

Japan Earthquake Charity Literature

Jungo Aoki

*Special Edition:
Sack-toting Turtle Spotted
in West Ikebukuro*

Translated by Ian MacDonald

WasedaBungaku 2011

...Until today the three of us knew nothing about this bit of Ikebukuro's history. In retrospect our experience has taught us the importance of understanding the past and not taking things at face value. Today has inspired us to learn a lot more about Toshima ward. Here's a picture we took to commemorate our adventure!!

A photograph of three smiling girls in school uniforms accompanied this upbeat message announcing the successful conclusion of their extracurricular activities. The caption read: Stone monument at site of former pond from which Ikebukuro gets its name – your guides are (from left to right) Izumi Senkawa, Chiyoko Kaname, and Satomi Mejiro.

The gleam in their adolescent eyes as they stared straight into the camera spoke volumes about the depth of their emotion. In addition to the three girls and the stone monument, which had been the objective of their outing that day, there was a fourth figure in the picture: a costumed owl mascot named Mr. Hootie. He had an almost dirty, disheveled look, as though covered with ashes, and stood a bit to one side with the look of someone who had wandered into the picture by accident. Plus he was out of focus.

Through no fault of their own, both girls and bird found

their movements restricted to Ikebukuro. According to their profile, the three fourteen-year-olds lived in Toshima ward and attended junior high school together. That day the purpose of their visit to the Metropolitan Plaza exit of Ikebukuro station was purely educational.

Of course their names were aliases taken from the respective neighborhoods in Toshima where they lived: Senkawa, Kaname-cho, and Mejiro. The public school districting system in Tokyo mandates that students attend the junior high school closest to home, meaning the girls' movements were confined to their immediate community. If you wanted some ordinary citizens – as opposed to local business or political figures – for the Toshima home page, you couldn't have done better than these three eager students of local history.

This is Toshima ward – our home. The three of us attend a local junior high school where we're members of the school journalism club. The main activity of the journalism club is putting together the school newspaper. We're in charge of the metro beat. Today we're out gathering material for a regular feature called "What I Love about Toshima." The teacher in charge of our club is always telling us "Use your feet!" so we're pounding the pavement, talking to people to find out what

THEY love about Toshima Ward.

We're hungry for information. There're so many things we need to know. Come to think of it, is there anything in this world that's NOT worth knowing? People want news and we want to report it.

"C'mon, everyone! Tell us what you love about Toshima Ward! We're junior high school students and we really want to know. What about your town are YOU most proud of? We need your help!"

I bet there're tons of people out there on the street just waiting to talk to us. So let's get going. Today we'll walk along Kaname-cho Street toward Ikebukuro station.

Taking a bird's-eye view of Toshima ward, located in the northwest corner of metropolitan Tokyo, the three girls saw houses and apartment buildings stretching in all directions, not just around Ikebukuro station and along the main traffic arteries. There were hardly any parks to speak of unless you count the big cemetery. Based on official statistics the girls figured out that Toshima has the least amount of open space among Tokyo's twenty-three autonomous wards. They were astonished to learn it's the most densely populated urban area in Japan.

“Wow, I guess that’s why the proposed town hall is going to have retail and residential space too.”

“Yeah, it was bound to happen sooner or later.”

“It’s a sign of the times.”

The girls turned back to the map, marveling at how many people lived in so small an area. Then they happened to notice that the shape of Toshima ward resembled a bird in flight.

Being crammed into such a confined space has given people in Toshima bird envy. They’re everywhere – not just your common-or-garden variety birds: the impudent pigeons and cunning crows – but all sorts of objects in the shape of owls, scattered in and around Ikebukuro station.

“The Ikebukuro, or ‘Pond Owl,’ is located in the underground corridor outside the north JR ticket gate near the east exit of Ikebukuro station...”

Mr. Hootie introduced the stone statue of his fellow strigiform to the three girls as “the symbol of Ikebukuro station.” They instinctively reached out and rubbed its head, as though for good luck, and then began to examine it. Inscribed on the base they noticed the words “Serino stone.” They dutifully jotted this down in their notebooks.

“Now the type of stone Frank Lloyd Wright used in design-

ing the Jiyu Gakuen Myonichikan (located at 2-31-3 West Ikebukuro) and the old Imperial Hotel is called Oya stone...”

Mr. Hootie himself was made of a relatively soft material that covered his cylindrical body, oversized head and tiny wings. He struck a series of poses, reeling back in mock surprise, tilting his head to one side in puzzlement, and hanging his head in dejection – all while his face remained expressionless. In contrast to the whitish gray stone statue, Mr. Hootie was a garish greenish-brown. Both had the same big eyes and small beak.

Yet only the Pond Owl had that trademark wise-man-of-the-forest look of birds of prey, which is the product of some particular quality, be it the sharpness of their features or the proximity of their eyes and beak. Mr. Hootie’s face on the other hand seemed deficient in owliness; it lacked that sense of substance and gravitas one expects in an owl.

Toshima employs another owl mascot familiar to residents from the ward newsletter that comes out three times a month. There’s also a certain independent not-for-profit organization which uses a similar character in its promotional materials, but as owl mascots go he’s one or two rungs down the ladder.

Mr. Hootie is often to be seen outside train stations and

in department stores engaged in marketing-related activities. Though the costumed character is sometimes rented out to private groups for events, to be honest it's hard to say how many ward residents know who he is.

That day the girls might have chosen to rendezvous at one of the meeting spots on the west side of Ikebukuro station, such as the fountain in West Square or outside Marui Department Store at Gosaro Crossing. Instead they chose the Pond Owl on the east side of the station. It seemed they rarely ventured over to that side.

The statue was a popular meeting place. It even had an inscription which read, "Where people make a date with happiness." But since there were no junior high schools anywhere near Ikebukuro station, the three girls stood out like a sore thumb in their uniforms. Mr. Hootie had arrived first and was waiting for them.

The girls acted as though they'd stumbled upon the statue by accident, even though it wasn't on their route to school and they had no other reason to be on that side of the station. They began reading about the origin of the name "Ikebukuro" on the pillar behind the statue. Apparently, Ikebukuro (which literally means "Pond Sack") is located in what was long ago

a swampy sack-shaped depression, hence the name. But when they see the Pond Owl statue most people just focus on the pun (“sack” and “owl” sound the same in Japanese) and walk right on by without reading the pillar.

“I still vividly recall the excitement surrounding the long awaited opening of Krispy Kreme Doughnuts in October 2009 in the basement of Tobu Department Store in West Ikebukuro, near the entrance to the newly remodeled Prism Garden. I happened to be there when it opened. The very first Krispy Kreme Doughnuts in Ikebukuro, and on this side of the station – what a coup!”

Since they would have attracted attention wandering about the east side of the station, the girls turned their backs to the stairs leading up to the street and pretended that Parco Department Store didn’t exist. Since school supplies and anything else a junior high student’s heart might desire could be bought at Tobu or one of the many stores in West Ikebukuro, it was common among their peers to refer to East Ikebukuro as “out of bounds.”

At least in West Square they would have felt safe knowing they could flee toward Metropolitan Plaza where, even if a

teacher spotted them, it was unlikely they'd get into trouble. That corner of West Ikebukuro – bounded by the train station, West Square, the Metropolitan Hotel, and the police department – boasted a number of cultural and educational institutions, including the Tokyo Arts Theater and Rikkyo University. Of course, like the commercial area around any major train station, it also has its share of love hotels.

Having walked all the way from school, two stations from Ikebukuro, the girls were exhausted. They quickly took a picture of the Pond Owl, thanked Mr. Hootie, and quickly retreated to the west side of the station. They wanted to sit down and eat something, but since they were still wearing their school uniforms they couldn't step into a restaurant or café.

West Square looked vast and desolate. They changed their minds and veered off in another direction; if they couldn't eat in at least they could grab something sweet and sit down on a bench somewhere.

Someone told us there was a small monument in front of the Metropolitan Hotel in West Ikebukuro commemorating the old pond from which the area gets its name. We knew they weren't talking about the fountain called "Castalia Spring,"

which used to be in the basement of Prism Garden, but after coming up from the station it still took us a while to find what we were looking for.

Just as we'd been told, the monument was tucked away in a small park – if you can even call it that – without so much as a bench to sit on. Other than the monument itself there was nothing but a few owl statues and a circle of tiles on the ground. Presumably the circle was meant to represent the old pond. Later we did some research and learned that supposedly a turtle carrying a sack had once been spotted crawling out of the pond – and that's how Ikebukuro got its name.

So which was it, a sack-shaped pond or a sack-toting turtle? Or – a third possibility – a pond with an owl perched nearby? Then again, it's not entirely clear if the pond had anything to do with the origin of the name Ikebukuro in the first place, something the plaque put there by the Toshima Board of Education conveniently glosses over.

...So in the end we found the site of the old pond (located at 1-9-12 West Ikebukuro) and learned about the origin of Ikebukuro's name. Although it's hard to imagine what the pond looked like long ago, at least the monument is there to remind us it existed. Even if a high-rise now stands on the

site of the actual pond, as long as the monument remains it'll never be forgotten.

END

Jungo AOKI

Jungo Aoki was born in Saitama in 1979 and graduated from Waseda University. In 2003 he received The Shincho's New Writers Prize for his novella *Yonju-nichi to Yonju-ya no Meruhen* ("Forty Days and Forty Nights in Märchen"), which was republished in book form in 2005 together with the short story *Kureta No Hotoride* ("On the Edge of the Crater"). This book earned him The Noma Literary Prize for New Writers, sponsored by Kodansha, Japan's largest publisher. An established fellow writer has praised Aoki as "the Japanese Thomas Pynchon."



Ian MacDonald

Ian MacDonald (b. 1968) holds a PhD in Japanese language, literature, and art history from Stanford University. In 1997 he was awarded First Prize in the Shizuoka International Translation Competition for his translation of a story by Izumi Kyoka. His published translations include *The Curious Casebook of Inspector Hanshichi* (Okamoto Kido) and *The Budding Tree* (Kitahara Aiko) as well as two forthcoming books, *The Sharaku Murders* (Takahashi Katsuhiko) and *Tales of the Ghost Sword* (Kikuchi Hideyuki). He lives in Berkeley, California.

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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