

Japan Earthquake Charity Literature

Aoko Matsuda
Planting

Translated by Angus Turvill

WasedaBungaku 2011

Planting

Marguerite planted. She planted roses. She planted violets. She planted lilies of the valley. She planted clover flowers. And, of course, she planted marguerites. When marguerites came out of the box, she would smile. ‘We meet again!’ she would say softly. The gentle curves etched lightly by the years around her mouth and eyes would dance. Marguerite planted. She planted balloons of pretty colors. She planted lip cream, its smell tingling in her nose. She planted thick ceramic mugs. She planted cashmere socks. It was Marguerite’s job to plant. And so she planted. She planted lovely clothes, though nothing grand. She planted clothes one wouldn’t tire of. She planted clothes that would make one feel happy all day. She planted soft, gentle colors. She planted soft, gentle textures. Marguerite planted every day. She planted a heart that knew each day was precious. She planted a heart that kept things it liked and used them time and again. She planted a heart that treated things with care. Marguerite didn’t hurry. She planted slowly. It was fine to plant slowly here. How long had she been planting slowly? It was hard to say. Marguerite – her glasses, unfashionable but delicate, cardigan and trousers of pure cotton, simple curls at the tips of her light brown hair. Marguerite and her garden, wrapped in the faint light of evening – to a passer-by it would have seemed like heaven.

Marguerite was turning the pages of *Townwork*. She looked tired. Her clothes itched. She didn't care about them, didn't even notice the material was artificial. She was in a Doutor coffee shop, upstairs, in the seat nearest the toilet. Normally she drank her iced coffee quickly. If she waited for the ice to melt, the outside of the glass would become wet with condensation and droplets would seep down through the coaster to wet the table. She hated that. But on Mondays she let the water spread messily on the table. Goodness knows how many futile days she had spent waiting for the next issue of *Townwork*. She picked up a copy at the Family Mart convenience store every Monday, crossed the road to Doutor and started turning the pages. Before looking inside the thin magazine she could never suppress a momentary hope – perhaps this week there would be the perfect job. But by the time she came to close the magazine, this hope had always turned to disappointment, disappointment mixed with resignation. Every single time. It was too much – Marguerite felt as though she might faint. The jobs pages were updated every week. There were always new positions advertised. What struck her most were the dental nurse ads. They gushed out of the pages like water from a spring – it was hard to believe there could be so

many dental surgeries in the world. Looking through the ads in Townwork was fun. But the fact was Marguerite never felt like applying for any of the jobs. ‘A friendly workplace’ – that was no good. She didn’t feel she could work with friendly people. ‘We’ll help your dream come true!’ declared a restaurant manager beside a photograph of cheerful part-timers, bandanas around their heads. That was no good. She didn’t think she could work with people who had dreams. And she couldn’t work in a place where staff would have to clap and sing if they found out it was a customer’s birthday. ‘Supportive colleagues’ were no good either. Marguerite had never come across a colleague she could rely on. Basically, Marguerite was tired. She was tired of involvement with people, tired of working with people. But she didn’t think she was yet tired of work itself. She wanted a job working alone, without having to speak to anyone. There had never been any jobs like that. But one week she found one – on a flimsy page in a small square framed ad.

The first thing to come out of the box was a pure white shirt. Marguerite planted the shirt nervously, but in accordance with the manual. She was relieved when she had successfully planted it. And after that she planted, carefully, one by one, each of the other items that came out of the box.

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A box arrived every day. Some days from Yamato Transport, some days from Sagawa Express. Working time was 9 to 6 – eight hours allowing for breaks – 900 yen an hour. No work at weekends. At first she thought the rate of pay was rather low, but she soon decided she couldn't help that. After all, the job was only planting. And she didn't have to meet anyone or speak to anyone apart from the delivery men who gave her the boxes. There were no performance targets. If she couldn't plant everything in the box one day, she could plant them the next. So Marguerite planted slowly. Lovely tinkling ceramic bells. Macaroons of many colors. Figurines of fighter girls. Band T-shirts. One after another they came out of the box. And Marguerite planted each one slowly, so that she would not forget any of the wonderful objects, beautiful objects that came to her. Marguerite cherished everything that came out of the box. That above all was what made her happy.

Marguerite was surprised to see the dead rat that came out of the box. She planted the dead rat, holding it away from her between thumb and fingers. A screwed-up handkerchief came out of the box. Marguerite planted the screwed-up handkerchief. Muddy water came out. Marguerite planted the muddy water. She went to a nearby supermarket in her break and

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bought some rubber gloves. Rubber gloves on, she planted. She planted a soaking wet cuddly toy. She planted shriveled vegetables. She planted a bird with its wings pulled off. She planted a carpet stained red-black with blood. She could not stand to look at what came out of the box. She didn't know what had happened. As soon as a thought came out of the box, the exact opposite thought would follow. As soon as a feeling came out, the exact opposite feeling would follow. Marguerite was confused. Confused, she planted. She planted a broken cup. She planted a tongue cut out from a mouth. She planted a heart that could love nobody. She planted hatred. She planted anger. She planted, though she wanted to bury. She wanted to bury everything that came out of the box. She wanted to bury them so deep in the earth that no shoot could ever reach the surface. Though only Marguerite here could bury them, Marguerite had to plant. So she planted. She wished what she planted would wither quickly away. 'Wither. Wither. Wither,' she muttered. That is what her job had become. She didn't plant slowly any more. Her heart sank when each new box arrived. She tried to deal with it as quickly as she could. But however quickly she dealt with it nothing wonderful now came out, nothing now to warm her heart. Marguerite planted sadness. She planted anxiety.

She planted regret. She planted fear. She planted fear. She planted fear. She planted fear. She planted fear. Day after day she planted fear, as though in a game of forfeit. Instead of relaxing with a home-made lunch, she now ate as she worked, gnawing at a rice ball from a convenience store. Marguerite stopped breathing deeply. Her field of vision narrowed. She took fear from the box and it slipped from her hands. She gasped. As if waking from a trance, she picked up the fear and planted it quickly. She noticed she was sticky with sweat. She felt uncomfortable. She took off her wig, releasing trapped heat and stiff black hair. She took off her plain-glass spectacles and rubbed her face. Her wrinkles, drawn in eyebrow pencil, smudged diagonally and disappeared. What do you mean 'Marguerite'? A stupid girl, not yet thirty, pretending to be tired out. A girl who can only plant what she wants to bury. A coward, incapable of anything. Makiko cried. Makiko stood crying stupidly in the middle of the garden.

(Some time ago here was an author called Mori Mari, who called herself Maria. Makiko loved Mori Mari. She thought that if Mari could call herself Maria, then she, Makiko, could call herself Marguerite. It wouldn't harm anyone, would it? She knew that the men who delivered the boxes looked at her

with mystified expressions, mystified feelings, but while she worked here she would be 'Marguerite'. She had decided this on that first day, when she planted the shirt.)

Makiko looked around the garden as she cried. Fear hung low in the air, like fog. The black garden was like a mire sucking Makiko down. Like a black hole. The place she stood was nowhere. Where is this? she thought. Then she realized – she had never had a choice. There was no way she could have chosen. Of course, there wasn't. Makiko smiled faintly. Her tears stopped. She put her wig back on. She put on her glasses. She wiped her face with a towel handkerchief and took a make-up pouch from her bag. Looking in her hand mirror she redrew the wrinkles. I will plant. I will plant, she thought. She put her hand in the box. Fear appeared. Marguerite did not look away. She fixed her gaze on fear. Then she slowly planted it. She planted it neatly. Marguerite resolved: I do not have the right to choose. But I can wait. If I carry on planting here like this, one day wonderful things may come out of the box again, things it warms the heart just to see. So I will wait here. Keep planting and wait. Marguerite planted fear. She planted fear. She took a deep breath. She planted fear. She stretched a little to relieve the tension in her body. She relaxed for a

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while with some nice smelling herb tea from her flask. She planted fear. She planted fear. The man from Yamato Transport brought the next box. Marguerite took it, smiling. The man thought this was the first time he had seen her smile. She didn't yet know what was inside the box. Her watch, a men's style watch that would never go out of fashion, told her it was time to stop work. She decided to open tomorrow's box tomorrow. Marguerite will be planting again tomorrow.

Aoko MATSUDA

Aoko Matsuda was born in Hyogo in 1979. She graduated from Doshisha University Faculty of Letters, Department of English. She published her first novel in 2007. Her keen mixture of rhythmical spoken language and bookish sensibility suggests fresh possibilities for Japanese literature. Of her small number of publications to date, the short story in this collection is the first to be translated into foreign languages. She looks set to become one of Japan's leading young authors.



Angus Turvill

A graduate of Edinburgh and London universities, Angus Turvill is Grand Prize winner of the 5th Shizuoka International Translation Competition. He is also a prize-winner in the John Dryden competition, the UK's leading literary translation competition. Translated authors include Kaori Ekuni, Natsuki Ikezawa, Kuniko Mukoda, Kiwao Nomura, and Osamu Dazai. He taught Japanese translation at Newcastle University in the UK for seven years.

Waseda Bungaku's charity project:

Japan Earthquake Charity Literature

The earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan on March 11, 2011 claimed the lives of more than 15,000 people, displaced many more times that number from their homes, schools and workplaces, and triggered a nuclear accident whose effects are sure to last for decades. These unprecedented events have forced people in Japan to think and act in new ways. We recognize our responsibility to mourn the dead and do what we can to help the people whose lives have been turned upside down. We realize that we are victims ourselves – both of the short to mid-term damage from the earthquake and the long-term damage from the nuclear accident. We cannot escape the fact that we are somehow

responsible for the effects that the contamination from the nuclear accident will have on current and future generations both at home and abroad.

In towns where street lights and neon signs have been dimmed and where air-conditioning and the number of trains running have been reduced, everyone – regardless of whether they were directly affected or not – has been thinking about what they can do as well as what it means to use nuclear energy. Writers are no exception. Jean-Paul Sartre once famously asked what literature can do for starving children. Each one of us began to ask ourselves similar questions: What can we write or not write? What can and should we be doing other than writing? What is it that we really have to offer? The damage wrought by the disaster and the reconstruction process that followed on the one hand, and the accident at the nuclear power plant on the other, each raised issues that had to be thought about quite separately.

In responding to the first, we searched for words to mourn the dead and encourage survivors who were trying to get back on their feet. Some tried to write pieces that would bring solace to these survivors, while others composed re-

quiems, just as Shoyo Tsubouchi, one of the founders of Modern Japanese literature, did in 1923 following the Great Kanto Earthquake. It is often said that “authors always arrive last”. Some made a conscious decision not to write, choosing instead to write about these events as history one day. There were those who questioned the value of writing fiction, while others did not hesitate to write when asked to do so. Some considered it their duty as a writer not to be moved by it all and chose to go on as always with daily life.

It was (and continues to be) terribly difficult to find the words to offer those who have been directly affected by the disaster. Faced with the continuing effects of the nuclear accident, some shed tears thinking of the people in Fukushima they had grown up with; others joined demonstrations calling for the government and the electricity company to be held responsible for their mismanagement; still others began to rethink the way they had lived, dependent on electricity supplied by nuclear power; and some even called for the need to reevaluate the modern era that had “progressed” in that direction.

Such reactions naturally extended beyond the borders

of Japan. We all imagined, lamented, and felt anger at the thought of the many devastating disasters that have shaken our world, the accidents that all kinds of technologies have caused, and similar events that are sure to happen again in the future, as if they were happening to our neighbors, our friends, and to ourselves. We think of Hemingway rushing to Madrid with rifle in hand to report on the Spanish Civil War as we head to Fukushima armed not with rifles, but buckets and shovels.

But for those of us who make a living by writing, it is clear that the biggest contribution we can make is through doing what we do. (Standing in front of a mound of rubble and debris with shovels, we are far less useful than local high school students.) Although they have used different methods and approaches, all the authors who participated in this project chose to try to do something for the areas and people affected through their writing. They all struggled in different ways as they wrote these short pieces that have been made available in English through the efforts of a number of translators.

This program aims to give serious thought to the disaster

and accident, then bring these words that were born, directly or indirectly, through this thought process, to people across the world. We hope that after reading these texts you will choose to make a donation to the Red Cross in Japan or in your country or to another charity.

We hope that these pieces, written for ourselves as much as for anyone else, will reach people around the world, and eventually, in some small way, also serve to help the people in northern Japan who are now working hard to rebuild their lives.

Makoto ICHIKAWA (literary critic / director of The WASEDA
bungaku)

September 11, 2011

This story was written primarily for use in *Waseda Bungaku's* charity project for the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 2011 and for distribution via the *Waseda Bungaku* website in PDF form. An e-book publication of this story will also be made available in Japan. All proceeds from sales will be donated to the families of victims and survivors in areas affected by the disaster.

PDF files of all the stories in this collection will be available to download from the website until March 2012. Sending these PDFs to third parties via e-mail, and posting the URLs to third-party sites, is permitted. (though *Waseda Bungaku* will take no responsibility for the content of such third-party sites). However, reproduction, in whole or in part, of the data on these PDFs in any printed media by any unauthorized third parties is strictly prohibited. Data alteration is likewise strictly prohibited. We hope that after reading these texts you will choose to make a donation to the Red Cross in Japan (details below) or in your country or to another charity supporting disaster relief. In case of data transfer, we suggest you send

us notification beforehand.

Donation Bank Account 1

Name of Bank: Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation

Name of Branch: Ginza

Account No.: 8047670 (Ordinary Account)

SWIFT Code: SMBC JP JT

Branch Number: 026

Address of Bank: Ginza Joint Building 6-10-15 Ginza Chuo-ku
Tokyo JAPAN

Payee Name: The Japanese Red Cross Society

Payee Address: 1-1-3 Shiba-Daimon Minato-ku, Tokyo JAPAN

Donation Bank Account 2

Name of Bank: The Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi UFJ, Ltd.

Name of Branch: Tokyo Government and Public Institutions
Business Office

Account No.:0028706(Ordinary Account)

SWIFT Code: BOTKJPJT

Branch Number: 300

Address of Bank: 3-6-3 Kajicho Kanda Chiyoda-ku Tokyo JA-
PAN

Payee Name: The Japanese Red Cross Society

Payee Address: 1-1-3 Shiba-Daimon Minato-ku, Tokyo JAPAN

Donation Bank Account 3

Name of Bank: Mizuho Bank, LTD

Name of Branch: Shinbashi Chuo Branch

Account No.: 2188729 (Ordinary Account)

SWIFT Code: MHBK JP JT

Branch Number: 051

Address of Bank: 4-6-15 Shinbashi Minato-ku Tokyo JAPAN

Payee Name: The Japanese Red Cross Society

Payee Address: 1-1-3 Shiba-Daimon Minato-ku, Tokyo JAPAN

(All bank accounts above are open until March 31, 2012.)

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(*English translations will be made available):

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