

The Voice of FUKUSHIMA
A CRY FROM THE HEART

Ground Zero 01: Earthquake
Yotsukura Diaries 3/11 and Beyond

Yogan Baum

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Preface

Looking around me I sometimes feel like the only survivor of a shipwreck. I cling to a frail wooden plank and try not to think about the future, but then, there is nothing else to think about! All around I see water, nothing but water. A bottomless ocean stretches east and west. Then, there is fog – and through the mist I hear seagulls cry: there must be land somewhere near! Or are those gulls, I wonder in my dazed drifting, mocking me? Keeping a lazy eye on me, just in case? I've seen gulls in a feeding frenzy before, and don't want to remember the talons and beaks tearing into those long dead salmon that had no way to hide, no way to go in the shallow mouth of the Kido river north of here. Too close to the sea, too close to the monster. The tsunami? Yes, that, too.

All alone I feel at times: trying not to go under in a deluge of people trying to forget their danger. We were cast adrift and are now caught in a flood of lies and deceptions. Nobody has the courage, or the means, to cut through the sordid web we, people of Fukushima, are trapped in. Nobody opens their hearts to cry out to their gods: silence reigns supreme. It is almost five years after March 11 now, and the monster looming less than twenty miles north of here is just not mentioned where human voices are heard. It is the nameless fear, it is "that which must not be spoken of". It is taboo. Only engineers and politicians talk Dai-ichi.

Deep down we are all scared shitless. My elderly neighbors are. All our young mothers are. My wife is. I am. How could it be different when you know there are three molten-down cores of Uranium and Plutonium, weighing hundreds of tons, smoldering somewhere, in completely unknown state, underneath the burned-out ruins of Dai-ichi?

We live in fear, that is a fact. Things have cooled down, for sure, but the nagging remains. Looking around me I see Iwaki booming: disaster is good business, man! Not for the victims, though. What can a poor boy like me do, then? I started to write. Not to go mad I began to write down what I saw. What my wife of thirty years and I had to go through, just like countless fellow humans here. Animals fared even worse. I started to write down what I began to understand about this mess. The first year I was just stunned. After that I grew angry. Now I am almost resigned to my fate. Resigned to be a victim. Worse than that – to be a victim of victims! Big fish eat little fish, yes, but this one little fish at least is not willing to go down in silence. Will it do Mariko and me any good? I don't know. It is of secondary importance. Important is to speak out.

This is the chronicle of a manmade disaster. A disaster that was mercifully not the absolute catastrophe it could have been. A disaster unfolding over the decades. Chapter one: Chernobyl. Chapter two: Fukushima. Chapter three: Please select from a list of more than four hundred nuclear power plants. There is one near you, you may be sure.

If not – there may be one planned. Better stop it. Before it is too late.

1 We're not leaving!

It's been more than 30 years since I came to Fukushima. Am I to leave, now?

"We'll stay." That's what I said in an interview on national TV some time ago. The media were interested, very interested in Fukushima, for some time. For a very limited time. The time was early 2011. You will remember March 11, I hope?

"WE STAY!" - well, am I saying this with an undercurrent of hope these very words might open a way out of the desperate situation we are facing here in Fukushima? We being Mariko, my wife, and me. "Me"? Who am I, then? I wish I knew, I often feel. My wife calls me Giorgio at times. When she's in a good mood. So, why don't we stay with that? – Call me Giorgio.

We have a situation... Indeed, sir, we do. Of course a part of us wants to run from this blighted place, run as fast as can be. But...

"Why on earth are you going back there?" we were asked by all our friends and relatives in the old country when it gradually became clear that that was exactly what we were going to do in May 2011. "Are you crazy?!"

Why indeed? - We have no real alternative, my dear Louise. What else are we supposed to do? How could we make a living in the old country after 30 years abroad? How could I ask my wife to leave her family, how could we give up a life of thirty years as long as there was even a shred of hope? Back to Fukushima, it was.

2 Roots

After thirty years in one place a person grows roots that can not easily be cut. There is an attachment. Was our friend right? She regretted that our house had not been washed away by the tsunami. “It would have been so much easier for you!”

Fifty meters from here to the water lapping the village’s little fire station on March 11.

Right here, in Yotsukura, the tsunami was inexplicably low. Height about seven meters only. Average height for most of Iwaki City was even more than that. In some villages and towns nearby, both north and south of here the ocean came in much higher. We were spared. Nobody knows why. The ocean floor, maybe? A rocky outcrop north of Yotsukura port? Tsunamis have a will of their own.

The sea is only about 500 meters from our house, close enough to walk to the beach in flip-flops.

If the wind is right we hear the surf roar its mighty song; I remember one late night when it was so loud I actually put on my shoes to go and see what was happening outside. An overwhelming feeling of the ocean coming ashore. The funny thing was – as I got closer to the beach the surf sounded weaker until it almost faded out. A hill in the back of our house, the same hill I evacuated to on that Friday, March 11, amplified the sea sound and made it ring like a bell. Was this some kind of premonition, I wonder now.

We live in Yotsukura, city of Iwaki, in Fukushima Prefecture, Japan. Distance to Fukushima Dai-ichi, the stricken nuclear plant, just under twenty miles. Had evacuation been ordered and compensation been paid based on mile distances we should have been better off than we are now, sitting outside the thirty kilometers “evacuation recommended” zone. Twenty kilometers was obligatory. Everybody here fled the smoldering ruins of Dai-ichi, the American government advised its citizens to leave in case they were closer than sixty miles and the whole world was collapsing upon us in the days after the M 9.0 earthquake that shook northern Japan only to be followed by a tsunami that reached forty meters and killed almost 20,000. Some videos on YouTube are still unbearable to watch. In our own City of Iwaki, there were 347 deaths. In our home town, the fishing port of Yotsukura there were nineteen. One out of a hundred perished. We in Iwaki City were the lucky ones, compared to others.

Yotsukura. Our home town since October 1985. Coordinates: 37 degrees north, 141 degrees east.

You go far south from here, right off our favorite beach to hit Papua New Guinea after a long journey, then pass through the Gulf of Carpentaria to enter Australia, slide by Melbourne to exit the second driest continent on earth and sail the Roaring Forties before you go ashore on the driest: Antarctica. Where? At Cape Jules on King George V. Coast, during the early seventies location of the constantly moving Magnetic South Pole, and supposedly the windiest place on Earth. Go on through the frigid continent that once teemed with life and exit it to reach the vastness of the South Atlantic Ocean. Go steady and slice through Pernambuco, the easternmost province of Brazil, before you reach Greenland. Nothing but water and ice one more time until you go ashore again in eastern Yakutia, Russia. Your trip back home will take you very near Oymyakon, along with Verkhoyansk the coldest permanently inhabited place on earth. Both clocked the same temperature of -67.7 C and I’m glad it’s more temperate here. As we go south some more we finally pass through Sakhalin just off the Asian

continent before hitting Hokkaido and soon after that the main island of Japan, Honshu. Welcome back – what a trip.

Sailing east from Yotsukura will take you near Monterey in beautiful California! From there it is Las Vegas and miles and miles of North America until you end up in Chesapeake Bay to cross over into the Atlantic Ocean. The voyage will take you into good old Europe next, to Portugal. Landfall at Cabo Sao Vicente. It is the same rock the ancient Greeks called Ophiussa, snake country. I stood high on this south westernmost point of Europe in 1981 and had no idea I was on track for Yotsukura, Japan. Coincidentally it's there I heard the first words of Japanese in my life. They were: "Sagres! Naka naka!" and advertised a local beer. Ads were crazy even then. I lived and worked for several months in the nearby city of Lagos on exactly the latitude of here and now Yotsukura: 37.102 N. Much closer you won't get. We'll walk across southern Spain to reach the Mediterranean north of Almeria, scene of the 1966 crash of an American B 52 bomber that sent four atomic bombs type B28RI with a yield of about a megaton TNT each into the ground near, and the sea off, the village of Palomares. Again there is a strange coincidence to be observed: I walked down the eastern coast of Spain in 1981 with Rayun, best and truest of friends, and must have slept on exactly that beach. And only now did it dawn on me that maybe, just maybe, the cut in Rayun's front paw that never healed might have been a souvenir of a radioactive infection from Palomares. Impossible? My well travelled, four-legged companion died of cancer in 1985. Those lost warheads held more destructive power than all bombs and shells, including the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs, of World War II ever packed. Two of those Palomares bombs, splitting open, poisoned Spanish soil pretty permanently as Plutonium has a rather long half life. We won't look at this too closely as we don't want to get scared right now, and cross some more water to return to Africa, after a journey of a hundred thousand years, just north of old Carthage before reaching the Greek island of Naxos where our whole little family of four slept on the windy beach for one glorious week in the hot summer of 2003. Naxos makes those precise 37 degrees northern latitude a curious fourth for me. Does everybody have this kind of attachment to a certain corridor of Earth, I sometimes wonder? On through Turkey and the whole width of Asia: the tiniest slivers of Kurdish Syria and Iraq, then northern Iran, southern Turkmenistan, the Wakhan Corridor in northern Afghanistan, Tajikistan, possibly one or two mountains north of the Hunza Valley of Pakistan and on into China. Tall mountains, Khunjerab Pass at 4693 meters, and say a little prayer before you cross the Karakorum Highway. Do we skirt what once was Tibet? I would like to think so... but we can't stay, we move on.

Tasting saltwater again on the shore of Shandong Peninsula we are just an hour or two by plane from home: Incheon airport in Korea is on the line, too. Just a short trip across the Japanese Sea and the rugged and in winter extremely snowy mountains of Niigata Prefecture will take us back to what we still call home. Home away from home, but still home for the four of us: Mariko, me, May and Leon.

Is it preposterous to place oneself in the center of such a world-spanning net of lines?

Probably so, but, on the other hand, it's indicative of the spider's web we are caught in. Just like everybody who is not a wandering monk without a home other than his faith. Looking down between my feet, trying to imagine where the corium of exploded reactors 1, 2, and 3 might resurface after burning its way through crust, mantle and core and mantle and crust one more time, a China Syndrome, a nightmare, come true, I see and fear the cold, deep South Atlantic off the mouth of the Rio de la Plata.

We found our little house here in September 1986: and how happy we have been.

Leon, our son, who demanded this chronicle of me, 'write things down before Fukushima will be forgotten', was not even born. Our daughter May, who, incidentally had been pestering me even before

to ‘start writing things down!’ was an adventurous toddler of ten months when we moved in, October 1st. Actually it was mainly because of her that we wanted out of our previous little apartment: the stairs up there were dangerously steep, practically a ladder – and little May loved them. We feared them, and when we were offered a house, “a real, traditional house, although it might be a little old...” we were interested. Yuko, the singer, a participant of one of my classes at the time, who in her turn happened to teach a merry chorus group of elderly ladies, took us to Yotsukura one fine September day. The landlord’s wife, dear Mrs. Aoki was expecting us and showed us our future home of almost 30 years. A little dark, we felt, and way too spacious for our still incomplete family of three. What misconceptions!

The old house, it must be close to a hundred years old, sits surrounded by shrubs, trees, a lawn that was just a stretch of dirt at the time, and a vegetable plot large enough to supply the best veggies you can imagine: once upon a time. We even tried to raise some hens for their eggs only to have had them disappear one by one. A fox? We never found out. The house itself needed some fresh paint and some scrubbing and oiling of its posts and beams to shine as probably never before. Japanese houses are built and forgotten. There is no DIY here and nobody would have walls painted or the woodwork cleaned! Still, houses like ours were built to last a lifetime. These days houses are built to last for no more than 30 years, they sometimes even have a 30-year-warranty, and are made of all kinds composite materials, that is to say, of tacky tacky. Little boxes, on the hillside. “Little boxes”: would you know Pete Seeger? “And they all are – just the same.”

You see, I am partial to a simple style of living, and I hate the rat race of “modern life” with its silly trappings. Plus, in singing the beauty of our old house I try to keep it alive as we were recently given notice: after thirty years here in these whitewashed clay walls with their lovely supporting cedar-wood frame the market, and circumstances, are forcing us out.

Now, here is the place to clarify something. This report was originally written in the space of two months, starting New Year’s Day 2012. I sat in front of my keyboard for days on end, in a frenzy of remembering. This came about only after both our children had urged me to start writing. I wrote a manuscript in a state of uncertainty, what with three reactors full of molten nuclear fuel in our backyard, 33 kilometers, about twenty miles distance to hell. “Cold Shutdown!” had been declared a month earlier but nobody could be fooled by that. Everybody here was aware of the government’s agenda, and everybody here had their suitcases packed. You don’t get fooled twice that easily. The highest concentration of nuclear reactors on this planet was and is way too close for comfort. Fukushima Dai-ichi had six working reactors, Dai-ni, ten kilometers closer, four. Two more were planned at Dai-ichi, plus an additional new plant a little up the coast. Think of the more than ten thousand fuel rods in cooling tanks and you have over fourteen thousand fuel rods in Dai-ichi alone, all ready to run wild if not constantly cooled. Add the thousands in Dai-ni to gain a more complete picture. March 11 brought the world much, much closer to unspeakable horrors than most people realize. Only by a certain amount of good luck, the courage of some good men and the grace of the gods, as former Prime Minister Naoto Kan said in a recent speech, were we saved.

To which I would like to add: more than anybody else this self effacing, truly honorable Naoto Kan himself saved his own country from ruin, and the whole world from catastrophe. We were saved by the courage of two men, the other being plant manager Masao Yoshida. These two practically conspired to save us. The TEPCO management, on the other hand, was and is ridiculously inept. Criminals they are, moreover, as will become clear during the course of the trials to come. Friends in high places – yes. But: the truth will out.

Kan’s finest hour came the night of March 15. Panicked TEPCO were down on their knees, as Kan and others remember, (this has been recorded, although some evidence has been destroyed, it seems) begging him for the permission to withdraw from Dai-ichi. Withdraw completely. Kan was not to be

bent: for that one time in his life he stood his ground in the face of overwhelming adversity and ordered TEPCO to continue cooling efforts. This 2:00 a.m. shouting match made the difference. While Japan slept – the balance swung in humanity's favor and complete disaster was averted through one man's courage, and another man's sense of duty. Yoshida testified he felt he was sure to die, but even though, he did not give up his post. Through his own personal example he got enough men to stay inside the ruined plant, literally crawling in the dark, to somehow save us all. These men, plus two or three scores of firefighters from Tokyo, were the legendary Fukushima Fifty. Legendary for several reasons, the main one being their number is pure invention. Because it rhymes so nicely, probably. That double "F" was just too attractive to some smart media savvy person, and it stuck. For a while. Well, fact is there were courageous men who did not give in to their fear. We owe them very much, those men and their Prime Minister. We are forever in their debt.

Confusion reigned during these days, and only after weeks and weeks the hard hit northeast of Japan gradually came to its senses, and gradually started to recover from the triple hit of an M 9.0 earthquake, the ensuing tsunami and the explosions at Dai-ichi. It's amazing how hard Japan worked to recover. We were in shock for so much longer, "we" being the people in the vicinity of Dai-ichi.

On New Year's Day, January 1st of 2012, I began to write down what I had experienced in 2011, warts and all, and the meandering course of those memories, as I reread them now to distil an English version out of this bubbling cauldron of fear and confusion, seems to adequately convey my state of mind at the time of writing. Getting down on my knees the Japanese way at the traditional, low desk I inherited from our landlord (nobody but us wanted to keep old stuff like that when her house was torn down after Mrs. Aoki's death in 2003 and all the furniture given away) helped me to go back to mental near normal. Near the "New Normal", which I still can't accept. I hate it, this new normal. It doesn't give us space to breathe. We are traumatized, to various degrees. Mariko seems to cope better, or maybe she just feels more responsible for her family than I do. They say a mother has supernatural strength at times, and I believe it's true. Mothers are the strong ones for sure, but they are also the most vulnerable. When my first report finally appeared in print, six months ago, I showed it to some young mothers I know – and was stunned by their reaction to my proud achievement: silence. Fearful silence. I understood, and promised myself to never again open a wound that hasn't healed at all. These brave hearts just don't deserve to be confronted needlessly with their worst nightmare.

I can't help them. Then, why do I write this at all? It surely must be more than the ramblings of an old man. Indeed there is a purpose to it! A dual purpose. First, admittedly, it is a therapy for myself. Half a lifetime ago it was an old tenor sax that saved me – this time around it is words. I had absolutely no life, no sense of direction left in me when I started typing on that New Year's day. Words help. I have hardly anyone to talk to, alone in a foreign culture, but I do need to share my thoughts just as everybody else. "Gentle reader, abide with me", someone from a more civilized age might have put it: a cry for attention I can't very well express in my own words.

Also, I would like to think it is important for others to learn a little about what happens to people when their world falls apart. Mariko and I lived through a historic event that changed our lives. We experienced not only a natural disaster but a manmade one as well. A tragedy in the Greek sense: consequences arising from some fatal initial flaw. After Dai-ichi was built it was just a question of time before it would be hit by a tsunami. Engineers calculate in probabilities; their bet was called. Our coast here has destructive tsunamis every couple of hundred years – who would have thought...? Dai-ichi was a catastrophe waiting to happen! ALL nuclear power plants are. It is complete madness to neglect the slight probability of a mishap if this mishap has the potential to poison half the planet, to kill thousands outright, to ruin a country. It is insane – but is routinely done worldwide. The risk can't be calculated, and that is exactly why no insurance company anywhere is willing to cover nuclear power

plants. Governments build them, maintain and hide them for their own purposes, usually to be near stuff that can be converted to weapon grade material.

Visions of a nuclear free world? Didn't someone get a Nobel for just this type of visual impairment? Well, that was years ago. Nuclear power is still with us, a backdoor to bombs, and a threat to each and every person on this lovely green planet, except maybe those lucky guys down under. Nuclear power is recently even being touted as mankind's secret weapon to fight global warming. I know. I also know the kind of people that do the touting. I have gotten to know them all too well, and I know they lie. Everybody knows they lie; too often have they got caught red-handed. Fact, pure and simple. Not in this country only, nuclear breeds lies and deception everywhere, just look around you. Now here is one thing I realized about these people, these capable engineers and clever managers: I came to understand they lie to themselves. They are trapped in their own minds, in their own false sense of security. They really believe if an event has a probability of one in ten thousand it won't occur. This is their rational, and this is how they build nuclear power plants. Plants that function to near perfection: a complete failure once every ten thousand years. This, however, translates into a catastrophe every 25 years if there are 400 plants around. Am I wrong? There are, incidentally. 400 and then some. Easy arithmetics – the next meltdown isn't due before 2036. Reassuring?

One recent beautiful September day we took a visitor to the town of Futaba. The road up there is open again. Drivers are advised to keep their car-windows closed, no bikes are allowed, and just before entering Futaba town we saw a familiar silhouette looming through the trees on the far side of some rice fields. Part of Dai-ichi, the monster. The building that houses reactor 4. It was surrounded by huge cranes and made us feel really, really uncomfortable as we listened to the hectic clicking of our friend's Geiger counter. No more than 4.5 microsieverts per hour, but still quite disconcerting!

Futaba has become famous for a huge banner-like signboard spanning its main street.

Advertising a forgotten glory it says something like: "Nuclear power – towards a bright future" and was never once intended to be gaped at the way it is eyed now. The pretty slogan was thought up forty years ago by a little school boy. Now this schoolboy is wiser and asks the passing motorists in bold, red letters, both Japanese and English, not to forget. "REMEMBER OUR FOLLY!"

There are things to be learned from the follies of the past. Those who do not learn are condemned to repeat their mistakes, or so I've heard. Without pain there is no wisdom. Another commonplace, but another deep truth as well. We here, in this our town so close to Dai-ichi will not forget. Let me try and share our fear, and our newly found wisdom.

The old schoolboy from Futaba, Yuji Onuma is his name, would agree with this, I believe.

We are victims. Have been victims for more than four years now: and there is no end to the cascading trouble. Strangely enough, our family are now victims of the second order. We are victims of victims...

Iwaki has become a boomtown. How so? Upwards of a hundred thousand evacuees still live in temporary housing, many of those here in our neighborhood. As they received compensation for their lost homes, however inadequate compensation in many cases, they swamped the market and have driven prices up at an all Japan maximum rate. Prices for real estate have doubled, apartments are unaffordable and the type of house we love is hardly there any more at all. The Japanese love new things, houses included, and after the earthquake many homeowners jumped at the chance the City of Iwaki offered them: cost free demolition. Depending on the amount of damage a house had sustained, owners, and even tenants were given financial aid to either repair a house classified as 'seriously damaged' or tear down the structure if it was 'severely damaged'.

The former gave Mariko and me free repairs worth 4000 dollars, the latter is worth about 15,000 dollars. (All “dollars” USD) Too attractive to too many owners. The wreckers had the time of their lives, seven hundred houses went down in Yotsukura alone. The tsunami took a few dozen only.

We had some badly needed repairs done and were happy to have given this beautiful old place something back, we felt, for the hospitality it gave us over the last twenty-eight years.

When we were given notice, though, in 2014, Mariko didn’t want to fight the new owners, children of our original landlord couple. We “signed” an agreement to leave on good terms. Signed of course means that we affixed our registered seal to the document. A simple wooden rubber-stamp, but as it is officially registered – it is absolutely binding. For us, there is no way now to stay in this simple home we love so much. I am squatting on tatami mats in front of my low desk – a year from now the wind will blow sand across the deserted but pricey piece of real estate that was shelter and more to generations for a hundred years.

This house is one of the last relics of Sumitomo Cement’s company housing in Yotsukura still standing! Studying the 1984 Landsat photos of “Fukushima from Space” I found in a gorgeous book Mariko’s father gave me I see the whole complex as it was when we moved here. Narrow streets, no supermarket, no oversized parking, no nearby funeral home yet: affordable housing for the living. For about twenty low-income families: the rich did not live here. Our home looks good from space.

It used to be one of the better houses, the second best, in fact: a vice president once lived here. That’s why we have five rooms; a kitchen, an indoor bathroom, two tiny toilets and the numerous corridors not counted. Corridors half surround the house and provide insulation in winter. In summer they keep the infernal heat out. We don’t have air conditioning. For the cold season we have two portable little stoves and the traditional “kotatsu”, an electric version of the charcoal brazier. Those never warm a house properly, and so, for months, we live inside a giant refrigerator. Still we never wanted to move. There is a garden surrounding the L-shaped house with its roof leaking and its windows never properly closing, there are old trees and new flowers and memories of laughing children.

Mariko was heartbroken when she was first rudely told to consider leaving, and so was I. That was almost ten months ago and we still can’t believe what’s happening. It’s a bad dream inside a bad dream. And, there is no awaking. Only a miracle... Do I believe in miracles? YES! (- Don’t you?)

It’s a miracle I am here, alive and reasonably well, to tell my story! By rights all of Tohoku, that is, Northern Japan, should be a radioactive wasteland: but we are still here, and I am ready to tell my tale. Tempered after four years of no really, really bad news? A little.

Let the story begin on the morning of March 11, 2011. It was a beautiful morning, I remember perfectly well. March here is a month of easily changing weather. The frost of February is gone, and you are not unhappy to find the winter constellation of Orion disappearing into the west: but, it is still chilly. There’s a certain westerly cold wind, “first of spring”, that comes howling over the hills in March just as to let you know the cherry blossom is still some weeks away. March is the time for Mariko, or better say WAS the time, to get busy in her garden. She used to grow all kinds of vegetables in the plot behind our house. Large enough to feed a family it was never gardened to perfection but gave us plenty of first class organic food over the years. As she is an early riser she may have done some early gardening before we had a good breakfast together that day. Our breakfasts are gorgeous: she bakes bread, and nothing beats that. Friends sold us a little gas fired oven more than twenty years ago and this little, rusty thing works wonderfully. Good ovens are a rarity here in this country of non-bakers: rice just can’t be made into cakes or bread. That scent of fresh bread! Writing this very

sentence I remember how I saw the bowl filled with dough, whole meal wheat and rye, ready to rise earlier today – and am looking forward very much to tonight's kitchen warmth and sweet smells. Fresh bread! There's nothing better in the world. Of course, as it is rye bread, it needs to be one or two days old to be really, really good.

After breakfast I sat in the kitchen and read: I used to be a voracious reader. All kinds of books, novels, science, history: lately more and more politics. Once you wake up to certain things it is hard to go back to sleep again, and that's where politics come in. Not a pleasure. What I read on that blessed morning, the sun high and promising in the air, with my wife out on a trip to a new art gallery? I remember perfectly. I was reading two books. One, "Heat. How to Stop the Planet from Burning" by George Montbiot, the other "The Revenge of Gaia" by James Lovelock. Both courtesy of our city library, 5th floor – a place that was only a couple of hours away from a deluge of books. Fifty thousand volumes scattered across the floor! It took them weeks to sort out the mess and nobody complained when I duly returned the checked out Montbiot and Lovelock, a little late. Two months later, that is.

Fully agreeing with George Montbiot about the dangers humanity faces in consequence of our own silly insistence on a "civilized" lifestyle that is too insane to be seriously considered at all I was fired up with good intentions and ideas about saving energy and reducing waste. We do try to lead simple lives, Mariko and me, and try not to fall for all the crap that is constantly being touted to all of us, whether we live in Japan or in India or in Brazil. Nobody needs SUVs or shopping trips by air. Nobody needs all those all night lit up cities and towns. What a shame most children have never seen a sky 'ringing with the constellations of the stars'. Soon our children, huddling in their underground shelters, will read, in old books, about the Greenland icecap, and about sea ice and all those strange phenomena we take for granted. If we don't act soon – this will happen. There is no way to stop climate change, there are ways though to slow it and avert the worst. If we act fast.

James Lovelock, the first modern scientist to conceive of our planet as a living being, is so worried about the changes Earth faces that he sees practically no way to avoid a catastrophic future. It is all too late, he says. What made me sit up in my chair, however, on that morning, was his endorsement of nuclear power as the only reasonable way to slow global warming. "I would gladly set up a nuclear reactor in my own backyard," he wrote and I felt a gut reaction of "this just can't be true!" and threw the book on the old table in front of me. Salvaged, that one, as so much of our interior, from our landlord's doomed house.

I have been against nuclear power all my life. It is a tragic mistake of ours to try and get "unlimited energy – for free!!!" as the new, promised land was advertised to us in the fifties and sixties. There is no such thing as a free lunch, they say, and in Japan it is said that nothing is as expensive as things offered for free. Beware! The Trojans should never have accepted the beautiful wooden horse the departing Greeks left behind – we know that by now, and still. And still we are so willing to believe in the most incredible nonsense, if only it suits us. When I was a child I read about flying cars and nuclear powered vacuum cleaners and was happy. Reality is different, as we learned. But, have we stopped daydreaming?

Well, unfortunately, no, we have not learned the lesson at all, I have to say five years after Fukushima. The wheels have not even slowed down. We are on a runaway train and all we ask for is more speed? Can it be true? Pinch me, someone, pinch me hard – I must surly be imagining things!

Going back to that sunny morning so full of hope and full of worries I see my wife return and me pack my books away. She had had a good time with the painter friend of hers who loved seascapes and for that reason had moved to Yotsukura some years ago. What a life that lady has had! Illegitimate niece of Big Man Kimura – three time governor of Fukushima Prefecture in the late sixties, the man who

brought 'nuclear' here. He profited mightily, as they all have, and when years later embroiled in a scandal about black money had to resign and was actually tried and sentenced. The first provincial governor to suffer such an indignation. A tragic mistake somewhere, he is forgotten now, but: as insignificant as Yotsukura is, history was made here. Kimura was born here and lived here. His family's clinic (he, too, was a medical doctor) still prospers a three minute's walk from here. There is an ugly, forlorn statue of his in a neglected spot at the entrance to the old people's home he owned – and this good man, as the inscription calls him without giving too many details, actually lived in the house our family has lived in for 29 years now. He sat right here in this room, and looked out at the same trees I see – for a time. He had his own house rebuilt, it's just a stone's throw from here, and as this one must have been vacant at the time, Morie Kimura found it very convenient to move here for a while. He did some of his dirty dealings in the very room I now kneel and write these sad pages in! I just couldn't believe it when I heard our landlady mention this in passing! To clarify, though: it was not Kimura who brought me down on my knees. Not quite. Even if I hold him, to a certain degree, responsible for the disaster called 'Fukushima Dai-ichi' I defiantly say, and quote a line: "I'm still standing!" No, it wasn't Kimura. It was our good old landlord, Mr. Aoki, whose low desk I inherited. My computer with the keyboard I'm hammering this out on sits on his low traditional Japanese desk, and it's only the desk that makes me get down on my knees each time I get down to this sorry business of trying to make myself, and all of forgotten Fukushima, heard. It is not an easy job, this one. Well, I came to understand something about Japan: this is no country for beginners! So I try and try. I am not easily discouraged.

Morie Kimura was a man whose life spanned the century. Born in 1900, dead in 1996. Important and eminently respected in his time. A villain and a sentenced criminal. Anyway, his fortune (they caught him with some hard to explain three billion Yen, as is common local knowledge, although I can't find confirmation for that figure. A hundred million dollars in today's money. Doesn't sound unreasonable given the fact a nuclear power plant used to take about five hundred million dollars in assorted monies to prepare the grounds: 'nemawashi' is the old Japanese gardener's word for it.) – his fortune didn't expand to Mariko's friend who was in love with an American and followed this man to live overseas in absolute poverty for years before coming back with her two sons to settle and paint. What an irony her uncle, even from his grave, didn't allow her to live out her life here! She fled the day after the earthquake, like so many of us, and never came back. Occasionally my wife gets a wistful call from the island of Shikoku, a thousand kilometers away, where she is now.

3 Premonitions?

Neither my wife nor I felt anything like the catastrophe of March 2011 approaching. “Beware the ideof March”? Well, we didn’t see it coming. There were no elephants heading for safe hills as reported from Thailand in 2004, no snakes leaving their holes as told from China in 2008, and no ants going crazy as Isabel Allende describes it in her novel “The House of the Spirits”. What we did see, however, was a bird everyone in Japan knows but nobody ever sees. It is called “uguisu” which is sometimes translated as ‘the Japanese nightingale’ which is of course totally fanciful. It is the bird of approaching spring and dearly beloved by children and adults alike. Even someone who could hardly tell a sparrow from a swallow knows and loves the melodic call of this gentle harbinger of spring. First, in early March, the uguissu’s plaintive call is only a timid one-note affair, “it still has to practice!” before later the fully resounding call for a mate can be heard all through the day, right up to early summer. This bird is never seen – but, there it was ‘practicing’ and hopping up and down in a still leafless shrub right behind our little pond. The very pond our son almost drowned in when he was two – fortunately grandma was quick enough to pull him out in time! A pond where some aged fish still live: we were given three crucian carps by departing neighbors more than twenty years ago, and grandma contributed small catfish-like creatures, what’s their name now, loaches, I think, and even now some of them in that pond survive to keep each other company. In spring the sole remaining carp basks in the sun at times – I am happy to see it each April or May, the yellow blossoms of an unruly *Kerria Japonica* mirrored in the smooth surface of our tiny pond. The loaches, caught in her own rice field by grandma as a gift for Leon, never surface. We had other fish, too, goldfish the children scooped up at summer festivals in any one of the numerous traditional affairs around shrines and holidays of yore...

Those goldfish disappeared mysteriously, though. Was it our cats? Or was it herons? There is plenty of water around, and there are herons. You see beautiful, snow white egrets in the rice fields, also hear their harsh cry when they fly at night: this cry was enigmatic to me for a long time until I actually saw white, large birds crossing the stars one night and finally understood. There are also grey or blue herons staring philosophically across the waters, just yesterday we saw several at the river waiting for a fish the right size, no, certainly not the salmon we saw, to come near enough for a quick dip of the large bill, and it was one of those patient philosophers that startled us five years ago. Just two or three days before the quake it stood for some minutes reflecting over the pond before it felt spotted by us, or something. It spread its huge wings and actually perched on our roof for some seconds before taking off majestically to soar into a large pine on the nearby temple-hill. The very pine I would be standing under, waiting for the tsunami to roll in, only three days later!

Was this an oracle? Didn’t the Romans and many other of the Ancients observe bird flights in order to understand what fate held in store for them? Well, what would they have concluded?

More birds! A wedge of swans on their way back to the wide open spaces of Siberia! These swans winter here, there are spots on the Natsugawa river famous for these annual gatherings and Iwaki kindergartens take their charges there to have them watch the birds. They are fed, too, by their many visitors, but also forage on the fallow fields near the river. In March you can hear them trumpet a distant farewell as they sail over the blue skies, and that is exactly what had Mariko and me race out of the house on March 10th, I know the date because I wrote down a few lines about them, to wave after the beautiful white exiles on their way back home. I myself am an outsider in this country, so could

THAT be why I compared my fate to those of the swans? Exile, literally – was just around the corner for us. Temporary exile, as we are back, but, yes.

In a way our exile is never ending as our estrangement continues until today. It even got worse over time, helplessly enduring the miseries “Fukushima” brought over us. I saw the future when I jotted down these few rhymed lines about life in banishment.

In retrospect, then, some more coincidences seem strange. The first month of the year brought death to a good friend’s husband in Tokyo, and that could have been the reason for me to start ordering my affairs. I wrote a will, not that I have much, but even so. I wrote down all the passwords and whatever information my wife or our children might need in case of my sudden demise, and I even got rid of some cash I had stashed like so many people here in Japan do. Why entrust your hard earned money to a bank you don’t really trust at all after the “Lehman Shock”, as it is called here, the ongoing financial crisis of 2008, especially as it won’t give you any interest other than a few ridiculous pennies and the occasional box of gift tissue paper? I read that these under-the-mattress cash reserves in Japan amount to 800 billion dollars, which would be 6500 dollars per person – well, I didn’t have riches, but in Japan many times a teacher like me is paid in cash, and over time this adds up. In Japan cash is king indeed, no one ever uses credit cards very much. Fortunately we still had cash when all the banks were closed that March! This is another lesson we learned about civilized life: never be without cash! Oh, we were going to learn a lot in the space of a few days.

I was sick in bed with a fever in February and round and round in my head wheeled the wildest plans for renovations of our European house! I was sick and tired of my own imagination but completely unable to stop that merry-go-round in my brain till I finally managed to get off somehow. I was going to build a shelter. Underneath the two room apartment, kitchen plus bedroom (including even a shower and space for a toilet) we had made for ourselves just three years before, I was going to dig. I would dig deep enough to be safe, safe from what I didn’t know. This reflected the uncertainty of the world during and after the banking crisis, I now think. I would also dig a secret escape tunnel to reach a cave I was going excavate overlooking the nearby little stream. There, I would have an iron bathtub with cold well water in the summer – and a roaring fire under the tub in winter. A bit like a Japanese outdoor hot spring.

What happiness to comfortably sit in hot water and watch the silent snowflakes drift by!

Well, I overcame my fever and the digging never got started: although I am glad we had our little apartment. It proved to be just what we needed after fleeing Japan in March 2011.

On the almost grotesque side of forebodings there are some more things to set down. One – we watched the old chestnut of “China Syndrome” without too much sympathy for that dated Hollywood production just a few days before IT HAPPENED right in our backyard, and, two – we bought a season pass for our favorite “onsen” spa. Our favorite onsen is called “Tenji Misaki” and just reopened to the general public last month. What took it so long? Location, my dear, location! Tenji Misaki is situated on one of the numerous bluffs overlooking the Kido River, whose salmon run attracts anglers for the first time in five years right now, at the time of writing, fall of 2015, and it is way too close to Dai-ichi. It is in the town of Naraha, formerly home to seven thousand people who still prefer to live elsewhere even after the evacuation order was lifted recently, and at present ‘home’ to millions of huge, ugly black bags that contain radioactive debris. These diligently numbered but in the end countless bags are neatly stockpiled in hundreds of dumps, but, I move too fast, we’re still busy with the season pass Mariko and I bought and never needed.

My wife and I loved Tenji Misaki and went there at least once a month each winter. We loved to look out over the deep blue sea, right out of the outdoor pool, and on our penultimate visit, in February, we

saw a full moon rise over the waters. It was huge, and if not for the glare of the outdoor lighting it could have been superb. Well, in Japan you learn to sometimes see the things not the way they are – but the way they should be, or could be, which is part of the ‘art of living’, and so, let’s be content with a moon that was glared at, if rather fecklessly. The next and last time we went to Tenji Misaki, high above the Kido River (and isn’t it a great pity that Dai-ichi could have been serenely overlooking the ocean, too, had not TEPCO decided to bring it down to near sea level? The bottom line... seemed to demand closeness to cooling seawater, so, well, they hacked 25 meters off the cliff to make Dai-ichi more profitable, and, well, a little vulnerable) we had a good laugh that’s not very funny at all in hindsight. We drove back down the slope to enter a long stretch of lantern lined road leading up to the N 6, ‘National Road 6’, that would take us straight back to Yotsukura.

Now, here’s a short history lesson I am going to torture you with. Must be the teacher in me! I would like you to understand a little better about “Tohoku” to give you a feeling for the situation Fukushima finds itself in. In the greater context of the Japanese nation’s welfare, Tohoku doesn’t count so very much, unfortunately. It is rural, it is beautiful, and it is not essential to “Japan”. In Japan, everything is top down, and people in the north are pretty much at the bottom. The capital, Tokyo, is top – all the rest is second rate.

Tohoku means “North-East”, and that’s where we are. For long centuries the domain of the fledgling Japanese Empire ended right here, in Iwaki. Present day Iwaki itself is a newly created administrative entity, though it does have old roots. It was formerly ruled by, you guessed it, the Iwaki clan. Before that, from about 800 AD, it functioned as a border post to keep the ever dangerous Ainu and the hairy ‘Emishi’ out. Japan as a monolithic bloc of one race, one nation is a myth. Japan was settled relatively late, around 40,000 years ago. 14,000 years ago the ‘Yayoi’ people came in through the Korean peninsula, bringing pottery techniques and farming. The original people of the north, the ‘Jomon’, were quite different in build and language from the ever on-pressing southerners: who are the Japanese of today. These are closer related to Koreans and Chinese. Emishi, or Ainu (it’s hard to differentiate), on the other hand are of Siberian descent. They were hunters. They were stocky, hairy, lived close to nature and venerated the bear. They look a little bearish, too, and, by God: what gorgeous flowing beards they had! Visible in old photographs only... for almost a century after having shaved those beards they rather hopelessly try to blend in. At long last, only two years ago, they were officially recognized as a national minority after decades of struggle, thus creating a tiny crack in the former monolith of Japan. A monolith of propaganda only, of course, but a myth that made the majority feel special.

And, made everybody else a little inferior. How the Ainu suffered! I saw it on my bike trip to Hokkaido, in that glorious summer of 1984, without understanding it in the least. How they hated to be sitting there on show, in full tourist view, wearing their traditional best to carve silly wooden bears for the gawking ‘mainland’ tourists. I was positively shocked to feel such a hatred, such a deep resentment as theirs. I had until then seen nothing but smiles in this beautiful country. The country of a new found love! What on Earth was wrong with those people!?

An original proto-Japanese culture developed in the densely populated southwest of the archipelago, but there always was an influx of mainland people, crafts and thought. Notably Buddhism, of course. From the high time of the Nara period, 1200 years ago, China has been an inspiration, and occasionally, an adversary, to these islands. Nara is located far to the southwest, and not before Tokyo, then called Edo, was made capital of the Shogunate in 1603 did the northern provinces matter much to the rulers of fledgling Japan. Over those largely peaceful centuries, thanks to the ‘divine winds’ of the typhoon season, two Mongol invasions of Kublai Khan’s failed. Japan slowly came into being. A core Japan expanded from the lands of ‘Yamato’ near Nara to finally encompass the three islands of

Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu. In the process the northern Ainu were pushed back further and further. The name of Japan's holy mountain, "Fuji" is Ainu, so we know they once lived in all of Tohoku at least, until they were reduced to a miserable fringe existence in Hokkaido. The northern island of Hokkaido was formally made part of Japan in quite recent times only, after a struggle, during the Meiji Restoration that finally established modern Japan on all of its four main islands. Nobody counts the others. There are over 430 inhabited ones as well as more than 6000 uninhabited rocks: some of which are bitterly contested. Ask the Chinese, or the Koreans. Or the Russians. On a more positive note: new ones appear out of the blue! The deep blue waters of the Pacific Ocean. They are volcanic and very ugly at first: but the potential, my friend! Think Mauna Loa, think Mauna Kea. The youngest of those is called Nishinoshima, and is growing at a fast clip.

Another recent addition to the nation are the islands of Okinawa Prefecture: the ancient kingdom of the Ryū Kyū was officially made Japan only in 1879. Before that it had been a stepping stone for both Chinese and Japanese on their way to Southeast Asia, its population mixed but predominantly Chinese as it was under Chinese control until 1609. Okinawa suffered cruelly during the 1945 battle that killed a quarter of its people, in addition to all the soldiers. These days it is contested again as the central government continues to regard Okinawa as a bulwark, and a bone the Americans have to be thrown to keep them happy, and in defense of Tokyo. The people of Okinawa don't like that too much! There is a constant struggle about the American bases on the islands, right now escalating daily.

The governor of Okinawa, Mr. Onaga, revoked a permit to finally, finally relocate the American air base of Futenma to Henoko and so antagonized the central government greatly. I love him for that. Nobody else has the guts to stand up to the bullies in Tokyo! I wish we in Fukushima had someone like Mr. Onaga to take on those who rule the land!

The end of this, unfortunately not very entertaining interlude brings us back to our nice, relaxed drive along the straight road out of Tenji Misaki with its tacky faux chinois lanterns left and right, and its silly slogans strung up on corresponding poles left and right the street. I wonder if they're still there? They exhorted us to "Make Fukushima Famous". Seeing that, I could not help wisecracking a joke I should have killed before it reached my lips. I just couldn't help it. "Fukushima? Famous? What could we possibly be famous for – except for those bloody nuclear power plants?" Which, of course, implied a major accident. Accident, my foot, though! "Man made" is what the official report of 2012 called the disaster. No consequences were drawn so far. "Accident", as the official, the NHK news, call it? Never. NEVER!

We rode back in silence, gliding down Route 6, few red lights and little traffic on that stretch of road north of Iwaki, a no man's land even before 2011.

To someone travelling north from Tokyo even these days, what am I saying, I mean before March 11, Iwaki must have felt like the last outpost of civilization before entering the wilderness. On a medieval map the region north of Iwaki would have the "hic sunt leones" warning written with great skill across the whole area between Iwaki and Sendai. "This is where lions are", unknown dangers: and how utterly correct that imagined prescient warning reads now. Tread with care. Wear a helmet. "Don't stop your engines, don't roll your windows down!" is what the intrepid traveler is told in 2015 as he approaches Dai-ichi. "Don't look! You're fine. Keep your eyes closed and the green-eyed monster won't do you no harm. Drive on. It is nothing."

Now, I have lived in Yotsukura for almost thirty years, and there's just one village, the devastated Hisanohama to pass through before you enter a tunnel, and still another one, and come out in quite a different world.

A dreary place. I vividly remember my first impression when I rode my Honda 125 CB up that coast on

my way to Hokkaido in the summer of 1984. It seemed to take me forever to go through this Hades of sorts, this land of shadows. Yes, even then I felt some strange gloom brooding over that netherworld north of the tunnels. I saw a fancifully decorated bridge of some kind to my right, was duly attracted and crossed it only to reach a barred and heavily guarded gate a few hundred meters later: I had been on an access road, and was now at the gate to Fukushima Dai-ni. I turned my bike around, what a strange moment it had been, and rode on. I passed Dai-ichi minutes later without even noticing it, tucked away as it is. That long stretch of coast is a quiet area indeed. Very well chosen for the largest concentration of miserable nuclear reactors on the planet! Out of sight, out of mind? Famously machine-translated as the “Invisible Lunatic”? Let’s count again. Dai-ichi: six, with advanced planning for two more. Dai-ni: four. Dai-san: planned to be built. Namie-Odaka: one, to be built from 2017, but application now withdrawn. To be repeated: the largest number of brooding and breeding monsters on the planet, and all too close for comfort.

Which is what I told a newcomer to Yotsukura, another of those foreigners. He phoned me out of the blue to ask me about life here, and I told him things about our then 25 years in Yotsukura.

That was in February, 2011. He considered buying a house, “a real opportunity!” close to the sea. I warned him the salty air might damage his pet, a Harley Davidson, “and, of course, you are in danger should there be a tsunami... plus, you have all the nuclear garbage just round the corner!” These are the words of warning I gave him, trying to paint a true picture of pros and cons. We got together over a bottle of red after that once, and I still don’t know what made me say these things. A tsunami HERE? In Iwaki? Unheard of!

The local wisdom was, “There are no big earthquakes here”. No known fault lines near! Tsunamis occurred in other places, everyone knew the coast north of Sendai with its fjords and inlets was in constant danger of tsunamis, but – Iwaki? No.

Local wisdom unfortunately doesn’t reach back twelve hundred years in this part of the world! Just around the time of the 2011 quake a geologist named Masanobu Shishikura had completed a survey showing the extent of a year 869 tsunami – which proved to tally exactly with the damage done by the 2011 tsunami. He had had a date with the Fukushima prefectural government to present his findings, but that appointment was for March, 23rd. “If only...” all over again. There are cycles to earthquakes. Some are known, others are so long term geologists are required to spot them. One example for this is the cataclysmic event that destroyed Lisbon, Portugal, in 1755. No one-time event, it seems – every thousand years or so huge quakes occur in the area, just as is the case in our region. Japan is well acquainted with earthquakes, of course, and the seventy-year-cycle of Kanto quakes is feared and prepared for as well as possible, I hope. The next very, very big thing expected to happen is still farther to the south: the Nankai quake will send giant tsunamis up and down Japan it is feared. In its reach: the nuclear power plant of Hamaoka. Then prime minister Naoto Kan ordered it shut in 2011 – but, it is alive and kicking, thanks to Kan’s ouster and the change in government that followed. It is ‘protected’ by a seawall of 22 meters in height. Is it just a nagging thought of mine that a 22 meter high wall poses a hell of a lot of surface for a really big tsunami to crash into? Let’s see. It is 1600 meters long, built at a cost of 1.5 billion dollars, by the way, which gives us 33,500 square meters. A tsunami of 20 meters smashing into it would exert a million tons of pressure, rule of thumb. No problem? No problem. The engineers have figured it out. How about the earthquake, then? The one to cause the tsunami, yes, exactly that one: suppose it cracks the wall open? Just a little? With no Dutch boy in sight to stick his finger in?

The wall was completed December 26th,, eleven years to the day after the Sumatra tsunami. Was that meant to be a message? If so, to who, if not Poseidon, brother of Zeus, ancient and wrathful god of the sea? Also held responsible for earthquakes? Was it a taunt, then? Fortunately, the engineers have all

figured it out, we are told. Just as they had Dai-ichi figured out? A warning about tsunami dangers was given to Dai-ichi after Sumatra, 2004. It was duly received by TEPCO and duly put in the bottom drawer, labeled “events too expensive to happen” and forgotten. “Take action? Us? Nah...”

A final deft touch of the destructive deities: just three months prior to March 11 Dai-ichi had reached the limit of its 40 year life span and should have been shut down to be decommissioned. Instead, it was given a new lease on life with “twenty more years”!

Only, those twenty years turned out to be a trifle shorter than expected.

Speaking of unfortunate events it is only fair to say something in this context, and say it again. All the tragedy, all the suffering, all the misery was NOTHING compared to what could easily, easily have happened. The government considered evacuating Tokyo. It is thanks to a few courageous men, possibly the then Prime Minister more than anyone else, that Japan as the country we know it still exists. His personal decision to stand up to the incompetent crisis management at Tepco, enough of capital letters for those nitwits, his harsh “NO!” to Tepco pleading permission to withdraw from Dai-ichi during the early morning hours of March 15th saved the world from inconceivable pain. Tepco wanted to abandon Dai-ichi. Naoto Kan alone, and nobody else, stopped them. This needs to be repeated!

It is a fact. There are witnesses and there is testimony to this, in spite of Tepco’s denials. Immediately after Kan was brought down, brought down mainly because he had decided to change Japan’s future and get out of nuclear power, the knives were sharpened and the slander, the slaughter began. To make sure there would be no new Japan. To make sure the ‘friendly atom’ would stay. Kan was incompetent, the believing public learnt, he was even a liar, moreover he had hindered rather than helped the efforts on site when he flew there early morning of March 12 While other politicians ran as fast and as far as they could to save their own hides: this honest but soon to be so shamefully maligned man faced his own worst fears and had a helicopter fly him out to Dai-ichi. He was educated a scientist, and he knew what he was up to. He willingly risked his own life. “Aren’t we all past sixty?” is what he asked his staff.

I saw the early morning helicopters flying, I saw them with a sinking feeling, an awful realization of big, big trouble, but I will never forget Naoto Kan was in one of them. He saved us all.

Had Tepco abandoned Dai-ichi with its three molten down cores, housing a grand total of more than fourteen thousand fuel rods, there would have been no going back for hundreds, or even thousands of years. In addition to Dai-ichi there was Dai-ni ten kilometers south: Dai-ni escaped a meltdown by a hair’s breadth. In case of Dai-ichi going kaboom Dai-ni would have had to be abandoned as well, without a question, and then? What next? There is no answer to that. There are no answers to the really painful questions. There is caution, though. Better use it when handling materials that may explode...

Tepco: Riding the bus to Fukushima one lazy day recently I found a good anagram for that company of fools. To those of the forked tongue! “Oral Pro? Creep! Crook! Coyote! Nitwit!!” These exactly are the letters of their name which I don’t care to repeat here. “Tokyo Electric etc...” Nitwit!” is the one word to sum you up. Tepco? “Crook! Creep! Coyote! Nitwit!!” is what one may call the president of that ridiculous outfit, those clowns of horror, to his face without fearing reprisals or lawsuits. It is what he calls himself, after all, being their representative. “Cool Operator? Creepy Crook! Nitwit!” - “Ya Loco Trooper! Crook! Creep! Nitwit!!” Mercifully suppressed by the editor: ‘Wart Pie! Oily Coon! Creep! Trot, Crook!’) Do anagrams reveal a hidden feature, a shadow of a name? Some people think so. Oh, and there are tons of anagrams to be found here, but, please notice how stable the “Crook!” and Creep!” parts are. – The “Nitwit!” was brought to you courtesy Basil Fawlty, aka John Cleese, by the way. Could somebody find an even better one, I wonder? How I need a good laugh at Tepco’s expense!

– Come on guys, it's free! Enjoy it. There are a few little problems, unfortunately. Lack of material, mainly. The founding fathers of Tepco's were farsighted enough to avoid the presently much needed letters "S" and "H", just as they took great care about the "F" and the "U" so we won't have the Fish Cheer here, sorry. Letters "C" and "K" are available but, what good do they do us now. Well, you can't have it all. (Surely better off without. - The editor)

Which brings me back to March 11 once more.

4 Taira! Taira! Taira!

Mariko made me a quick lunch of noodles, it is just amazing how fast this woman can get food on the table. It used to take her ten minutes to feed her family of four, and this was done without a microwave oven, of course. She uses the typical Japanese cooking range, a two-flame gas burner with the additional fish-grill. That's a drawer-type grill set a little lower, and between, the two flames on top of the simple, oh so simple contraption. She has been using this all her life. Does that explain her prowess? Not by far. She is just so fast, and such a genius in making do that she will fix you a meal out of potato peels and rice husks, if need be. An excellent one at that! There are not many cooks around who could hold a candle to her in doing what she does, I always feel, but I keep that a secret... She draws the line, however, at meat: except when the young lion, our son Leon, demands some bacon for his breakfast. That's how far she is willing to go. Dinner would be fish. She herself has been pretty much vegetarian since forever, and following her lead our family gradually turned away from meat. You would, too, if you cared, if you dared to find out how your yummy hamburger looks from the inside! May is an even stricter vegetarian than her mother who does eat clam, squid, octopus, and certain fish; not to forget her passion for sea urchin! Sea urchin... It may be a sin to take a life to eat it – but this little spiky creature does make it hard to resist temptation. It tastes like the boundless ocean itself. Best eaten on the beach. It just takes a rock, or anything pointed, I saw it done with car keys, to crush or pry open the crusty victim of your lust – fill your mouth and get immersed in an incomparable adventure of taste. Close your eyes and do a header into the cool waters of the Pacific Ocean, dive to the bottom of the sea, swim with the fish and feel the rush of something never known before in exploring the deep blue green. Live!

How we love the ocean, how we love the poor, tortured sea. It is now blamed for killing and destroying, it is feared and therefore walled in. It is radiation poisoned, it is smothered with concrete and steel, it is taken away from us in so many ways after it came ashore in a moment of madness five years ago. We humans still don't know better than to try and lock away the culprit: even if the culprit was pushed ashore to ravage beaches and towns by forces older than both sea or man. We forget so easily that the sea is our mother, and that we owe her everything we have.

I could go on and on to sing her praises, I could sing and laugh with her, and cry when I see what the government of Japan sees fit to do to her. "What else?!" I think each time I take that painful short walk down to the beach where the huge concrete "tetrapods" multiply by the minute, an army of four legged beasts strewn up and down the coast that was once beautiful. Man's dominion? Isn't it time we learned to be humble in the face of our ever growing power? Ever growing knowledge? The more we know the less we feel, unfortunately. The less we understand. True knowledge is knowledge of limitations, but that is something even our all too smart scientists come to realize in their old age only. Just like our politicians.

But, I got carried away in the surf. In the surge. Forgive me. There is no one to talk to but you, dear reader, sitting comfortably, I hope, in front of that little screen of yours! There, just beyond the larger screen I see my lines appear on, letter by letter, as I hammer strange, halting rhythms into my keyboard! HELLO!! Are you near, then? Are you far? I wish you could hold these words in your hands printed on paper, in a somewhat more tangible form: communicating is touching, isn't it, but abstraction is still another thing to grieve about and not really an appropriate topic here. Take my

narration's twists and turns as an expression of my own tortured soul, try to look behind the words, if I may I ask you to do that, as this book is not a report on earthquake xyz and its consequences but an effort to heal the hurt these very consequences inflicted. You want to learn about how people here in Fukushima cope with all the pain these last years have inflicted on them? You can feel some of the pain through my uncertain groping for the truth of the matter. What happened? That is the one question reverberating through my brain. Like a circle in a spiral, like a wheel within a wheel this thing won't let me go. It draws circles within circles, it is reflections chasing shadows, it is thoughts and considerations spinning and spinning endlessly. What happened? What is the lesson? What am I to learn from running and hiding? From finally coming back here? Not to be mired in resignation, I must surely find a purpose! Why am I here in this sad village of Yotsukura with the dump trucks rushing through, on their way to another beach to be concreted, with the twenty-two wheelers carrying machinery and supplies to nearby Dai-ichi and with those thousands of cars each day carrying thousands of young men into deserted northern townships to decontaminate what is left of former communities? What am I doing here, five years after, endlessly pondering human folly – not seeing my own?

Writing is meant to provide a look into a mirror of one's own self, a hard look: but how can I go beyond the foolish grin on my face that thwarts my efforts to really see who I am, who we are? I am not alone! All of us here in Fukushima share the pain, just as we shared the gains of our technical prowess. It is good to have electric light, it is wonderful to have this machine humming on my desktop – yes. It is good, but what is the cost? It is hard to get down to the real questions. My nose was put to the grindstone, yes, but not this one person's nose only. We have all embarked on the same boat, you too, wherever you may be, me here in Japan sharing the voyage with you in Jamaica. Who are we, and where are we going?

We are passengers, every one of us, on essentially the same terms, never mind if you travel first class or steerage. It is a beautiful ride on this huge ship... if only I were not seasick just now, if only I could make out the ship's name more clearly. I have this numbing fear it is a name I know all too well, one that ends in "...tanic". I can't be sure I am right, though, and go on searching for the lost letters.

Back from her exhibition trip, a little later than planned, as she had some sushi with her friend on the way home, Mariko, the best wife of all fixed me a bowl of buckwheat noodles in a hurry, and it was goodbye, see you in the evening, already. At the time I helped out at "ies", a little independent language school run by our old friends Rick and Sanae, scheduled to have class from 14:30.

The school is in Taira, the administrative center of Iwaki. Iwaki, meaning something like castle rock, is a young city, old in name only. It was in 1966 that my host city came into existence with the stroke of a pen. It was deemed expedient for whatever reason to shuffle the deck a little. October 1st of 1966 children here woke up in an entirely new town: a real city! Population at present 350,000, including more than 20,000 refugees from the evacuated areas north of here. People sometimes find it hard to understand why these evacuees chose to stay in the vicinity of danger: but isn't it all too human? You want to be at least near your home if you can't live in it any more. I understand that very well.

Iwaki is made up of 14 municipalities and was, at the time, the largest city in Japan areawise, Tokyo apart. Personally I think the demise of mining had to do with the establishment of this synthetic city of "Iwaki"! Coal was first found here in 1855, mining began in earnest around 1870, dovetailed with the establishment of modern Japan, and soon was a huge operation. Joban coal fields were the largest in all Honshu, but, unfortunately, not of best quality. Anyway, coal was our lifeblood for sixty years, until 1971, when mining stopped for good. The transition to secondary industries was successful and today Iwaki is well diversified.

Joban Mines, the biggest enterprise of them all, pulled off a very special stunt. Someone a little wacky, a visionary, in other words, had a dream. He dreamt of Hawaii, literally a “dream destination” for the Japanese during the sixties as airfares were impossible to pay. People didn’t even have passports! So this genius of the boondocks convinced the management of Joban Mines to build “Spa Resort Hawaiians”!

Hot water for the pools was available in abundance. One of the ‘big three’ hot springs of Japan, there are ‘big threes’ everywhere here, happens to be in Yumoto, Iwaki. They even have a bath for horses! A huge water world was built, girls were found to dance the Hula, and having heard ‘if you build it they will come’ they came! There is even a movie about the Hula Girls. We don’t go now, but when I was new here I sat in the golden bathtub they had there, and when our children were little we took them there a couple of times. Leon almost drowned again – this time, it was my fault. He walked at my side and somehow slipped into the pool without me noticing! A man came up to me with ‘excuse me – isn’t that your son drowning over there?’ and I dived in to pull him out. It took him many years to overcome a fear of pools. “Spa Resort Hawaiians” attracts mainly Tokyoites, and right from the start it was meant to do so. A poster advertising the opening, January 26, 1966, shows an affluent, blond western couple in Aloha shirts and some locals hiding behind a palm tree. All of them overshadowed by a mighty, beautiful dancer. The sixties danced in style! The locals, obviously, were still not sure of their place in this.

Five years after 2011 Iwaki is on the threshold of a rather gloomier dream. The ‘atomic’ business of decommissioning, and what not, is going to be extraordinary. The area north of here will be the national center for all things related to cleaning up the ungodly mess forty years of ‘nuclear’ have wrought, but, hey, didn’t we enjoy it? Certain people will profit enormously, again. Locals will suffer. “Heads we win – tails you lose”, there is no way around it. We will be the garbage pail of all Japan. It will be a ‘hell of a good time’ for this part of the coast. And remember, you read it here first: “Nuclear: towards a brighter future!” (again... and that sinking feeling, again...).

Our young people tend to move away from the home of the Hawaiians. Into the metropolis. A trend that existed before the disaster. After, of course, you could practically see them run. What young mother would choose to expose her baby to the dangers of radiation, however low level it might be? They were leaving in droves, and still are. What we get in return is workers without families from all over the country, and slick businessmen. Plus those who prefer not to be seen: big money is to be made around here, big money! The yakuza know it, and certainly the yakuza aren’t stupid. I’m sure they know how to tap the riches, as well as our esteemed politicians do. There is a regular 3% kickback on all public building projects, everyone knows this, down from 5%, well, times are not what they were in the good old days. Corruption in Japan? Not in your everyday dealings with the government, not for you and me, brother, never, most certainly not, NO! – it is large scale only. We have this nice culture of gift giving here, you see, and sometimes this gets out of hand, that is all, so, who’s complaining? Election campaigns are expensive! And, without sufficient funding, how could you be sure the right party wins? The one that has been in power since 1955, a few short glitches not counting? It is called LDP, and we’ll hear more of it. Three percent of every bucket of concrete poured makes an awful lot of dough, though. The construction industry is to Japan what “defense” is to the US: a terrible blight. A source of never ending sorrow. It doesn’t usually kill people, admitted, but it kills nature to a degree unheard of in most countries. And it undermines all politics, hand in glove as the bosses work together.

Seeing mad seawalls and all kinds of infrastructure no one needs going up everywhere I draw my conclusions. Should you require further reading I recommend “Dogs and Demons” by Alex Kerr, or “Tokyo Underworld” by Robert Whiting. There are countless other well researched books, too. All of this collusion is not secret at all; it is just – so pervasive everybody takes it for granted. Just as you

can't fight the seasons, or see through fog: you just won't get to the bottom of large scale corruption.

These records are a cry of pain. They are a cry from the heart: Help us! Save us. Understand what happened here to maybe prevent the same catastrophe in other places. We are all one! What happens here today is of your concern, wherever you live. Human folly, paired with greed, is a force capable of destroying us. We do not suffer from one disaster only, not from the triple disaster that we lived through – but also from the second one. We suffer from vultures and hyenas. There are scavengers around, and they are wearing expensive suits and highly polished shoes. They are everywhere; they are in your neighborhood, too: waiting for a chance to fleece you. They like Iwaki very much; they love the scent of money, you know. I see them getting off the train from Tokyo each time I join the dirty dozen in front of Iwaki Station to denounce the foolhardy policies that brought us “Fukushima”. The protest never attracts much notice, and yet it goes on, rain or shine.

The center of Iwaki is called Taira. It has City Hall, more than 100,000 inhabitants, a thousand bars and the main station. “Taira, Taira, Taira!” a voice sang out on June 29th of 1984, as it did many times a day before a computerized voice took over. I was still welcomed by a human, however, as I stepped out of the local train from Mito that summer evening. I was a little excited to have finally begun my trip to the north! This was the first leg of my real adventure, after riding the train through Asia for a month, I felt – how could I know it was its last leg at the same time? Just like Annushka had already spilled the sunflower oil in Mikhail Bulgakov's novel, Mariko had already left Pearl's English class... but, fortunately I slipped not under the tram to have my head cut off - but slipped into an undeserved life of good luck when I stood helplessly in front of the long demolished, white station building.

A long trip it had been! 16,000 kilometers by boat, by train, and by airplane. After arriving in Narita Airport from Hong Kong late afternoon on June 26th, I felt at peace.

I finally was where I had wanted to be! Officials at immigration were so forthcoming as to give me a six months' visa, why, I don't understand in retrospect. They had asked me how long I intended to stay and I had said well, about half a year? Looking me over, my green hippie backpack, ex-US army, well worn on countless hitchhiking trips all over Europe and Northern Africa, beautifully decorated with Tibetan clouds and various other symbols stitched in colorful thread, my cheap clothes, and my old shoes, even if not outright labeled 'bought on a flea market', they demanded to have a look at my money. I showed them my wallet, and, oh, I have traveler's cheques as well! apparently set them a riddle they were unable to solve. I had no idea how expensive life was in this country and did not know I would never once in 30 years get to sleep on a Japanese beach, either!

The official said a silent prayer, I suppose, and stamped “six months” into my passport. I was young and protected by my innocence, I believe. At the information counter I asked for information, what else, and learned my first words of Japanese. “Moshi moshi?” the girl said each time the call connected. She tried to find me a cheap hotel, and I was intrigued by the soft, furry sound of her words. “What does it mean?” I wanted to know. It means ‘hello’, or something like that, I was told, and – was I disappointed? Mysteries are better left unexplained, that is for sure. In Japan there is an abundance of mysteries so fortunately I don't have to be afraid of running out of them at all. The more you learn about life here the stranger it gets, I found. Churchill called Russia a riddle wrapped in an enigma inside a mystery: he should have tried to argue with my wife. Was he married at all?

I was drawn a map, reached my hotel and was shown into a room: what a nice smell! It was a tatami room. I stretched out on the green colored mats and listened to the softly falling rain. No doubt those were the minutes that sealed my fate.

There was a soft knock on the door, then a sliding sound: an employee came in, got on her knees gracefully and set a cup of tea in front of me. I didn't understand a word of what she murmured but

liked the tea. After finding some food, I was disappointed the bowl I had ordered from a wax model display in the restaurant's showcase contained more liquid than solid, but, hey, you get what you pay for. I went to bed, futon on tatami, and slept well. After so many days in big cities – Moscow, Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong – I was quite certain I didn't want to go to Tokyo and so turned north. To relax a little, and to get a feel for the new world I was in, I stayed in a youth hostel near Narita for three days. People there were rather unfriendly, I thought, and the place itself was somewhat gloomy. I was served strange food for breakfast and it rained quite a lot. I walked around some and explored the fields and lily ponds around Itako. Hitchhiking was unheard of here, even in those days, but, as ignorance is bliss I put out my thumb and hitched a ride with a middle-aged couple who took me to an iris festival first, sorry to say I didn't enjoy the singing, before we embarked on the journey north. We travelled for hours and hours, it seemed, and still got nowhere. Traffic is slow in Japan. Speed limits of 50 km/h on all major roads? If you're lucky. Could as well be forty. Kilometers, not miles, per hour. Safety first! That ride gave me a glimpse of the years ahead. I got to know Route 6 really well, believe me, the trunk road connecting Tokyo to Sendai. On its way, stop and go, Mito, Hitachi, Taira, Yotsukura, Dai-ni, Dai-ichi and all the other wonders of the modern world.

Safety first everywhere. Everywhere except the blasted nuclear power plants where it is profitability first.

Those two friendly weirdoes, they must have been to pick me up, finally dropped me in front of Mito station where I asked for a ticket to "Iwaki, please". I was ahead of my time. There are eight stations in Iwaki on the Joban Line, but none called Iwaki at the time. Our good mayor of the late eighties and early nineties, the present goodly Minister of Justice, named Iwaki himself, was the one to resurrect the old name, and why not. It didn't bother him to find his own name printed in millions of information leaflets after that, I suppose. Probably he had great plans even then, the suave, good looking, mild mannered Mr. Iwaki, and no whiff of corruption, oh, rumors, rumors only, could stop him. I don't feel too good about bringing these rumors here, even though they are pretty persistent, especially as I had a short meeting with the mayor at one time and quite liked him. It is just that he is with the wrong crowd, the ruling party, that is, and they – are beyond the pale. I wish it were my job to accuse corrupt politicians in my own country, or in China, or the USA; good hunting everywhere! I don't enjoy exposing myself, either, but showing the LDP, the forever ruling party, in the harsh light of the morning after – simply can't be avoided if one is to talk about "Fukushima". Which is what I have to do. Why else am I here? I have asked myself this question a hundred times over the last years. What am I still doing here? Why don't Mariko and I pack up and leave? The only reason for our still being here, apart from the necessity of earning money, is this report. It is not a report in the classical sense as I am too deeply involved personally. How could I try to be cool and detached about casualties when I'm one of them? I couldn't, so I won't try.

We in Fukushima are victims of too much bullshit. What's worse is that we have absolutely no voice. That is why I began to write!

Writing saved me from utter despair, and writing is the boat to carry me across to the other side of truth – the personal side. I don't claim to understand the intricacies of politics or science; I do claim the right to speak out about what they are doing to me and all those other victims of "Fukushima", though.

There is no objectivity in reporting, I came to understand. The detached reporter of the past had an assignment and played by the rules of his or her education (a very thorough one; I deeply respect the work ethics I encountered in one brilliant and very 'old school' journalist who befriended me) but even then good reporters were few. Most saw what they were told to see, and wrote about it accordingly. These days good journalism is even rarer and practically everybody has their agendas. You look at TV, look at mainstream newspapers, look at blogs and find people screaming at you from all directions.

What they want from you is not hard to see – they want your LIFE. They want your time, your money, your cooperation. Usually for this gigantic scam they call progress, even if what they really mean is financial gain for the few, or so it seems to many of us these last years.

Imagine just for a second you were a Greek philosopher, why not Socrates? Or a poetess like Sappho? Persons with a limited understanding of the world, no doubt – Socrates' one and only certainty was that he knew nothing – but with a life of their own! Would Socrates, would Sappho, or would any Greek simpleton have fallen for the promise of unlimited, of near free energy, as we did? Weren't we aware that there is usually some catch when someone promises you the world, for free ('oh, you'll just have to sign the contract though... here, just a tiny drop of your own blood will do, please...')? Would the Greeks have believed in reporting a tragedy without pouring their own heart's blood into it? What I found is that "progress" is a big, fat lie. I don't like lies. How then could I not cry out in pain, in anguish? I write the way I do to show people everywhere a little bit of what everyone in Fukushima had to learn after March 11. For some reason I find myself unable to go back to sleep again after learning some inconvenient truths in the school of hard knocks, and so I beg permission to go on with this jeremiad. It is not targeted at all those wonderful people in Iwaki and elsewhere in Japan who kindly welcomed me and made it possible for me to raise a family: me, who arrived with an old, olive-green rucksack and not much else. It is not against them, quite on the contrary it is for the people here, the voiceless, the forgotten victims that I write.

After some consultation, mainly on the far side of the ticket window in Mito station I was issued a ticket to Taira on the 17:35 local and rode off into the sunset. There were schoolgirls on the train, I remember, who were thrilled to see me, a foreigner, an absolute rarity in those days, on their train and, curious as girls are, quizzed me about my plans.

"I'm going north, to Hokkaido!" I told them. Little did I know. Arriving in Taira twenty minutes past seven in the evening I had my guidebook ready and tried to find a bus to Shinmaiko Youth Hostel. I turned to a bus driver and was impressed by his white-gloved hands but disappointed when he waved me away, white-gloved, after the shortest of glimpses at my foreign guidebook. What was I to do? That very moment SHE came across the street. Our eyes met and I approached her, "excuse me...?"

Two minutes later there I was, galloping after a pretty and also determined girl through the bar district of Taira. Pimps enjoyed the sight and cheered us on, and when the bells on my good old rucksack chimed I knew what had happened. I asked Mariko for her hand five days after that. Six months later we were married.

She took me to "Gallery Iwaki", newly opened, whose owner she wanted me to meet. Chuhei speaks English. My lovely Mariko was not too sure of her own English, she always pretended afterwards, but I think there was more to it than that. She had, in the blink of an eye, decided to help me, and did it the Japanese way – by taking me in to her group. Friends! She alone could have done nothing, but friends, oh, friends can do much. Unfortunately Chuhei had already gone home, but fortunately Mariko's good friend Humiko was still there. The two girls had a look at my book and talked things over while I listened, resigned to my good fate. After a few minutes, closing time, Humiko went to fetch a car, got me in and off we went, the two girls chattering away. It was not hard to notice we took four right turns, and there we were: right back at the Gallery! I was invited to stay over at Humiko and Toshikazu's, he being her husband. We walked up to the old house at the foot of Matsugaoka Park, a couple of hundred meters from the Gallery, and had a cup of tea or two until finally Toshikazu came home from work. He welcomed me warmly, 'you can stay', and held my hand in the longest handshake I have, to this day, experienced. It really was an experience, that long handshake, and the beginning of a wonderful friendship.

Only much later, actually just some minutes ago, when I got up to stretch my legs a little, I realized what a classic of procreative biology this gallop through the seedier quarters of Taira reenacted: boy meets girl, girl has boy pursue her, boy proposes, girl surrenders. Followed by a thirty year long afterthought: both live happily. And, both work their asses off for the little ones, for the next generation. For them to start afresh.

The game of life!

Toshikazu and Humiko let me stay for a whole month. What a great time we had! They were newlyweds and still free of any obligations. Mariko and Humiko were best friends and soon the four of us were inseparable. We went places in their old Mitsubishi Gallant and listened to their jazz and other records for hours. This was before CDs. Daytime I hung out at the Gallery while everybody else worked. Evenings and weekends were spent out. I already had a second-hand motorbike: a little Honda 125 CB, with two red helmets. Still have the helmets; the bike was scrapped when our daughter May was eight: how sad she was when she came back from school that one day! The bike had been the children's play horse for all their lives, and then it was gone so suddenly! She made a drawing – and the smear of her tears is still on it. May is a real artist, her lines so alive, and that bike's drawing is surely one of her best.

Well, the bike saw good days; Mariko liked to ride with me, and the funny thing is the bike did better speed with the two of us on than with me riding alone. We loved the beach, and as that year the rainy season was a 'dry' one we went there often. The police stopped me for speeding, for entering a one-way street the wrong way, for this and that, but never made me pay, until one fine day I had reached my limit. They gave me a ticket! But this is just the beginning of my friendship with the authorities here. Mariko did the paperwork for me, as she always does, poor thing, and I paid up. Then, some days later there was someone in uniform at the door: would I please present myself at police headquarters?

I went straightaway, was shown into a room and had a rather serious conversation. I was told, one, my international driver's license was not valid. Therefore, two, I should not be riding my bike around. As we don't want trouble, three, we won't do that anymore, right, and furthermore, wouldn't it be much nicer to assume nobody had been riding around without a valid license at all? Agreed? So, five, here's your money back! And, six, go to Fukushima City as soon as possible to get a nice and valid Japanese license. Goodbye.

That was, seven, quite an experience.

I appreciate this way of 'enforcing' the law immensely and have had the greatest respect for the Japanese police until quite recently; but, that is a different story. Times got rougher, that is something felt even far away from the focal points of confrontation.

I met Pearl the day after I arrived. A meeting that instantaneously showed me the essence of her life in Japan, and all life in Japan: "I'm so busy!" is what she said. Being busy was the main occupation of people here, and still is. The young these days don't even have the time to say it anymore, life is just eating them alive with school and cram school while they are young, and with insane working hours once they are older. It is mad. Death from overwork is an officially recognized way to pass on. These days people are underpaid in addition to being worked to death. The rule of the 'one percent' is felt on these shores, too. Everyone in Japan was famously middle class after the war – not any more. In 1984 Japan was nearing the pinnacle of its trajectory. The Japanese were taking over the world. It is hard to believe in 2015: but it's true. Look at China now – and see Japan in the eighties. Life in Japan was, well, busy – but there was an overarching feeling of joy and pride in achievements that seem remote these days. The bubble burst.

It was good to be busy, and the greatest sin was to be idle. Even if 'busy' meant to stand in line for hours waiting to see a miserable frilled lizard in its cage! The rage of 1984. Which is exactly what Pearl and I did. Her sons absolutely had to see the endlessly hyped beast, so we stood in line on a hot summer's day. First on the boardwalk, next on the stairs, then on the pedestrian bridge crossing the N 6, and finally inside the building itself. "Daikokuya", long gone. The local department store, pride of the town. The mythical dragon however was much smaller than expected and Spencer and Justin were not happy. Possibly they resented the intruding foreigner as well. Pearl did what she always did; still the waters and just do whatever was called for to save the situation. Quite casually, too; in an almost superhuman effort. She is remembered fondly everywhere even now, twenty years after her marriage tragically broke up. She had to leave her husband Eizo and went back to the United States. Eizo! What a man. Our friend. Someone who, with his sensitivity, does not belong in this century. He is so easily hurt, and tends to react in his all too predictable way. He cut his family off a long time ago, then his wife, even his sons: small wonder he shooed Mariko and me off like flies the last time we saw him. He was in hospital after a cancer operation, and didn't want to be bothered. "I just want to be by myself" he had said on the phone, the first words after years of silence, and the last we will ever hear from him now. Should we have respected his wish? I wanted so much to meet him.

Pearl and Eizo ran two small restaurants at the time, diners if you will, and these were a second home to me those first years in Iwaki. Pearl was mother to all of the foreigners who came to Iwaki, foreigners meaning Caucasians, in principal. "Americans", as we were all called. The glamorous ones, as seen on TV! When I came here those were Lise from Tonga, Boyko from Bulgaria, Barbara from France, and an old unnamed catholic priest. No other foreigners apart from the occasional Chinese or Korean who were not regarded as "gaijin". Neither were they, nor are they, Japanese. Their status is unresolved, even now. Japan has this difficult history!

Tons of books have been written about it, of course, and we experienced one side of it firsthand.

The sunny side. History is so hard to interpret, especially when it's not 'history' at all. People in this neighborhood find it extremely difficult to come to terms with what happened, I understand now. Thirty years ago I knew nothing.

5 Earthquake!

I drove our second hand Subaru R2 down to Taira and parked it on the upper deck of the local shopping center's parking. Not really entitled to that space, although we do some shopping there, but a little bit of service to the general public wouldn't hurt this eyesore of a cash machine, I thought, and sometimes used the parking even without shopping. I arrived at Rick and Sanae's English school in good time. There is a small school, one of those that were quite numerous in the past but then got squeezed out without mercy by the big, nationwide chains. It's the same game as everywhere; the big fish eat the little fish even though the little fish are much better at doing their work. Somehow Rick and Sanae survived, and I respect what they do. All teachers hate the nationwide schools with their mean salaries and their own satellite-based programs. Teaching English is big business here!

Teaching English has been my life for thirty years now, who would have thought? I am not a native English speaker at all, but I do love the language and fortunately am fit enough to teach it. In 1984 there was such a huge demand for foreign teachers that I had more work, and made more money than I ever expected. Those days I didn't care about money at all, though, and even now I am not very conscious of financial affairs. In a general sense – yes. That is to say, I feel the growing injustice and the worldwide widening gap between rich and poor acutely but somehow never succeeded in managing my own matters too well. Extreme good luck gave me a good start and stayed with me even after the bubble burst and jobs paid less and less – provided there were any. It is no small wonder I still have enough to do, and enough income to support Mariko, myself and our children who are still in college and require their parents' support. I do all kinds of work and never shrank back from doing things. Even happily washed dishes before I started to teach. Best time in my whole life! Dishwasher to millionaire – that's me. Well, a million yen is not a million dollars.

Rick was in need of a substitute teacher in 2011 and I helped out. Arriving at their school you would walk up a frightfully narrow flight of stairs to reach the simple swinging door of "ies", as the school is called and enter – a world apart. It is always magical to open a door to enter a room, but the door to "ies" would take you into a different country altogether. It used to be warm and friendly inside; music played and Kaori, the secretary would greet you with a welcoming 'hello' from behind the counter. This friendly atmosphere of course made students feel just as home as me, and it was really fun for kids to have class there. Still is, as "ies" relocated after the quake and continues to do a good job. Cram Schools are so dreary, but this was never one of them. It was, and is, entirely different.

After exchanging a few words in good cheer with Kaori it was already time to arrange a table and three little chairs of blue, red and yellow color that surprised you by their weight, get the textbook and the crayons out and wait some minutes for a little girl named Himari, who would be the only student in that class.

Next to me, behind a partition, Leah would be hard at work with her favorite students; three middle aged ladies who shot salvos of laughter and volleys of mirth over to me. They just loved to talk shopping and fashion! Leah herself had this thing about shoes...

She was a Filipina, working here for some years in order to make enough money for university in the United States, and a very good teacher. Friendly, but tough in her high heels if need be. Oh, her voice did have that edge of steel in case kids were starting to get out of hand! Across the room, hidden behind

yet another partition, there would have been yet another teacher at work. Possibly Rick himself, possibly a different teacher. Rick had several freelance teachers to work for him – and, what a lot of pain they gave him over the years. Foreigners are nothing but trouble, as any Japanese will tell you! One who did never gave anybody trouble was Adrian. Almost a saint, that man. He deserves a better chapter in a book than this one entitled “Earthquake!” but I met him in exactly that upstairs room so he needs to be in here.

I was busy teaching at my little, round table with its, for my frame, ridiculously low chairs when he stood at the counter, a very erect, very fit-looking young man with a red tie, and that was the only time I ever saw him with a tie at all, come to think of it. He had applied for a job in Iwaki as the surfing would be reasonably good; he was an expert surfer from Australia who had this love for Japan. He is also a practicing Buddhist and a novice in a Thai monastery now. God bless him! There are not many like him, and that’s what everybody says. We all hope to see him again.

Our class was scheduled to begin at 14:30, and Himari was on time, of course, as she lived just across the street in a ten story block of rather luxurious apartments. Her mother and three years old sister usually accompanied her to class, but not on that day. The little sister had come down with a cold and a temperature and so it was just the two of them. Her mother took a risk in leaving the three-year-old alone at home, of course, and I was surprised she did that, but probably she saw no way out of her bind. With one of her daughters pestering her to go to English class and the other asleep in bed she took advantage of ‘bedtime’ and rushed over to Rick’s. Japanese mothers are very, very conscious about their children’s safety, so I’m sure she badly needed that little break!

Himari’s lessons had a very nice rhythm to them. The first fifteen minutes we would do a textbook that had a simple story and some follow-up exercises. Himari was only five years old and could not read or write yet, and I never pushed her to do things she didn’t want to do. Then there was the workbook: crayon time! Children love coloring, and so this was another treat for my adorable little student. Such a sweet girl. She had such a seriousness in her demeanor, and such a thoroughness in the way she’d draw her lines and colored her ducks and horses that I just loved seeing her work. Teaching children can be so rewarding. In my thirty years here I have met and taught thousands of them, mainly kindergarten age, and I still love singing and playing with them. At one time in the late eighties I taught classes in six kindergartens with a total of around a thousand kids. Once a week I would appear and, in one place in particular, get on stage with my large Mickey Mouse doll to somehow keep 180 children’s attention for fifteen minutes before I started a veritable race through six classrooms to teach all children once more, this time in groups of thirty. The kindergarten paid me well, you see, and the owners just tried to get their money’s worth out of me on those mornings. I was young and able to do it day after day. In the afternoon, of course, there were more classes, and there was also the College of Technology, and there were various company classes. For several years, my last class started at ten in the evening, and it was an hour’s drive from home! I was young and strong, but looking back it was a crazy time. I sometimes taught on auto-pilot, singing the same songs a hundred times a week. I remember kids staring at me with question marks in their eyes once and realized I had fallen asleep singing Baa Baa Black Sheep. My family supported me a hundred percent and it was good to be busy, although in retrospect I wish I had had more time for my own children. They were so happy when I came home in the evening. Of course they knew instinctively what days I would be too late for them to meet me, and what days I would be home before their bedtime: and then, there were the evenings they just tried to hang on. Those nights, no matter how softly I opened the door there would be a joyous shout from the bedroom: “Otosan!!” and Mariko would sigh and get up once more to first feed me and next to start a second cycle of tucking the little rascals in. She went to bed and slept with them, as was customary. Me, the husband and proud father, was adored and well taken care of but mainly left to do my own thing, which was to make money for the young family. That was, and still is, the Japanese way.

“A good husband is healthy and out of the house: working” is a proverb my wife loves to quote with that twinkle in her eyes...

It works very well, too, up to a point. Up to a point – as children do need to see more of their fathers than the door closing behind him, especially once they get a little older, and that is when the Japanese way leaves them short changed. The male element in the family, in education at large, is represented by the educational system first, and by the state in consequence. Schools here have an enormous bearing on children’s lives. I saw high school teachers hurry to students’ homes in order to solve certain teenage problems and just couldn’t believe what I saw. School teachers are responsible for their wards in a way I find incomprehensible: well, ‘that is the Japanese way’, I was told. The one sentence to explain everything. Also, to hide just too many things, as seen quite recently, of course. A wall, this sentence, and a moat around the fortress this island nation remains. The killer quote.

Himari loved her coloring, especially as she knew it was the prelude to the main event of the day, actually each lesson’s highlight: “Hully Gully!”

This is a game. Players take turns drawing a card from the stack placed in the middle of the table. Cards show fruit. There’s bananas, melons, prunes, grapes and strawberries.

The number of these varies... Players turn over cards and display what they just found in front of them, could be five strawberries or two melons, or one banana, you never know in advance. It’s a fast game! What you want is to identify five items of a kind. Whenever there are five of the same fruit on the table it’s time to ring the bell. Fast. The bell, exactly like the ones you still find in some restaurants, is placed in the middle of the table so that all players have equal chances of reaching it. Once the game is in full swing it is great fun! Everybody gets really, really excited! Elementary school age children are faster than most adults both in adding up the numbers and in hitting the bell: Himari, of course, was too young to be a contender.

She also had this preference for strawberries! She seemed to purr like a kitten once a strawberry card came up, and it was too nice to see her draw up her upper lip a bit and start drooling... All other cards were of no interest to her, but the strawberries she just loved. The rules of the game were immediately changed, once this became clear, and from day two it was hunting strawberries with us, my little student and me. And, wasn’t it nice she always found more of them than her teacher? At the end of the game the catch was counted. She could count to ten only, so there were neat stacks of ten in front of her: what a laugh we had! In all seriousness, of course.

Well, that peculiar day things turned out differently. We were not even in game time when the room suddenly began to shake. “Jisshin!” is what everybody says or thinks, and freezes, when this happens. “Earthquake!”

--- Earthquakes are not uncommon in Japan, in fact Japan is, as a country, probably the most earthquake prone one in the world. From Hokkaido in the north down to Kyushu, and even further to Okinawa, the Ryu Kyu islands in the south no part of the archipelago is safe from quakes. Japan sits on the Pacific “Ring of Fire”, a circle of volcanic and seismic action round the Pacific Ocean. From Alaska down the Rockies, the Andes, even in Antarctica where there is Mt. Erebus and north again through Indonesia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Japan and Kamchatka back to the Aleutians you will find fire and smoke like nowhere else on Earth. As volcanoes and earthquakes are like peas in a pod you know exactly what is what once the room begins to stir, once you hear that certain strange low sound swelling up. There is an advantage to the frequency of earthquakes, too: they are too numerous and too strong to be ignored!

From prehistoric times builders here knew what they were up against, and built accordingly. Japanese

traditional houses, like the one we live in, are frame structures of such interconnectedness that they move with the ground without ever breaking up. Our house has no foundations at all but simply sits on rocks. The carpenters placed around 60 stones, each one the size of a football in the sand (as we live close to the sea we sit on sand underneath a thin layer of topsoil) and started building! Before ground breaking, of course, the local Shinto priest would come and bless the site in a short ceremony. This is done even today. A square is fenced off with a rope made of straw, a certain kind of white paper strips tied into it, and the beautifully attired priest will ask the gods, the ten thousand, for their grace. It is all over in a couple of minutes, but does convey a special feeling to the attending hopeful homeowners. I was invited to a similar ceremony once and felt a surge of something hard to define, some extraordinary clearness rise in me. It was very uplifting!

Back to the 60 or 64 rocks I am kneeling on right now. The carpenters of almost a hundred years ago raised a timber frame on them and joined the rafters to it. I once drew a plan of our house and counted the posts, which is not hard to do as they are clearly visible in each wall, evenly spaced at 90 centimeters for closets or single doors, or 180 centimeters for the sets of two sliding doors that are standard. Easy to remove, too, so you can have a wide open space within seconds should you need it. Japanese carpentry is world famous for its quality, and not without reason. The joints are so well thought out and so well executed that it is extremely hard to tear such a house down, as wreckers after March 11 found in all too many cases. You find the world's oldest wooden structures in this country. Temples in the ancient capital of Nara have survived countless tremors as well as typhoons, plus the awful humidity of eight hundred summers. Modern residences are built much in the same way traditional houses were made in principle, except for the ersatz materials used from top to bottom. Even skyscrapers, and your residence of more than two floors are built the old way, of course using steel beams in place of that lovely cedar wood that was used before 2 x 2 and particle boards were introduced. I was here to see it happen: the Japanese market was just too rich for foreign lumber companies to be left to itself. Tall structures' steel frames are anchored so deep in the ground that they are able to withstand even major shaking. As was proved on March 11: the Tokyo Sky Tree, a 634 meter needle of steel and concrete, unfinished at the time, swayed and half shook off a construction crane but was otherwise completely unfazed. Building in Japan has always been done with earthquakes in mind. It is just amazing how well these incredible structures, both old and recent are built.

I used to be awfully afraid of earthquakes and was relieved to hear time and time again that "Iwaki is safe" as there is no major fault underneath it. Japan has been researched thoroughly, of course, and geologists know all the major faults, they believe: until a new one pops up unexpectedly, that is.

There are four major plates moving against each other underneath Japan: the Pacific, the North American, the Philippine and the Eurasian Plate. In addition there are smaller plates with lives of their own. It is not exactly clear how all of these move and there is no way yet of predicting quakes other than giving rough probabilities. The only sure thing is that there will always be major earthquakes in the region Japan finds itself in. I am still afraid of quakes although some of the panic has worn off; we have had so many. It is just the soon to be expected mega-quakes that scare me. The two monsters on everybody's mind are the Kanto Earthquake and the Nankai Earthquake. Both of them are regular occurrences with cycles of 80 to 100 years for Kanto and 100 to 200 years for Nankai. The last Kanto upheaval, the great earthquake of 1923, struck on September 1st of that year, two minutes before noon. Cooking fires could not be extinguished in many homes and soon large parts of Tokyo were on fire. The epicenter of this M 7.9 quake was deep under the ocean floor southwest of Tokyo and created a tsunami of up to ten meters. Tsunami, landslides and collapsing structures killed well over a thousand people but the real tragedy were the fires that swept through the capital. Official figures say that more than 140,000 lives were lost, of whom 38,000 alone perished in the former Army Clothing Depot in downtown Tokyo where they had sought shelter. The flames unfortunately were fanned by an

approaching typhoon and as the water mains broke during the quake the fires could not be put out until September 3rd Tokyo was in ruins. Fear and confusion ruled. People went crazy, it can't be said any other way, and a terrible slaughter began. Scapegoats were sought. There had been tensions with Korea, a Japanese colony at the time, and the Korean minority in Japan was made to pay for the catastrophe. The media played into the mob's fears and the mob went on a rampage. The authorities were fatefully slow to react. Korean lives did not matter very much, it must be concluded. The ensuing hush up does nothing to dispel that notion: 231 Koreans were officially reported dead in the first, the worst week of violence, whereas in reality thousands were killed. Not only Koreans and Chinese were victimized: even Japanese from far away provinces who spoke their strong local dialects died. Rumor had it that foreigners were poisoning the wells. It must have been nightmarish. The police took the opportunity to eliminate critics of the government. This is all well documented. It must have been hell to all who were in it. Some people, though, knew exactly what they wanted out of this confusion. One name in particular, is connected with inflicting violence: Matsutaro Shoriki. We'll meet him again. An extraordinary person. At the time high up in the Tokyo Police and responsible for many deaths, it is said. Could it all happen again? Didn't it happen already, on a different scale, of course? Isn't it going on here and now, right in front of our eyes, Mr. Abe? The advancement of hidden political agendas in times of crisis is not confined to Japan, as the world learned the hard way after a certain bright September day in New York City. Anyway, to this day September 1st is disaster day in Japan. Years ago, on business in Tokyo, I was shocked dreadfully when sirens went off and loudspeakers started to blare – the same procedure as every year. Last September 1st it was not too reassuring either to hear the voice of the much despised present Prime Minister on the radio admonishing all the land to stay calm: a major earthquake had occurred, he said, but all nuclear facilities were safe.

The next Kanto quake is overdue already. I hope and pray it will not be as bad as the last one.

Even worse, potentially much worse than the Kanto quakes are the Nankai quakes. We are warned to expect an earthquake of more than M 8.0 should, in a worst case scenario, all five segments of the Nankai trough rupture simultaneously. This happened last, with a magnitude of M 8.6, in the year 1707 and caused a tsunami of up to of 25 meters. Seven weeks after that quake Mt. Fuji erupted big time to become as beautiful as it is today. It is thought the quake caused the eruption. Should a similar quake occur now, hundreds of thousands of deaths are feared. In many locations along the southwestern coast precautions are taken. Some townships relocate completely. How about the new Osaka International Airport then, sitting pretty on reclaimed land right in Osaka bay? On an unexpected stopover there last year, seated comfortably in my Narita bound plane, doors closed, I suddenly felt a surge of fear. What if it happened now? The mental picture of my Boeing 777 being swept away like a cheap toy scared me very much, and the more I thought about it the scarier it got. All those airplanes of March 11 drifting down the tarmac of Sendai Airport, not even close to the sea, came alive in my memory. I was awfully relieved when we finally ran, rose and climbed to leave Kansai International Airport behind! How good to see a danger, however imaginary, recede into the distance.

Citizens on that coast are constantly advised to store food, water and clothes, as actually everybody is in all Japan, and moreover asked to provide safe storage for legal documents and other essentials in places away from the sea. Projections of tsunami height are of major concern for the Hamaoka nuclear power plant, too. To protect it from the expected Nankai tsunami the giant wall mentioned earlier was raised by three meters after it was found the tsunami might come in even higher than thought before. No problem, the engineers said. Well done, the politicians say. Let's hope they are right in their assessments. Nature has this way of doing the unexpected, unfortunately! It is chaotic. IT IS!!!

"Jisshin!" was sung out in that low, announcing-the-presence-of-a-ghost-voice, probably by Kaori: the men tend to be rather quiet about things here. What you do in that case is clear. It is well rehearsed

from kindergarten on and each and every Japanese knows how to react. First extinguish open flames. Cooking fires, stoves, gas heaters. Next open an escape door, and stand under a door frame for protection. Get away from heavy furniture. Dive under your desk. Do not run outside if you are indoors as falling window glass or other falling stuff will hurt you more than your gently rocking and rolling room. Even if it rocks harder – enjoy the ride! That's what they advise you to do.

What I did in that second floor classroom however was none of the above. After the initial typical two seconds of not looking into anybody's eyes... looking into a corner, or the ceiling, anywhere but into a person's eyes... everything happened extremely fast...

Himari's mother shot up without a word and started to run. She panicked. The thought of her younger daughter, alone in her apartment, must have hit her like a hammer. Most probably she was a bit uneasy anyway, and when things started to go bonkers she just ran. I, in my turn was alarmed by her running away and reacted fast, too: I didn't want to be left responsible for little Himari!

So I instinctively jumped up in my turn, split second, grabbed Himari's hand and ran after her mother. She was not far ahead of us. I remember her glide down those claustrophobic stairs and still feel the child's small hand in mine, running at full speed while the building all around us creaked and rattled and started to heave, still see us running down the stairs and actually catching up with Himari's mother in the street outside. Had I called out to her? Had she turned around? Did we speak? Did we exchange words like thank you, take care, oh my God... hurry... be careful!! or anything like that? I don't remember.

I find myself in the street and want to get away from that ten story building Himari and her mother had just disappeared into. Going back was not on my mind at all, everything growled and creaked and my only wish was to get away from those threatening ten stories. I moved across a side street into a parking space and stood there like I was rooted to the spot. I saw tall buildings in the distance sway and wondered about my chances to survive. The quake grew stronger and stronger, and you could hear a milling and a subterranean churning to freeze your bones. There was a man not far from where I stood who fiddled with his cell phone. We both stood upright, whereas Mariko later told me she had to hold on to someone not to fall. We stood, that man and I, and I desperately tried to get in touch with him, at the very least I felt he owed me eye contact as one human being in solidarity with another in the face of disaster. It didn't happen. He never looked up. We were far apart, drifting through space on our separate planets, following an unknown course in uncharted waters. We were all alone in the world, this man and I. Worlds apart we were.

He didn't look at me. He was too busy. I myself tried to get to the bottom of this unfolding – in slow motion almost – enormous thing that I was becoming part of, just as it became a part of me for ever. It was crystal clear this was THE BIG ONE, the quake everyone in some remote corner of her or his mind anticipates and fears, the moment of truth I had been waiting for, in a way, since I first came here. All quakes before had been a prelude and child's play; THIS was IT. So much was clear. The only question was, "How big is this going to be? Will those crazy swaying buildings stand? Am I going to survive this?" The strange thing is that these were kind of cool, kind of rational calculations. No fear was involved. Even the idea of death was not frightening. Maybe only because I knew somewhere deep down I was not in immediate danger? I felt safe in that open area. Still, the enormity of the thing! I was shaken to the core of my being. All of my mental faculties demanded information, demanded to understand! I saw buildings sway, I heard the constant, deep, rumbling sound of bedrock or concrete, impossible to tell, I also heard the traffic lights on their crane-necked poles rattle like mad, but what I really needed was to go below the surface. What I wanted was to get to the inside of this. I wanted to hear the VOICE of this. Something like the voice of silence, the sound of silence: the source. This was an experience that had mystical qualities, no doubt. The voice of Mother Earth was all there was to

perceive in those moments. Even though I heard – I strained with all my might to go even beyond that, to hear the origin of the sound, so to say. A little like what they teach in Nada Yoga, I think. The silence that encompasses all, that is at the bottom of it all.

Of my five senses it was not the eyes that I turned to in these long three or four minutes, impossible to gauge time then, it was not the eye (that could never go beyond surfaces as I felt instinctively), no, it was the sense of hearing that I turned to. I am not a visual person, maybe that is why. I love to listen to things, and I feel that the nature of things, or even people, is better understood from listening to them than by seeing them. A chord on a guitar tells me more than a painting. Bad music tortures me more than bad pictures. The world is sound! That seems to be my deepest conviction. Looking back on those long, short minutes in the street trying to HEAR, only trying to HEAR it is inevitable to ignore this. My way of coping with that sudden, terrible presence of God, the way absolute power revealed itself to me, to that poor lost soul in a parking space – was to instinctively try and unlock my ears. To open my ears as never before and listen. “HEAR, ISRAEL...”

Did I hear the voice of God, then? The sound beyond the silence behind the thrashing and rolling sounds of a shaken earth? I don’t know. I really don’t know how deep I went.

All I know is that this was deeper than several other times I came close to death. I have been in car accidents and near misses several times in my life, either hitchhiking or in the driver’s seat, but those were different from what I felt here. Maybe just not long enough time wise to contemplate my fate. You see the thing coming up to you, very slowly though, somehow... you know you are done for, bang: and it’s over. You wake up, hurting, but it’s over and you are busy healing already.

The only other experience in nature that came close to these moments of looking into the void, if absolute uncertainty about what things ARE AT ALL may be called so, I had twelve years earlier.

Our family of four experienced the great and terrible 1999 eclipse of the sun, the one foretold more than 400 years ago by the great Michel Nostradamus, on a roadside field in northern France. We were lucky to be there in time as the roads were choking with eclipse-seekers. We barely made it into the narrow belt of totality. It had been growing gloomier for an hour already, streetlights in the beautiful city of Luxembourg were switched on and an all permeating feeling of some strange uncertain dread hung over the valley of the river Sauer. After a few short minutes of waiting under an overcast sky the clouds suddenly broke and we saw a crescent sun through our improvised eye protections, when, all of a sudden a chilly wind arose, some crows flew, roosters in the distance crowed and I felt as if the whole world disintegrated. I felt my life drain out of me and disappear in an explosion of shadow. It was horrible. I have never felt like that before or after. “I” was not real anymore. “I” had become something like a shadow myself. The corona around the dark sun glowed, I took some photos that came out reasonably well, and it was just so strange to be standing there in that field with no sun to center us. To hold us. To maintain us. After some short moments of muffled French voices the eerie silence of totality gave way to a new crescent sun and the ten or twelve of us who had gathered in that roadside field looked around and were surprised just to be where we were, or so it seemed. The children were overexcited! We all felt incredibly relieved. The shadow had passed, and we howled with laughter: something a friend had said the day before, something which was really nothing at all – was so extremely funny in the light of this new day! We just couldn’t stop laughing. We were so glad to be alive under the sun.

When the rolling and rattling finally subsided it was an elderly woman who had come out of a shop from across the street who called out to me. “KOWAI!” she cried, “I’m so afraid!” “This is so scary!” When she saw the foreigner head heard her, and was on his way to comfort her, she went on in English, “HELP ME!” “I’m from Tokyo”, she blurted out, and “Tohoku is so scary!” Tohoku, of course, is

northeast Japan. Is where we are.

I put an arm around her shoulder, there were others in the street by then, and soothed her like you would comfort a child: “It’s all over now, it’s ok... you don’t have to be afraid anymore” while she insisted, “Tohoku is terrible! KOWAI!!”

This went on for I don’t know how long, under a minute, I should say, and now there also was Leah. She already had her cell in hand and informed me that this was a quake magnitude M 8.0 with its epicenter near Sendai. This shocked me – if it was that far away, 200 kilometers, it must have been much worse in Sendai and other places up north, I thought and felt vaguely sorry for all the people up there, trapped under fallen buildings, maybe, or even dead. I felt awed, and a little sick in the stomach, but not afraid at all. I was relieved! It was all over, wasn’t it?

In hindsight I know I was in a state of shock. And only in hindsight do I understand that this shock did not wear off for months.

But, there we were, lightheaded, so happy to be alive: what a story! What a THING we had been through! Something to tell our grandchildren about.

I once walked, with a friend, and a dog named Rayun, a narrow road through the mountain side of Crete when we encountered a group of people in their Sunday best: they were somehow strange, we felt. Elated. A few hundred meters on we saw a bus perched in precarious balance on the shoulder of the narrow road – high above the river deep down below.

Leah, her students and I: we felt the same way. Giddy. We were survivors!

While we still smiled at each other, a little bit of Dutch courage in our smiles, too, wondering what to do next, the owner of the sandwich shop downstairs was already taking action. He had a roll of duct tape in his hand and resolutely went upstairs, so I followed him, not to let a stranger put me to shame. I felt responsible for the school! This man was as levelheaded as all the Japanese around me would prove to be in the following months. He walked straight over to the cracked window he had spotted from the street and started to tape it. I assisted somewhat. How thick the windowpane was! This was a matter of seconds, totaling a minute, possibly, or two. I was so focused on getting the job done that I didn’t even look at the devastation around me. I never noticed that Rick’s huge fish tank with all those pretty neons and other tropical fish had cracked, or toppled.

While we were busy with the window there were dozens of little lives ending in complete silence. Only several months later I learned of this; and I am glad I didn’t notice that tragedy at the time. I could not have saved the fish. Sometimes it is a grace not to notice things.

Down in the street again Leah told me that she could not contact Rick as the grid was already down with overload. We hemmed and hawed a little and then decided, not really sure we did the right thing that “School’s closed”! We correctly assumed no more students would be coming that day, but did feel somewhat uneasy about closing school for the rest of that Friday. We had no idea of the scale of what had happened some minutes ago, let alone that this had been only the prelude to disaster.

This, the “Tohoku Earthquake” had a magnitude surpassed only three times in recorded history. It is not yet the time to describe it in detail, me, laughing nervously on the pavement that March day, but I do have to say one thing here. The beastly shaking and pounding, originating deep under the surface of the Pacific Ocean did not do so very much damage at all. It did create a tsunami, though. The tsunami killed close to 20,000 people, and it did ruin Dai-ichi. This, in turn, set in motion the chain of events we are currently suffering from. ‘Never waste a good crisis’ is a motto that was studiously heeded by certain politicians in Tokyo who prefer to look back instead of forward. The media played along. Japan

was deprived of a historic chance to rise from the ashes of a shattered dream, once again. Japan refused to be a leader. This is what I call the second disaster. The earthquake of March 11 was nothing but its trigger. All of this is painful to report, and I wish I had had a better understanding at the time of what was going on in certain quiet, expensive Tokyo rooms in that spring of 2011. It dawned on me only very, very gradually. After I was personally confronted with the way this tragedy was played. The way we people of Fukushima were coldly used, without any scruples: to serve a political agenda.

"Fukushima" is just a pawn in the game. The larger, later part of my records deals with this second disaster – but, reader, let me show you first how it started. The big questions of how a small number of people could so deftly navigate through the debris to create the 'strong Japan' we all suffer from these days, of why the media didn't cry out in pain, and of what the outlook is at all, will be asked later. There are no answers, of course, but there will be some very interesting observations in the course of this series of books. All in due time. Nothing focuses the mind like a hanging, it is said. In my case, the prospect of 'hanging' was a prolonged one, but, oh, it did indeed sharpen my wits. Gradually. Very gradually. It took me a whole year to come to my senses after those five minutes of trying to HEAR and the five days of running that followed after Dai-ichi showed its true face. Only after almost a whole year did I finally sit down trying to understand what had happened and at the same time trying to understand what went on around me, and, boy, was I surprised! I began to SEE.

"How are things at home?" – was the question all the three of us, down on the pavement, silently pondered at the back of our minds, of course, and so it didn't take us long to reach a decision. "See you tomorrow!" were our parting words, when, "your coat!" Leah sent me running up that long, narrow flight of stairs for the last time – and off everybody was. We never met again.

Leah, I learned later, was flown to the Philippines as her government ordered all of its nationals out of northern Japan and did not return to Tohoku. She couldn't overcome the shock she suffered. Did come back to Japan, though and lives in southern Kyushu as far as I know. Contact broke off after some e-mail exchanges over the following year or two.

Kaori must have driven back to her village of Hirono unaware that she was headed right into the storm. Hirono is within 20 Kilometers of Dai-ichi and was evacuated two days after the quake. By now it is apparently safe again to live there, or, better put, not insanely dangerous. Few young people, and no young women go back there, however. What became of smiling Kaori I have not the faintest idea.

I went for my car; did I run? Possibly. I remember rolling down the ramp, as I was parked on the upper deck of the two-floor parking, gesturing to another driver to go first, but do go, hurry, don't keep me waiting more than necessary, and out in the street I was. To my big surprise I saw people by the hundreds streaming out of the department store only then: how could they be so late in leaving? As a matter of fact the city was wrapped in a muted silence. Things seemed to roll forward in slow motion. There was no sound. Or so I remember. Which is probably a false memory. Indicative of my own state of mind rather than reality, but then, what is reality? I had begun to live in a dream without knowing it. Even now, more than four years after, it seems the nightmare of "Fukushima" is not willing to let me go, ever.

6 Tsunami Coming!

Out of the park deck you go straight for a couple of hundred meters, then turn right, now there's a traffic light I am sure didn't stop me on that day, left again and go straight for two minutes until you reach Route 6, the artery connecting Tokyo to the only really big city in the north: Sendai. Distance is about 360 kilometers, the south of Iwaki being at midpoint between the two. From Yotsukura, where I was headed, it's 200 kilometers to Tokyo and 160 to Sendai, more or less. Of course you went to Tokyo rather more than to Sendai, in fact Sendai was rather far removed from our lives even before all connections were severed.

Sendai people did strike me as unfriendly in the past so I used to not like it at all until, a couple of years ago, we discovered we could perfectly well go to famous Matsushima on a day's rail pass that was sold for local trains. Only then Sendai began to be attractive. Iwaki is not, technically speaking part of "Kanto", the eastern heartland of Japan, the second Japanese heart being "Kansai" around Osaka, but we are near enough to the metropolis to feel its pull. Now that all fast trains out of Iwaki go in one direction only we feel Tokyo's pull more than ever. It's a hateful pull, too, as we are being sucked dry. Always were sucked dry, it's just that nobody noticed before. Let's leave this chapter for a while, though.

I can still picture me on that ride home. Fifteen minutes, but how long they were on that day! I can see me turn left onto Route 6, then go, go, go. There were few cars on the road. I was relieved to see most houses intact, apart from a fallen wall here and some shattered windows there, everything seemed to be okay. Still, I was terribly worried. The thing had begun to sink in. I clenched the wheel, I drove like I was a robot. Must have had the car stereo turned on, must have – but don't remember any of what it said. There was news, tons of news, mountains of news but everything was confused, of course. There must have been tsunami warnings on, too. I am sure of that because I calculated my danger, taking into account my distance from the ocean. Taking into account time lapsed already as well as the tsunami's expected arrival time, "Tsunami in Iwaki 15:25" or something like that. Before getting disaster information from the car stereo full blast the thought of a tsunami had not crossed my mind at all, but there, in my car "TSUNAMI" must have been the key word of all warnings, though I don't remember a word of it. My hands gripped the wheel, I listened to the sound of the tires, and the engine, eyes on the road, as if my life depended on it. Which it did, in a way, and which it did not quite, in retrospect. I drove with absolute concentration. Route 6 gradually approaches the coast as it approaches Yotsukura until it is just a stone's throw away from the sea at Yotsukura fishing port. That part of the road would be littered with boats some twenty minutes into the future.

I was hell bent on reaching home, figuring things out as reasonably safe if only I would be able to go beyond 'that one intersection' and drove faster. The closer I got to the intersection where I'd turn left, off Route 6, towards Yotsukura Station, away from the ocean, the harder I gripped the wheel. There it was, and no sign of water at all. Good. Did I run the light? Was there a light? I don't remember. The only thing I am absolutely sure of is I didn't stop the car once on that way home. I didn't drive recklessly, no, but I did obey a law that was above all rules and conventions. A different reality ruled my actions, and it was a cold one. There was no energy to be wasted. The only thing of importance was to reach home before the tsunami could possibly get me. Nothing could have stopped me. I would have driven right into the tsunami had water appeared out of the fields to my right. I was no longer human, I

was a machine programmed to reach a certain place: and I am glad the thing worked out. I did it.

Had I been in that critical intersection some ten minutes later the tsunami would have washed me away like any old piece of junk. It doesn't take more than fifty centimeters of water to set a car afloat. That would probably not have killed me, but still I consider myself lucky to have escaped that intersection. Trapped inside a car you don't have too many options: in fact you have none but to go with the flow and pray. "Tsunami!" is a word I didn't really understand before I saw roiling and silently rising waters, advancing without halt, without mercy, fast, outrunning even the fastest human by far on video months later. Tsunamis are scary. I had always believed you could, in the event, save yourself swimming if only you ducked beneath the initial wave: now I think that would probably only work if you're extremely lucky. In a tsunami you are carried away with so much debris milling around that it's completely pointless to rely on your swimming skills. You'd be pulled under water or beaten senseless within a few moments of desperate struggle. It's a different game. I should have learned something from the Sumatra tsunami of Christmas 2004, we all should have learned something – especially TEPCO, Tokyo Electric Power Corporation as these miserable buggers call themselves, should have learned something. Doesn't it make you wince there actually was a risk assessment after 2004 that stated the need to protect Dai-ichi against a freak tsunami? An assessment promptly discarded: bottom drawer. Too costly. Forget it.

Well, I reached home, the old house where I knew Mariko, my wife, would be. I didn't care about a single thing in the world, other than the car and the road, during those strange fifteen minutes I was a machine. A machine with a purpose, though. Not really human any more I still wanted desperately, I needed to get to that one place called home. I made it. Only the next day I saw 'the intersection' deep in mud, strewn with a variety of twisted garbage and realized how lucky I had been indeed. The tsunami would have got me alright.

I turned into the dirt yard in back of our house, wheels crunching gravel, stopped the engine, jumped out – her car wasn't there. This didn't bother me at all, though. My mind was as sharp as a razor in some ways those minutes, my thinking not clouded by emotions, opinions, or memories at all: my brain worked like a computer. My eyes saw things, the brain provided reasons. First impression: house standing, no damage discernible, good. Car gone? Okay, she must have heeded the warnings and fled to a safe place. Good. One thing off my mind. Was the old back door through the wooden fence swinging open, I wonder? I dashed through it. The kitchen door pushed wide open, the radio on, full throttle? I can't be sure of that but believe it was so. In an earthquake you are advised to open doors, if at all possible, before they jam, and Mariko, like all Japanese, has had earthquake drills from kindergarten days on. I didn't fear for her at all once I saw the house was standing and the car gone. As it IS old and seemingly fragile many of our friends later told us they hadn't really expected to see it survive the quake. But survive it did, and it came out of the shaking and stomping much better than many other houses. Typically houses got cracked walls on March 11, as did ours, and many suffered major damage to their roofs, which ours didn't.

The wealth of those traditional gorgeous Japanese houses is partly in their roofs. The tiles are often glassed, sometimes brownish, most of the time black, and the underlying woodwork elegantly curved. Japanese carpentry at its best. Top layers are special again, roundish tiles stacked three or even more deep to create the beautiful, rounded finish that an Asian structure traditionally needs to harmonize the work of man to the workings of heaven. It's not like the Japanese are religious, at least they say they aren't, but you can feel a certain spiritual quality in their every tradition. In modern things – very little. That is why modern Japan is so depressing to those westerners who come here searching for the quintessential; there are many sad and good books about this. "Looking for the Lost" by Alan Booth, is outstanding! There are vestiges of the old Japan everywhere, too. Japanese culture is resilient to a

degree that gives one some hope for the future. To me, it's not the cities, though: it is the countryside. Rural Japan, cut off from the fast life, the mad dash, and left behind – is this country's best hope for the future, I believe. But it is a strenuous affair, this fight for cultural survival. If you see culture embodied in the traditional way of living, (where else?) you may find the old-style houses of well-measured proportions the best symbol for the unique Japanese tradition of richness in restraint. A simple affair, such a house! A square hall to leave your shoes in, not too many rooms, a tiny kitchen, several narrow corridors, a toilet, a bathroom – that's it. All rooms and corridors are tatami. The kitchen might have a wooden floor, the bath is raw concrete. You want hot water in there, lots of it, and you want to freely splash it over you – so you don't want anything fancy or easily rotting to interfere with your bath.

A good house doesn't enslave its owner. It makes the owner, or renter, love it – over time.

I am describing our own house, of course, and have to admit it took us some time to get used to living in a draughty, chilly place like this. We moved in October 1st and caught cold in mid November, I seem to remember, not to stop sneezing and wheezing before April. A house like ours is impossible to heat in winter. For months we live inside a huge refrigerator. Wear warm clothes. Woolen hats in bed. There are no heating facilities other than portable stoves that warm your back, or your front, but never give you a really cozy warm room, and there is the ubiquitous 'kotatsu' of course, to slip into. A dangerous contraption, that one, though: once you feel so warm and secure wrapped in the huge blanket you disappear under, you are most likely to fall asleep. Only to wake up in the middle of the night cursing yourself. Off to bed into the freezing room next door! Out of bed is no fun, either, in winter. Fortunately, Mariko is an early riser and strong enough to withstand a couple of cold minutes before the stove will fire up. By the time I wake up she has long done her Yoga and the kitchen is nice and warm already. Summers are somewhat better. They are hot in Japan, very hot, and very humid, too – the old way of building admittedly can't make them drier, or cooler, but it gives you a chance to go without air conditioning. A modern house without air conditioning will just kill you. Our old rooms have high ceilings and earth walls that provide just enough insulation for us to sweat but not melt. Oh, summers are miserable, too, I have to admit! I am writing these sentences in December so I am a little nostalgic for summer. The good times in Japan comprise just a few weeks in spring and autumn; but, oh, how good those are. October, November – those are months so featherlight they make you dizzy.

People here used to contend they "lived with nature much more than westerners do" and I think they realized they suffered more than the Americans or Europeans they saw in movies. In the cities especially summers are almost unbearable. Incidentally this talk about "living with nature" is not heard much anymore as all around everybody but us has air conditioning by now, and people never lived with nature in the city anyway.

"Nature" here in Japan has its ways to make itself felt. Even if the mosquitoes and the unrelenting heat of those long summers, the typhoons of autumns and the rising seas in general don't faze city dwellers as much as the latest rise in value added tax, mother nature has some pretty sharp arrows in her quiver. We live precariously, here on the rim of the ring of fire. A truth the "friendly atom's" promoters of the late fifties and sixties chose to ignore. It was not easy to have the Japanese swallow the bait; good job, Mssrs. Nakasone and Shoriki! To name just the two foolhardiest of the lot. Both of them CIA assets to boot.

We'll come to these two once more, later, definitely. These two need to be in this report.

And the Pacific "Ring of Fire" I fell into? It is actually of horseshoe shape, open at the bottom, with an extension going through Indonesia towards India. Plate boundaries are where the action is! We float, mountains and oceans and forests and all, rather like the toppings on a pizza upon a deep, hot, molten rock mantle underneath the crust. Huge pieces of crust move constantly, bumping into each other,

sliding underneath or on top of each other just like ice floes on the surface of the Arctic Sea. Except these plates are a trifle larger. The Pacific Plate now is really, really large: and has this explosive rim. A list of volcanoes on that rim reads like a veritable “Who is Who” of volcanoes. Except for Kilimanjaro, Vesuvius and some others all the strangely poetic names of the fearful can be found there: Tambora, Krakatau, Fuji, Shasta, Popocatepetl, Chimborazo, Pinatubo and over 400 other active ones. In Japan alone there are more than a hundred from Abu to Zao. Adatara, Azuma and Bandai are in our neighborhood, as well as others. You couldn’t get away from a volcano if you tried. Bandai is the signature volcano of Fukushima Prefecture, overlooking Lake Inawashiro and the five-colored lakes it created when it blew its top in 1888 after a rest of a thousand years. This was a major outbreak, obliterating villages and killing hundreds in that scarcely populated area of our prefecture. The Yomiuri Shimbun rose to the occasion and carried the very first newspaper photograph ever in Japan, showing the ruined mountain. Fortunately Japanese volcanoes don’t interfere with nuclear power plants, we are told! And isn’t it considerate of them. I have an old snap showing yours truly smiling in front of a smoking heap that was only ten years older than he, the author, was at the time, but a lot taller: 398 meters, and growing. Whereas I am steadily shrinking. Funny thing I read: the formation of that sucker was kept a wartime secret for three years as a new volcano was considered a bad omen! And I thought the Japanese loved their smoky ones. I was deceived by the veneration Fuji-san receives, the holy mountain of the nation. To climb Fuji once: a saint. To climb it twice: a fool. Well, I am neither. I climbed Azuma, five minutes up a slope, the car parked roadside, and was underwhelmed. It stank, and there was nothing to see except some yellowish stuff around the large hole in the ground at the bottom of the crater ridge we circumnavigated in a couple of minutes. It had last erupted ten years before and there was nothing to see. Something entirely different was the trip to Aso. Aso, tucked away in the mountains of Kyushu, is a picture book plain of twenty kilometers in diameter. It has villages, a train line and all you want in it, and it also is the caldera of a huge, huge ancient volcano. A caldera! The completely flat inside of a crater. This fertile plain is ringed by mountains, one of them, believe it or not, an active volcano. Your grumpy neighbor raining dirty white ash on the station building. There it sat and retched, rumbling, spewing smoke and making the earth heave like Mount Doom at the end of all things. Just a short bus ride from Aso station. It was scary even at the safe distance tourists like me were allowed to go. A beast like that teaches you respect, yes, sir, it does. And, to wit: what I saw was no more than a shadow, no more than the ghost of some ghastly thing long past. Fortunately! The last sigh of an expiring giant. A door to hell twenty kilometers across, it boggles the mind. Volcanoes and earthquakes, earthquakes and volcanoes. Facts of life on the “Pacific Rim”.

One sad thing about volcanoes is their attraction to the desperate. The most famous suicide volcano is Mt. Mihara on a little island south of Tokyo. Tiny Izu Oshima and its looming central mountain devoured more than a thousand young lovers and others in the years running up to the second world war, which started early for Japan: the first shots against China were fired at the Marco Polo Bridge in 1937. By then the authorities had mercifully but incredibly late barred entry to the one spot on Mt. Mihara where one could jump straight down into the fire. 904 people did just that in 1933 alone, following the example of a young woman called Kiyoko Matsumoto. Being goaded on by the media! The Yomiuri Shimbun, property of the omnipresent Matsutaro Shoriki reported in detail. It even had a cage lowered 415 meters down the crater the better to cheer you on: on your way down. Mass media were like that even before TV came along, but still it is revolting. Even then Shoriki’s paper claimed it perpetrated this stunt for the public good only – to prevent, not to promote. Just like the media of today. Well, sales were terrific! The Yumiuri Shimbun was always cutting edge – be it fanning adulation for the new emperor in the twenties, be it warmongering in the thirties, or be it ardently supporting the postwar LDP government and its dubious policies, especially the promotion of nuclear power. The Yomiuri Shimbun’s was the first voice to call for restarting the idled reactors of Japan’s bellyaching electric power companies, spring of 2011. So, here’s a disclaimer: I don’t like the Yomiuri, although I

neither own stock nor am involved any other way. This paper, circulation 12,773,241 in May 2015, down from more than eighteen millions some years earlier, continues to write in the spirit of Matsutaro Shoriki, villain of special proportions. Think Rupert Murdoch and Randolph Hearst rolled into one, and add plenty more juice. On the other hand, I have to admit to some personal involvement in the volcano business. During the glorious summer of 1984 Mariko and I hung out at Chuhei's just opened "Gallery Iwaki" right in the centre of Taira. The "Gallery" was the place Mariko had taken me to, that fateful June evening, and is the one place in downtown Taira that has a very special meaning for Mariko and me even now, when the original Taira "Gallery" no longer exists. Chuhei gave me the name "Yogan" right there and explained that the Japanese word "yogan" means "lava" in English. So! I tend to think of myself as a meek lamb, but there is apparently something smoldering under that surface. And the old "Gallery" now, rather its owner Chuhei Fujita – never gets proper credit in the media for giving "Cai-san", the renowned Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang to the world. Cai himself never forgot Chuhei and his old friends, though. "Team Iwaki" is active around the globe on Cai's behalf, if called for, and Cai is a frequent visitor and a constant contributor to Tadashige Shiga's project of planting ten thousand cherry trees on a slope overlooking the plains north of Taira. Anybody can sponsor the project in donating some money to plant a cherry tree there. Mariko did just that three years ago and her tree is a beauty. As for Cai-san: he lived right here in Yotsukura with his wife. In a little house on a hilltop overlooking the sea, an extraordinary place, fit for the struggling artist he was at the time: the house could only be reached on foot. I didn't even know he was there at the time. Our children were little, and I had so frightfully much to do. If only, if only I had known! Mariko and could be frightfully wealthy by now had I known this young, shy, totally unassuming Chinese guy's crazy gunpowder art hung in the "Gallery" for one week in 1987 would later be worth millions and millions. Of dollars.

Well, "lava" is my middle name, then... even if the outside is a bit crusty by now.

Earthquakes and volcanoes. Cai's first big project, the mother of all his fireworks installations,

"Signals to the Extraterrestrials" I did not even care to watch, though. It was cold, and I was busy. Leon was a baby in diapers and May a little difficult. No time for luxuries! Our young family needed all the free time, however little, daddy had. Mariko, of course, carried the main load. I carry the regret and go on to make a living the traditional way. I work. Was born in the year of the horse, in case that says anything to you?

A large group of volunteers had somehow made a mile-long rope with a core of gunpowder, what else, in the winter cold of an unheated warehouse. The floating rope had been towed out some short distance to sea from Yotsukura port, and, all stars aligned just right, the fuse was lit and the rope was fired. Smoke rose and flames shot up into a late afternoon: the signal had been given. Did the extraterrestrials receive it? We will know some decades from now, at the earliest, unless there really is intelligent life on Jupiter's moon Europa. Poseidon, easily angered god of the ocean, for one, seems to have smiled on Cai's offering. Poseidon is also, as the old Greeks thought, the one who shakes the earth in his wrath. Fire and smoke, storms, trident and earthquakes: throw in the occasional tsunami – and you're set. Which brings us back to the story. Yotsukura fared comparatively well in both quake and tsunami!

Nature has her ways, and I felt that she had been kind to us when I saw our house standing and the roof intact. For years to come, even now you occasionally see them, blue tarps strung across housetops would be all over Fukushima. Carpenters and roofers have had few holidays these last years. The ill-mended door in our wooden fence, yours truly is an avid but rather poor carpenter, stood wide open and I rushed through it to find the kitchen door just as open; let's agree on that. It's only five or six hurried steps across the tiny yard where Mariko hangs her laundry into the house. On your right, if you come in as I did, you find a shed and a handmade red table in front of it. All made of bamboo, a very special present from a long lost friend, it has, although on its last legs, outlasted many rainy seasons already.

On your left hand you have a splendid view onto our lawn: a rather untidy one. When we moved in, that space was just a dirty square of sand and grit the March wind would blow into your face, and I just can't quite convince myself it will be like that again this time next year: a juicy piece of real estate. Waiting for a buyer. Well, it is green now. Very green indeed. I hate lawn mowers more than anything, and Mariko loves a good jungle, so we are quite happy to let things grow. Up to a point. Of course after 2011 everything got out of hand, who would want to weed a garden first poisoned and then condemned? We were given notice, victim of victims, but no more of that right now.

Right on the corner, at the beginning of a short path from kitchen to grassy green there grows the rose my mother gave to us more than twenty-five years ago. So little remains. She loved roses but had little luck with them, in general. I am happy to think she would be pleased her gift is prospering here, ten thousand kilometers from its old home. We will take that rose with us, that is for sure, wherever we may end up.

I didn't see much of what I describe here so lovingly on that day. I vaguely seem to remember the radio, installed under the kitchen table, blasting tsunami warnings full throttle, but can't be sure. It is probable, though. In the event of an earthquake there are a few things you do without thinking: one of these is to turn on the TV or, as we don't own one, the radio. We never had a TV. It is one of the few real achievements in my life of over sixty years to never have owned a TV – although, I have to admit, the internet “got me” much, much worse than the tube could ever have gotten me. Strictly speaking this is true only for the years after that March day. Before 2011 we resisted pretty well. Mariko is so much stronger than I am, in this respect as well, and much prefers the company of her cats to the soothing hum of the desktop computer I have become enslaved to. And not only to write all of this down. The “internet”, just beyond that screen – is a bottomless pit. A description I have heard before, haven't I? What was the context now, and what was it describing, then? What exactly?

Into the kitchen: nothing crashed on the floor! The fragile, beautiful cupboard we saved from its roadside fate when our Ogawa friend's old house was demolished, stood! Its antique glass sliding doors had not fallen out, all the priceless pottery in it, even the eggs we store in it just as they are delivered to our house each Tuesday were fine: it was a small miracle. One I did not even notice that afternoon. It took me months to understand why neither the cupboard nor any other piece of tall furniture but one had toppled. The reason is probably they are all, save the fallen one, aligned roughly east to west. The quake shook us from somewhere near east and thus moved our furniture up and down its long axes. That fact explains how our nice collection of pottery escaped its death in tears. Mariko's tears.

Through the kitchen into the next room, some things on the floor, shards of glass, be careful (had I taken my shoes off? I wish I could remember!) and on. Passing the bathroom. My study – oh, that was a lovely mess now! The shelves had happily shed some of their load. I love books and have far too many of them. The floor was covered ankle deep in fallen literature and other stuff, a cheap clock in the midst of it all: its batteries had been knocked out in its fall off the shelf and that way its frozen hands indicated the time of the quake. I took a photo later to document this! The only problem: that clock was never set exactly, so as to give me an extra minute or two as I tended to be late for appointments. Well, this was one appointment I certainly was not late for, just as nobody is late for their own final appointments, right? Almost 20,000 people were only moments from their last while I did not give the room more than a quick glance.

Same with our storage room, the part of the house (along with the study which is really the office and corporate headquarter of the small import business my wife and I have been running for more than twenty-five years now) belonging to our beautiful, beautiful wooden figurines. Just pulling the sliding door open a hand-wide showed me enough. I saw and heard glass. Shattered glass in front of me. Push back the door, don't go. Turn back, go into the living room in the center of the house. Where I am

writing this. No big damage at all! The bedroom, the children's sunny space at the south end of this establishment – not really a room, rather a widened corridor, but the sunniest place here by far – alright, no damage either.

Did I mention already that we live in a far eastern palace of seventy-five doors? There are only four windows, admitted, and five peepholes out toilet and dead ends in the corridors that almost surround everything. A house inside a house, a friend recently had it spot on. I used to count our doors in sleepless nights, as some people would count sheep. As I never really reached the end of this tally “seventy-five” is not much more than a, rather good though, approximation. The living room I write this in alone has fourteen of them, to put your doubts to rest. I can't swivel my head as I'm not an owl, despite my sleeping habits, but I see most of them in front of me, and out the corner of my eyes left and right. The room is practically nothing but!

There are five segments of solid wall, too. “Segments” refers to the ninety centimeters' space between the wooden posts that are the frame of the house. Of those there are sixty-four, more or less. You can see I had many sleepless nights over the years! To put my mind to rest once and for all I finally drew up a floor plan of our humble abode, seventy-five doors give and take and all, but where is a good plan when you need it? OK, here is one. “A man, a plan, a canal: Panama!” Nice palindrome, but, well, awful plan in reality, Monsieur de Lesseps. Did the Americans improve on the original? A man – a plan. Sounds good when it was so awful.

Doors here come in three varieties, to give you an idea. The flimsiest are called “shoji”. They are the Japanese doors of the Hollywood movie. Think of James Bond, “You Only Live Twice”, my favorite, of course. Remember station chief Dikko Henderson standing far too close to the paper doors? Just as he was about to convey some vital information? A beginner's mistake, really. He could have avoided the knife so easily.

We here have harmless ones, lattices of cedar wood covered with white paper which the good Japanese housewife will soak and easily pull off every couple of years to renew. Every couple of months, should small children be around. I vividly remember our baby daughter poking her tiny finger through one of these neat squares after the other...! Renewal is best done on rainy days to allow the glued-on paper strips, width thirty centimeters, to contract to virgin smoothness later. Those shoji doors usually have a central glass pane so you can see what's cooking on the other side. The white paper is semi translucent and at times, with a certain light, pure magic. The second type of door grants a little more privacy to the occupants of the room on the other side. These are called “fusuma” and not meant to see through. A thin core of wood is covered with multiple layers of paper. The topmost layer, the one you see, will show certain traditional designs dear to the Japanese heart: wave patterns, pine trees, mountains.

From time to time, especially in case there are little children around, who have so much more freedom to explore and destroy than in any other country I have seen, these fusuma as well need repapering. A much bigger job, and best left to experts. Which I didn't know at the time, and valiantly bought several rolls of heavy fusuma paper only to find out this wasn't quite what I had expected. Somehow it got done. Not without gain! We found, a previous restoration no doubt, newspapers from the early nineteen thirties underneath the surface of one of those fusuma! That was the first solid information about the age of this house we got. The only one, so far, at that. It should be possible to find out when exactly Sumitomo Cement built this gaggle of company houses for the employees of their new cement factory in the then booming coal mining area beyond the old borders of civilization. There are no mines in Yotsukura, true, only tunnels and shafts reaching out far under the ocean floor, so I do not really know what brought Sumitomo Cement here. The housing project incorporated about twenty simple wooden houses originally, but only four remain as of today. What a pity. This could have been something of a museum, should have been preserved to show future generations how their ancestors toiled and lived.

Our family lives in a former vice president's rooms so we have more space and better materials than most of the other huts – had.

Both shoji and fusuma type sliding doors are arranged in sets of four. They run in two parallel grooves, nicely spaced so you can slide them in pairs of two right and two left to open a wide space in the center of this four-set. It is also extremely easy to remove all four of them in case you would like to connect two rooms: you just lift the door a little so it comes free of the bottom groove and pull it towards you at an angle. It will be putty in your hands. Within minutes you can open a whole house to the elements should you want to do so! And go back just as easily.

The third kind of door, or should it be French window, one to let the sun shine in, typically has an aluminum frame around its large glass panes. It is also set in fours, but is run on a thin rail protruding from the huge overall frame bolted with great precision into the side of the house. There is an additional rail for a mosquito screen, as well. Aluminum is a recent choice, of course. Those doors used to be wood and dark. We were quite happy to move into this place just after our landlords had had something fancy installed!

All measurements are standard. The esthetical satisfaction gained from contemplating each and every oh so humble Japanese home is derived, at least in part, from the overall design based on one simple unit of length and width, but unlike John Taylor's and Charles Piazzi Smyth's elusive "Pyramid inch" this basic unit is not to be contested. It is called "tatami" by the cognoscenti. All rooms in an old house, except kitchen, bath, toilet and hall, have tatami floors of various sizes. There is variation, but no willfulness. You can't have a room of fourteen square meters however much you'd want one. It is eight tatami, be content and shut up already!

Eight tatami mats are a teeny little bit short of thirteen square meters, and surprisingly spacey if you have little furniture and sit on the floor. Just sitting on the floor makes a room so much larger! Try it! It is like going back to being five years old, to the time when Christmas trees were tall. A room can be one, two, three tatamis or more. Usually it will be either four and a half, six or even eight. Eight tatami of about 90x180 centimeters, give it two or three "centimeters", although Napoleon and the French metric system did not quite reach Japan and so the Japanese craftsman uses measurements much like inch and foot to this day (without mixing them up to send a spacecraft to a hard and fiery end instead of having it orbit the Red Planet) to make a good and proper room. We mercifully stick to centimeters here. Anyway we find houses built somewhat like Lego homes. The Lego blocks of the early sixties, that is: rather few types available. Height of your typical home varies as long as it is one floor. Few exceptions allowed. Colors will be muted, and thank you for choosing the standard model! Come again in a hundred years. Reader: should you think I'm a little too enthusiastic – you're probably right. Forgive me.

There are far too many houses in Japan not worth half a line of praise, of course! Houses built only for the wrecker. There's millions of them, true. But then, there is only this one humble house we call home. It is so hard to give up a place that has sheltered you for thirty years, that has seen your wife young, your children grow and yourself become a man. An honest little house that has survived earthquake, tsunami and Dai-ichi only to be put down like an old dog nobody loves: for profit's sake. That is what is driving Mariko almost crazy with worries these days. We just can't believe this is happening! Deep inside, we can't accept it. Up for sale? With no option for us buying it? Our home nothing but a piece of real estate. We'll have to take it.

Real estate is, to this day, measured in tatami sizes. Two tatami will give you one "tsubo" size, standardized legally at 3,306 square meters, and the price of one tsubo of land has unfortunately more than doubled in Yotsukura since 2011 with extremely unpleasant consequences for my wife and me but

brings us back to me opening and closing sliding doors on a certain Friday.

I shouldn't be dawdling here explaining the structure of a Japanese house to you, though! The tsunami is underway, and it is huge. What am I doing there, at all? Of course I am trying to save our valuables! I have grabbed a backpack in passing and stuffed it with some cash out of a certain no longer existing drawer, Mariko's few pearls, I wish this series of books could make us money to buy her more, our passports, bankbooks, and of course, the "hanko" seals! Hanko come in two varieties, and this will be enough before we start running, the everyday type and the officially registered one. Somebody affixes your official hanko, or "inkan", to whatever sales contract – and you are sold, however hard you might struggle to wiggle out of it. There is no wiggle room with the registered inkan.

So I was glad I had found everything in under two minutes' time, and, right, my good old Leica camera, and was out the backdoor just the way I had come in. Probably, very probably in shoes. The only time ever I, or anybody else wore shoes in these rooms! Okay, one very last thing to explain.

There are a few transgressions the Japanese have no patience with. Like blowing your nose in public. Or despoiling the bath tub, that is, bathing without having scrubbed thoroughly before. The worst thing to do in Japan is something else, however. – I mean, building nuclear plants shoddy enough to kill two thousand, latest count, to leave uncounted tens of thousand animals starving when their owners fled (I have seen things I would give much to forget; bones and hides in chains), to curse who knows how many children with thyroid cancer, to drive over a hundred desperate souls to kill themselves, and then endlessly covering up your foul play, all of that is no problem at all, really, Tepco, it's no big deal at all– AS LONG AS YOU REMOVE YOUR SHOES. There.

Well, what keeps me going on and on about such trifles. I am in hurry, the tsunami is already upon us – and, unlike me, who was lucky in his boundless stupidity to search for valuables, many of its victims died for just that same silly reason. You shouldn't look to save some silver shillings when your life is in danger: everybody would wholeheartedly agree to that, but, but, but, it is easier said than done. There was no precise information available. You just don't believe in a danger you have no way of understanding! You have been warned of tsunamis before, for sure. Actually you have been warned far too often! Mine may have been a case, in reverse, of the boy in the well known Aesop Fable. He cried "wolf!" so often nobody heeded his cries when the wolf finally came in earnest. We have had many tsunami warnings in the past, and were kind of inured to them, I think.

Japan being a very "regional" country I have no idea how people in the north, on what I call the "tsunami coast" with its inlets and Norwegian fjords, reacted, but we here south of Sendai, in Fukushima prefecture, never dreamed a tsunami would hit us that badly. It was squarely outside our range of comprehension. Should not have been, though: even apart from the event 1150 years ago a scientist from Kyoto University was scheduled to tell us about end of March 2011, what an irony, right here on the coast of Iwaki three people drowned in 1960. The great Chile earthquake Isabel Allende wrote about in her first novel sent a shockwave right across the Pacific Ocean. Tsunami waves are strange beasts; they are hardly felt in the deep, open sea, where many, like this last one, come into being. Huge chunks of Earth crust snap down, others up once the ever moving plates of planet Earth reach a certain point of no return and a huge amount of water is displaced should this happen under the ocean floor. You can easily create your own tiny tsunami in a cup of tea, you know. Tsunamis travel at almost the speed of a passenger jet plane – think a long line of billiard balls that touch and so instantaneously transfer the minutest push – until they reach shallower waters where they will slow down and pile up at the same time. Pile up very high at times.

The only real tsunami we experienced prior to 2011 was the one of February 2010. The quake in Chile was an M 8.8 and caused the water to rise close to three meters there. The authorities here took the

super cautious approach Japan is famous for, except when nuclear power plants are concerned, I don't know why I bring this up again and again, and a huge thing was made out of it. Maybe it was a practice run for police and other emergency personnel, at any rate we were advised to leave our homes before expected arrival time. Not more than advised; everybody knew this was some kind of a dry run, but still sirens blared all around and announcements were made ceaselessly. We have this wonderful system of loudspeakers all over the coast, and what a nuisance it is at times. The authorities are even more careful after March 2011, of course, than before, and there have been several sleepless nights listening to that friendly but hateful disembodied voice warning us at intervals that a tsunami was on its way. Expected arrival time: 4:12 am. Expected height: 30 centimeters, in places even higher than that. On and on we were warned, even an hour after the time the tsunami hit the shore the damned speakers wouldn't let off. On a stormy night of tall surf you wonder, though: how much damage might a tsunami of thirty centimeters cause? Especially when you know full well from experience, as we do now, that an M 7.7 earthquake in Papua New Guinea won't hurt you any in Japan.

Those bullhorns each 500 meters or so! If only they had worked March 11. It is sad but true they did not function in Yotsukura on that day. Could they have made a difference? Nineteen lives were lost in Yotsukura, nineteen out of how many living near the sea? Five hundred?

The Chile quake of 2010 made us curious. We were in an adventurous mood. It was a Sunday and our son Leon was with us. We discussed where to go in order to have a good view of the so tirelessly announced show, got in the car and drove to Hisanohama, the village north of here. Just out of Yotsukura we found the N 6 teeming with police who stopped all traffic as the road is very close to the water there, indeed. No problem. It was fun outwitting them, fun being smarter than all the drivers who were turned back: having been a local for such a long time helps you find ways around some of the trouble you encounter.

We got to exactly the spot we wanted to go to. Stood there on a recently built hillside bridge high over the village of Hisanohama – and waited. Nothing happened. Alternating between car and curb we spent most of two hours there seeing absolutely nothing. The tsunami was clocked in at all of twenty centimeters or so. The car stereo informed us dutifully, for hours on end, on similar tsunami heights all along the coast. We saw nothing: we could not see into the future. Had we stood in that place a year and twelve days later we should have had a vantage point to see Hisanohama first burn and then be swept away. A year and twelve days after that cloudy Sunday dark comedy turned to tragedy.

Was that last Sunday of February 2010 on my mind as I packed my things, conscious of my danger but not panicky at all – that is to say, NOT conscious of the danger I was in? Never.

I was lucky to be at a great enough distance from the sea, that's all. The man who came to live in the house next to us, as the former occupant, granny Ishikawa, never came back after March 11, was also lucky. Even luckier than I was. His house had been near the beach. He followed the evacuation orders only to remember something important he had left behind: 'oh, shit'! Ran back and got caught in the water. Got stuck beneath something heavy. Fought to tear himself loose – and, at the last moment, did. The water had been up to his breast, his wife told us. He himself never spoke about it. Men in Japan don't speak so very much, except to their old chums, and obviously I was not one of those. What friendly people these two! Good neighbors until they went right back to their old place, a stone's throw from the sea. Built a new little house for themselves in the old place and are happy there once more. No hard feelings, mate! I just hope he is off his tranquilizers. We miss them, and also miss the veggies they gave us once the Geiger counters were a little lower in their clicking. "Here, a good friend grows them, and we couldn't possibly eat all these potatoes, onions, cabbages and leeks. Here you are! Homegrown! Eat!" At first we were a little wary... but the year not being 2011 any more we gratefully ate what Yotsukura provided. Radiation? We were wary. But we ate what we were given, and it was good. In

2013 people went back to eating local stuff. Foodstuff could by then be checked for radioactivity and the results were acceptable. With very few exceptions. We ate: many others did not.

But now, really, Giorgio, really, hurry up and get going to higher ground! There is a huge tsunami coming, man!! – One for the history books, although nobody here, at that point in time, had the faintest idea what was coming to hit us. “Out the door with you!!!”

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Thank you, gentle reader, for staying with me up to this crucial moment. Should you like to find out more about “Fukushima” and its consequences, as well as the further adventures of our unlikely hero Yogan Baum and his wife: stay tuned. There will be more to read, hopefully much more! The Yotsukura Diaries are a work in progress. There is no end to what I call the “Second Disaster”. I will continue to faithfully report on how I see it unfold. Japan is suffering! I just wish its pain were beneficial to others.

Yogan Baum

P.S. You might want to visit <http://www.yoganbaum.com> to get in touch. A recommendation of these pages to friends, or an online review, are highly appreciated! Thank you again.

Also, feel free to point out errors, please.

About Yogan Baum



“What brought you here?” is a question I was asked hundreds of times over the years. “Well”, I used to say, “the train, mainly”: which is not untrue. After a weeklong ride on the famed Moscow Peking Express of 1984 I rolled through China some more, went up in the air for the second time in my life, reached Hong Kong and took to the air again. I saw Philippine palm trees out of an oval window and here I was in Japan. The immigration officer looked into my wallet, then at my naivety, in despair and stamped my passport: “Welcome to Japan!”

The friendly Narita information girl, “moshi moshi”, charmed me and the green scented tatami in my hotel room made me feel at home instantly. I had arrived.

What made me leave my own country, then? Was it a love of travelling? When I was a child I spent many happy hours exploring maps. I loved the deep brown highlands of South America and, before all else, Tibet. Not Japan. Later on India was my dream destination – something made me veer off course and so I did not reach Bombay but Iwaki, Japan, instead. Was it Tony Scott and Hozan Yamamoto’s “Music for Zen Meditation and Other Joys” that hooked me? The magic of the Shakuhachi I could not resist. It conjured up pictures of a rural hillside in autumn, of wind rustling in leaves and mist rising from the valley. I felt at peace. I felt at ease in the eerily spine chilling strains of these strange sounds.

Did I find that hillside, then? That peace? As for that hillside, I haven’t found it yet. Could it be my present state of being in limbo, between loss and hope, will lead me towards the light I once had a glimpse of, in a lost world far, far west of here?

Not a hillside in autumn – a family was what I found in Japan! A wife. Children. A whole, new, unexpected, wonderful life! I worked hard and learned to be a husband and a father. Our life in the small fishing port of Yotsukura, Iwaki City, was as happy as could be. People were good to us, and we tried our best to be responsible. All foreigners are outsiders, yes, but being on the outside of things has its advantages, too. Opening my soul to the near vastness of the Pacific Ocean and the night stars high above gave me space to breathe: there was nothing much I missed.

Life changed dramatically on and after March 11, 2011. We were spared in many ways: the earthquake did not break us, the tsunami stopped short of our street, and the triple meltdown of the ruined Dai-ichi

nuclear power plant 20 miles north of here miraculously came to a halt somewhere below the crippled plant. Thanks, mainly, to the courage of a man called Kan. Where and in what state it is, and how to deal with it, is absolutely unresolved. It is the black heart of Fukushima.

Life changed all the more as it went on as if nothing had happened. This, the second catastrophe, is the real one, I now think. This country was spared and squandered its chance to rise out of the ashes: the old guard was too strong. We are in decline. We suffer and there is no end in sight. Japan could have contributed to a better world; it didn't. Fukushima's tears could have watered the seeds of a better future; they were not allowed to. This is bitter. In simple language, English not being my mother tongue, I'll try to tell the sad story of defeat as it unfolds in one man's, one family's struggle. I tell it to honor those who suffer in silence. The old. The children. The uninformed. The victims.

I do not claim to be uninvolved in my report on life twenty miles from ground zero. "Ground Zero" it is, how ever often you will hear that "it was just an accident". This is a lie nobody should accept. I do claim to be completely honest in showing you, reader, how human hubris, as exemplified in the recently exploded dream of "unlimited energy, for free!", blighted all existence so close to the shore. Life is precious. It is fragile. We have to treasure it if we want to survive. "Life is an ocean", a song says, "but it ends", too. We are stewards, not kings.

Other books by Yogan Baum

The Voice of FUKUSHIMA – A CRY FROM THE HEART continues with those upcoming releases:

Ground Zero 02: Tsunami and Worse

Ground Zero 03: Home but Home no More

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