

So Happy to see Cherry Blossoms: Haiku from the Year of the Great Earthquake and Tsunami まんかいのさくらがみれてうれしいな 大震災と津波の年が生みだした一句

Mayuzumi Madoka

Co-Winner of the Kyoko Selden Translation Prize (2014)

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The great earthquake that struck off the Pacific coast of Japan's northeast region on March 11, 2011, and the tsunami it created, destroyed wide swaths of the coastal regions, killing 16,000 people, with more than 2,600 people missing. The tsunami also disabled a nuclear power plant in Fukushima and forced large numbers of people to evacuate or flee the affected areas. Three years later, more than a quarter million people still live in temporary housing or elsewhere not in their own homes. Nearly 50,000 Fukushima residents continue to live outside the prefecture.²

Amid the torrents of words and images that gushed out of the calamities (and continue to do so), the haiku poet Mayuzumi Madoka's anthology, *まんかいのさくらがみれてうれしいな* (2012), was a modest attempt to record how ordinary people in affected areas reacted to the disasters. She did this through the shortest poetic medium in the world, selecting haiku composed by amateur writers, of all generations.



Thus the author of the title haiku was, at the time, an 11-year-old boy, Abe Ryusei:

まんかいのさくらがみれてうれしいな

Mankai no sakura ga mirete ureshiina

I'm So Happy to See Cherry Blossoms in Full Bloom

This haiku may immediately bring to mind A. E. Housman's famous poem that begins, "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now / Is hung with bloom along the bough." But 11-year-old Abe's circumstances couldn't be more different. The fifth grader from Yamada Town, Iwate, explained: "Orikasa was left with wreckage and rubble. But I saw a cherry tree, small but blooming. It was in full bloom. So I wrote this haiku."

Orikasa, part of Yamada Town with 16,000 people, was almost totally destroyed by the

tsunami and the great fire it touched off. The township of Yamada as a whole suffered a death toll of 604, with 149 people missing.

However, Abe Ryusei is not the youngest haiku writer whose work Mayuzumi selected for her anthology. That distinction goes to Shuto Miu, an 8-year-old girl, from Ishinomaki, Miyagi. She wrote:

年賀には「こんどあったらあそぼう
ね」

*Nenga ni wa "Kondo attara asobo
ne"*

In New Year's card: "Next time we
meet let's have fun"

Shuto explained: "Every year I exchanged New Year cards with a friend since kindergarten, but he died in the tsunami. The New Year card I had received two months before the tsunami said this. I feel very sad."

The city of Ishinomaki, northeast of Sendai, was practically wiped out by the tsunami. Its death toll of 3,256, with 451 people missing, was the largest that any municipality suffered.

At the other end of the generational spectrum are sexagenarians, octogenarians, even a nonagenarian. That may reflect not just the rapidly aging Japanese society but also the fact that many of the areas devastated by the tsunami were slowing depopulating, with rising proportions of older people.

Ara Fumiko, 91 years old, has two haiku in the English edition. One of them reads:

春寒や卒寿の避難つらかりし

*Harusamu ya sotsuju no hinan
tsurakarishi*

Spring cold painful to evacuate at
age ninety

Ara is from Iitate Village, Fukushima. Iitate, distant enough from the Pacific Ocean not to suffer from the tsunami, had just one casualty. But the village was too close to the disabled nuclear power plant. When their village was designated as one of the "planned evacuation zones," all the villagers had to move out to different locations. It was a great blow to the dairy village proud of pursuing self-sufficiency and sustainability despite the tough winter weather.

Like the 11-year-old Abe Ryusei's haiku, Ara Fumiko's fulfills the traditional haiku requirement of inclusion of a seasonal indicator. Here, it is "spring cold," *harusamu*, which refers to the cold that persists after the Vernal Equinox.

Those in their prime tend to express their shock and dismay in the face of the calamity with a somewhat greater immediacy. Yoshino Hiroko, 38 years old, wrote, using the same seasonal term as Ara's, "spring cold":

春寒や家も車も流されて

*Harusamu ya ie mo kuruma mo
nagasarete*

Spring cold both house and car
washed away

To this vivid haiku, Yoshino, from Namie Town, Fukushima, adds a few more details in her note: "In a single moment our house, our car, and all valuables, including the piano we'd bought a month earlier were washed away in the tsunami. But all of my family were spared our lives. At this time we live in Yamagata."

With a death toll of 149, Namie, "Estuary of Waves," may have been among the luckier

ones. But radiation from the disabled nuclear power plant directly to the south forced the residents there to evacuate. To this day, Namie largely remains a ghost town.

Koike Michiko, a 41-year-old high school teacher in Miyako City, Iwate, wrote:

泥掻いて泥掻きだして春夕焼

*Doro kaite doro kakidashite haru
yuyake*

Shoveling up mud shoveling out
mud spring evening glow

“To get back to our house with its floor flooded by the tsunami,” Koike explained, “we had to walk through great quantities of rubble. With the aftershocks repeating, we concentrated on shoveling out the mud until the day ended. Thinking of going back to the evacuation site while it was light, I looked up to the sky and saw the beautiful evening glow no different from before the disaster.”

The death toll of Miyako was 420, and 94 people were still listed as missing in the spring of 2014. The high school teacher’s description of the day her city was engulfed by the tsunami and the days that followed, when her school, built on a hill, turned into an emergency evacuation shelter, is included in the anthology in the form of her letter to Mayuzumi.

Just sixteen years before the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, Japan had been struck by the Kobe earthquake, which claimed more than 6,300 casualties. But the new disaster was far worse in size and the extent of devastated areas, and a nuclear accident was added to

that. Mayuzumi Madoka's anthology captures popular responses to the triple disasters with startling insight and eloquence. We have been honored to work on the anthology and are pleased that the committee for the Kyoko Selden Memorial Translation Prize recognized our work.

Hiroaki and Nancy Sato work collaboratively on the translation of Japanese poetry. Mayuzumi Madoka, *Happy to See Cherry Blossoms: Haiku from the Year of the Great Earthquake and Tsunami*, Red Moon Press, 2014. Hiroaki Sato is former President of the Haiku Society of America and winner of the 1982 PEN Translation Prize. In addition to his numerous translations of classical and contemporary Japanese fiction and poetry, he has recently published *Japanese Women Poets: An Anthology* (M.E. Sharpe, 2008).

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This is the second selection of poems and introductions to the collection published by the Asia-Pacific Journal. See also [So Happy to See Cherry Blossoms: Haiku from the Year of the Great Earthquake and Tsunami Edited by Mayuzumi Madoka](#), Translated by Hiroaki and Nancy Sato

Notes

¹ Red Moon Press store - [Happy to See Cherry Blossoms: Haiku from the Year of the Great Earthquake and Tsunami](#)

² The figures are from [tabulations in March 2014](#).