2:46 p.m., Friday, March 11, 2011: an earthquake centered off the Sanriku coast near Miyagi, 9.0 on the Richter scale. At Mito, in Ibaraki, the shock is just shy of magnitude 6.

1.
Yamanoue no just as I am explaining
Okura no uta o a poem by
tokioreba Yamanoue no Okura
yururu kyōtaku my desk starts shaking
kishimu kyōshitsu the classroom creaking

2.
yokoyure no the room reels sideways
nochi no hageshiki then jolts violently
tateyure ni up and down
taetsutsu kyōshitsu no I keep my footing and slide open
tobira o hiraku the classroom door
3.
“tsukue no shita ni shouting
atama kakuse” to “get under the desks
sakebiori and cover your heads right now!”
warau seito o I bark at
shikaritobashite the laughing students

4.
guraundo we are ordered
hinan no shiji ga to evacuate the building
todokitaru and head for the playground
kyōshitsu ni mau white dust fine as powder
shiroki funjin dances in the classroom

5.
“uwabaki de when we reach
iin desu ka” to the fire escape
toikakeru one of the boys asks
seito to hijō “is it really okay to go out
kaidan ni deru in just our hallway slippers?”
6. “hitokurasu danno niretsu” to “each class, form two lines--
danjo o dasu one for boys
shij o dasu one for girls”
tsumetai kaze ga an icy wind
ho no sasarimu stings our cheeks

Same day, 3:15 p.m., another earthquake centered off the coast of Ibaraki, magnitude 7.7.

7. guwan-guwan to GONG! GONG!
hij o kaidan the fire escape
narihibiki bangs against the building
denshinbashira ga utility poles
furafura to suru sway like drunks

8. “t oka no osore ga arimasu “careful
kiken desu the building could collapse!
guraundo ch o ni it’s dangerous
yotte kudasai” make your way
to the center of the playground”
9.
“gakezoi ga jiware shitemasu”
“the bluff is sheering off”
gakezoi wa kiken desu kara
the bluff is dangerous—
hanarete kudasai”
please stay back”

10.
v no ji no tairetsu o kumi
aligned in V-formation
tonde yuku a flock of swans
hakuchô ga miyu appears
nishi ni mukatte flying away
headed west

Around 5:00 o’clock, we decide to move to the temporary shelter.

11.
kyôkasho to pushing past
nôto pasokon piles of textbooks
fumiwakete and laptops
shokuinshitsu no I make a path into
naka ni iritari the staff room
12.
rokkâ no from the locker
nakano miyage no I grab
kukkii to tea bags
kócha o tsukami a gift box of cookies
kóto o haoru I throw on my coat

13.
hinan kaishi no at the signal to
aizu to tomo ni take shelter
arukidasu a hundred students
seito hyakunin set off into
yûyami no naka the darkened evening

14.
shari-shari to crunching through
garasu no hahen shards of glass
fumishimete we trudge carefully
airo o nukete along a narrow alley
sokudô ni deru and come out on a side street
15.

hôkai seshi  
from a doghouse

minka no niwa no  
in the garden of

inugoya no  
a flattened house

ippiki no inu  
a lone dog

kanashige ni hoyu  
howls mournfully

16.

gasu no ka no  
we make our way along narrow streets

tadayou roji o  
where the odor of gas

susumiori  
hangs in the air

danjo niretsu no  
the neat lines of boys

tai kuzuretsutsu  
and girls drift apart

17.

shingô no  
at the intersection

kieta jûjiro ni  
traffic signals are out

tachidomaru  
we come to a halt

kinkyûsharyô  
as a single ambulance

ichidai ga sugu  
passes by
18.

yûyami no it’s evening
jûtakugai o the smell of gas envelops
tsutsumikomu the streets of darkened houses
gasu no nioi ni we choke on the fumes
ikutabi mo musu again and again

19.

usuyami wa twilight deepens
kurayami to nari into pitch dark
haru no yo no above us
zujô ni ichibanboshi ga in the spring night
hikarinu the first star shines

20.

“dosoku nite I bow to the volunteer
o agari kudasai” who welcomes us politely
keigo nite “please come right in
kataru shokuin ni no need
atama sagetari to remove your shoes”
21.

hiete yuku the gym floor
taiikukan no is getting colder
furoâ ni a crowd
suwarikomitaru of people
hito amata ari has already settled in

22.

danbô mo a gym
shômei mo naki with no heat
taiikukan no light
rajio nyûsu no only the voice of the radio news
koe nomi hibiku echoes

23.

chinmoku no in silence
naka de honbu o we fashion a makeshift headquarters
tsukuriori placing folding chairs
paipu isu maruku around and around
maruku narabete in a circle
24.

makkura na
in the pitch dark
taiikukan ni
gymnasium
todokitaru
someone delivers
misutâ dônatsu
Mister Doughnuts--
yaku sanbyakko
about three hundred

25.

“konban wa
“this could be
nagaku naru kamo
a long night
shirenai yo
everyone
narubeku minna de
huddle together
katamatte ite”
as much as you can”

26.

“hada to hada
“the closer we are
yoseau hodo ni
skin to skin
atatakaku
the warmer we’ll be
naru kara minna
so everyone
jitto shite ite”
stick tight together”
27. 
| tazunekishi | a seventh grade boy |
| haha ni dakitsuku | clings to his mother who |
| ichinensei | came looking for him |
| danshi no senaka | I watch his figure |
| yami ni kieyuku | disappear into blackness |

28. 
| imôto o | from a former student |
| hikitori ni kishi | who’d come to |
| sotsugyôsei yori | take his little sister home |
| tsunami hassei no | we hear news of |
| shirase kikitari | a tsunami |

29. 
| “kaigan de | “my dad was |
| chichi ga sagyô ni | helping out there |
| atattemasu | on the waterfront |
| futari shinda to | I heard that |
| kiite imasu ga…” | two people died” |
30.
kurikaesu even the voices
yoshin no tabi ni of those crying out
wakiokoru startled by each and every
koe mo shidai ni aftershock gradually
hette yukitari fall off

31.
kin-kin ni I’m gnawing
hieta dōnatsu a stone cold doughnut
kajiriori the sweet taste
choko no kanmi ga of chocolate
kuchi ni hirogaru fills my mouth

32.
kyōin de the teachers
kata o yoseai huddle together
katari au and talk about
rinkai jiko no what happened the day
ano hi no koto o there was a nuclear accident\(^1\)

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\(^1\) On September 30, 1999, there was an accident at the nearby uranium re-processing plant in Tōkaimura—the second of two widely publicized toxic events at that plant. “Aoi hikari” (Blue flash), Tanaka’s sequence of 29 tanka on the 1999 Tōkaimura accident is included in *Natsubiki* (2000), the poet’s first collection of poems.
33.
“ほしなわ
めにめないが
じしんなら
わかりかんな”と
つぶやいており
at least you know”

34.
yoshin nochi
あとはきかん
yoshin no fukaki
黒い深い
yami no naka
のあのうきかん
pettobotoru no
共有する
mizu o wakeau
プラスチックの水

35.
“わたしだい 귩이체
ですから”と
sukuwatatto
one of the teachers
hajimeru kyōshi
starts doing
oritari
deep knee-bends
36.
shukushuku to the temporary shelter
hiyuku rinji is freezing
hinanjo ni softly, solemnly, it echoes
waga ko o sagasu the voice of a parent
koe ga hibikinu seeking a child

37.
daiben no pouring in
afureshi benki yori from a backed up toilet
nagarekuru the stench of shit
ben no nioi wa floods
hinanjo ni mitsu the shelter

38.
gozen reiji at midnight
mawashinomi suru we pass around
ki no nuketa some bottled cola
kôra no aji ga that’s gone flat
kôchû ni mitsu the taste of it fills my mouth
39.

konban no in the gleam of
yakei haichi o flashlights
kimete yuku we start making
kaichû dentô no arrangements for
akari no naka de tonight’s watches

40.

yonhon no dividing the four
kaichû dentô flashlights among us
wakeaite we step out
jin to hietaru into the school grounds
kôtei ni deru chilled to the bone

41.

kurayami de in the pitch dark
neiki o tatete the frozen midnight air
nemuriiru envelops the sleeping
seito o tsutsumu students, their
yowa no reiki wa quiet, rhythmic breathing
42.

yogoretaru  stained
shinbunshi nimai  newspapers, two sheets
makitsukete  wrapped around me
nemurenu yoru no  I lie sleepless
soko ni fuseori  in the dead of night

43.

yami no naka  I sense someone
yori chikazuku  draw near me
kehai kanjiori  out of the darkness
gozen ichiji no  it’s one a.m.
isu ni suwarite  I’m sitting in a chair

44.

“keitai no  “my cell phone’s
dengen kireta” to  gone dead”
fuangaru  I tell the anxious student
seito ni yoake o  let’s just wait
matō to tsugeru  till day breaks
45. nanajūnimei no inochi ga jin to hiete yuku taiikukan no kurayami no naka

the lives of seventy-two people are freezing in place in the utter darkness of the gymnasium

46. nemurezaru seito no kao no hanamizu o saigo no tisshu de nuguitoritari

a student can’t sleep his nose is runny I wipe his face with the very last tissue

47. zan-zan to hoshi no kagayaku gozen niji ume no kaori ga kaze ni tadayou

brilliantly they glitter the stars at two a. m. scent of plum blossoms drifts on the wind

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2 With the permission of the author, we have transcribed “tesshu” as the more standard Romanization “tisshu.”
March 12 (Saturday), just before dawn, relief supplies arrive from the City of Kôfu.

48.
“haikyûyô out of the darkness
kurakkâ wa a relief worker
hitori ikko desu” instructs us
kurayami no naka “one ration of crackers
shokuin wa tsugu per person”

49.
kanpû ni hunched
mi o chijimetsutsu in the cold wind
hakumei no I look up to find
sora o mitsumeru the sky tinged by pale light
asa o kanjite and sense morning
akanesasu  
glowing crimson

asa no hikari ga  
the piercing light of morning

afurekuru  
 begins to flood

higashi no sora ni  
the eastern sky

kumo ga tanabiku  
its trailing wisps of cloud

3 Akanesasu is a poetic epithet (makurakotoba) associated with the words for “sun” or “day” (hi, hiru), and “lavender” (murasaki, a word that refers to both the color and a plant used as a source for purplish dye). Akanesasu combines the meaning of “red dye” (akane, a red dye source), and the verb sasu, which can mean “to pierce”—as the red light of dawn pierces darkness—and “to permeate,” as dye permeates or tinges cloth. The epithet akanesasu appears frequently in tanka from the very earliest periods, including the poetry of the Manyôshû (see introduction, n. 3).

4 The poem’s closing image of clouds trailing in the east echoes the well-known opening lines of Makura no sôshi (The Pillow Book, late 10th century), where author Sei Shônagon epitomizes each of the four seasons, beginning with spring: “In spring, the dawn—when the slowly paling mountain rim is tinged with red, and faintly crimson-purple clouds trail in the sky.” Meredith McKinney, trans., The Pillow Book (Penguin, 2006), p.3 (translation modified).