

Japan Earthquake Charity Literature

Fuminori Nakamura

When the Earthquake Hit

Translated by Michael Staley

WasedaBungaku 2012

When the earthquake hit on March 11, I was in my apartment, in Tokyo, working. When I felt the first jolt, I knew it was going to be a big one, so I went over to the window to stop the speakers from falling off the ledge they were perched on. But soon the shaking grew, and grew, until finally it occurred to me that my life was in danger, that this was no time to worry about whether something would break. I had never experienced a quake this size before. I wondered if the building would collapse. I opened the door to go outside, and everything in the scene before my eyes was swaying.

In that moment, in that storm of twisting and creaking, in that cage of hard concrete, I realized how soft, how fragile the human body was. All I could do was stand there, and just barely at that. The view from my floor, which I'd grown so accustomed to, looked different now, surreal even, as it churned and rumbled. My will and my thoughts were completely disconnected from the development of this phenomenon, and from the question of they had no bearing on the question of whether the shaking would get worseintensify or subside – a questionupon which; and yetmy life depended entirely on that question – would the shaking grow worse, or would it subside? The unusually long duration of the quake seemed too real to be real.

When the shaking stopped, I turned on the TV. I thought I must have just experienced the historically large earthquake that has been predicted to hit Tokyo for some time. But the epicenter was off the coast of Miyagi Prefecture, more than two hundred miles northeast. I felt something sharp and heavy stab me in the heart. If the shaking was this bad here, the cities and towns up there had to be in ruins.

In the hours and days that followed, as news reports came in, I learned that those few minutes of violent shaking—during which I could do nothing but stand there, feeling soft—cost untold numbers of people their lives; that the quake had released massive energy in the form of a tsunami that ultimately would take even more lives; and that a beast of a nuclear reactor had begun to spiral out of control.

I plugged on writing. I was born in Aichi Prefecture, but since I graduated from Fukushima University, I consider Tohoku—the region of Japan where the earthquake occurred—to be the land of my rebirth, a land that kindly took me in despite my gloom and distrust of humanity. I could not simply hang my head low and claim that words are powerless. A newspaper in Fukushima Prefecture asked me to write something, so I wrote a piece for the people living in relief shelters. I also wrote about the quake for a Tokyo

newspaper, and for other publications as well when I thought I could make a meaningful contribution. I have a lot of friends in Tohoku. Those I was able to get in touch with were fine, fortunately, but as I continued to write, I cried many times.

For some reason, during those dizzying days after the quake, I always felt hungry. This might have been just a symptom of the tension in my body. Or maybe it was that, subconsciously, I was sensing a threat to my life, despite being safe in Tokyo (so safe that it made me feel guilty). Whatever the reason, I was starving all the time. But since supermarkets were low on food and water, meaning that we had to refrain from buying in bulk, I was careful to eat only as much as I ordinarily ate. Maybe the food panic that swept Tokyo at the time had to do with everyone feeling this inexplicable hunger.

I talked to a number of people who were also experiencing unexpected, uncontrollable drowsiness. They said that even though they were getting adequate sleep, they felt tired all day long and had trouble functioning. Other people said they always had the sensation that the earth was shaking, even when it wasn't.

An earthquake, needless to say, is a phenomenon in which the earth shakes. It is when people have their very existenceshaken to its foundation, against their will, while they fear for their

lives. We had our bodies shaken. By the same shaking that killed thousands of people. This reality will never go away.

What can anyone do in the face of energy of that scale, energy that spread with it fear and anxiety to every corner of the country? What can anyone do in the face of wars, plagues, dictators, and other disasters, for that matter?

Somehow this essay has turned serious. It seems I haven't had enough time to reflect on the earthquake. Just as I haven't had enough time to reflect on all the problems in my own life. Two months is far too short a time to make sense of anything. I guess that is what living is all about: going on, coping with sadness you can't make sense of.

But I want to tell people, Let's live together. We don't have to be overly positive, nor feel pressured by the world to "do our best". It is enough that each of us lives life at our own pace. Life is all that remains for those of us who are left, so we have to live it, no matterwhat. Right now, that is how I feel.

Fuminori NAKAMURA

Fuminori Nakamura was born in Aichi in 1977. He debuted as a writer in 2002, when he won The Shincho's New Writers Prize for his novel *Jû* ("A Gun"). In 2004 he received The Noma Literary Prize for New Writers, for *Shakô* ("Shade"). And in 2005 he was awarded the Akutagawa Ryûnosuke Prize — Japan's most prestigious literary award for new writers. Within the short span of a few years, he has achieved much acclaim. In 2010 his novel *Suri* ("The Thief") won The Ôe Kenzaburô Prize, awarded by the Nobel Laureate himself. Ôe described the novel as, "A work done by a writer who realizes the possibilities of introducing the contemporary perspective into the form of today's novel writing." Nakamura has been translated into various languages and *The Thief* will be published by Soho Press (N.Y.) in March 2012.

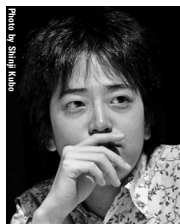


Photo by Shiro Kubo

Michael Staley

He received both a BA and an MA in East Asian Languages and Literature from the University of Colorado at Boulder in 2000. Between 2001 and 2011 he worked as an editor at Kodansha International, where he produced Mitsuyo Kakuta's *The Eighth Day* and Kotaro Isaka's *Remote Control*, among other works of Japanese fiction in translation. He is the Chief Editor of *Kodansha's Communicative English-Japanese Dictionary*.

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

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 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
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.)

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(*English translations will be made available):

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