

3/11: Temporary Shelter

(3.11 *Rinji hinanjo*) (2011)

Written by Takuya TANAKA (b. 1971)

Translated by Edith Sarra and Yasuko Ito Watt

Winner of the University of Chicago William F. Sibley Memorial Translation Prize, 2014

Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011, popularly called “3/11,” people across Japan—amateurs as well as professional poets-- responded to the triple disasters by writing poetry. Newspapers turned their weekly *tanka* and *haiku* columns over to an enormous communal outpouring of verse in various forms. Many of those writing were amateurs, not professional poets--ordinary people directly affected by the disaster, as well as those who had only witnessed it via horrifying media images. That so many should turn to poetry in general and *tanka* in particular in the face of public trauma is perhaps not so surprising. *Tanka* (short poems) have occupied a central place in Japanese literary history since the tenth century, with origins dating back to Japan’s earliest written texts. Known in pre-modern times as *waka* (song that harmonizes, or Japanese song), the form’s genius lies in its evocation of discrete moments of heightened response to external stimuli. *Tanka* typically correlate images drawn from nature or human society with glimpses of an inferred emotional landscape. They are extremely brief, though not so short as *haiku*, a form they predate by many centuries. Composed of five phrases or *ku*, the *tanka*’s meter is defined by the number of sound units it contains, in a phrase pattern of 5-7-5-7-7, for a total of 31 syllables (as opposed to *haiku*’s 17). In both classical and modern times, *tanka* have often appeared in related sets—large, intricately organized anthologies representing multiple poets, as well as smaller collections and sequences authored by individuals.

“3/11: Temporary Shelter” is a sequence of fifty *tanka* written by school-teacher and prize-winning poet Tanaka Takuya (b. 1971)¹ concerning his experience of the Great East Japan earthquake in Mito, Ibaraki Prefecture. It chronicles a period of about fifteen

¹ Tanaka Takuya has been writing *tanka* seriously since the age of 16. Recognition of his work began early and has been consistent throughout his career to date. “Banka no kawa” (The River in Late Summer), a sequence of 30 *tanka*, received the 11th annual Tanka Poets’ Circle Prize in 2000. The sequence was later included in Tanaka’s first collection, *Natsubiki* (2000; Summer Threads), which received the 9th annual Nagarami Publications Prize, and the Ibaraki Prefectural Prize in Literature, both in 2001. The poet’s second collection, *Hitachimichi* (2004; Straight Eastern Road), received the Japanese Tanka Poets Club North Kantô Division Best Poetry Collection Prize in 2005. In 2012, the 17th annual Terayama Shûji Tanka award for best publication by a male poet was awarded to Tanaka for *Kumotori* (2011; Birds Flying Between Clouds), the volume to which the sequence “3/11: Temporary Shelter” provides a coda. Our rendering of the sequence and of Tanaka’s “Afterword” to *Kumotori* are the first translations into English of Tanaka’s work.

hours, from the afternoon of March 11 to sunrise March 12, 2011, recording the earthquake and countless aftershocks, the poet's guiding of 72 students to a public shelter, and the long night they spent there. The sequence proceeds as if in real time, re-presenting salient moments of the situation the poet confronted, not yet aware of lives lost farther north and the beginning of the toxic meltdowns at Fukushima. His primary aim was to "record as directly as possible" his experience of the disaster.² With the exception of the final poem, diction and syntax are strikingly simple. As a form of lyric reportage, the sequence subordinates verbal dazzle to the project of documentary narrative. Nonetheless, it is punctuated by poems in which images of arresting vividness momentarily halt narrative momentum. These interruptions impart an erratic rhythm that mimes, perhaps, the speaker's fear and anticipation of fear in the students he was leading, but also his irrepressible observation of signs of hope despite imminent chaos. Reading the sequence from beginning to end, the eye moves across its minor stops and graces, and its longer swatches of dark vigil to arrive at a vision of sunrise that kindles something approaching joy.

On that Friday afternoon, Tanaka was standing at the blackboard in a classroom of 8th graders, translating an iconic *tanka* by Yamanoue no Okura.³ The first poem in "3/11 Temporary Shelter" alludes to that moment and that poem, linking Tanaka's sequence to one of the earliest iterations of the *tanka* genre, a poem whose theme transcends time and place to implicate our contemporary predicament as human beings. It also commemorates his work as a teacher, a custodian of both cultural legacies and the fleshly legacy his students embody as children.

As with many works inspired by 3/11, the title's reference to a place that offers shelter only temporarily points to a Japanese tradition of writings about "impermanence" (*mujô*) that dates back to *Hôjôki* (1212; Record of a Ten Foot Square Hut), Kamo no Chômei's meditation on his several temporary dwellings and the ephemerality of all life. In his "Afterword" to the volume in which the sequence appears, Tanaka limns changes in his own relationship to the idea of impermanence and to nature—a process he began to become conscious of when he moved into a house of his own. He describes this transformation as a gradual awakening to what immediately surrounded him there. The past is literally embedded in the place, and the present swarms with life. Nearby fields conceal an ancient shell mound, its artifacts still being turned up by 20th century farmers. When Tanaka planted a garden and began harvesting his own food, his efforts attracted non-human inhabitants, a gathering he celebrates by exuberantly listing the variety of

² Tanaka Takuya, interview by Yasuko Ito Watt and Edith Sarra, August 9, 2013, Mito, Japan.

³ The poem appears in the *Manyôshû* (late 8th century; Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves), the oldest extant anthology of poetry in Japanese, long regarded as a foundational text in the canon of Japanese literature:

shirogane mo	silver, gold, jewels—
kugane mo tama mo	what do they mean?
nani semu ni	are they more precious
masareru takara	than the treasure
ko ni shikame ya mo.	our children embody?

vegetables the plot brought forth and the assorted creatures that feed on it. Distance from the prehistoric past is closed by the surfacing of prehistoric pottery shards and by the timeless human practice of gardening. Distance from the non-human present is also erased, as the poet dines on the same food with neighboring animals and birds. When the pastoral quality of that life was violently interrupted by the earthquake, he received an indelible lesson on nature's power and beauty, a vision imparted at a corporeal level, seared into his heart and mind.

Two poems register perturbations in the poet's belief that the disaster involves simply an earthquake, not also a nuclear accident; these poems underscore the actual slippage between "natural" and man-made disasters that occurred on 3/11. Tanaka's lyrical record of 3/11 thus quietly points to the fundamentally ecological nature of contemporary global crises, and speaks compellingly to a long conversation in world literature about humankind's relationship to nature. His account rectifies the reader's view of the place and proper scale of humanity within the world. Ancient kitchen middens are buried in the soil of 21st century kitchen gardens. Continental plates heave, and the earth tosses buildings like toys. Man-made boundaries dissolve: a line of swans flying away from the direction of the quake finds its analogue in two lines of boys and girls, shepherded by a teacher, picking their way carefully through the ruins of an otherwise ordinary suburban neighborhood. In the primacy given to a narrative about protecting children, "3/11: Temporary Shelter" also suggests the moral coordinates of our place in nature. Without preaching, it demonstrates our need to envision a more responsible mode of dwelling in the world, even as it reveals our ultimate subordination to nature, whose scale and splendor it makes powerfully tangible.⁴

⁴ Located on the periphery of the region most affected by the 3/11 disaster, the city of Mito is about 80 miles south of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant and approximately 155 miles southwest of the epicenter of the 3/11 earthquake. Mito suffered substantial earthquake impacts, but escaped the extreme tsunami damage that devastated entire seaside villages in northeastern Japan and triggered the radioactive contamination at Fukushima. However, a tsunami 17.5 feet high battered the coast of Ibaraki near Mito at the already ailing Tōkaimura uranium re-processing plant where additions to the seawall had been completed only two days before March 11. The Tōkaimura Daini plant has since been decommissioned, but not without reported toxic incidents, both before and after 3/11. See James M. Acton and Mark Hibbs, "Why Fukushima Was Preventable," *The Carnegie Papers on Nuclear Policy* (March 2012):18, carnegieendowment.org/files/fukushima.pdf and "Tōkai Nuclear Power Plant" *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, last modified 21 November 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=T%C5%8Dkai_Nuclear_Power_Plant&oldid=582668246.