was soft and easy to saw through, and very fragrant, too. Known for its powerful antiseptic qualities, the eucalyptus was apparently known as the "Australian fever tree" in recognition of its role in preventing the spread of malaria.

Bundling the leafy branches together proved more strenuous and time-consuming. Gathering the branches, pruning them to about the same length, and tying them into bundles took nearly two hours. The thought occurred to me, as I was sweating from expending all this energy, how minuscule this was compared with something like, say, the cleanup after 3/11. This was just one tree. Cleanup after 3/11 was beyond conceivable.

About two months before the fall of my eucalyptus, I had traveled to Miyagi Prefecture to do research for a television program I host. Four months had passed since 3/11, but rubble and debris of every imaginable sort still littered the landscape. Along the coast of Sendai, a city whose finances are on relatively solid ground, a gigantic disposal and recy-

cling site had been set up and construction had begun on a large incineration facility. At the disposal site, the refuse was separated by category—concrete, metal, plastic, vehicles, appliances, lumber, scrap wood, dirt, textiles, and on and on. They were in enormous piles that called to mind the pyramids of Egypt. It was surreal. The hot midsummer sun beat down, millions of flies buzzed about, and a repugnant odor hung in the air. I began to feel that I had no business seeing this. It was a strange sort of déjà vu—I had felt similarly upon first viewing photographs of Auschwitz. I remembered one of a warehouse in which the possessions of gas chamber victims—shoes, clothing, jewelry, eyeglasses, even locks of hair—had been sorted into various piles.

I left Sendai for Okumatsushima, where a number of villages still lay in ruins. The devastation seemed endless: a fishing boat split in two, grounded on someone's porch; cars and trucks half buried in the mounds of mud outside flattened houses; scraps of lumber and chunks of concrete entangled in the felled remains of trees. And everywhere you looked were little red flags with names written on them, marking spots where victims' bodies had been discovered. These flags were reminders that the debris wasn't mere wreckage that needed to be cleared away but rather materials, equipment, and tools that had supported and sustained people's lives.

After removing the horizontal eucalyptus from our garden, I went back to my real job. I had research to do for the novel I'm working on. The book I was reading, *Uejini shita eireitachi* (The Heroes Who Died of Starvation), by Akira Fujiwara, claimed that the majority of Japanese troops who died dur-

ing the war in the Pacific died not in battle but of starvation, malnutrition, and disease. The Imperial Japanese Army had not only ignored logistics but gave little consideration to geography and climate as it continued to send troops to the Solomon Islands, New Guinea, Burma, the Philippines, and other battle zones. The result was a staggering number of collateral deaths.

In May 1942, hoping to capture strategically important Port Moresby on the southern coast of New Guinea, the Imperial Army decided to blaze a trail overland from Buna on the northern coast. The 17th Army's South Seas Task Force, stationed at the front, expressed the opinion that an overland attack was not feasible. Between Buna and Port Moresby were 360 kilometers of dense tropical jungle, and bisecting the island was the Owen Stanley Range, with mountains as high as 4,000 meters. There were no roads, meaning that sheer manpower was required to keep the troops supplied with food. Under the prevailing conditions, the most a man could carry was 25 kilograms of the main staple, rice, and considering the topography and climate, he couldn't have traveled on foot more than about twenty kilometers a day. If you subtract the amount of rice that the bearer himself would consume, in order to support a force of 5,000 troops, each requiring 600 grams of rice per day, the army would need 32,000 men—more than six times the fighting force itself. In other words, a land attack was a practical impossibility. But the planners of the war judged the opinion of the frontline task force, which actually knew the local conditions, to be "overly pessimistic" and ignored it. The attack on Port Moresby was launched, and within a month, food supplies ran out. The troops ended up not battling the enemy, but having to battle starvation.

Why was such a reckless and irrational strategy imple-

mented? The principal reasons would appear to be the Imperial Army's disdain for logistics and local intelligence; their fanatical idealism; their disregard for the human rights of their own troops; and the inflexible, pyramid-style chain of command. Some of these characteristics of the old army remain, unreformed, in many Japanese organizations today, although it can't be denied that a lot of progress has been made.

Immediately following 3/11, more than 10,000 members of the Self-Defense Forces participated in rescue operations in the disaster area. The entire SDF consists of some 24,000 troops. What with logistical support, rotation of personnel, information gathering, and communications, one wonders if virtually every person in the SDF wasn't involved. Forces mobilized from the Ground SDF alone included the Northeastern Army's 6th and 9th Divisions; the Northern Army's 2nd Division, 5th and 11th Brigades, 7th DHQ, and 1st Artillery Brigade; the Eastern Army's 1st Division, 12th Brigade, 1st Engineer Brigade, and Logistic Support Group; the Middle Army's 3rd and 10th Divisions, 13th and 14th Brigades, and 4th Engineer Brigade; and the Western Army's 4th and 8th Divisions and 15th Brigade; not to mention its Central Readiness Force, 1st Airborne Brigade, 1st Helicopter Brigade, Central Nuclear Biological Chemical Weapons Defense Unit, and NBC Counter Medical Unit. In the four days following the earthquake and tsunami, these forces rescued some 19,000 people.

If the SDF had retained the worst characteristics of the old Imperial Army, lifelines of various sorts would have remained severed in the disaster area. It's unlikely that an organization like that could have rescued 19,000 in four days.

Ten years ago I wrote a novel in which a middle school student delivers a speech before the National Diet. "This country has everything," he declares. "You can find whatever you want here. The only thing you can't find is hope." I mentioned this in an article I wrote shortly after the initial disaster, which concluded as follows:

"Today evacuation centers where supply lines have broken down are facing serious shortages of everything, including food, water, and medicines. We have had shortages of goods and power in the Tokyo area as well. Everyone's lifestyle is threatened, and the government and utility companies have not responded adequately. Yet, for all we've lost, there's one thing we have regained. The great earthquake and tsunami have robbed us of resources, civic services, and many lives, but we who were so intoxicated with our own prosperity have once again planted the seed of hope."

Whether that hope has taken root and sprouted, these several months after 3/11, is not a certainty. Hope is like faith. It's a notion or feeling that things will be better in the future, and it becomes necessary when misfortune makes it difficult to go on living. We see quintessential examples of that in refugee camps around the world and in nations and regions ravaged by war and civil strife. People who find themselves in a scorched postwar wasteland bereft of their homes, their wealth, their families, need to look for hope somewhere.

After 3/11, the word *hope* popped up everywhere in Japan. The recommendations submitted by the Reconstruction Design Council in Response to the Great East Japan Earthquake, convened by the prime minister, Naoto Kan, carried

the subtitle "Hope Beyond the Disaster." Japan has been inundated with the word, but I'm not so sure that the populace is filled with the conviction that a better future is coming.

I've come to feel, however, that hope isn't something that permeates the whole. Hope isn't born all at once, like buds erupting in spring; nor does it envelop the landscape like freshly fallen snow.

After the eucalyptus tree was disposed of, I dried some of the wood shavings in the sun and then put them into a wineglass on my desk. Before beginning work, I drop some eucalyptus essential oil on this homemade potpourri, and a refreshing, invigorating fragrance fills my study. I've never had any interest in aromatherapy and such, but I was seduced by the scent that hung in the air when I was sawing through that tree.

I also saved about ten twigs to use as cuttings. After a bit of research on the Web, I soaked the ends in water for a day and a night, planted them in small clay pots, and lined them up on top of my bookshelf. It'll be a couple of months before I know if my cuttings will take root and grow. But it makes me feel good to see the "baby" leaves on the ends of the cuttings waver in the breeze from the window.

I think that maybe hope is like one of those little eucalyptus leaves. You suddenly become aware of its existence and potential; you figure out what you need to do, and you set goals; you gather information and knowledge and, if necessary, capital; and then you take action. Whatever the scale of the project, the buds of hope at first seem tiny—insignificant and unreliable. There's no way to be sure that they'll really

blossom. But once you make the first step forward, possibilities begin to take shape and show themselves.

Katsunobu Sakurai, the mayor of the city of Minamisoma, which was devastated in the earthquake and tsunami and contaminated with radiation as a result of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, had this to say about recovery and reconstruction:

"If we bring in general contractors from Tokyo, whose recovery are we talking about? We'll do the work here ourselves. The Ministry of the Environment permits burial of waste with readings of up to 8,000 becquerels. The tsunami breakwater was destroyed, and the coastal region is flooded each time there's a typhoon or big waves or a particularly high tide. The important thing here is to rebuild the infrastructure. We'll construct a bigger breakwater and bury the waste with acceptable radiation levels behind it. What we call debris was once the stuff of people's lives. We're working on a plan for a protective shoreline forest to be planted on top of the reclaimed land. And we're looking a hundred years, two hundred years down the road. We need to go about this calmly and steadily" (*Aera*, 8/8/2011).

Buds of hope are definitely popping out, one by one.

AFTER THE DISASTER, BEFORE THE DISASTER



David Peace

In an emergency such as this earthquake, art is useless, to say the least. Our recent experience only helped expose the ultimate futility of all artistic endeavours.

—*Ruminations on the Earthquake,*
Kikuchi Kan, 1923

After the disaster, Ryūnosuke lived for four more years. Before the disaster, Ryūnosuke had been in his study in his home in Tabata, in the north of Tokyo. Throughout the morning, there had been brief showers and a strong wind while Ryūnosuke read newspaper reports on the formation of a new cabinet under Count Yamamoto. Just before noon, he had finished the last article and lit a cigarette when he felt

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* Words *

Losing everything
We even lost our words
But words did not break
Were not washed from the depths
Of our individual hearts

Words put forth buds
From the earth beneath the rubble
With accents like old times
With cursive script
With halting meanings

Words grown old from overuse
Come alive again with our pain
Grow deep with our sadness
As if backed by silence
They grow toward new meanings

Shuntaro Tanikawa

Translated by Jeffrey Angles

