

The mire and a shovel

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Brought together in this book are 16 short stories by 15 Japanese authors inspired by the Eastern Japan Earthquake from March, 2011.

March 2012: one year has passed since the earthquake. Has it been “only one year” or is it “already one year”? – there is not a day all forms of media do not speak of the earthquake or the nuclear disaster. There is no day we do not talk of it and not a single one in which we ourselves do not think about it. What occurred that day and the future that was lost there, that “after” which began then, continues to blanket our everyday.

Of course, it is not only these larger “events” which have a hold on both our lives and our time. Some may momentarily think they would rather die than to suffer the pain of separation, are overwhelmed by a scene more than the loss of the place they grew-up, or, like the dust of a millennia, experience a shame that cannot be washed clean. The awareness of knowing there is no guarantee of living the next moment is a single truth that continuously makes itself felt in an event that accompanies the death of so many. From the outset this is a concept encapsulated within the very etymology of the word mortal, from the Latin *mort-*, or ‘death’.

From the beginning the function of literature has been to commit to writing without outside comparison that which to an outsider must seem like trifling, deeply personal events. This includes the death of

each and every one of us. And yet because this is the case, effortlessly confronting such an “event” head on will no doubt be accompanied by hesitation and hardship. And when having confronted it we have no confidence that the manner of our confrontation was correct.

One thing is certain, however: it is only our imagination (not simply a “literary” one but that of the sciences and social systems, as well as in the broader sense which includes the very personal) which is a tool for a future yet to come, a method of mourning that which has already become the past in a future that could have been, and a means for reflecting upon the present hanged between the two.

In a certain town in Tohoku the majority of coastal buildings had been lost and the surviving roads and structures were still buried in soft mire and water. With a heavy shovel in hand I walk along a path that just two weeks ago people may have been swept across. At each railroad tie the earth was in ruins and scattered around were cars and furniture and countless articles of daily life. It was that imagination I was thinking about. To be precise, it was about the limits of our imagination and understanding.

We are capable of imagining all types of things, both fortunate ones and unfortunate ones (this of course can be called “thought”), and doing this expands our future and its very possibility. However, in both detail and actuality, no imagination can ever predate reality. Recognizing the reality that has come and returning this to the source of imagination is the power of language. The two supplement each other.

And yet, a reality that surpasses limits and is at once both expanding and minute will for a short time freeze such a cycle. Our imagination is overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness; our words are left behind as our subjects rapidly multiply beyond our control and comprehension. I thrust the tip of my shovel into the vast muddy expanse, scooping that little amount up and lift my eyes. As if puzzled at the unchanging landscape reality is there, towering like a sublime nothingness.

The desire that seemed to descend upon me (almost like a lifeline being extended) when faced with this sight, was to have the writers

whom I most trusted – not writers of criticism who used words to try to further understanding, but writers of fiction who used the same words to push the limits of the imagination – to scoop up the reality that lay beneath the mire. By this I do not mean that I wanted them to record or write stories about what they saw. I did not expect them to write something that would bring either comfort or courage to a reader (even if the process did indirectly end up helping people in some small way). And I certainly could not expect them to tackle the task with the same urgency with which people searched for missing friends and family members. What I was hoping was that these writers – like the volunteers digging their shovels into mire – would unearth new words from the mountain of debris that the imagination had been reduced to.

I imagine that if I would have approached the authors of the works collected here (which include numerous essays, pieces of criticism, and recorded dialogues) they would have, without hesitation, joined me in clearing mire from damaged areas. This is what I initially had in mind. But it seemed as if the same desolation that stretched before our eyes extended to our language and imaginations (naturally not everybody felt this way, but to me at least, the sight of those plots of land left vacant in the wake of the tsunami overlapped with what I saw happening to our imagination and language), and I felt that to tackle these ruins was no less important than digging the mire beneath our feet. And that is exactly what the writers who participated in this project did. Using words, the only tool available to them, and one which must have suddenly felt more futile after that day (I am overcome with hesitation and uncertainty just trying to document my experiences an entire year later), they went about their task, scooping the vast emptiness presented by reality, one shovelful at a time.

How each piece is received will of course be dependent on the reader. Whatever the motive or hardship behind a work may be it does not have a bearing on the value of each work. And yet, for these 16 short stories that have been assembled here, there is meaning in the when, how and

what type of emotion each writer uses that is no less important than the work itself. This is because, in its entirety, it is to become the shovel we use to scoop the mire away from the imagination and language of us readers that have buried since that day.