

Japan Earthquake Charity Literature

Kazushige Abe

*RIDE ON TIME*

Translated by Michael Emmerich

WasedaBungaku 2011

Another day of uninspiring waves. Nothing bracing about the wind, either – it just feels chilly. Occasionally a perfunctory gust springs up, as if it's suddenly realized it should have been blowing all along, flapping the banners outside the seafood shops and the curtains hanging in the storefronts before heading elsewhere. In its wake, the salty pungency of the rocks and an image on the retina of billowing sand.

The waves are always the same. It was like this yesterday, and doubtless it'll be this way tomorrow, too. Bland, ordinary swells, unremarkable, average.

Still, we know they're not as bad as we say they are.

Truth is, we've gotten used to them. Inured to their excitements.

Having spent so many years on this coast, paddling out past the breakers day in and day out, all year long, we've become so familiar with the particular qualities of the wind and waves here that there are no surprises anymore, unless something well out of the ordinary comes along.

Lucky enough to be served gourmet meals on a daily basis, we grumble about the cooks above the clouds. *This isn't good enough, do better!* Blaming the weather bureau has gotten so old that we no longer even bother. We're as passive as chicks in a nest, straining upward, opening our mouths, cheeping

shrilly ever so often as we wait for our food.

We've long since become bored with the whole situation, but that doesn't keep us from staying on. Because we have a reason to be here. Because we can't abandon our hope that someday that same wave will come crashing toward this shore again.

Some of us, more than just a few, still can't believe it was real.

A grand swell of unprecedented size that appeared a decade ago, the likes of which has never been seen here again.

That's what we've been yearning for all this time, that's the wave we've been picturing in our minds' eyes – a sea dragon flapping its wings, so huge it blots out the sky.

Some among us are veterans aching for a second try, others are rookies who only half accept that such a wave could really exist, or get as large as people say. Still, every one of us shares the same desire to come face to face with a legend.

That's who we are. The surfers who've made this northern coast our home, choosing of our own volition to pass our days in unrelieved monotony.

We've forgotten who we were, but sometimes, rarely, we see what we've become.

Of course, just because a place is beautiful, you don't neces-

sarily want to stay forever. It's not easy to keep from getting worn down or falling prey to routine when you remain in one place too long.

Matted hair, grainy with salt; faded raglan tee shirts; white jeans dyed in earthy tones; high-performance sunglasses with polarized, mirrored lenses – that was the look we favored. It didn't matter how old a surfer was, even if some of us preferred prescription sunglasses. We weren't an especially attractive group of people, overall, but it's not like any of us were old or decrepit.

Now, having waited so long, we look like skeletons. Even the youngest have skin so dry it's sandpapery, almost keratinized, and they pop as many vitamins as the rest of us.

Years of surfing have made us prone to complain that none of the waves are any good, but that doesn't mean we've lost our enthusiasm for catching them.

Just the opposite, in fact. We may complain, but we can't forswear the joy of romping through variations on a theme we've long since mastered. If anything, without noticing that it was happening, we've become comfortable with the predictability of our situation.

By now we like to think we've grasped the patterns of the waves on the ocean's surface, even though in reality the same

movements are never repeated twice.

Of course we know it's an illusion, but we're not about to change our attitude now. And so we go on proclaiming cockily that things will be the same tomorrow, and the next day.

Our goal is still the same: to be here when the groundswell comes.

But if we were honest with ourselves, we'd have to admit we've been so coddled by the smooth, easy waves on this beach that none of us is really ready to take on such a monster.



And now here we were, headed for a Friday unlike any other.

Someone had posted a tweet. At last, it said, this is the one you've been waiting for.

It was almost positive. The wave would hit the north coast on Friday.

This time, the information could be trusted.

Now that this legendary wave was approaching, for the first time in ten years, the best surfers were already preparing. So they said. The new faces and the younger surfers, unable to believe this was actually happening, were probably busy trying to gather any information they could. Those who'd gone

down the last time and were preparing for a second try were fiercely waxing their boards, hardly noticing the numbness in their hands.

And yet faced with a wave like the one we were expecting, there were no veteran surfers, no rookies. There was no knowing whether anything you'd read in a manual, any technique you'd acquired, would be of any use.

Forecasters said it was almost 100% certain the wave would come on Friday.

The date got a double circle on smartphone surfing apps, and knowledgeable figures in the Fishing Coop agreed that Friday was the day. An old surfing judge who was better than anyone at predicting waves and more rigorous in his appraisal of their scale, said he had no doubt the leviathan was coming back.

Everyone was psyched over this once-in-a-decade event.

Last time, every single surfer had been thrown.

I myself hadn't had a chance of catching the wave at its peak. In fact, I hadn't even been able to get up on my board properly before I was swept into the massive wall. Not one of us had been able to conquer that wave, and make the super long ride in.

This time, though, there might be a breakthrough. There

were signs.

Whenever new surfers arrived, the locals told them right off about some of the people who had died trying to ride that monster in the past.

Each time the dragon wakes, always in early spring, it devours a few of us, then vanishes again for years at a time.

The same awful scene has played out again and again. And each time, the locals tell the newcomers all they've witnessed, as clearly as possible, and make them listen.

The sharper the accounts, the more each listener retains.

The more each listener retains, the less meaningless the old deaths are.

Because when those memories are carried on, they point the way toward new methods of attacking the wave, and make it less likely that so many will go down the next time.

A decade ago, we were all thrown from our boards, it's true, but everyone made it back to shore. Because we had learned what we could from the past.

Slowly but surely, in other words, the old surfers' experiences, handed down from one generation to the next, were leading us closer to matching the force of that huge wave.

There was no knowing whether our manuals and techniques would help, but history had given us wisdom, and history was

gradually pushing us toward a way out.

And so we had to try again. Try, once again, to win.

A decade of calm waters had turned us into tough-talking wimps, but even people like us could be useful, lending our strength to try and force the exit open.

Either way, the wave was coming. It would hit the north coast on Friday.

On Friday, we would put on our drysuits just like always, head for the shore at the same hour we did every day.

The only difference would be the class of the wave, and our determination.

But the wave we would be going to meet was a mega grand swell some fifty meters tall, and we'd know that the worst might happen.

So I guess the truth was that everything would be different.

We needed to be in our best form, to be ready for a Friday unlike any other.

Who knew, if we were physically in peak condition, and if we could keep calm, maybe we could turn a Friday unlike any other into a Friday just like every other.





Three hundred people, including surfers and spectators, stand on this northern beach.

We're all staring out at a legend that has become real.

We had known more or less what to expect, but the awe-inspiring force of this ten-year wave leaves us stunned: surfers, forecasters, and the surfing judge, all gaping.

Every one of us is transfixed by the sight, no one says a word – it's like being at a movie, overwhelmed not merely by the vast quantity of water but also by the thunderous, even majestic roar the wave raises, filling in our silence.

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

One of the surfers has broken from the group and dashed bravely into the surf. Another follows, then a third. Soon they've started paddling toward the wave.

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

One after another, the surfers attempt to slide down from the crest into a super long ride, but unfortunately they all go

down.

Still, more surfers keep leaving the group, running into the sea to try their luck.

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

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

And whatever that is, it will help us push the exit open.

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

I believe we can do it. I'm going to try and ride that wave.

## Kazushige ABE

Kazushige Abe was born in Yamagata in 1968. He graduated from the Japan Academy of Moving Images. In 1994, his novel *Amerika no Yoru* ("The American Night") was awarded The Gunzo's New Writers Prize. This award was chosen by literary committee members including Kojin KARATANI, who at the time had considerable influence in the Japanese literary scene. Since then, he has established himself as a literary pioneer. In 2004 his full-length novel *Sin-semilla* received The Itô Sei Prize and The Mainichi Publishing Culture Award. With his novel *Grand Finale*, published in 2005, he won the most renowned literary award in Japan, The Akutagawa Ryûnosuke Prize. His most recent work, *Pistils* achieved The Tanizaki Jun'ichirô Prize, garnering respectful positive reviews.



## Michael Emmerich

He received his PhD in East Asian Languages and Cultures from Columbia University in 2007. He is the editor of *Read Real Japanese Fiction: Short Stories by Contemporary Writers* (Kodansha International), and the translator of books by Yasunari Kawabata, Banana Yoshimoto, and Gen'ichirô Takahashi. His most recent translation, Hiromi Kawakami's *Manazuru* (Counterpoint), was awarded the 2010 Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission Prize for the Translation of Japanese Literature. Emmerich teaches Japanese literature at the University of California-Santa Barbara.

*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 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



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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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