

3/11: Temporary Shelter

(3.11 Rinji hinanjo) (2011)

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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 kyôtaku	my desk starts shaking
kishimu kyôshitsu	the classroom creaking

2.

yokoyure no	the room reels sideways
nochi no hageshiki	then jolts violently
tateyure ni	up and down
taetsutsu kyôshitsu no	I keep my footing and slide open
tobira o hiraku	the classroom door

3.

“tsukue no shita ni
atama kakuse” to
sakebiori
warau seito o
shikaritobashite

shouting
“get under the desks
and cover your heads right now!”
I bark at
the laughing students

4.

guraundo
hinan no shiji ga
todokitaru
kyôshitsu ni mau
shiroki funjin

we are ordered
to evacuate the building
and head for the playground
white dust fine as powder
dances in the classroom

5.

“uwabaki de
iin desu ka” to
toikakeru
seito to hijô
kaidan ni deru

when we reach
the fire escape
one of the boys asks
“is it really okay to go out
in just our hallway slippers?”

6.

“hitokurasu	“each class, form two lines--
danjo niretsu” to	one for boys
shiji o dasu	one for girls”
tsumetai kaze ga	an icy wind
hoo ni sasarinu	stings our cheeks

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

7.

guwan-guwan to	<i>GONG! GONG!</i>
hijô kaidan	the fire escape
narihibiki	bangs against the building
denshinbashira ga	utility poles
furafura to suru	sway like drunks

8.

“tôkai no	“careful
osore ga arimasu	the building could collapse!
kiken desu	it’s dangerous
guraundo chûô ni	make your way
yotte kudasai”	to the center of the playground”

9.

“gakezoi ga	“the bluff
jiware shitemasu	is sheering off
gakezoi wa	the bluff
kiken desu kara	is dangerous—
hanarete kudasai”	please stay back”

10.

v no ji no	aligned in V-formation
tairitsu o kumi	a flock of swans
tonde yuku	appears
hakuchô ga miyu	flying away
nishi ni mukatte	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
naka no miyage no	I grab
kukkii to	tea bags
kôcha o tsukami	a gift box of cookies
kôto 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.

hōkai 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.

shingō no	at the intersection
kieta jūjiro ni	traffic signals are out
tachidomaru	we come to a halt
kinkyūsharyō	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
taiikukan ni
todokitaru
misutâ dônatsu
yaku sanbyakko

in the pitch dark
gymnasium
someone delivers
Mister Doughnuts--
about three hundred

25.

“konban wa
nagaku naru kamo
shirenai yo
narubeku minna de
katamatte ite”

“this could be
a long night
everyone
huddle together
as much as you can”

26.

“hada to hada
yoseau hodo ni
atatakaku
naru kara minna
jitto shite ite”

“the closer we are
skin to skin
the warmer we’ll be
so everyone
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

attemasu

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 dônatsu	a stone cold doughnut
kajiriori	the sweet taste
choko no kanmi ga	of chocolate
kuchi ni hirogaru	fills my mouth

32.

kyôin de	the teachers
kata o yoseai	huddle together
katariau	and talk about
rinkai jiko no	what happened the day
ano hi no koto o	there was a nuclear accident ¹

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.

“hōshanō wa
me ni mienai ga
jishin nara
wakaru karane” to
tsubuyaite ori

I mutter
“radioactivity--
you can't see it with your eyes
but with an earthquake
at least you know”

34.

yoshin nochi
yoshin no fukaki
yami no naka
pettobotoru no
mizu o wakeau

after an aftershock
in the deep darkness
of another aftershock
we share
a plastic bottle of water

35.

“watashi, taiikukaikei
desu kara” to
sukuwatto
hajimeru kyōshi
oritari

“well, I'm
the athletic type, so...”
one of the teachers
starts doing
deep knee-bends

36.

shukushuku to	the temporary shelter
hieyuku 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
jîn 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

yoru 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

matô to tsugeru

till day breaks

45.

nanajûnimei no	the lives of
inochi ga	seventy-two people
jin to hiete yuku	are freezing in place
taiikukan no	in the utter darkness
kurayami no naka	of the gymnasium

46.

nemurezaru	a student can't sleep
seito no kao no	his nose is runny
hanamizu o	I wipe his face
saigo no tishshu de	with the very last
nuguitaritari ²	tissue

47.

zan-zan to	brilliantly
hoshi no kagayaku	they glitter
gozen niji	the stars at two a. m.
ume no kaori ga	scent of plum blossoms
kaze ni tadayou	drifts on the wind

² With the permission of the author, we have transcribed “tesshu” as the more standard Romanization “tishshu.”

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

50.

akanesasu	glowing crimson ³
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 ⁴

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).