

# Sorrow, History and Catastrophe in Japan After the 3.11 Earthquake, Tsunami and Nuclear Meltdown: A Personal Encounter

## 地震・津波・炉心溶融後の日本における悲しみ、歴史、惨事—個人的な出会い

Vivian Blaxell

### Sorrow, History and Catastrophe in Japan After the 3.11 Earthquake, Tsunami and Nuclear Meltdown: A Personal Encounter

By Vivian Blaxell

*The most precious thing in life is its uncertainty.* Kenkō, c. 1283-1350

When my marriage ends I am in the middle of reading *Norwegian Wood*. Traumatized by the news that Naoko, the enigmatic and troubled woman he loves, has committed suicide, Murakami's narrator, Watanabe Toru, packs his rucksack, empties his bank account and takes the first express train out of Tokyo. For months he wanders through Japan from town to town. He sleeps in doss houses and car parks, stations, and on beaches, eats anything or not all. Movement is meant to be the antidote to Watanabe's trauma and sorrow, and what Watanabe does inspires me. Shocked and grieving, I travel. I go back to Japan planning to leave my sorrow behind me, dump it in the exhaust of Pratt and Whitney jet engines, meditate it away at a Zen temple, return to the safety of a land that was once my home, forget the loss in work and weeks of wandering throughout southwestern Honshū. But once I go, what I find in Japan is more sorrow than I have ever known, more loss than it seems possible for any community to sustain. In my quest to escape my own sorrow I find many other sorrows layered across time and space in a Japan deeply etched by the traumas of

catastrophe, traumatic memory and history. Once I am there in Japan, it is all so sad or so enduring in the sadness, that my own grief at losing the person I love more than any other is simultaneously exacerbated and absorbed by it.

By the time I begin my therapeutic journey, the March 11 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdowns in north-eastern Japan, which left more than 20,000 people dead or missing,<sup>1</sup> whole cities razed and iodine, cesium and strontium in the air, water and land, are relegated to page three or four in the international press. Gaddafi, Syria and the sexual crimes of the chief of the IMF now have pride of place. I had turned off the television on March 20, unable to watch any more. And even though my profession as a specialist in Japanese history and politics meant that I followed the many aftermaths of the March 11 disaster, I had done so in a clinical way: data about the Fukushima nuclear power plants; millisieverts; efforts to contain what seemed almost uncontrollable; analyses of likely effects on economic growth; criticism of a system of governance that allows energy companies like TEPCO to get away with negligence in the siting, construction, maintenance and criticality management of nuclear power plants. As my marriage teetered and collapsed, the human impact news was too wrenching for me to watch. I kept the emotional matter of the disaster as far away as possible. But as soon as I take my seat on All Nippon Airways' Beijing to Osaka flight, my detachment ruptures. The

flight attendant hands me *The Japan Times* and *Asahi Shimbun*. The first four pages of both newspapers are full of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown news, much of it emotional matter: orphaned dogs; children suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; the use of therapeutic animals in shelters; lost wives and brothers; cesium in the meat. For the first time it occurs to me that shaking off my own sorrow in Japan might not be such a good plan. I look away from the newspapers. In my mind, the sober colors and hushed service of the business class cabin now appear suffused with sadness. The flight attendant is too austere, miserly with her smiles, and I imagine grief at work there. The man seated next to me reads nothing but the post-earthquake news in *Asahi*, *Yomiuri*, and *Nihon Keizai*, after which he only picks at his Wagyu beef lunch while knocking back several small bottles of good shōchū as though trying to drink himself out of what he has read in the newspapers earlier.

At Kansai International, Renzo Piano's long, low curving terminal is almost empty, echoing. The JR West Haruka airport express is almost empty. My hotels are almost empty and one of them will close down completely at the end of June because, my taxi driver tells me in nearly perfect Californian accented English, "350 rooms! Before the great earthquake and all this nuclear meltdown they were filling about 60 percent of the rooms and that wasn't good. Now only 15 percent of the rooms are occupied and that's shut up shop and go home time, neee?" Even *shinkansen* bullet train services seem emptied out, reservations unnecessary, empty seats in the unreserved cars always available. The Japan Rail group of companies reports that the number of passengers traveling on JR bullet and other express trains fell by 11 percent year on year during the end of April Golden Week holiday, usually the peak travelling period in Japan.<sup>2</sup> My Japanese colleagues and friends tell me people are too sad to travel and that it seems wrong now to spend money and to enjoy oneself. And

according to the Japan National Tourism Organization, visits to Japan from abroad dropped steeply after March 11; 73 percent less in the last 2 weeks of March 2011 than in the same period the previous year; 62.5 percent less in April than in April 2010, and 50.4 percent less in May 2011 than in May 2010.<sup>3</sup>

Japan feels like a land losing density and in this emptiness, poignancy abounds. A taxi driver in Hiroshima complains that he must struggle to make money now and describes Japan to me as "*kanashii kuni*" a sad country. Waiters wear buttons that say "Ganbarō Nippon!" "Try hard Japan!" Many cities I visit -- Yamaguchi, Hagi, Gifu, Mino -- have new signs on street corners adjacent to the municipal offices and the message on the signs is always the same: Be strong; bear it. The eyes of my first Japanese language teacher fill with tears when she talks about what all the radioactive material in the air, in the earth, the water and the plants will do to the children, but her sorrow bursts into voice when she watches the news. "They would do anything to hide the truth," she says, "The energy companies. The government. Sacrifice us all." Two Korean tourists in Hagi ask me if I'm a Christian. When I tell them not, they frown and say, "How could you not be in view of all this?" and they gesture wide with their arms to take in the whole country.

Over a hotel buffet breakfast one morning with signs on the yoghurt telling me it's not from Fukushima or even close to Fukushima, I come upon a newspaper story about a barber from the small city of Natori right next to Sendai in Miyagi Prefecture, one of the worst hit areas. A photograph shows sixty-two year old Hashiura Shin'ichi giving free haircuts and hair styling to people living in shelters in the city and surrounding areas. His wife, Toyoko, died in the tsunami trying to help an elderly neighbor to safety at the local middle school, which was engulfed by the great wave. Mr. Hashiura blames himself because he told his wife to take

the neighbor to the middle school rather than to the care center where he was heading and where he was safe against the tsunami. Eight days later, he found Toyoko's body in a temporary morgue. He had cut and styled his wife's hair the morning before the earthquake, but he had been rushed and not done his best work for her and when he came to her lifeless body, Mr Hashiura bowed and wept and begged her forgiveness for telling her to take refuge in the middle school and for not giving her the best cut and blow-dry he was capable of.<sup>4</sup> Mr Hashiura's story is too close to the bone, partner lost forever to something that can only be accepted not understood, clouds of self-blame and doubt. I fold the newspaper and pay my bill. I have taken my own sadness and attempted to travel it out of existence, but the place to which I go for this healing or purging is forlorn and grieving, a nation traumatized by what happened on March 11, 2011 and by what was and was not done since then. The sorrow piles up and up in signs and exchanges and stories until it dwarfs my own.

And to make matters more complicated, in Japan I spend much of my time in Hiroshima, which must be one of the saddest places in the world, especially since its primary sorrow has been so artfully rebuilt and greened in the name of peace. There is little sign of the A-Bomb and what it did on August 6, 1945 in Hiroshima these days and most of what there is remaining has been turned into a didactic museum, stripped of original emotional content, transformed by the message of world peace. Even the iconic A-Bomb Dome seems less sad than nostalgic in the way that ruins were beautifully nostalgic for the British Romantics. It is carefully fenced off, carefully explained on tablets and small billboards around the site and carefully preserved, for through the gaping windows and doors one can see metal support beams and joints installed in 1967 and painted the same color as the building itself, holding it all together in its ruined state. But the atomic sorrow of

Hiroshima is mostly glossy now, under-signified by Kenzo Tange's Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park with its a raised modernist buildings, its peace monument inspired by the shape of ancient Japanese imperial tombs and its highly axialized spatial arrangements with plaza and green swathes covering the space between rivers where before August 6, 1945 there had been a maze and hectic bustle of homes, businesses and theaters at the heart of the city.

On my first day in Hiroshima, I walk for hours around the perimeter of what was the hypocenter of the atomic explosion. The spring rain clouds break up and release dappled sunshine on the rivers. Everything is green and very clean. Although I come across monuments here and there, and scraps of atomic ruins, many of them draped in rainbow colored shawls made from thousands of origami paper cranes, the scene and the sense of the place is nearly idyllic.



### Idyllic Hiroshima

A man in baggy shorts sits smoking  
a Mild Seven and scratching his crotch  
next to an atomic monument.

Homeless men gossip beneath maple trees. A panting, pink-cheeked band of high school boys jogs along a towpath. A woman with metal teeth walks two plump tri-color cats along the promenade across the river from the Peace Park. "Oh, no," she tells me, "they don't want to do it every day, only when the sun is out and the river is like a mirror do they come with me." She strolls away, the cats beside her, grave and rigorously dignified on their outing, tails erect. As Japanese cities go, Hiroshima is beautiful, especially around the hypocenter of the 1945 explosion; what actually happened here and the sorrow it generated is hard to see. Walking, I think of my failed marriage and practice letting my sadness go like invisible dust into the sky and into the pretty parks and the sluggish rivers of the city, which secrets its own sorrow behind modernist architecture and peace conferences, buries it in a locked and cryptic mound in the Peace Memorial Park containing the ashes of 70,000 unidentified victims of the American bomb.<sup>5</sup>

Near Tange's buildings at the entrance to the Peace Memorial Park, I trip and fall heavily where it should be impossible to trip and fall. A tiny woman, profoundly bowed, withered and not much more than a concatenation of bones in web of skin, hobbles over to me and helps me up. She apologizes over and over again for the pavement and for Hiroshima itself for making me fall. Although she can barely walk, she insists on taking me to a drug



**Lazing in the hypocenter**

store where she buys some disinfectant wipes and bids me apply them to my scratches. When she bends down and bows her head to look at the graze on my ankle, her shirt gapes at the nape of her neck and I see a blossom of thick, pale scar tissue there, disappearing down her back. It is impossible to ask. What is the etiquette? Is she *hibakusha*: a person affected by the atomic bombing? Is she the woman who grabbed an atomic burn victim by the arm to help them, but the meat on the skinless arm crumbled like tofu? Now the sorrow of Hiroshima, almost hidden in green swards and peaceful avenues and fancy architecture, erupts into view. On August 6, 1945, the majority of people living in the city were women, children, Koreans and the aged. Many of those at the hypocenter and in its radius who did not die in the blast, nor in the 3 months following the blast, still live today. Yet they have endured lives of almost incomparable suffering. Stigma clings to them. Traumatic memories warp emotional life. *Hibakusha* lead lives dominated by persistent health problems and fear of health problems, including dramatically increased incidence of thyroid cancers, breast cancers, leukemia, uterine and colon cancer. Most show evidence of chromosomal rearrangement and instability. Goiter and cataracts are common. Some *hibakusha* carry glass or other solid fragments



generated by the explosion deep in their tissue. Keloid scarring caused by radiation burns often softens over the years but not always, and there is one medical report describing a man whose scarred skin is so tight that if he gains more than 2 kilograms in weight his skin causes agonizing pain because it cannot stretch.

She looks up at me. "Does it hurt?" she asks, very formal, and I say, "Yes, it really does," but I don't mean the ankle and she nods as though she knows, then leads me to a bench outside Tange's Peace Center and says goodbye. I sit there for a long time. The sun passes its zenith and the spring rain clouds gather again. Yet it does not rain. And I think about my partner now lost to me in Germany and the 20,000 dead in Tōhoku and the strontium in the groundwater, cesium in the food, in the bodies of children, Mr Hashiura's wife, and I think about the women who bore microcephalic babies after the atomic bombing of the city where I now sit, and I cry.

This multiplicity of sorrows I find in Japan -- the personal, the post-catastrophic, the atomic -- becomes only more complicated and more intrusive the longer I stay and the more work I do on my research agenda. Even Tange Kenzo's design for the Peace Memorial Park escapes its stated purpose of memorializing the sadness of Hiroshima's atomic destruction: Lisa Yoneyama has noted that Tange appears to have transferred the basic design of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park from his larger design for the Commemorative Building Project for the Construction of Greater East Asia in 1942, a massive Shintoist memorial zone to be built at the foot of Mount Fuji.<sup>6</sup> Though never begun, perhaps because of funding problems, Tange's earlier project was intended to give built expression to a triumphal celebration of Japan's at once authoritarian and collaborative colonialism in Asia. Now the design intended to celebrate imperial domination and victory, scaled down but largely intact, stands for world

peace and the victims of atomic warfare. Yet, Japan's imperial past seeps out of Tange's buildings and on this day of encounters with the sadness of Hiroshima, the imperialist taint in the design of the Peace Park points me back to my research, and sends me off to the island of Ōkunoshima, where I find myself enmeshed in yet another layer of sorrow.



**Tange's Peace Memorial Park**

Nothing is remote in Japan, almost everything is efficient, but by Japanese standards, Ōkunoshima is not easy to get to. I take a taxi to Hiroshima Station. Soft rain falls on the streets. Soft sighs and gasps come from the dashboard: the driver has been streaming pornographic videos on his Docomo mobile phone and forgot to turn it off when I hopped in. He notices now and switches it off. I take a slower bullet train service to Mihara, a plain little city northeast of Hiroshima. Again, the train is almost empty. An hour wait at Mihara Station where the station signs sport a picture of a happy red octopus wearing a samurai helmet, brandishing a sword and a paper lantern in two of his tentacles. Beneath the happy octopus the legend reads, "Mihara --- Octopus Town." From Mihara, Japan Rail West runs a two-car train down the snaking coastline of the Seto Naikai, the Inland Sea, to a little town, Tadanoumi, from where a ferry runs to Ōkunoshima. Once the suburbs of Mihara drop away, everything seems washed in gray. The

colors of the sea, the cedars on the islands, even the signs warning people not to step into the road are soft and faded by warm haze. Mountains tumble almost to the sea.

My train curls around the spines of tiny beaches, past dilapidated shrines to local deities, a small high-tech shipyard. Then, when we break out of a tunnel, Ōkunoshima appears a few kilometers off the coast, right where my map and my handbook had told me it would be.

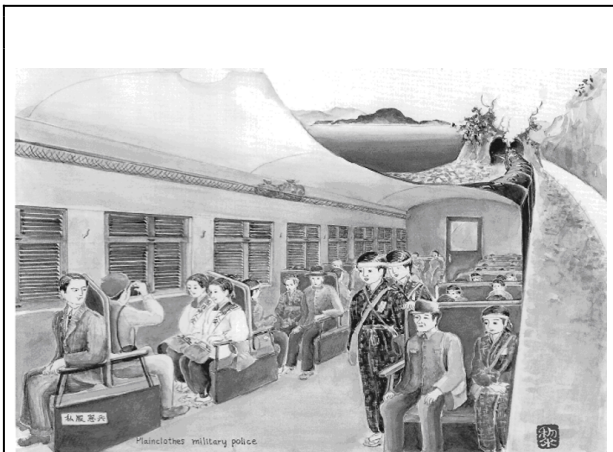
This is the island where much of Japan's poison gas and poison gas weapons delivery systems were produced during the long war beginning in China in the 1930s and ending in August 1945. In those days the government erased Ōkunoshima from maps. Trains running between Tadanoumi and Mihara went along with their window shutters down so the island could



**Ōkunoshima coast line**

not be seen. It was forbidden to look. Curtains were always drawn on the windows of ferries plying the waters around Ōkunishima. Some trains along the Kure line even carried plainclothes *kempei* military police to ensure that nobody peeped.<sup>7</sup>

By the time I visit Ōkunoshima, I know quite a lot about the island's history and about the sadness of that history. In many ways, World War I had been the first truly total war, and part of that totality was an overlap of scientific research, capitalist Fordist production methods and weapons technologies. The list of new weapons technologies produced by this overlap is long: interrupter gear, allowing a machine gun to be mounted behind the propeller so the pilot could fire directly ahead along the plane's flight path; long range strategic bombers; tank technology and mass tank mobilization; "dreadnought" battleships; submarines able to be powered while submerged; heavy long-range artillery, and poison gas weapons. Most of these new weapons were, however, too expensive for the Japanese government as it sought to reorganize



**No looking from the train at Ōkunoshima**

and re-arm the military after World War I.<sup>8</sup> Not so chemical weapons. Poison gases were cheap and the other colonial powers were making, stockpiling and using them in minor wars and skirmishes around the world throughout the 1920s and 1930s, despite international prohibitions. The army thus initiated and supported research, production and training in poison gas weapons use.<sup>9</sup> Scientists from Japan's most prestigious imperial universities contributed to the program. Production of

mustard, lewisite, phosgene, hydrogencyanide, chloracetophenone and diphenylcyanarsine gases<sup>10</sup> and gas weapons delivery systems began at the purpose-built facilities on Ōkunoshima.

The loss and sorrow caused by Japan's poison gas weapons



**Ōkunoshima poison gas factories**

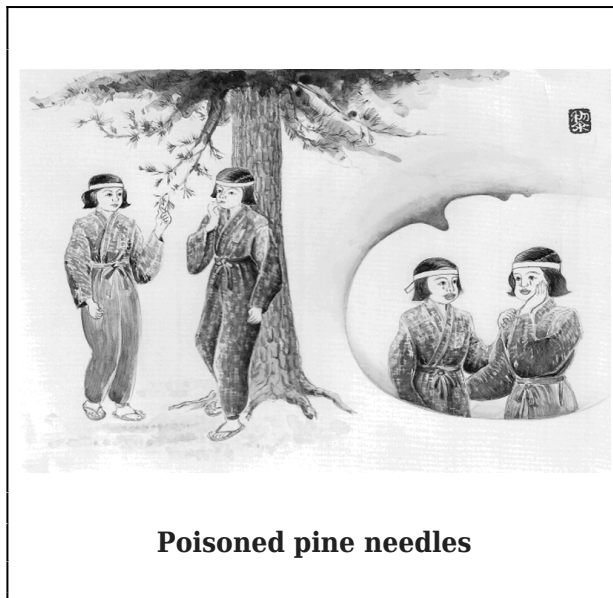
program based at Ōkunoshima was and still is considerable. Chinese historian, Chi Hsueh-jen estimates that between 1937 and 1945 there were “2091 instances of Japanese use of gas producing about 80,000 casualties among Chinese soldiers and civilians,”<sup>11</sup> and although Chi's figures may be distorted by the ways in which memory is used in China's postwar relationship with Japan, and though the meaning of the term “casualties” is unclear, there is no doubt that many Chinese died or were seriously injured by Japanese poison gas attacks and gas experiments on prisoners. What is more, in the last 20 years, tons of chemical weapons hastily buried by Japanese troops in China as war's end approached have begun to reappear, rusting and leaking and causing damage to the environment and to people for whom the second Sino-Japanese war is just history. Late in the summer of 2003 construction workers on a site in Qiqihar (Heilongjiang province) dug up a cache of gas

weapons buried by Japanese soldiers 58 years earlier. The badly decayed weapons leaked yperite gas. One worker died and 43 were permanently injured by exposure to the gas. Forty-eight Chinese filed suit against the Government of Japan in the Tokyo District Court, claiming ¥1.4 billion in compensation. In 2010, the judge ruled against them. He acknowledged that the weapons were Japanese, had been buried by Japanese military personnel, and that the Japanese government could have predicted the consequences for human beings exposed to the weapons. Nonetheless, the judge ruled that the Government of Japan was not responsible for the leakage of gas, and thus not liable for death and injury caused by it.<sup>12</sup> Similar cases have foundered on the statute of limitations and on Article 5 of the 1972 Sino-Japanese Joint Communique, which stipulates, “The Government of the People's Republic of China declares that in the interest of the friendship between the Chinese and the Japanese peoples, it renounces its demand for war reparation from Japan.” Japanese courts often rule that this provision precludes compensation to Chinese individuals for war-related injuries,<sup>13</sup> although critics have argued that Article 5 should prohibit only reparations to the Chinese state not to individual victims.

This is what I know about the sorrow of Ōkunoshima when I disembark from the ferry that brings me, along with a serious photographer and a clutch of frantically texting young women, the last leg to the island. Not much remains now of the poison gas weapons facilities. Cedar and pine forest covers the hill and parts of the flat peninsula at the northern end. About 100,000 tourists visit Ōkunoshima every year and the island is one of Japan's 36 official *kyūkamura*, villages of rest and recreation. Leisure facilities include a full-service hotel, an *onsen*, tennis courts, a swimming pool, and there are several beaches suitable for fishing and snorkeling. Most noticeably, there are rabbits everywhere,



descendants of the animals used to test the efficacy of the poison gases made on the island. Now they are tame, aggressive about food, and account for Ōkunoshima's other name, Rabbit Island. A summer holiday mood prevails until I go into the small *shiryōkan* research center with its displays of gas masks, gas weapons casings and photographs of hideously blistered human skin. I buy a slim volume with text and hand-drawn pictures, an illustrated memoir of the island in its last days as a poison gas weapons factory by Okada Reiko, who tells me that Ōkunoshima looked very different in 1944 and 1945 than it does today. Safety measures in the gas factories were so lax that much of the island forest was exposed to toxins and the pine trees died. "How pathetic the blighted pine trees looked," writes Okada, "The whole island had become polluted by gas."<sup>14</sup> She remembers that one of the girls working on the island used a pine needle to pick her teeth after eating. The pine needle was so permeated with poison from the production and testing of gas that the girl's gums swelled and began to bleed.



I read this sitting in the shade of a tree, the warm sea sucking gently at the rocks, a kite wheeling above the forest, a fishing boat puttering quietly by on a hunt for octopus

perhaps, but Okada's description of how it used to be pollutes the beauty of Ōkunoshima, poisons it with that special sadness that only memory in the form of history brings.

My discovery of Okada's little memoir is one of those unexpected events in research that drops you into another dimension of understanding and feeling. I go through the volume and realize that my effort to escape my own sorrow in Japan is simultaneously an exercise in narcissism, an exercise bound to fail and an exercise bound to succeed. What personal suffering could not be both obliterated and exacerbated here, at this time, in awareness of this history? Not only is the sorrow of Japan in the post-Tōhoku cataclysm and in the human history of atomic Hiroshima larger and sharper than my own personal agonies, the sadness of poison gas warfare in China I had known I would find on Ōkunoshima now becomes intensified and enormously complicated by Okada's memoir, for can there be anything sadder than a state that destroys not just its enemies, which is after all a sovereign right of states that has generally been unyielding to restriction, but destroys its own people as well, and not just its soldiers and adults but its children, who are its future?

In the autumn of 1943 the military mobilized seniors at the Tadanoumi Girls' High School and sent them to Ōkunoshima to work in the poison gas factories. In 1944, there came another mobilization order.

This time, the second-year students, all about 13 years of age, including Okada Reiko, were also sent to work in the





**Okada Reiko**

poison gas plants. In all 1084 students went from Tadanoumi to the island every day during the last years of the war. Those who stayed at home or skipped a day of work were labeled traitors. Most were exposed to the gases they made. There were accidents and explosions that left the children with severe chemical burns to the esophagus, the trachea, the face and arms. Girls were also set to work on manufacture of paper balloon bombs, one of Japan's quixotic last-ditch efforts at defense.

Since making the balloon paper was fine work, young girls with small dexterous hands were put to it, working in unheated rooms, constantly having to painfully bend their fingers as far back as possible to securely connect small pieces of the paper with paste to make up an entire balloon skin. Supervisors forced the hands of the girls further and further back if one pasted spot was not as strong as it should be. Each group of children worked as a team. Efficiency was constantly checked and teams that failed to come up to scratch were publicly scolded. At war's end, these girls and boys were ordered to dismantle the poison gas production facilities and in the course of this, many came into direct contact with the toxins as they were collected for shipping prior to being dumped at sea.

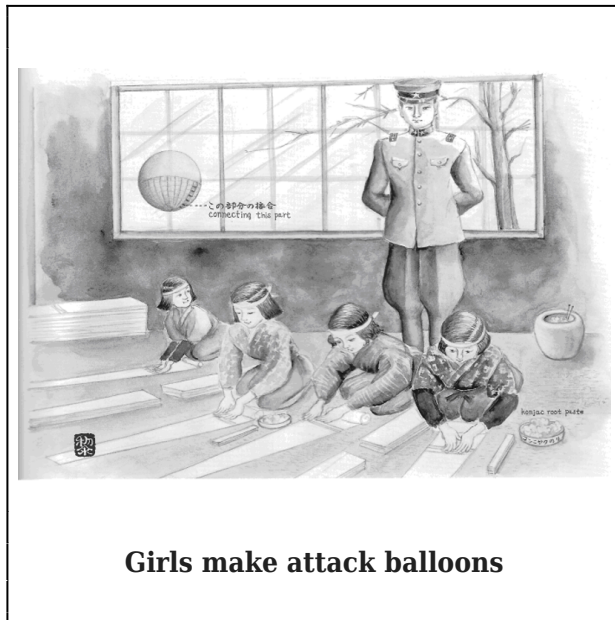
In her memoir Okada notes that after the end of the war many of the girls in her



**Entrance to part of the poison-gas plant**

class suffered from chronic illnesses caused by exposure to gas and other toxins during the enforced period of labor on Ōkunoshima. Doctors at Tadanoumi Hospital began to suspect a pattern of respiratory neoplasms in former poison gas workers as early as 1952, though people living in Tadanoumi say there had been many deaths all along. But this was just the tip of the iceberg. Several thousand Japanese civilian deaths caused by the military policy of total war through poison gas production at Ōkunoshima must be added to the Chinese deaths resulting from Japanese poison gas attacks in China during the 1930s and 1940s. And into this already considerable lagoon of sorrow, we must add the more than 5000 Japanese who live with disability and illness caused by their work for the empire on Ōkunoshima, and the many thousands of Chinese citizens also living with disease and disability because of exposure to Japanese chemical weapons, either during or after hostilities. The most common diseases are lung, larynx and bronchial cancers, but chronic obstructive pulmonary disease also scourges those who came into contact with

Ōkunoshima.<sup>15</sup> Among cancers, respiratory neoplasm is one of the most difficult categories to treat. Treatments are often cruelly invasive and result in significant disfigurement to the neck and face along with damage to the voice, breathing and swallowing. To make matters worse, until 1975 those who worked on Ōkunoshima as children did no better in getting compensation from the government than Chinese victims of Japanese gas weapons do in the



**Girls make attack balloons**

Japanese courts today.<sup>16</sup> At work in this 30 year denial of compensation to Japanese citizens was the pre-war Japanese legal theory of *kokka mutoseki*, which holds that the Japanese government “is not responsible to its citizens for damages caused by the acts that it performs in the exercise of official authority.”<sup>17</sup>

There is an ineluctable sadness in this story of schoolgirls forced to make poison gas weapons and then denied compensation for diseases caused by that work throughout their lives. How did they endure it? How do the *hibakusha* of Hiroshima live as international emblems of suffering while the truth of what happened to them is always at work in their bodies and minds? How do the people of Japan carry on in the face of the Tōhoku earthquake, tsunami and

the ongoing and deepening disaster of nuclear catastrophe at Fukushima? Traveling like Murakami’s hero does in *Norwegian Wood* turns out to be no panacea, no solution to loss and sorrow at all. In the novel, Watanabe returns to Tokyo after his months of ceaseless movement and finds that “The months of travelling neither lifted my spirits nor softened the blow of Naoko’s death. I arrived back in Tokyo in pretty much the same state in which I had left.”<sup>18</sup> Running away does not do the trick, so what might be done with all the sorrow in Japan?

One response to loss and grief is anger. For weeks after the end of my marriage, I dream of hitting my former partner in the face, one big, hard, cracking slap, and for more weeks, I put the blame for what went wrong squarely on her: it’s a normal way of bearing the things that seem unbearable. Yet, in my encounter with Japan’s distress, both present and historical, I find little overt retaliation. There is no rage and blame in Okada Reiko’s memoir about working as a teenager in the poison gas factories on Ōkunoshima in 1944 and 1945 and the long term effects of that work. Autobiographical accounts of *hibakusha* suffering spit no vitriol, point no fingers at Tokyo or even Washington where the decision to drop the A-bombs was made. There *is* anger, activism and protest in Japan after the Tōhoku earthquake, tsunami and nuclear accident, but given the malfeasance of both the government and energy industry in the matter of nuclear energy in general and given TEPCO’s crisis management incompetence and the government’s side-stepping in the matter of the catastrophe at the Fukushima nuclear plant in particular, the anger seems mostly managed. Privately, my friends and colleagues shed tears, seethe and quietly try to organize a counter discourse to the official story. One translates interviews with British radiation scientist, Chris Busby, into Japanese in the hope that the counter-discourse will reach the mothers of Fukushima and help them protect their

children from the serious effects of low-level radiation.

But Japan is not Athens where Greeks set fire to the streets because the Eurozone has not worked out well. This is not London where a police shooting triggers days of burning, looting and violence. On the surface all is polite and mostly calm in Japan after 3/11. The international media speaks only of the dignity and civility of Japanese. "Order is their weapon," writes Rohit Brijnath in the *Straits Times Indonesia* of March 16, 2011. "But how can they be so composed and orderly in the wake of such unspeakable devastation? Why are they standing calmly in queues in supermarkets and petrol stations?" asks Ghanaian journalist and politician, Elizabeth Ohene, on the BBC website.<sup>19</sup> In *Forbes Magazine*, former Prime Minister and current Minister Mentor of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, writes of Japanese conduct with all the admiration one might expect of the architect of Singaporean conformity and authoritarianism:

Few societies could maintain such order and solidarity during a catastrophe of this magnitude. But group interaction and cooperation are the foundation of Japanese society. The whole world has witnessed Japan's dignity and grace in the face of devastation. The capacity to endure the unendurable is the very essence of the Japanese character.<sup>20</sup>

And many Japanese might agree with Minister Mentor Lee. Post 3/11 signs placed in all the Japanese towns and cities I visit exhort the people to persevere and not give up: *Ganbarō Nihon!* Everywhere I go I hear the word *gaman*, which in this case might mean something like, don't enact your own distress, be patient and endure. It's like a survivalist mantra. Historically, both *ganbaru* and *gaman* have

been key terms for creation of an ideal Japanese citizen, orderly and productive, especially in the late war years and after defeat when things were astonishingly difficult and survival and reconstruction of the nation paramount. These days, perseverance and endurance seem to be regarded as almost unquestionable features of Japaneseness both in Japan and out. Certainly, traumatic loss and sorrow in Japan are often managed with an air of stoicism and self-sacrifice. Much is made in the western media about *gaman* and *ganbaru* as signs of just how different Japanese are from the selfish and disordered rest of us, and both concepts are often used in the western media to create stories about how and why the Japanese are docile, obedient to their leaders and not given to political protest.

There are costs associated with *gaman* and *ganbaru*, but there's not much evidence that those costs are political. Since 1868 there has been a sequence of political and social rebellion and protest sometimes resulting in change, including peasant rebellions against landlessness and the pace of modernization in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a series of government-toppling riots against the price of rice in 1918, nationalistic assassinations of political leaders and attempted coups d'état in the 1920s and 1930s, a vigorous and confrontational anarchist movement until the end of the 1930s, and in the postwar period, protests and confrontations from student radicals, right wing groups, the Japanese Red Army Faction which declared war on the state in 1969, victims of the atomic bomb, the Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attack, and protests against industrial pollution, the Vietnam War, Japan's military and geopolitical subordination to the United States, high prices and environmental degradation. Even as I travel around southwestern Japan, citizens were planning a great anti-nuclear protest to take place outside the offices of the Fukushima culprit, Tokyo Electric Power Company, in Ginza on August 6, the anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Fukushima

mothers bring the urine of their children to meetings with government representatives and demand that it be tested for strontium, video the government's refusals and then put the videos on YouTube.<sup>21</sup>

No, the price of *gaman* and *ganbaru* responses to catastrophe and sorrow is not a politically docile community as the international media sometimes suggests; the price is personal. As a close friend writes to me in English via email from Japan, "The whole world is so dirty, and there is no hope for Japan, as Japanese people are not riot-type. They just commit suicide."

And she is right, for recent statistics hint that the real cost of perseverance and self-sacrificing endurance might be suicide. *Mainichi Shimbun* reports that the suicide rate in Fukushima Prefecture jumped by 20 percent between April and June, 2011, with 160 people killing themselves, including farmers confronted with the contamination of their land and a 58 year old woman who burned herself to death.<sup>22</sup> Early in July a 93 year old Fukushima woman committed suicide in the garden of her home leaving behind a note: "I have become a burden. I take shelter in the grave."<sup>23</sup> Nationwide, 3191 Japanese committed suicide in May, 2011, 472 more than in May of the previous year.<sup>24</sup> The Cabinet Office says that a link between the 3/11 disasters and the nationwide rise in suicides has yet to be established, but at the same time, it admits that the dramatic increase in Fukushima Prefecture suicides is probably a cost of trauma and deep sorrow. Of course, what is also possible is that the social obligation to persist, endure and persevere with dignity overlaps with denial of trauma and sorrow. As trauma theorists know, the line between endurance and denial is tissue thin. Trauma endured is often trauma denied, and trauma denied inevitably, sooner or later, resurfaces as anxiety, despair, self-harm. The opposite of *gaman* is *gaman dekinai*, I can't stand it, I'm not taking it any more or, more accurately, I think, I can't sacrifice my own feelings for it. *Gaman dekinai* is the answer

often given by Japanese protestors when asked why they protest, and it seems to me as I travel through Japan that the rise in suicides as the aftermath of 3/11 unfolds is both a cost of the *gaman* imperative and a refusal of it.

Yet suicide also represents a negotiation of another central formulation in the ways that Japanese understand themselves as Japanese and in the ways in which Japanese deal with trauma, loss and consequent sorrow: *mujō*, the concept of impermanence in which nothing is fixed, all things change, decay and die endlessly. *Mujō* comes from an intersection of the contemplative impermanence found in Buddhist philosophy with the intense awareness of seasonality in Japan's original rice culture.<sup>25</sup> It received its most distilled literary expression in Japan in 1212 in the *Hōjōki*, an account of various catastrophes befalling the capital city of Heiankyō, written by Kamo no Chōmei and opening with: "Ceaselessly the river flows, and yet the water is never the same, while in the still pools the shifting foam gathers and is gone, never staying for a moment. Even so is man and his habitation."<sup>26</sup>

In *Norwegian Wood* Murakami's narrator, Watanabe, finally accepts the death of Naoko as the nature of things as they are in all their impermanence, and in a speech accepting the International Catalunya Prize in Barcelona on June 9, 2011, Murakami takes up the concept of *mujō* to explain the dignity and near-seamless equanimity of Japanese in the face of great suffering after 3/11. "This concept of *mujō* has been seared deeply into the Japanese spirit, forming a national mindset," Murakami says.<sup>27</sup> Thus it is not so much *ganbaru* and *gaman*, not so much perseverance and selfless endurance that accounts for the grace and dignity of Japanese after the 3/11 disaster, that explains the dignified lives and work for peace of the atomic bomb victims, that accounts for Okada Reiko's gentle remembering of victimization as a schoolgirl at the hands of the



imperial state on Ōkunoshima. Rather, it is the awareness that everything changes, life becomes death, death becomes life, joy becomes sorrow and sorrow becomes joy that accounts for the observable equanimity of Japanese in the face of disaster and great suffering. This entails a radical acceptance of things the way they are in the certain knowledge that things will change; acceptance that struggle against the ceaseless flow of life and death leads nowhere, except to more suffering.

After the earthquake and tsunami, as the Fukushima nuclear plants explode and melt through and bodies seed the mud along the coast in northeastern Japan, a Chiba fisherman remarks, "You just can't imagine how beautiful the sea is after the tsunami!",<sup>28</sup> and he is not being perverse. The fisherman's active discovery of beauty in the midst of death and destruction symbolizes the core of everyday *mujō* consciousness in Japan, and it is this awareness that permits so much grace, dignity, and yes, order in the face of natural cataclysm, poison gas, fire bombs and atomic bombs, and governmental malevolence during the imperial era when Okada Reiko was sent to work and to be made ill in the poison gas factories on the island of Ōkunoshima. It is this consciousness that I end up meeting in Japan right at the point when I see that my attempt to escape personal sorrow through traveling has been futile. My own grief finds no solace in



**White Dragon Shrine**

the journey itself. My encounters with current and historical traumas and sorrow in Japan in the summer of 2011 do nothing to help me overcome my own suffering.

Then, in the last couple of days of my journey, I climb to a tiny ramshackle white dragon shrine in the cedar forest high on the side of a mountain in Gifu Prefecture.

My friend and I have been poring over both the human suffering and the scientific data circulating around the Fukushima nuclear accident, focused so closely on it all that it has become difficult to sleep and our conversations veer chaotically from the catastrophe to abuses of power in imperial Japan to why my marriage ended, as though all sorrows and losses are rolled up into one. Suddenly and without discussion, we head into the forest. We reach the shrine, bow and drop some coins in the box, then we sit on the rocks and watch the white dragon, the waterfall, shoot from a great height straight down in a spume of thunder into the pool at the base of the cliff. And in those moments watching the white dragon spurt, fall and change into a mountain pool, then into a brisk rivulet running to the valley where it becomes a river flowing through this sorrowing land I find a way to be with my own grief. My encounter with the multiple sorrows of Japan

leads me to the discovery of something beautiful in my own private disaster, some way of accepting the loss. The irreversible and death-infused separation from my partner tangles with a Japanese awareness of impermanence, and in this knotting of sorrow with *mujō* I see that my own loss is nothing more and nothing less than the life process itself.

Vivian Blaxell is an Asia-Pacific Journal Associate. A researcher on the spatial, cultural and social practices of Japanese colonialism, *she currently lives in Melbourne, Australia, and may be contacted at [vivian\\_blaxell@mac.com](mailto:vivian_blaxell@mac.com)*

Recommended citation: Vivian Blaxell, Sorrow, History and Catastrophe in Japan After the 3.11 Earthquake, Tsunami and Nuclear Meltdown: A personal encounter, *The Asia-Pacific Journal* Vol 9, Issue 36 No 3, September 5, 2011.

#### Articles on related subjects:

- Winifred A. Bird and Elizabeth Grossman, [Chemical Contamination, Cleanup and Longterm Consequences of Japan's Earthquake and Tsunami](#)
- Adam Lebowitz, [Blackout Nippon: Notes from 03/2011](#)
- Tsuneishi Keiichi, [New Facts about US Payoff to Japan's Biological Warfare Unit 731](#)
- Tsuneishi Keiichi, [Disposing of Japan's World War II Poison Gas in China](#)
- Eric Johnston, [Okunoshima: Poison Gas Past Belies Isle's Bucolic Serenity](#) <http://japanfocus.org/-Eric-Johnston/1776>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Greg Mitchell, "The Great Hiroshima Cover-

Up—And the Greatest Movie Never Made," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol 9, Issue 31 No 4, August 1, 2011, [link](#), Accessed August 11, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces: Time, space, and the dialectics of memory*. (Berkeley; University of California Press, 1999), pp. 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Okada Reiko, *Ōkunoshima: Dōingakuto no monogatari* [Ōkunoshima: The Story of the Student Brigade], (Mihara: Toxic Gases Island Research Institute, 1989), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Leonard Humphreys. *The Way of the Heavenly Sword: The Japanese army in the 1920s*. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1995) p. 127.

<sup>5</sup> Bu Ping, *Nihon no Chūgoku shinryaku to dokugasu heiki* [Japan's Invasion of China and Chemical Weapons] translated into Japanese by Yamabe Yukiko and Miyazaki Kyoshiro, (Tokyo: Akashi-shoten, 1995) p. 179.

<sup>6</sup> Intelligence Report on Japanese Chemical Warfare, Volume II, The Chemical Warfare Research And Development Work Of The Japanese, 1 March 1946, Office of the Chief Chemical Officer, General Headquarters, U.S. Army Forces, Pacific, Tokyo, Japan

<sup>7</sup> Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, "Research Notes on Japanese Poison Gas Warfare in China" p. 6. [chinajapan.org/articles/05.1/05.1wakabayashi4-10.pdf](http://chinajapan.org/articles/05.1/05.1wakabayashi4-10.pdf) Accessed May 12, 2011

<sup>8</sup> Akahata, January 11 & 26, 2007, [link](#), and May 25, 2010, [link](#), Accessed July 25, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Shin Hae Bong, "Compensation for Victims of

Wartime Atrocities: Recent Developments in Japan's Case Law." *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 3 (2005), 190.

<sup>10</sup> Okada Reiko, *Ōkunoshima: Dōingakuto no monogatari* [Ōkunoshima: The Story of the Student Brigade], (Mihara: Toxic Gases Island Research Institute, 1989) p. 12. English text translated from Japanese by Jean Inglis.

<sup>11</sup> Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, "Research Notes on Japanese Poison Gas Warfare in China" p. 6. [chinajapan.org/articles/05.1/05.1wakabayashi4-10.pdf](http://chinajapan.org/articles/05.1/05.1wakabayashi4-10.pdf) Accessed May 12, 2011

<sup>12</sup> Akahata, January 11 & 26, 2007, [link](#) and May 25, 2010, [link](#), Accessed July 25, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Shin Hae Bong, "Compensation for Victims of Wartime Atrocities: Recent Developments in Japan's Case Law." *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 3 (2005), 190.

<sup>14</sup> Okada Reiko, *Ōkunoshima: Dōingakuto no monogatari* [Ōkunoshima: The Story of the Student Brigade], (Mihara: Toxic Gases Island Research Institute, 1989) p. 12. English text translated from Japanese by Jean Inglis.

<sup>15</sup> Kōno Nobuyaki and Awaya Yukikazu, "Dokugasu to haigan" [Poison Gas and Lung Cancer], *Nihon naika gakkai zasshi*, Vol. 91, No.6, pp. 20-22.

<sup>16</sup> Tanaka Yuki, "Poison Gas: The Story Japan Would Like to Forget." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, October 1988, p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Shin Hae Bong, "Compensation for Victims of Wartime Atrocities: Recent Developments in Japan's Case Law." *Journal of International*

*Criminal Justice* 3 (2005), 187-206.

<sup>18</sup> Murakami Haruki, *Norwegian Wood*. Translated by Jay Rubin. (London: The Harvill Press, 2001), p. 329.

<sup>19</sup> [Link](#). Accessed 08/01/2011.

<sup>20</sup> [Link](#). Accessed 08/01/2011

<sup>21</sup> See [this link](#).

<sup>22</sup> [Link](#). Accessed 08/04/2011

<sup>23</sup> [Link](#). Accessed 08/05/2011

<sup>24</sup> [Link](#). Accessed 08/05/2011

<sup>25</sup> See Steven Heine, "From Rice Cultivation to Mind Contemplation: The Meaning of Impermanence in Japanese Religion." *History of Religions*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (May, 1991), pp. 373-403

<sup>26</sup> *The Ten Foot Square Hut and Tales of the Heike*. Translated by A. L. Sadler. (Kessinger Publishing, 2005) p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> [Murakami Haruki](#). "Speaking as an Unrealistic Dreamer" *The Asia-Pacific Journal* Vol 9, Issue 29 No 7, July 18, 2011. Accessed July 25, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in *2:46: Aftershocks: Stories from the Japan Earthquake*, Patrick Sherriff, editor (London: Enhanced Editions, 2011). Location 826 in the Kindle for iPad edition.

