Japan Earthquake Charity Literature

Kiyoshi Shigematsu

To Next Spring - Obon

Translated by Angus Turvill

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Last summer there were a hundred and eighty people. This year only about thirty had turned up so far. The festival was going to be a quiet affair. It wasn't just a matter of numbers – there were no children running about, no youngsters in bright-patterned *yukata*: almost everybody was in their fifties or sixties.

No young ones, and nobody older either. Perhaps the old folk didn't have the energy to come out in the heat – still almost 30˚C in late afternoon. Or maybe they weren't in the village at all – perhaps they'd lost the will even to come home, and were spending *obon* at their emergency pre-fabs in distant towns.

The old folk of every family had lived here for decades. They'd never had the feeling of 'coming home'. 'Home' wasn't something far away. It was here. They were here. Home was at the soles of their feet. Not much good for running or jumping, those flat feet were always firmly planted on home ground. To the youngsters, they were tied down – they understood that in a way; but they'd never thought twice about staying – they'd spent their lives here with no uncertainty, no complaint. They'd believed it was only the call of heaven that would lift their feet away from home. They'd never dreamed of leaving in the way they had.

But the soil of home had been polluted. The water couldn't be drunk. And the wind that blew over the village secreted an invisible, odorless poison.

A car approached, sending up a cloud of dust. Nobu instinctively screwed up his face and held his breath. He thought again how glad he was that nobody had brought their grandchildren. There was poison in the ground where they stood. It wasn't good to breathe in the dust. In fact, people said the poison shimmered up from the ground, like a transparent haze of heat. So you were exposed to poison just standing there – standing anywhere in the village.

Nobu watched Koji climb out of the car. They'd known each other since childhood. Koji looked around the empty space where the festival was to be held, and came over to the tent where Nobu was standing.

'It's not surprising,' said Koji sympathetically. 'There's nothing that could have done about it this year.'

'Are you on your own?' said Nobu.

'Yes…My wife stayed behind. Our son's back from Tokyo with the children.'

'Where is it you're staying now?'

Koji pointed eastwards and said the name of the town where he'd been housed.

'How about you?'

Nobu pointed west and said the name of another town.

'That's a long way,' said Koji. 'But then so is mine,' he added wryly.

No-one was living in the village now. About a month before, at the end of the rainy season, the government had recommended evacuation. It was practically an order.

The villagers found vacancies in emergency housing and moved out to surrounding towns. Some went to live with relatives. Some went to stay with their children in the cities. They could get in touch with each other by email or cell phone, just like they had in the village; but in fact they were now scattered all over the place.

They were allowed home for three days at *obon* to visit family graves. Naturally, they wanted to busy themselves at their houses, but in fact they could do nothing. If they started opening windows and airing rooms they'd be letting poison in. They'd even been told it was dangerous to weed their gardens. And they should stick to bottled water.

Like Nobu and Koji, most people who'd come back hadn't brought their children or grandchildren. The poison in the village had a more serious effect on children – and unborn babies. And it could impact fertility in young adults.

It was a strange poison.

Exposure didn't bring any immediately visible change. But years later the body would be a wreck. They said that it would take hundreds of years before the contaminated soil was back to normal.

The future of the village was polluted, wounded.

Nobu, who had turned fifty this year, could surely not tell how deep that wound might prove to be.

Nobu finished preparing the *yakiniku* barbecue. Now they just had to wait for the drink to arrive.

He lit a cigarette and sat back.

'Hey!' said Koji 'You've started smoking again?'

'Yes,' said Nobu. 'I tried giving up, but…'

'You lasted less than a year.'

'Yes, but what's the point?'

It seemed stupid now – why go through the pain of giving up smoking when a far stronger poison was just hanging in the air? Completely stupid.

Nobu didn't explain, but Koji nodded nonetheless.

'Quite,' he said.

He rubbed the palm of his hand over his belly.

'I wonder what's happening in here?' he said. 'Quite a lot

must have got in already.'

The poison had been spewed out after a major accident in the spring. From then until the evacuation the villagers had continued their lives much as normal, the government hardly admitting that the poison even existed. And still now the villagers knew very little. How much poison had their bodies absorbed? The government said there would be 'no immediate damage to health' – how immediate was 'immediate'? What precisely was meant by 'damage to health'?

Koji looked around.

'But people are taking their time, aren't they?'

He counted.

'Thirty-two, thirty-three?'

He sighed.

But it wasn't a matter of people being slow. The scheduled start-time had come and gone; nobody else was going to turn up now.

'I think it's a good turnout, though, Nobu,' he said. 'People are living all over the place. It's a major exercise just making contact. You've done very well. You've done what you could.'

'Well…' said Nobu

Chairman of the Residents' Association, he'd been hoping for at least half as many people as last year, but had feared

that numbers would be even worse than they actually were. He hadn't been able to decide how much drink to get until the last moment, and with no youngsters here it looked like there'd be plenty of meat left over.

A festival had been held here in front of the village hall every summer for the last thirty years. It was always held during the days of *obon*, in mid-August, when ancestral spirits were thought to come home. The villagers cooked meat on a hot-plate barbecue, sung karaoke, and sat in circles drinking. They normally had a plastic pool for the children, and fireworks at sunset. After dark, they always danced to a tape of traditional *bon* music.

People looked forward to the festival every year. Children and grandchildren who'd gone to live in the cities would time their trips home so that they could attend. It was like a reunion for them. Those who'd stayed in the village turned out each year as well – the same old faces drinking together. But it was fun. Just being outside drinking with almost two hundred other people made you feel good.

The ties between the people here were very strong. Their families had originally been a group of settlers who'd set up farms in the area. For three or four generations they'd been like cousins. It was deep in the mountains and winters were

severe, so people had always kept close together and helped each other out. They'd lived contented lives, though they'd never been very prosperous.

Now the villagers were split up. The authorities – the national and prefectural governments – said they hoped to get things back to normal in two years, but no specific plans had yet been proposed. Apparently, all you could do in the polluted areas was to replace the topsoil. That might be possible for the school sports ground and the playground. Maybe it could be done in private gardens as well, though it would be a tough job. But what about rice fields, what about soybeans and buckwheat? What about pasture? What about the woods and mountains?

These thoughts always made Nobu despondent. And he'd end up with one particular remark about to spill from his lips.

He'd kept it back, held it at the back of his mouth, as he prepared for the festival. Koji and the others may well have had the same unspoken words in their mouths too. When their chat gave out, and each looked momentarily into the distance, the expression on their faces seemed strangely similar.

Another vehicle drove up. It was Eno's pick-up. He'd been to get the drink. He slammed on the breaks, threw open the

door, and jumped out. His face was red with anger.

'What's the matter?'

'The bastard!' he shouted.

He'd been to a liquor store in the next town, where the government had issued no evacuation advice. He was an electrician and the name and address of his business were on the side of his truck. The liquor store owner had noticed the address and told him not to park outside the store.

'Your village is polluted,' he'd said. 'There's poison on that truck. We don't want your poison spewed over us…I've got my customers to think about. A truck like that parked outside will ruin my reputation…'

Those listening to Eno looked angry too. Several reported similar experiences. In the month since he'd moved into temporary accommodation, Nobu himself had often felt unpleasant looks, though he hadn't suffered the open hostility that Eno found at the liquor store.

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They moved on from beer to *sake*, but the party still didn't get going. Things had been quite lively at first, as people exchanged their latest news. But that was followed by quieter

voices and awkward silences. In previous years they'd always vied for the karaoke microphone. But there'd been no singing yet this time. It looked like there would be more meat and drink left over than Nobu had expected.

What next..?

Everyone was muttering.

If they couldn't live in the village, they couldn't do their work in the fields. People said there was going to be some kind of compensation, but, here again, no action had yet been taken. And anyway it would only relate to losses this year; nobody knew anything about future years. Nobu himself was a dairy farmer and had been forced to cull his whole herd – over thirty cattle.

For families with children another problem was school. Just as Eno had faced that hostility in the liquor store, people worried that their children would be bullied at their new schools if they said where they came from.

What next?

Temporary housing was just that – people couldn't stay there for ever. People who'd gone to their relatives or children would have to move on as well. And for Nobu, who now had no work, it was time to think about his next job.

It was obvious from TV and newspapers that the idea of

getting back home in two years was totally unbelievable. Some reports even said that the evacuation area was going to be extended.

The *sake* smarted against the unspoken words at the back of Nobu's mouth.

He had to think. He had to decide. He wanted to hold onto his dreams. He didn't want to abandon hope. And yet, there was something called reality. It was certain and unavoidable. And it had to be accepted.

The atmosphere gradually changed. People were still subdued, but now a needling irritation seemed to lurk in the conversations. There were sharp words in the hum of quiet voices. People drank faster. Suddenly there was an angry shout. Nori, never pleasant when drunk, swayed to his feet, staring fixedly at Moro. 'Why don't you calm down?' suggested Moro, who in his mid-thirties was the youngest of those present. Nori, old enough to be his father, grew angrier still and threw a plastic cup of *sake* at him.

Several people intervened to restrain Nori, while Moro, his head dripping with *sake*, went off home, casting dismissive looks not only at Nori, but at the whole assembly.

Apparently, they'd been talking about what they were going to do. Nori was proud of how well the nine members of

his three-generation household got along. He'd said they'd all come back to the village as soon as evacuation advice was lifted. Moro, whose son had just started elementary school, was planning to move out of his temporary housing as soon as possible – he was going to buy a new house in a different town.

'You mean you're going to betray the village?' Nori had said.

'If you love your grandchildren,' Moro had retorted, 'it'd be odd to bring them back here.'

And so they'd started to quarrel.

It was that simple. But when people heard the background, they fell silent.

What next..?

Everybody had a different answer to that question. And in each answer lay that individual's frustration and anger.

So nobody asked the others 'What do you think of that?' or 'What would you do?'

Instead, everybody looked uncomfortable. Perhaps the *sake* was beginning to smart on those words at the backs of their mouths.

Things were still more oppressive after the spat between

Nori and Moro. It wasn't simply that people weren't cheerful; there was now something fierce in every group. People picked up on others' comments and lashed out; they clicked their tongues; normally abstemious people poured themselves cup after cup of *sake*. Uncomfortable with the atmosphere, people began to leave early.

Fireworks had been bought as usual, but nobody was now in a mood to enjoy them. Maybe the *bon* dancing after dark wouldn't happen this year either.

Perhaps we shouldn't have held the festival after all, thought Nobu. He sipped his *sake* unhappily and cleared the frazzled meat from the barbecue.

He'd asked various people's opinions. Quite a few of them said there shouldn't be a festival. One old man had been very angry. 'At a time like this?' he'd said. 'What on earth are you talking about?'

But in the end Nobu, on his own authority, had taken the decision to go ahead. He'd convinced himself that, with the community split up, the festival would be particularly important that year. But now all the reservations he'd put out of his mind returned to plague him.

One of the groups was getting noisy. They were squabbling. Somebody managed to calm them down. But then from yet

another group came angry shouts. Some of the wives were screaming.

More people were getting ready to go. They each came over to Nobu, apologized for leaving early and thanked him for organizing the event; but not one of them said they'd enjoyed themselves.

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Nobu arrived at his house. 'I'm home!' he said quietly as he opened the door. There was no reply. He didn't expect one. His wife and daughter – their only child, a student at university in Tokyo – were spending *obon* at a hot spring. It was a little treat. They'd spoken to him yesterday on the telephone. They'd had a real feast, they said – they hadn't been able to eat it all. Since the accident in the spring his wife had been very tense. She'd become very sensitive to rumor; she worried about what people thought, almost to the point of cowardice. Nobu told her there was nothing wrong in taking time out, nothing wrong in enjoying herself. They weren't guilty of anything; they hadn't messed up. They'd been forced from their village simply because an industrial plant had leaked poison, and because they happened to live where the poison

ended up. If they weren't allowed the luxury of a trip to a hot spring, then as far as Nobu was concerned, the whole country – government, parliament, industry, and people – could go to hell.

The house was still full of their belongings. They'd only taken the bare minimum to the emergency housing. They were ready to resume their old life at any moment. But that life was now far away. It was time to accept that now.

One thing they had taken to the emergency housing was the family altar. But Nobu's wife had said it wouldn't be nice for their ancestral spirits to come home at *obon* to an emergency pre-fab, so Nobu had brought the memorial name tablets, normally placed on the altar, back to the village with him.

Their emergency housing was cramped anyway and the altar made things even worse. If they were going to take the name tablets back home at *obon* then really there was no point in having the altar in the pre-fab at all. Their daughter sighed at the fuss they made about it all. It showed they were getting old, she said.

There were eight name tablets on the low table in the living room. The newest and biggest were those of Nobu's parents. His father had died five years back; his mother three years

later. They'd both been in their early seventies, so perhaps young by today's standards. His grandparents had not been very long-lived either. It was difficult to read the faded script on the oldest tablets, but apparently one of them was that of a child. Only his parents or grandparents could have told him more about it. He felt a growing regret at not having asked them. This too, perhaps, was witness to his own ageing.

He'd brought some *sake* back from the festival. He sipped some of it cold. Whilst there he hadn't been conscious of drinking much, but now he was home he realized that he was slightly drunk.

They hadn't touched the fireworks in the end. They hadn't danced either. The whole thing was over even before the flames of the barbecue charcoal had burnt out.

The fact that it ended early probably wasn't just because people hadn't enjoyed themselves. Nobu reckoned that people were reluctant to stay long for fear of exposure to the poison.

Nobu had a two-year term as Residents' Chairman, so he would have deal with the festival again next year. But nobody had mentioned next year. Probably no-one would have objected if he'd said he was intending to give it a miss. People who'd been worried about the poison might have been relieved. They might have been happy. They'd only turned up out of a sense

of obligation. Should he have said there wasn't going to be one? Perhaps he ought to have done. Perhaps it was his duty. The villagers might be happier with a clear break from the future. But he hadn't been able to say it. Why not?

He drank faster. The alcohol took its effect.

He suddenly remembered that it was the 16th. He should light a fire outside to send the spirits on their way. His head told him to; but his prostrate body wouldn't move. One symptom of exposure to the poison was general fatigue. You wouldn't expect that kind of symptom to develop – they said there was only a tiny amount of poison in the village. But if that was the case why evacuate? That very question had been asked at a village meeting with government representatives; but there'd been no convincing reply – just a rush of difficult words and detailed figures. You didn't know what to believe or who to believe. You didn't know what you could set your hopes on for the future. You didn't know what plans to abandon. Nobody had said.

As Nobu sipped his *sake* he thought vaguely about the past – back to first or second grade of Junior High School.

He remembered a poem in his Japanese text book. It was

called 'Snow' by Miyoshi Tatsuji. It had just two lines.

Put Taro to sleep, the snow falls deep on Taro's roof.
Put Jiro to sleep, the snow falls deep on Jiro's roof.

The class had been asked to imagine the situation depicted in the poem.

The most popular interpretation had been that a mother was lying with her two children on a snowy night. The teacher had treated this as the correct answer.

Nobu's thoughts had gone off in a different direction.

Taro and Jiro had both died as infants. He guessed 'put to sleep' meant they'd been killed because their parents' life was so harsh they couldn't bring up all the children they bore. The 'roofs' were the small mounds of earth that covered the bodies or ashes, side by side. The snow was falling quietly onto the mounds.

He couldn't remember what the teacher had said, but this version had not been correct. Nobu remembered that his friends had thought him creepy after he described that scene.

But in the old days there'd certainly been people in the village who'd endured extremely harsh lives. A couple with eight children might lose six; if they had five, they might lose four;

if they had three and lost them all, then they'd get on and have another. Things had certainly been like that once. People had struggled through it; and beyond it was the life of today.

Nobu had been told a great deal about the suffering of the past by his grandparents. His grandfather had six brothers and sisters, of whom four had died as children. When she came as a bride from the next village, his grandmother's chapped and chilblained hands had been as tough as thick leather gloves. After drinking one evening, Nobu's father said the village had been so poor that newborn infants had to be killed. He said that if you covered its mouth and nose with a wet scrap of paper a baby would die straight away, without uttering a sound. He also told of pregnant women who waded into cold rivers to force miscarriages. Fuelled by the drink, at first Nobu's father had been laughing; but gradually his face became grave and finally his voice did too.

'Your generation is lucky,' he told Nobu solemnly. 'You should be grateful you were given birth and brought up. Your life is precious. You must look after it.'

Having heard that kind of thing as a child, it was natural for Nobu to interpret Miyoshi Tatsuji's 'Snow' as being about dead children. It wasn't treated as the correct answer in the class, yet even now Nobu didn't believe he'd been wrong.

In fact, it wasn't just old tales from his father and grandparents…

Nobu sat up. A distant memory had suddenly come back to him.

That's it, he thought. That must be it.

He got quickly to his feet and picked up his cell phone. His heart was pounding.

'Do you remember the Ema-do?' he said as soon as Koji answered.

'Ema-do?'

'You know – that building over at …' Nobu gave the name of a temple – the oldest temple in the village, where his family grave was.

Beyond the main temple was a cemetery and beside that was a small building. He wasn't sure that Ema-do was the correct name, but the building contained a large number of *ema*, prayers that people presented at temples or shrines, often in the form of pictures.

'Yes, I remember now,' said Koji.

'Shall we go and have a look?'

'What do you mean?'

'I want to have a look. I want to see the *ema* and photographs and dolls.'

'Come on, Nobu, you must be joking…'

'I mean it.'

'We're a bit old for a game of scare.'

'That's not what I'm after. I really want to see them. If you don't want to come, I'll go on my own. But I'm drunk, so I can't drive and ….'

Koji didn't drink alcohol – it didn't agree with him. So he was the perfect companion in this kind of situation.

'You're expecting me to take you…?'.

Koji was unwilling at first, but he was bored at home on his own, and perhaps, at a slightly deeper level, he had a sense of what Nobu meant.

'All right, I'll come with you,' he said finally.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes...it might be the last time we go there.'

'You're right.'

'I suppose that lot won't have to evacuate,' Koji said jokingly. But Nobu sensed that he wasn't smiling.

'Maybe,' Nobu chuckled. His face too was taut.

The *ema* in the Ema-do were different from the five-sided wooden tablets you find in Shinto shrines. They were all pictures painted onto pieces of board or painted on paper and

then framed. They were hung on the walls of the room.

The wishes they represented were different as well. They were wishes that couldn't possibly come true – marriage beyond this world.

Parents of dead infants, of miscarried or aborted babies, had presented pictures of weddings, in the hope that those sad children might at least be happily married in the next world. There were also dolls representing brides and bridegrooms. And with the thought that the children would want friends as well as spouses, a host of child dolls had been given too. One photograph was a composite with a boy's face superimposed on the figure of a bridegroom, with a bride standing next to him. These were what Koji meant by 'that lot'.

Everything inside the building was a future that, in reality, was impossible. Futures that had been broken off lay here, strange and sad.

Nobu had been into the building a number of times as a child. He'd been taken there occasionally by his grandmother after memorial ceremonies for relatives. She used to put her hands together in prayer inside the building. Nobu wasn't sure whether she'd been bowing to one particular *ema*, or to all the *ema* in the room. His father had been the eldest of three children and the other two, Nobu's aunts, were still alive. Even

so it occurred to him that one of the *ema* might have been presented by his grandmother.

He hadn't been inside since childhood. He expected that it would now feel far sadder than strange.

And as Koji had said, there was no chance of the *ema* leaving the village. Perhaps the only happy future that remained for the village lived on in the silence of that building.

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'There are a lot of fireflies this year – even now it's August,' said Koji as they drove towards the temple. There was a stream running over the open land behind his house, and there'd been a large number of fireflies in his garden again that evening.

'I expect it's because nobody could grow crops this year,' he continued, 'so there aren't any chemicals about.'

'I suppose so...' said Nobu.

'On the other hand, there's no water in the paddy fields so there are fewer frogs.'

That's true, thought Nobu nodding in the passenger seat.

'I wonder,' said Koji light-heartedly, 'if so many fireflies being here at *obon* means a lot of ancestors have come home this

year. It's been a terrible year for the village after all...'

His voice grew quieter.

'Next summer they won't know where to come home to.'

Nobu nodded again silently. He looked at the dim reflection of his face in the passenger seat window. For the first time to anyone but his wife, he uttered the words he'd kept at the back of his mouth.

'It may not be possible to come back here again…'

There was no reply from Koji.

Instead, the car began to go a little faster.

The priest of the temple had come back to the village with his wife. It was he that had conducted the funerals for Nobu's parents and grandparents.

When Nobu asked if they could visit the Ema-do, the priest sounded dubious.

'Now?' he said. 'At this time of night?'

But in fact he agreed quite readily. Somehow he seemed to understand how Nobu felt.

'Actually,' said the priest, 'I'm glad I saw you.'

Along with the key he passed Nobu a letter.

'What's this?' asked Nobu.

'I'm going to send it out next week to everybody with family

graves here. But you can take yours now.'

He and his wife were going to stay at another temple for a while. The letter was asking for opinions on what should be done about memorial ceremonies and funerals while they were there, and in the longer term, what should be done about the graves.

'Every family will have its own ideas, so I want those to be considered..'

'Yes...'

'A lot of problems are going to come up. It's a real worry.'

The village had not only been deprived of its future. It seemed its past too was being ripped up by the roots.

'What will you do with the temple?' Koji asked.

The priest shook his head.

'We haven't decided yet…' he said apologetically.

Of course neither Koji nor Nobu intended any criticism.

'It's the same for everyone,' said Koji.

'It's very difficult…' said Nobu.

The priest, who was nearly eighty, smiled sadly. He pressed his hands together in prayer as the two men walked off towards the Ema-do.

The old fluorescent light flickered repeatedly and then came

on. The room smelled dank and musty, but the *ema*, crowded on the walls, were more colorful than Nobu had remembered. They seemed garish, almost threatening.

'It looks South-East Asian,' said Koji. 'Those temples and Buddhas in Cambodia or Thailand look gaudy, don't they? It's rather like that."

Nodding at Koji's remarks, Nobu started to walk around the room looking at each of the *ema* in turn. The name and address of the donor, and the year of donation, were written beside each one. The donors were mostly from this village, or other villages and towns nearby. The dates were mainly between the 1950s and 1970s. More recently dolls seemed to have been popular. All the bridal dolls were new, some very recent.

Inside some of the dolls' cases were photographs of the children who'd died. Many also contained sweets and toys. If a child had lived some years then the parents would have been able to choose things it liked. But how would they have felt choosing for a baby? Inside one case there were cigarettes beside a baby's photograph. They must have had an image of their child at an age when it might have smoked. How would they have built up that picture?

Nobu and Koji were standing back to back looking at *ema*

on opposite walls.

'I suppose these children must be back for *obon* too,' said Koji without turning around.

'Mm…'

'I wonder how many people in total have died in this village.'

'I wonder,' said Nobu, shrugging the question off with a bitter smile.

'What's the population?'

Nobu knew that. 'Just over six thousand,' he said quickly.

'So maybe ten times that number have died…'

Although the calculation was baseless, sixty thousand somehow seemed a convincing enough figure.

'With a population of six thousand,' Koji said, 'the government and prefecture can get us all out. They think six thousand can be squeezed in locally with emergency housing.'

Nobu reckoned that was right. It was a small village so everybody could be evacuated. They couldn't do it with a big town. The administrative center of the prefecture wasn't far away. That town had a population of 300,000. Some specialists were claiming that concentration levels of the poison were now far higher than had been made public. There were rumors that the government knew this and hadn't issued evacuation

advice for fear of the panic and disruption it might cause. If the rumors were true then the small size of their community had allowed the villagers to escape the poison before anybody else. Of course that didn't mean they felt blessed with good fortune.

'But really,' said Koji, 'there are 60,000. It's just they're not visible. That's a lot of refugees. I wonder if the authorities realize.'

The word 'refugees' did not sound exaggerated. Nobu looked around at the pictures crowded on the walls, at the dolls crammed on the shelves. They seemed now to harbor a still more vivid intensity.

'Where are they all going to come home to next year?' Koji muttered.

He turned towards the door. 'Take your time,' he said to Nobu, and walked out of the building.

Left alone, Nobu put his hands together once more. He shut his eyes and bowed his head. He prayed at length. His prayers were not so much for the children who couldn't live their futures; they were for their parents, who'd hoped to help them do so, even in this distorted way.

He went outside. He'd expected Koji to go straight back to the main temple building, but he found him standing on the

edge of the path.

'What's up?' he asked.

Koji pointed silently into the graveyard.

Fireflies. Through the darkness of the night, through the darkness where poison fell like rain, fireflies shone small and faint – gliding through the air, resting on gravestones, gliding again and resting. They would not outlive the summer, but as though cherishing the short night and their short lives, they carried on dancing in the darkness.

Kiyoshi SHIGEMATSU

Kiyoshi Shigematsu was born in 1963. He graduated from Waseda University. He started work on the literary journal *Waseda Bungaku* while still a student, guided by established writers such as Kenji NAKAGAMI. He became an editor and free-lance writer, publishing his first novel in 1991. In 2000, with *Vitamin F* he won The Naoki Sanjûgo Prize, Japan's leading award for broad-appeal literature. Conveying a strong sense of family warmth and love, his works attract a wide readership. He continues to foster a reputation as one of Japan's leading popular writers, and in 2010 received The Yoshikawa Eiji Literary Prize, named after Japan's foremost historical novelist. He has visited the Tohoku region many times to report on the March 11 earthquake and to support the victims. His visits have also provided the background to the series *To Next Spring*, of which this story forms a part. In this series we witness the full force of the author's literary talent.

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 UKs 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 ac-

cident. 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 requiems, 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

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 JAPAN

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.)

Participants of this charity project

(*English translations will be made available):

▷ Authors:

Hideo Furukawa*, Kazushige Abe*, Mieko Kawakami*, Toh EnJoe*, Shin Fukunaga*, Yasuhisa Yoshikawa*, Jungo Aoki*, Aoko Matsuda*, Sayaka Murata*, Fuminori Nakamura*, Akio Nakamori*, Furukuri Kinoshita*, Mayuko Makita*, Maki Kashimada*, Kiyoshi Shigematsu*, Mitsuyo Kakuta, Mariko Asabuki, Masahiko Shimada, Hikaru Okuizumi, Hiroki Azuma, Toshiyuki Horie, Akiko Akazome

▷ Critics:

Minami Aoyama, Koji Toko, Shigehiko Hasumi, Naomi Watanabe, Minako Saito

▷ Translators:

Michael Emmerich, Satoshi Katagiri, Lucy North, Ginny Tapley Takemori, Ian MacDonald, Jocelyne Allen, Allison Markin Powell, Michael Staley, Angus Turvill, David Boyd, David Karashima

▷ Staffs:Tatsuya Kuboki, Saki Fukui, Ayane Yokoyama, Takuya Sekiguchi, Keisuke Ouchi, Mayako Tsuruoka, Kaede Ienaga, Kenichiro Tobaru, Hirotaka Yamamoto, Moonsoon Park

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