Disaster Poetry from Ōfunato

Arai Takako

Translated by Jeffrey Angles

Abstract:
The city of Ōfunato is located in northeastern Japan, in the southeastern portion of Iwate Prefecture. It lies on the Sanriku coast and is a fine example of a ria coastline with several prongs of mountainous ridges that extend outward into the sea. The coast is home to Iwate’s largest port, and houses several well-developed industries, including industries related to fishing, marine products processing, and cement production. On the outskirts of the city limits are Anatōshiiso and the Go-ishi Coast, which because of their dramatic rock formations and islands, are well known for their natural beauty. Ōfunato is home to approximately 40,000 people.

The impact of the 3.11 triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear power meltdown is told here in visual images and the poetry by Arai Takako.


Ōfunato and the 2011 disasters

The city of Ōfunato is located in northeastern Japan, in the southeastern portion of Iwate Prefecture. It lies on the Sanriku coast and is a fine example of a ria coastline with several prongs of mountainous ridges that extend outward into the sea. The coast is home to Iwate’s largest port, and houses several well-developed industries, including industries related to fishing, marine products processing, and cement production. On the outskirts of the city limits are Anatōshiiso and the Go-ishi Coast, which because of their dramatic rock formations and islands, are well known for their natural beauty. Ōfunato is home to approximately 40,000 people.

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Anatōshiiso. The name of this site means
“pierced rocky shoreline.” Photo by the author, June 2016.

Go-ishi Coast. The name comes from the fact that the small islands look like stones used in the game of go (go-ishi). Photo by the author, June 2016.

Map of the Kesen region, which straddles Iwate Prefecture in the north and Miyagi Prefecture in the south. Map data from Google.

Ōfunato, along with the city of Rikuzentakata and the town of Sumita, are part of what is known as the Kesen Region. The speech used there has a high degree of regional distinctness and is known as Kesengo (literally “the language of Kesen”). In fact, there is an increasing push, which has been spearheaded by Yamauchi Harutsugu, a medical doctor who lives in Ōfunato, to have Kesengo recognized not just as a minor dialect of Japanese, but as a distinctive language with its own rich history and tradition.

Ōfunato suffered tremendous damage during the earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011. According to the website of the Ōfunato Municipal Government, a quake just shy of 6.0 on the Richter Scale was recorded downtown and the nearby areas, and soon afterward, a devastating tsunami of approximately ten meters tall assaulted the coastline.¹ In Sanriku-chō, one outlying area of the city, the tsunami reached the staggering height of twenty-three meters. The commercial district in the center center of Ōfunato was destroyed, and the rest of the town was left seriously damaged.

By December 2016, at the time when this article was completed, the official death count from the 2011 disasters was 15,893 people dead, 2,556 people missing, and 6,152 people injured.² Of those, 340 of the dead and 79 of the missing came from Ōfunato.³ 2,791 households were completely destroyed, but if one were also to include the numbers of houses that were classified as “partially destroyed,” then the number of households that sustained damage rises to 5,582.⁴

About a month and a half after the disasters, I
visited the city of Kesennuma, located in Miyagi Prefecture, a bit to the south of Ōfunato. I was there to help clean up earthquake-ravaged homes, but the destruction that I witnessed there is difficult for me to put into words even now, after all of this time.

Years have gone by since then. Rubble is still being removed throughout the region, and the ground beneath laid bare. Earthen mounds are being constructed, and large enterprises are moving ahead with plans to construct facilities for commercial use. Homes are being rebuilt, and victims placed in temporary housing are still in the process of trying to find permanent housing elsewhere. According to the Iwate Prefectural Reconstruction Bureau’s Division of Living Support (Iwate-ken Fukkō-kyoku Seikatsu Shien-ka), as of March 2016, there were still 1,691 people in Ōfunato living in temporary housing—a total of 781 households. Fortunately, through various efforts, this number had decreased by November 2016 to 808 people living in temporary housing—a total of 359 households.5

Meeting room at one of the temporary housing facilities in Ōfunato. Photo by the author, November 2014.

My first trip to Ōfunato was in November 2014, a little more than three and a half years after the disasters. I had been making plans with the Museum of Contemporary Japanese Poetry, Tanka, and Haiku (Nihon Gendai Shiika Bungakukan) located in the city of Kitakami in Iwate Prefecture to start a project that we had labeled, “Words to Stir the Heart: The Voices of Ōfunato.” The plan was to go around to the meeting rooms in the temporary housing facilities and work with the local people to
translate the tanka poems of the poet Ishikawa Takuboku (1886-1912) into the local language of Ōfunato—into Kesengo, in other words. As some readers may know, Takuboku is one of the great tanka poets of modern Japanese literature. He was a native of Iwate Prefecture, but his poetry was written in the language of modern Japan—the kind of increasingly standardized Japanese that would come to be seen as the language of the Japanese citizen. In other words, he wrote in Nihongo, “the language of Japan,” not Kesengo “the language of Kesen” or any other dialect. In working with the inhabitants of the temporary housing and their neighbors to translate Takuboku into Kesengo, our project aimed to help participants rediscover the unique charm of the language of the northeast and to help share that more broadly with the rest of Japan. As of December 2016, the “Words to Stir the Heart” project has held nine meetings, and we have reached the initial goal of translating one hundred different tanka into Kesengo. We are currently moving forward with efforts to publish them in book form.

Each time I visit, I see the changes in the city. The hotels in the center of the town, which were rapidly patched up after the disasters, have been completely rebuilt one after another. At the same time, people are criticizing the current plan to erect embankments against future floods, saying that the embankments are too large in scale. What should be the relationship between nature and mankind? Between the sea and humanity? The debates rage on.

Disaster poetry by the poets of Ōfunato

The Ōfunato Poetry Society

One of the big benefits of this project was that through it, I got to know many poets living in Ōfunato. While drinking beer together, enjoying ochakko (which is Kesengo for “snacks”), and riding with them in their cars,
we talked about all sorts of things—not just the disasters, but also our families, our jobs, our poetry, and the culture and customs of the Kesen region. They are now the strongest supporters of our “Words to Stir the Heart” project, and one of the reasons that I now look forward to heading up to the northeast is because I want to see them again. In the remainder of this essay, I would like to introduce some of the poetry written by Ōfunato poets about the disasters. All of this was material that I discovered through working together with them on our project.

Japan is a big place—it might sound silly for me to say this, but when I encountered the work of the Ōfunato poets, that is one of the things that struck me. Their work is almost completely unknown in Tokyo and elsewhere, if it is known at all. Over the last few years, there have been many people speaking and arguing about the role and language of poetry produced in times of disaster. We’ve seen popular journals and literary magazines taking up those questions. There have been anthologies of disaster-related literature. Sometimes they feature local poets from the northeast, but I feel that I only gained a real sense of what they were doing when I met the Ōfunato poets in person.

The first time we met for the project, we met in Okirai, Sanriku-chō. We held our event in the Sugishita Temporary Housing Complex. I was in the common room, putting away the CD player afterwards when someone handed me a booklet and said, “Please read this.” It was Nomura Miho, one of our participants. The title of the booklet was The Poets of 3-11: The Locus of the Heart (3.11 no shijin-tachi: Kokoro no kiseki), and it was published by an organization called the Ōfunato Poetry Association (Ōfunato Shi no Kai). In it, I found Nomura’s poem “Daffodil” (Suisen). Here it is in both an English translation and the original Japanese.

Japanese

小さな白い水仙を
赤い南天の実にそえて活ける
部屋が暖かくなると
香りが広がる
水仙は地中海沿岸が原産国という
シルクロードを旅して
東アジアに渡って
日本の浜辺にたどり着いたのだろうか
三一一あの未曾有の災害にも
耐え抜いて
厳寒の空の下
緑の葉を凛と伸ばし
可憐な白い花びらの中
金の盃を抱き
その盃に陽光が満ちるように
輝く幸せに溢れるときが
必ずやって来るだろう

English

I place a small white daffodil
Alongside a sprig of nandina covered with red berries
As the room grows warm
Their aroma spreads
As if unravelling
They say the daffodil
Comes from along the Mediterranean coasts
To East Asia
Reaching the coasts of Japan
March 11
The flower made it through
this unprecedented disaster
Beneath the bitterly cold sky
It grew its green leaves with
so much dignity
And now holds in its dainty
white petals
A golden cup
Surely a time will come
When that cup
Will overflow
With sparkling happiness
As if filled with sunlight
would be poets who wrote their own original works. This poem, describing the petals of a flower embracing a beautiful little cup, impressed me. I felt as if a sudden burst of light was washing the scales from my eyes.

And then, there was the remarkable poem “My Goodness, You’re Alive...” (Igide da gaa) by Kinno Yukie, in which she reproduces the kinds of conversations one heard after the disaster, all in the local Kesengo language. (The following English translation doesn’t attempt to render the dialect into any specific dialect of English, but I encourage readers interested in hearing the incredible musicality and intonation of the original to listen to the sound file. In it, Kinno reads her own work.)
The warm blood of life seems to be flowing through these words. All along the coast, when people found one another immediately after the disaster, they would greet each other with the words, “You... My goodness, you’re alive...” (Andaa... Igide da gaa...) as in the first lines of this poem. Reading between the lines, one senses the shadows of the 20,000 people who were not able to mutter these words. I was also struck by the powerful phrase “Give me some underpants and socks” (Pantsu to kuzusuta kerai). In this one, condensed phrase, one senses how desperate the situation was for all those people who managed somehow to escape the tsunami with nothing more than their own bodies and the clothes on their backs.

Kinno Yukié, the same poet who wrote the poem I just quoted, wrote the following poem entitled “God” (Kami-sama) in response to the Catholic church’s public call for prayers. Once again, Kinno writes in the vivid, local dialect—an important strategic choice that allows her to quite literally give voice to the battered and dispirited people throughout the region.
In the breath that flows from the narrator’s nostrils, she hears the cries of the dead calling out for help. She hears and understands their silent plea, but is at a complete loss as to what to do. She calls out to God, hoping that he will come closer, almost as if she hopes that his proximity and direction will keep her from being carried away by the spirits of the deceased. This poem teaches us that the spirits of the dead seem to be lodged deep within the bodies of the surviving, moving aimlessly through them. The dead are within the living. In the disaster zone, the dead and the living are together in visceral ways.

*Nakamura Sachiko and Tomiya Hideo*

As we planned the second meeting of our project, we sent some a flier and a letter to Kan Chieko, the head of the Ōfunato Poetry Association. She came to the Sawagawa Temporary Housing facility where we held our meeting, and there introduced me to Nakamura Sachiko, who had been in charge of editing the booklet that I had received on my previous trip.

Nakamura, known by her nickname “Sat-chan,” is of the same generation as I am. Since we first met, I have spent time with her on almost every one of my trips to the northeast. She married when she was quite young, gave birth to three children, and is already a grandmother. She sees the real world in a cool-headed way, and in her gaze, I sense calm maturity.

Nakamura told me that when the members of the Ōfunato Poetry Association wrote the works that were collected in *The Poets of 3-11*, everyone was united in their desire to preserve the dignity of the dead. The mountains of rubble and refuse everywhere were, in fact, also cruel piles scattered with corpses of the local residents—the same people that were their relatives, friends, and neighbors... Each one of the poets was clear that they didn’t want to sully the memories of those deaths. As they wrote their work and published the booklet, no doubt they were keenly aware of the friction that arises between writing about something and laying bare for all the world to see something that they cared about deeply.

The coast of Akasaki-chō in Ōfunato is known for oyster cultivation, and Nakamura, who worked in that industry with her husband’s parents, referred to the sea as a “field” (*hatake*). The tsunami, however, had destroyed their oyster beds, and after deliberation, her father-in-law had decided to give up the business. She told me that the painful decision came as her own father was in the hospital dying. She describes the circumstances in her poem “Alongside a Certain Death” (*Aru shi no katawara de*).
Unable to get a death certificate in the midst of so much confusion, the body of her father grows colder and colder; meanwhile, the bodies
The first thing to illuminate
The dark town
Were the traffic lights
Soberly
Brightly
Honest to the point of
foolishness
I heard someone say [...]
more stable, comfortable life.

Below is an excerpt from his poem *Toward Tomorrow* (Ashita ni mukatte).

When I first saw what little was left
Of my home washed away by the tsunami
Strangely, I didn’t shed a tear
Unable to carry out my parents’ memorial tablets
I barely escaped with my own life
But I think it was my dead parents that saved me
During the Bon Festival, I witnessed something odd
Our gravestone, which had shifted during a previous earthquake,
Returned to its rightful place
When the big one came
Change environments and your life changes too
When I moved my refuge from temporary housing
Change the subject little by little with a relative’s home to Camelia Hall
I felt such joy at finding so many friends there
They decided to use Sakari Elementary School as temporary housing
When I was the last evacuee left the night before the move
Such loneliness sleeping there in the large hall all alone
My views on life changed so much
I took a job clearing rubble
As I suffered through the summer heat and winter cold
I, who had never held anything heavier than a pen,
Worked with a shovel in hand
To my niece and nephew, I was a hero […]
There are no depths lower than this
So the only thing to do is hold out hope and keep moving forward […]

Some time ago, Nakamura, Tomiya, and I had dinner together at a Chinese restaurant. He took our hands in his and said, “It’s been decades since I held a flower in each hand.” I couldn’t help thinking what a kind man he is, but with a small show of embarrassment, we apologized saying, “Sorry we’re such dried up flowers.” After participating in the second meeting of the “Words to Stir the Heart” project, Tomiya wrote warmly about that night in an essay he published in the Tōkai News (Tōkai shinpō). That evening too, as we were having beers together, he spoke encouragingly about our project saying, “The people that stayed on afterwards said that they found it really interesting.” But then he suddenly changed the subject. With a smile lingering unchanged on his face, he told us, “I’ve been diagnosed with depression.”

In his poem, Tomiya mentions the abject depths to which he has fallen. It is difficult for me to ascertain exactly all of the feelings that are contained within the word “depths”… In fact, when I first read *The Poets of 3-11*, I found myself thinking that perhaps if more of the lines didn’t conclude with words like “hope” (kibō), “smiles” (egao), and “hang in there” (ganbaru), the poems would be more interesting. However, as I got to know these writers and found myself developing a relationship little by little with Ōfunato, even if only as a visitor to the region, I began to realize the depth of feeling and implication that was contained in these relatively commonplace words. If anything, I was the one who was not able to appreciate the depth that they contained. When Tomiya speaks about needing hope, he reflects the depression, hopelessness, and desperation he feels. Only after meeting him could I begin to understand that it was precisely because he
was feeling such boundless despair that he turned it around and dared to speak of hope. With this realization, I began to understand how essential it was for people like him to hold on to the idea that there would be a recovery one day.

**Meeting Kinno Takako**

Nakamura introduced me to another poet as well, Kinno Takako who belongs to another poetry group in Ōfunato known as the Akane Poetry Society (*Akane Shi no Kai*). (She is not related to Kinno Yukie, the poet mentioned earlier.) In August 2015, she self-published a book of poetry entitled *Kerria Flowers* (*Yamabuki*). When she contributed to the *Kesengo* translations in our “Words to Stir the Heart” project, she did so with such vigor that I had assumed that she was probably in her seventies, but when I saw the biographical note included in her book of poetry, I was surprised to find that she was older than that—she was born in 1932.
Kerria Flowers by Kinno Takako

Kinno’s father was one of the first people to cultivate oysters at Akasaki-chō Aza Atohama along the seashore, but because he passed away at a young age, her mother worked to support her through needlework and other small jobs. Because she is so deeply rooted in the area, Kinno grew up to become what we might call a “bilingual” poet—fluent in Kesengo and standard Japanese. (When she speaks with her close friends, I can barely understand a word.) Kinno worked for nearly thirty years as a nursery school teacher in Akasaki-chō. Perhaps because she spent much time reading to the children, but she has rich experience with the world of books, and takes great pleasure in tanka poetry. Below is an excerpt from the poem “The Slope to the Fields” (Hatake e no sakamichi) in her collection Kerria.

When I was a little girl and I visited the home of my grandmother on her farm, did it smell of night soil? In any case, when she was a girl, she had to carry buckets filled with excrement on a pole over her shoulder. We can sense in the poem how much the swinging buckets affected her feelings. She writes, “My shoulders ached, I was miserable and ashamed / Still for some reason, I laughed.” I can’t help but think that the fact that she began writing her own creative work had to do with that personality—she was the type of girl who laughed when she was miserable, and would remember that laughter for years to come. In other words, she is a person who keeps her feet on the ground, yet she has so much energy that she seems ready to take a gigantic leap from wherever she happens to be.

Not long ago, after one of our “Words to Stir the Heart” meetings, I went with Kinno to have lunch at the home of one of her friends who had just moved from the temporary housing erected after 3.11 to public housing supported by the prefecture. As we were talking, Kinno said that in the old days, they had to work hard to prepare their meals, feeding the flames of the stove with sticks. As she said this, she...
puffed up her cheeks, imitating the act of blowing through a tube of bamboo to feed oxygen to the fire. She recalled the days soon after she left home to start a new life as a wife. She recounted how a touring choir came to perform in Rikuzentakata City. She wanted so desperately to go hear them that she left her infant child with her own mother and set off to go listen to them. Although she initially said to me, “Honestly, I’m not even sure why exactly I wanted to hear them so much,” I pressed her further. It seems that one reason for her enthusiasm was that she wanted to hear the “standard” Japanese (Nihongo) she was learning in school put to practical use.

Let me share a poem that she wrote in Kesengo about the 3.11 disasters. The title is “The Day We Saw Spring” (Har-ar mēda hi). The English translation doesn’t try to reproduce the dialect, so once again, I encourage readers interested in the sounds of Kesengo to listen to the sound file.

What’s this?
In the rubble
A small yellow flower
blooming
My goodness
A small daffodil
It’s done well to bloom here
In such a small spot
The huge tsunami in March
Completely washed away our peaceful lives
And then after that
Everything stopped
The piles of rubble and refuse
Stopped even our words and our tears
The sky dropped nothing but snow
I thought that even the turning of the seasons had stopped
But my goodness, even in the midst of that
Something was silently moving
Taking spring into its small hands
The daffodils bloomed
Pushing up, pushing up
Through earth hardened by filthy water
My eyes
Begin to glisten
My heart begins to swell
I want to shout to the farthest edge of the rubble
I’ve seen spring
I’ve seen it for sure
The first line of the poem, “What’s this?” (Nanda be) suggests that the narrator is squatting down and looking down. There, barely emerging from the rubble, is a daffodil, which blooms as if not missing a beat. This poem reminds me of the poem by Nomura Miho, quoted earlier—after the disasters, it was these small yellow flowers, filled with light, that announced the coming of spring to the citizens of Ōfunato.

Each time I listen to the participants in our workshops read their translations of Ishikawa Takuboku in their local language, I am struck by the sounds of Kesengo. Of course, there are many voiced consonants (dakuon), but the language is also rich in resonance. In lines like “A small yellow flower blooming” (Kīroi hanakko-ar sear deda) or “Something was silently moving” (Damātte ugoide da monar), Kinno sometimes extends her vowels with a small a(r) sound, which she represents with the katakana symbol ァ and which lends an emotional complexity to the line. In poetry, we sometimes talk about reading in the space between the lines, but here, she has created a space between the individual letters themselves, and in that space, we sense her emotion. In that space, the narrator seems to take in a feeling of wonder, and at the same time, mouths it slowly, clearly so that the reader can take partake of it as well. Through those seemingly small sounds, the look of the poem on the page and the sound of the words seem to waver slightly, as if one is looking at a vision through shimmering currents of air on a hot day. In the final lines, “I’ve seen spring / I’ve seen it for sure” (Orār haru mi dār / Shikkado midār), the narrator directs her gaze toward the vision of the daffodil. The sound and meaning of this beautiful poem work so well together that it is almost as if the entire poem is itself one gigantic onomatopoeia.

Although this has only been a whirlwind tour, this essay gives a brief introduction to the work of some of the local poets whom I met in Ōfunato. I hope that you will obtain copies of their booklets and anthologies to read for yourselves. It seems to me that the disaster-related poetry that they wrote differs significantly from that written by more mainstream poets in the Tokyo region. (I should know. I am one of the many poets living in central Japan who wrote about the disasters.) In their work, reality precedes rhetoric. Still, their work is different than what we think of when we imagine realism. Yes, their work is real, but even more than that, their work is rare and raw. What do we find there? How should we take it in? Their work challenges us in many ways.

With its dramatic cliffs and inlets, the seashore along Ōfunato is spectacularly beautiful. If you look out over the landscape on a clear day, it is so beautiful that it hardly seems it could belong to this world. I will never forget what Iwabuchi Fumio, a master ship carpenter told me during one of my visits. Iwabuchi lived in Kesennuma and lost everything, both his home and his workplace, to the tsunami. Even so, he told me that he hoped I would carry within me, “the heart of the sea.”

Arai Takako was born in 1966 in Kiryū City, Gunma Prefecture to a family engaged in textile manufacturing, a traditional industry in Kiryū. She is a graduate of Keio University's literature department and currently teaches at Saitama University. In addition to several works of literary criticism and her editorship of the poetry magazine Mi‘Te, she has published three books of poetry, including Tamashii Dance (Soul Dance), which was awarded the Oguma Hideo Prize. Arai is known for writing socially engaged poetry. A frequent theme of
her work is the lives of working women and the ways that they have been shaped by contemporary trends, especially push toward globalization, the recent economic downturn, and the 2011 earthquake-related crises in northeastern Japan. Translations of her poetry are available in *Soul Dance* (http://www.mi-te-press.net/eng/books/index.html) (MiTe Press, 2008) and *Poems of Hiromi Itō, Toshiko Hirata & Takako Arai* (http://vagabondpress.net/products/poems-of-hiromi-ito-toshiko-hirata-takako-arai-asia-pacific-9) (Vagabond Press, 2016), both translated by Jeffrey Angles.

**Jeffrey Angles** (1971–) is a professor of Japanese and translation at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo MI 49008. He is the author of *Writing the Love of Boys* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011) and *These Things Here and Now: Poetic Responses to the March 11, 2011 Disasters* (Josai University, 2016). He is also the award-winning translator of dozens of Japan’s most important modern Japanese authors and poets. His most recent translation project was an annotated, critical edition of the masterpiece of Japanese modernist literature, *The Book of the Dead* (https://www.amazon.com/dp/0816688109/?tag=theasiapacj0b-20), by Orikuchi Shinobu (University of Minnesota Press, 2017). He believes strongly in the role of translators as social activists, and much of his career has focused on the translation into English of socially engaged, feminist, or queer writers. He also writes poetry, mostly in Japanese. His collection of poetry *Watashi no hizuke henkō sen* (https://www.amazon.co.jp/dp/4783735409/?tag=theasiapacj0b-20) (My International Date Line) was published by Shichōsha in 2016.

**Notes**


4 Ibid.


8 *Kita no bungaku*, vol. 66 (May 2013). This journal is published by the Iwate Nippōsha, the publisher of the *Iwate Daily News* (*Iwate Nippō*).


10 In the city of Rikuzentakata, located next to Ōfunato, there is a mountain called Tamayama Kinzan, where gold ore was first discovered in ancient times. As a result, the surname “Kinno” (meaning “gold fields”) is common in the region.