

Japan Earthquake Charity Literature

Sayaka Murata

Lover on the Breeze

Translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori

WasedaBungaku 2011

Naoko calls me Puff, because I puff up in the wind, and billow in the breeze.

She was in her first year at elementary school when her father, Takashi, hung me in her bedroom. Once he had fixed me in place with silver hooks, he stroked her head in satisfaction.

“Naoko, it’s light blue—your favorite color. Isn’t it pretty?”

“I wanted pink—blue’s for boys.”

Naoko pouted, but she couldn’t take her eyes off my ever so pale, liquid-sky blue.

My role was to cover the right side of her bedroom window. Outside was a white-painted veranda overlooking the garden beyond. The other cloth, my twin, said dismissively, “Now we’re stuck here we’ll just get dirty in the wind,” and went to sleep. I wasn’t at all sleepy, and I gazed curiously around Naoko’s bedroom at the pink cushions and her shiny study desk. As if aware that I alone was awake, Naoko looked over at me. That’s when she named me Puff.

Come morning, Naoko went off to school, her red school-bag on her back. Some time later, her mother Kazumi came in to clean the room. “Let’s get some air in here,” she said, and came over to open the glass window behind me. For the rest of the day until Naoko came home, I floated and flapped, almost swimming around the room.

When Naoko came home from school, she exclaimed, "It's cold in here!" and shut the window. And, still with her schoolbag on her back, she said, "Puff, I'm back," and buried her face deep in my folds.

Despite my name, I hated the wind. In winter it was cold and in summer it was unpleasantly warm, and the sensation of being touched up all over my body was gross. Naoko always felt the cold and kept the window shut, for which I was thankful.

At night, she would quietly bundle me up in her arms, and nestle her face up close.

There in the darkened room, I would be caught in her embrace listening as she murmured my name. Whenever she was sad, she would always come to me for a cuddle.

Yukio first came to her room around the time I had just turned eleven. It was the season I hated most, when a strong gusty wind would whip up petals from the cherry tree in the garden and stick them all over me.

Naoko had just started her second grade in high school. Kazumi was jittery, and kept coming up to the room with juice or snacks. Every time she went out again, Naoko and Yukio looked at each other and giggled shyly.

“Sorry, it’s the first time I’ve ever had a boy come to my room, so Mom’s getting a bit carried away.”

“That’s okay.”

Yukio was a rather slight, unremarkable looking boy. He wasn’t all that tall, either, and his face with its beautifully pronounced cheekbones was smaller than Naoko’s.

The surface of his fine black hair shone pale brown in the sunlight streaming through the window. Beneath thin, delicate eyebrows his eyes were shaped like small leaves, the black pupils reflecting soft brown in the sunlight.

His long arms extending from the rolled-up sleeves of the white shirt of his uniform were thin, but the muscles were well defined, contrasting with Naoko’s soft limbs.

Yukio was a little taller than Kazumi, and as he walked he generated a slight breeze in the room.

“Oh, Puff’s got caught in the window.” Naoko got up, opened the window, and pulled me loose.

“Puff?”

“This curtain...that’s what I used to call it when I was little, and the habit’s stuck. I suppose you think I’m childish?”

“Uh-uh.”

Yukio didn’t laugh at Naoko, but just shook his head, narrowing his eyes.

“It’s a good name,” he said simply, and bit into one of the cookies that Kazumi had left for them.

Every time his fingers and arms moved, soundlessly, a light breeze blew through the room. It was as if his sinewy limbs were summoning it.

As I watched those quiet arms gently making the air vibrate, it occurred to me that I wanted to feel this breeze flow all over me.

Yukio often came to the house after that. On his sixth visit, the two of them were watching a movie on the small television in the corner of the room when Naoko suddenly tugged at the sleeve of his uniform.

Yukio swayed as though in the breeze and brought his face close to Naoko’s, lightly placing a kiss on her. His thin, pale pink lips fluttered down towards her without a sound. They reminded me of the falling cherry blossom petals as they stuck to the window screen.

Yukio’s eyes were open, his lashes just slightly lowered. Naoko had her eyes firmly closed, so I alone noticed how his lashes fluttered in the breeze.

One Saturday night not long afterwards, Yukio stayed over

at the house. Kazumi and Takashi were attending a memorial service some distance away.

Laughter sounded continually from downstairs as the pair of them cooked dinner, and the aroma of stew came wafting up to the second floor.

Later they came upstairs and sat side-by-side eating milk pudding. Naoko had apparently made it the night before and had left it to chill overnight. The soft white custard slipped easily between Yukio's pale blossom-pink lips.

"This is good." Yukio looked at Naoko, smiling.

Naoko pouted unhappily. "But the potato salad was a disaster, and you cooked the stew pretty much all on your own."

"It's the least I can do when you're letting me stay over."

"No way! And anyone can make milk pudding."

"But it tastes great!"

"But..."

After finishing their dessert, Yukio and Naoko stood up and slipped between the white sheets on the bed. I watched intently as his inexperienced fingers slipped over her skin and, though he rarely perspired, beads of moisture welled up on his forehead.

Just as a small drop fell from his delicate skin and landed on her collarbone, I noticed her glance over at me.

The next morning, Naoko got out of bed alone, dressed, and went downstairs.

A faint smell of eggs frying came wafting up. It seemed she was getting her own back for yesterday by cooking breakfast for Yukio.

Yukio remained asleep, his shoulder exposed, in the bed she had vacated.

His bony shoulder shivered with cold, and at that moment I slipped one of my silver hooks from the curtain rail.

One by one my silver hooks slipped free, and as a gust of the wind that I hated so much came blowing through the window, I jumped and let myself be carried on it.

I swam through the room on the wind. It all happened in a moment, soundlessly, as if on the ocean floor. Holding my breath, I quietly let myself down over Yukio's body.

I could feel that skin I had been watching for so long.

"Naoko...?" murmured Yukio in his sleep, and drew me into an embrace.

A light breeze as he raised his arms set my body atremble. Every movement of his fingers or legs or shoulders generated a quiet, slightly damp puff of air.

"Naoko."

Again a light breeze came from his lips.

Each time it blew, I breathed it in, trembling. I finally realized I had been hanging in this room for the past eleven years just in order to be bathed in this breeze.

“What’s going on?”

Naoko’s voice was suddenly harsh. She must have finished making breakfast, for she now stood by the door in semi darkness staring at us.

“What the—?”

Yukio sat up, rubbing his eyes.

“What is Puff doing over here?”

“I don’t know. He must have blown over in the wind.”

“As if! You’re telling me he unhooked himself from the rail?”

“I don’t know how that happened.”

Yukio looked at me, puzzled. The bed creaked under his weight, and the tremor caused me to slip to the floor with a faint rustle.

That winter, Naoko and friends from her school club gathered for a small Christmas party in her room. The room was littered with alcopop cans and snack packets.

One brown-haired boy sitting in the center of the room telling joke after joke suddenly tapped Yukio on the shoulder.

“Hey Yukio, have you ever been unfaithful?”

“Of course not.”

“You’ve never done it with another girl? Not even once?”

A short-haired girl who was a close friend of Naoko’s said, “Stupid! Yukio’s not like you,” and slapped him on the head.

Watching them as he sipped his fizzy drink, Yukio said innocently, “Actually, there may have been one time...”

“Eh? Really? You never!” exclaimed the girl, drawing closer. Yukio laughed, then abruptly looked over and pointed at me.

“Just once, I mistook Puff for Naoko.”

“*Whaaat?*” Everyone laughed.

“I cuddled him and called him Naoko. It really came as a shock when I realized what I was doing!”

“Yukio, you’re so dumb!” The brown-haired boy alone seemed mystified. “Who’s Puff?”

“It’s Naoko’s pet name for her curtain, like it’s a teddy bear or something. ’Cos she’s still just a kid.”

“Hah! I bet you find that sort of thing cute, don’t you, Yukio?”

Yukio chuckled quietly and poured some more fizzy drink between his lips.

Only Naoko didn't laugh. She sat huddled in the corner of her bed and glared at me.

One afternoon not long afterwards, still in their school uniforms, Yukio and Naoko sat in the room filled with evening sunlight talking quietly.

"You want to split up? Why?"

I was taken aback when Yukio said this, and trembled even though the window wasn't open.

"Um..."

"Won't you give me a reason?"

"Well... I'm in love with someone else," said Naoko, staring into space, her eyes dry. "To tell the truth, I've known about it ever since we got together. You reminded me of him, and that's why I fell for you. I'm sorry."

"Oh."

Yukio nodded meekly and looked sad. They sat in silence for a while staring at the sky changing color outside the window, as though watching a movie. The sunset gradually darkened and finally turned to indigo.

Yukio wept a little.

I watched the transparent drops trickling from his eyes, and for the first time I hated Naoko for making him cry like

that.

There in the room vacated by Yukio, Naoko embraced me. It was the first time in a very long time, and her knees trembled as they sank into the carpet. Her hands gripped me tightly and wouldn't let go.

Naoko's unnaturally hot breath felt oppressive, like a summer gust of wind. She made me damp with her breath as she buried her face in me.

Motionless, she closed her eyes as if in prayer.

There in that room void of the breeze aroused by Yukio's arms and fingers, my body hung heavily. The indigo-tinged air stiffened in the silence, no longer making any attempt to move.

Sayaka MURATA

Sayaka Murata was born in Chiba in 1979 and graduated from Tamagawa University. In 2003, her novel *Ju'nyu* ("Suckling") received the Award for Excellence in the Gunzo's New Writers Prize sponsored by Kodansha, Japan's largest publisher. This story, with its echoes of Simone de Beauvoir, has won her many fans. In it she depicts the sexual behaviors of human females, gradually moving towards a departure from the duality of the sexes with the emergence of "the third sex." Her 2009 novel *Gin-iro no uta* ("A Silver Song") won The Noma Literary Prize for New Writers. The well-known writer Mitsuyo KAKUTA commented that, "The central motifs of her novels may be appreciated by readers of all ages anywhere in the world."



Ginny Tapley Takemori

Ginny Tapley Takemori studied Japanese at SOAS (London), Waseda (Tokyo), and Sheffield University. A Japan-based freelance literary translator, she has translated stories by Izumi Kyoka, Koda Rohan, Okamoto Kido, Hiroko Minagawa, Kanji Hanawa, and Yuko Yamao, as well as several non-fiction books. Since the March 11th disaster, she has made numerous trips to Ishinomaki to help survivors of the tsunami and is particularly pleased to participate in this charity collection.

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 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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