

Japan Earthquake Charity Literature

Mayuko Makita

*Signals*

Translated by Allison Markin Powell

WasedaBungaku 2012

“You don’t have a boyfriend, do you, Io? Should I fix you up?” A classmate of mine asked unexpectedly after school. I nodded yes, although my “yes” was almost indistinguishable from a “no.” We were on cleanup duty, carrying trash to the incinerator under a lustrous blue sky the color of Delft pottery. As the two of us rounded the corner of the school building, our skirts of varying lengths fluttered. My friend smiled. “He’s got a good personality. But he’s a bit of a player.”

How was I to know that she meant he was, unmistakably, someone who actually played on jungle gyms and swings?

“Nice to meet you. My name’s Tango.”

His eyes blinked as they took in my uniform, but he immediately fixed his gaze on me and held out a calling card. Hide-nori Tango. He worked at a university. “I’m 28,” he added. I myself had been startled at first when I saw him in a suit and tie. Of course I didn’t have any sort of calling card, so I announced my name and the school I attended a little bit louder than necessary. My voice was quickly absorbed into the evening air on the deserted children’s playground.

“My alma mater.”

“You were quite a few years ahead of me.”

“Sorry, I had automatically assumed you would be closer to

my age, so I was surprised.”

“I was too. That girl, she hardly told me anything.”

The meeting place was the park of my choice. That was the only piece of information that Tango had passed on through my friend beforehand. I had specified this ordinary park in the middle of a residential neighborhood, which was where I brought my four-year-old brother to play every day. Amidst the undulating scent of grass, and lit by the streetlights, Tango seemed much neater than I had imagined, and much wearier. Both corners of his mouth were gently raised, but his smile looked almost expressionless.

Tango started walking. I followed after him, two or three steps behind. I figured we were cutting through the park. The sound of the rustling leaves was constant. The streetlight illuminated a tree nearby in many shades of vividness. This was the same place that attentively watched my brother and me and the other kids and their mothers in the daylight, but now I felt like I was seeing a whole other outline of the park. Where would I go from here? It was too late now to start worrying.

We approached a piece of playground equipment that was just a big spherical frame. Without missing a step, Tango wrapped the fingers of one hand around the iron frame and

spun himself around once. A strange and strained gap opened up between us. Returning to the spot where I was, he let go of the equipment and started walking again. Next was the slide. Tango briskly ascended the rusty stairs, bent his knees, and smoothly glided down, rejoining me as I walked along on the ground. He dusted off the seat of his pants, which made a dry sound. I held my breath as I listened to it. This guy was weirder than I had expected. Ahead of us, mounted on moving springs, were the hippopotamus and squirrel rides. As we walked on either side of the hippopotamus, without thinking I glanced up at him with a look that said, "Do you want a ride?"

"Well, that's what they're here for."

Tango stopped and, setting his well-worn briefcase astride the hippopotamus, turned to face me.

"Every night on my way home from work, I play in the park. At first I thought I would invite you out to a proper restaurant to introduce myself. I'm really quite ordinary, apart from this daily routine, so it would catch anyone off guard. In my experience, if you find out about it later, both sides end up feeling hurt."

"On your days off, do you play all day long?" I asked.

His voice softened to a more casual tone than just a mo-

ment ago. “I don’t go to parks during the day. People would be suspicious.”

So he was aware that it was suspicious. Knowing this made me a little sad. For some reason, I was flooded with memories of the dozens of times I’d heard my little brother’s high-pitched cry ring out through this park. The time the new kid snatched his shovel in the sandbox, the time he fell down while he was playing tag with a beaming smile on his face, the time I scolded him for grabbing a girl’s ponytail with his muddy hand.

“Shall we go? Is there anything you don’t like to eat, Io? What should we have—Japanese, Chinese, or Western food? And if you want to go home, please just say so, don’t worry. I’ll see you home.”

“No, we don’t have to go. I can watch you play.”

He nodded without changing his expression. He removed his briefcase and shifted his legs in order to straddle the ride. *Isn’t it strange that the hippopotamus and the squirrel are the same size?* My brother had suddenly pointed out yesterday about the smooth yet sturdy rides.

I piped up, “You know, this squirrel is fun. It moves around like crazy.”

“Just like your friend said: ‘She’s used to playing.’”

It seemed that I too had been introduced in a peculiar way. “But I’ve never played here. I just watch over my little brother.”

Tango faced forward and, without any self-consciousness, rode the squirrel vigorously. The expression on his face was somewhat dark but nevertheless drifted lightly across his features.

“It’s admirable that you babysit. Are your parents very busy?”

“I guess. But it’s not admirable, really, it’s a pretty good part-time job.”

“Did you say you’re a junior? What do you want to do with your life?”

“Nothing, really.”

Tango got off the squirrel and stood by the iron frame, then in rapid succession, did a number of pullovers on the highest bar. Each time, the hem of his suit jacket flipped up, revealing his bright white shirt and his belt. The breeze carried a dense green scent, and it stirred up a cloud of sand. I gave a little cough.

“I wanted to be an astronaut. More than wanting to be one, I just had this vague sense that’s what I would become. Ever since I can remember until I was a junior in high school. But

then, of all things, I was just terrible at math and science, so I pulled the plug on the whole idea.”

I looked up at the sky. At that moment I was just about to remember something, and I caught my breath as if to hold myself in time. The night was overcast but I could still count several stars. There wasn't anything particularly frightening but sometimes I got scared when no one was in sight. All the more so when the setting was somewhere familiar. It seemed as though everything I was seeing was like a wall in front of me. When I couldn't hold my breath any longer I opened my mouth and the cool breeze rushed in. I felt Tango watching me, briefly but intently. I didn't want him to ask me about myself again so I spoke first.

“You've been playing all this time but you don't look like you're enjoying it in the least.”

“But I play because it's no fun for me,” he said brusquely.

Almost nobody came through the park. Someone pulled up in a car and went into the public bathroom; a couple in suits who, when they passed us, were rubbing up against each other as they walked. They quickly averted their eyes from the grown man who was working through a series of unimpressive but continuous horizontal bar skills like “mattress,” “swallow step,” and “around the world.” Tango dismounted,

and since the monkey bars were obviously too low, he gave them a pass. Looking me in the eye, he pointed at the seesaw. "Sure," I said, following him.

"Io, how many kilos are you? Your weight, I mean."

"Fifty, almost." The "almost" was a lie.

"That's just right."

Tango was more than a head taller than I was. "I'm not getting on," I replied sulkily. He lowered one side of the seesaw with the palm of his hand, then stood on it and started walking. He had a light but firm gait as he stepped along the upward-tilting plank, or rather toward the air underneath it. When he reached the middle, he found his balance and stood still. The metal at the fulcrum creaked softly. I noticed that a hazy moon had emerged.

"I come from a prosperous family," Tango boasted, out of the blue, standing the middle of the seesaw.

"My parents used to bring me to amusement parks a lot because they thought I would enjoy it. But the existence of things like recreational facilities in our miraculous world within this unfathomable universe was such a riddle to me, and something innate prevented me from any enjoyment of them. In this situation in which we find ourselves, how can you appreciate anything? I wondered why things like amuse-



ment parks and department stores even existed.”

A group of what looked like university students passed along the street beside the park, cursing intently at something and letting out aggressively raucous bursts of laughter. I shuddered to think that Tango might draw their attention.

“Listening to cool music, eating good food, wearing nice clothes, or seeing a funny show—for some reason these things made me anxious.”

Switching his speed and stride, Tango moved in a straight line using only his body weight. The seesaw, at the mercy of his movements, banged as the whole of its incline shifted.

“I figured there’s nothing I can do about the fact that I don’t understand the laws or structure of the universe. But that doesn’t mean that I can’t do anything about the fact that I’m alive.”

“Don’t bite your tongue!?!” I suddenly said, as if I were warning my brother.

Tango obediently got down off of the seesaw. Then, as if it were a matter of course, he clambered up the jungle gym. I saw the shadow of a thickset guy wearing a windbreaker on another street that faced the park. Through the thick foliage of the trees, I wouldn’t have noticed him but for the red ember of the tip of his cigarette. From time to time, the round

glow would move up and down but before long it disappeared from sight along with the guy's shadow. The park at night was unsettling. Chief among the list of disturbing things about it was Tango, who was nimbly maneuvering himself about the jungle gym as it plunged into darkness.

Casting a glance around before walking over to the next piece of equipment, he seemed mildly dismayed when he noticed what I was carrying and held out his hand as he said, "Thanks." He had casually left his suit jacket and briefcase on the sand and, without even realizing it, I had been holding on to them since.

"Nobody's ever offered to hold my things for me, so I was confused."

"It's okay, I'll hold them until you're done."

"I finish with the swings. And since there are two of them, how about joining me?"

It would have been fine to ride the swing next to him. But instead I leaned against the fence that surrounded the swings, and slowly adjusted each of my black knee socks.

As he pumped on the swing, he asked, "Don't you ever play with your little brother? Or do you chat with the moms about their kids?"

"No. If my brother and his friends get too used to me, I

act like a nagging parent to put some distance between us. I do the same when the mothers treat me like one of them. I'll pick up as many ants as I can find and fill a child's teacup with them, and the mothers on the bench all shrink away in horror."

"You're not very easygoing, are you?"

Belonging to either group would have meant playing along. I didn't like how acting made me feel like I was no longer myself. I thought about replying this way, but I didn't. It wasn't true—being myself ought not to be such a flimsy thing. But my laughing response, "I guess I'm not," was muted and vague. Tango's face was like a portal as he widened his eyes slightly, without uttering a word, as if to say, "Huh?!" It made me want to cast it open even wider instead of answering him. Where would it lead? To his melancholy? Or to midday in a park filled with clamor and light? Or into the pitch-black universe?

"Do you ever have run-ins with the drunks, Tango, playing here so conspicuously?"

"Sure, they heckle me. But, well, I'm a fast runner."

"Really? It makes me nervous, since you're not really looking around you."

"I'm looking. The guy who passed through here with a

woman just came back by himself along the street out front. Looks like he stopped at the convenience store by the station on his way. The old guy who's always around is here too. See, he's leaning up against the stone that has the name of the park carved into it. Not over there, but to the south. He keeps flipping his cell open, so he must be meeting someone. Now he's walking, probably to buy another to-go cup of saké from the vending machine behind the apartment building. And, just now, the two people who were out on the seventh-floor balcony looking at the mountains have gone back inside."

"Wait... Tango, where are you seeing this from?"

"From above," he said, gesturing towards the sky with his fingers held together like an elevator girl. "It's as if I'm watching all this from overhead. I'm gathering information about this place. It registers as an aerial photograph in my mind. Within that image, various things are happening simultaneously. Of course, it isn't accurate, especially I'm constantly in motion. The image is full of conjecture. What else can you do on unfamiliar streets?"

"You don't just do this when you're in the park, do you?"

"It's been a habit of mine since I was little. I'm always looking at maps and aerial photographs."

"Do you watch yourself too?"

Tango nodded as he maintained a gentle arc on the swing.

“Although I can’t do much to help my anxiety—wondering whether these things are miraculous or whether I understand them—the thing is, I’m a part of that uncertainty. An overhead perspective is an effective way of seeing myself as part of my environment.”

I didn’t respond. The thin squeak of the metal clasps seemed to punctuate the silence at regular intervals.

“It’s well short of outer space but, the year before last, I visited an acquaintance who lives on an upper floor of a high-rise apartment building, and he proudly showed me the view from his place. At that time, I had given up on ‘overhead’ watching myself. I scanned the vast streetscape. That was when I suddenly realized that my desire to become an astronaut stemmed from wanting to gaze upon the world without me in it. That was all it was. This really struck me. I wondered what ‘joy’ really meant to me.”

He wasn’t speaking softly but his voice was flat, almost completely consistent with the shallow silence.

“Amidst the crowded houses and shops and local factories that covered the ground below, some children were playing in the open space of a park surrounded by trees. Suddenly, that seemed so nice.”

Tango stood on the swing's plank as it swept along its curve. The entirety of his slight frame seemed to catch the wind, and his necktie fluttered.

"You know, everyone playing in the park may not necessarily be enjoying themselves."

I smiled wryly and recrossed my legs. Sometimes there were fights, sometimes kids got left out. Even though he was a wimp, my little brother was also vain, and when he played on a swing with another child, if that child swayed or swung too ostentatiously, his face looked like it would start twitching at any moment. Or he would watch, wide-eyed and pursed-lipped, while the big sphere that looked like a round fence spun around hard. I used to be timid too so that could have easily rubbed off on him. I felt an urgency or tension, like a tautness in the skin.

Tango said, "Yeah, sure, I couldn't tell the kids' individual expressions. But that was the only place that seemed to be smiling. I totally felt like I wanted to be there at that moment."

Was it that, for him, playing here like this was a substitute for smiling? Did that mean, as he looked down upon himself playing hard in the park, he was waiting for the moment when he would be able to access some kind of connection

between himself and his play? Tango's face was pale as his bony fingers gripped the chain of the swing. I clenched my jaw for the instant I stared at him and then eased up. Actually, neither one of us seemed particularly interested in the other, but both he and I were eagerly awaiting some kind of signal. Or so it seemed to me.

"But I can't help but notice, Tango, how blank your expression is," I said bluntly after a brief silence.

Rather than responding with defensiveness, though, Tango seemed to consider me by staring deep into my eyes as he nodded. Somewhat taken aback, I withdrew my gaze. Once again I looked up at the sky. I felt uncharacteristically overwhelmed by this divide. I cowered from deep within my body. The distance between me and the night sky that until a moment ago had looked like a wall was now unmistakable. As if Tango's gaze looking down here penetrated everything.

My throat was unusually dry and I swallowed before I spoke. "...I had a souvenir that I used for a while before I realized that I was in the photograph printed on it."

"A souvenir?" he sang out as if to confirm.

"It was a cup that a friend in junior high gave me as a joke. Printed on it was the name of some random elementary school and its hundred-year anniversary with a photo of the school

taken from high above. The students were lined up in the schoolyard in the shape of the number 100. The date and year was written in lime. I think my friend bought it at a bazaar for practically nothing.”

As I spoke, I repeatedly folded Tango’s suit jacket on my lap. Tango stared at his jacket, growing more distracted.

“I went along with the gag and used the cup for a long time. I would drink tea out of it every day. Then one time I happened to be staring closely at the aerial photo, and I noticed that there was a castle at the top of the frame. Something about it seemed familiar, and when I checked in my family’s travel photo album, I saw that we had indeed gone sightseeing there. The date stamp on the photo taken of us in front of the castle was the same as the date in lime in the schoolyard. Judging by the shadows on the human numbers, it was around noon so I think the time more or less overlapped too. I was inside the castle on that cup.”

Tango had stopped swinging, and was now simply using a wobbly seat that wasn’t part of the playground equipment. The never-ending playtime had ended.

I said, “I unwillingly gave my consent, yielded by an invisible force.”

“Your consent?”



“Perhaps I should say I agreed. To be there, I mean. Until then, I had thought of myself as something like an empty space in the world. I could never see myself as if I were watching a stranger. I was alienated from everything that was outside of myself. Rather than feeling happy or sad about this, I felt strangely dubious. But the moment I happened to truly see that aerial photo, I didn’t have a doubt.”

I pressed one hand to my neck and continued. “Even though it had been years, suddenly I felt as though I were looking straight at myself, as I had been in the castle. At some point, I turned away from the cup and stared outside the window, but I was unable to maintain that reaction. The same way that I couldn’t fix my gaze on myself in the present moment. That was a really pivotal experience for me.”

A police car’s siren sounded, quite nearby. A cat whose stripes were clearly visible under only the streetlight trotted past us. Suddenly the tension in my fingers relaxed—for some time I must have been grasping Tango’s suit jacket tightly and it was now wrinkled. I clutched the fabric again as I spoke.

“But now, Tango, you’ve gotten it for me.”

“Gotten what?”

He looked directly at both of his hands in his lap. “You, up there,” I laughed as I restated myself, pointing towards the sky

with my fingertips held together, like he had done earlier.

“I had forgotten completely about that moment when my gaze was drawn so firmly outside the window—it’s that drifting gaze that you’ve gotten for me. I have the feeling that I’ve been watching myself all along—from that moment until now—through your eyes.”

At some point, having left behind space and time, the divide had been bridged and seemed transparent. Everything was here now. My present self’s existence was now the slightest bit more assured than that of my previous self.

Tango came off the swing and gave a smile that seemed to unloose his expression. Like cool clear water, such a smile would reveal the heart of anyone who saw it.

“That’s weird. It makes me feel good though, that my view from above now means something to you, and not just to me.”

The park was filled with the multilayered sound of the leaves rustling in the wind.

I wondered if there were various gazes drifting about back and forth above our heads in the crisp evening air. Having eclipsed their owner’s intention and gone beyond space and time, it’s likely they sometimes came up against each other, or strayed apart, or became closely entwined with another new

one. And there would be times when we would be aware of this flow, and times when we wouldn't.

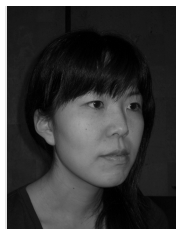
"I guess I should have left it on the sand," I said, holding up and gently shaking out the suit jacket that I had worked over.

"You can wear it if you're cold. I'll take you home," Tango said lightly.

I thanked him and put it on. Each of us had signaled to the other, and that seemed to have freed up our interaction. We left the park side by side. Would I see this guy again, or would this be the first and last time? Even if this were the only time we met, from time to time I would probably think about Tango's nighttime playing in the park. Only when I was able to catch a glimmer of myself—when I least expected it—but those were the times I would be sure to think about him. I felt a bit warmer wearing his jacket. Some day I wanted to observe this life. I'd never felt that before.

## Mayuko MAKITA

Mayuko Makita was born in Kyoto in 1980. In 2007, she received an Encouragement Award from the enduring The Bungakukai's New Writers Prize for her short story, *Isu* ("The Chairs"). The story describes a pro-



tagonist in a state of ontological anxiety, engaged in dialogue with an unusual secondary character, observing themselves according to their own particular coordinates. Makita has not written much fiction, but the writing of this talented young author is eagerly anticipated in literary magazines.

## Allison Markin Powell

Allison Markin Powell (b. 1973) is a literary translator and editor in New York City. She graduated from Dartmouth College and received a master's degree in Asian Languages from Stanford University. She has worked in the publishing industry for more than a dozen years, and has translated works by Osamu Dazai, Hiromi Kawakami, and Motoyuki Shibata. Powell served as the guest editor for Words Without Borders' Japan issue.

*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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