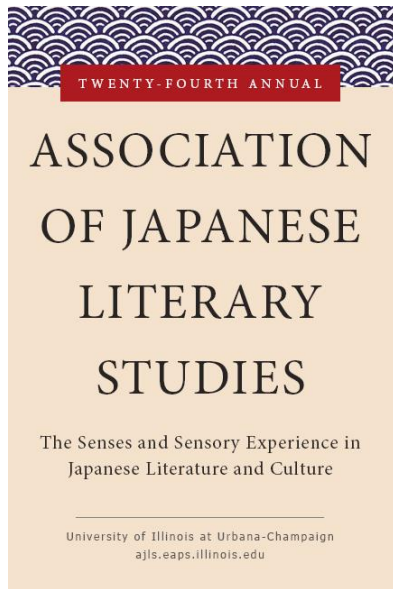


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**WHAT THE HORSES DO NOT KNOW:
FURUKAWA HIDEO'S *UMATACHIYO, SORE DEMO HIKARI WA MUKU DE***

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Furukawa Hideo's novel-length work, *Umatachiyo, Sore demo hikari wa muku de* (*Horses, Horses, in the End the Light Remains Pure: A Tale that Begins with Fukushima*) counts as one of the earliest, most powerful, and most important of post-3.11 documents.¹ There are a number of reasons for this. First, it registers the dissolution and disruption of sense that was wrought by the disasters. Next, it contemplates what the non-human actors, in particular the horses of the title, do in the face of such disasters, or, how they sense and make sense of such disasters.

Furukawa is one of the most powerful and energetic of contemporary Japanese writers. His writings, like his public reading/performances, come in torrents. They reflect his background in theater and stage. While Furukawa is from Kōriyama in inland Fukushima Prefecture and his extended family maintains farms in that region, Furukawa does not see himself as, nor does he want to be pegged as, a "Fukushima writer." For one, as he points out, "Fukushima" refers to a particular town and a nuclear power plant meltdown. But the earthquake, the tsunami, and indeed the radiation, affect a region much larger than either the prefecture or the town known as "Fukushima." Further, "Fukushima" is a semiotic world event that has not ended—it contains signs and symbols shared by peoples and cultures across the globe; it signifies an event bigger than Japan, as does "Hiroshima," or "Nagasaki." Further still, it is not contained by time. It is an evolving experience, an ongoing disaster that much of official Japan is actively trying to forget. It is not "past." Furukawa wants no part in the memorializing, no part in this forgetting, and no part in limiting these events as "past tense." This region and these ramifications comprise a present to be lived and remembered.²

I have referred to *Horses, Horses* as of "novel-length" because there are no entirely satisfying descriptors for this: it is not quite a novel, not quite a memoir, not quite a reportage. Much of it reads like fiction, like a novel. Nonetheless, many of the sections that read as though they are "made-up" in ways we expect of fiction are, to the Furukawa narrator—and to the actual Furukawa Hideo, I might add—as "real" and actual as the sights and scenes outside the car window on this road trip back to Fukushima. In other words, *Horses, Horses* is a sort of memoir, a sort of fiction, a sort of essay, something of a road trip; it is often chaotic and overwhelming.

It largely follows the trajectory of a road trip that Furukawa undertook with three others from Shinchō publishing company. Furukawa set off for Tohoku a few months after the 3.11 disasters. Further, we learn that on March 11, Furukawa was in Kyoto gathering materials for a novel. He was thus twice removed, that is, from the home that may or may not have been washed out to sea when reports flooded the

¹ Furukawa, Hideo. *Umatachiyo, Sore demo hikari wa muku de*. (Tōkyō: Shinchōsha, 2011). Translated by Doug Slaymaker with Akiko Takenaka. *Horses, Horses, in the End the Light Remains Pure: A Tale That Begins with Fukushima* (New York, Columbia University Press 2016).

² Private Conversation. June 15, 2015.

news channels. And while Furukawa bristles at being pegged a “Fukushima writer”, this biographical overlap adds depth to this work.

But the round trip narrative that forms Furukawa’s work becomes, as well, a continued exploration of location—namely of the Tohoku region. The path to that extended discussion is oblique, multidimensional, and multivocal. *Horses, Horses* opens with a confusion of sense and senses. It begins in *media res* of another novel; this marks only the first instance where Furukawa’s major 2008 novel, *Seikazoku* (Holy Family), muscles its way into the narrative. *Holy Family*, the *other* novel as it is often referred to, is a sprawling work that traces the convoluted story line of two brothers as they travel around the Tohoku region, the same region, that is, of Furukawa’s family lineage and of the 3.11 disasters, the “‘North’ plus ‘East’ [that] adds up to Tohoku.” *Holy Family* was completed and in print years prior to March 2011, but it was clearly still much on the mind of the author Furukawa. So insistent is it that the brothers of *Holy Family* appear as characters in *Horses, Horses*; indeed, one shows up in the back seat of Furukawa’s car as he makes his way north from Tokyo to Fukushima. The brothers’ story simultaneously traces the contours of Japan’s Northeast, of Tohoku, both in *Horses, Horses* and in *Holy Family*. This also marks the ways that the atmosphere of *Horses, Horses* is thick with multiple voices and challenging perspectives. These narrative complexities mark one way that it gestures towards magical realism in its conflation of temporalities and voices, of time and space. The work also reflects the fierce history of a rugged region in the shadow of the national, urban, and controlling capital of Tokyo. At that juncture, readers are led to think of William Faulkner or Nakagami Kenji. The brothers’ story of disaster and mayhem, which overlaps with violent histories of the region, weaves depth into the experience of the 3.11 disasters and their relationship to this area. One is inclined to draw parallels to Ōe Kenzaburō’s imagination of the rural, particularly in a work like *Man’en Gannen no futoboru* (*The Silent Cry*). Borrowing from Anne McKnight,³ one thinks of the “south” as a region and an identity, as an imaginative space for considerations of marginalization and defeat; this provides a provocative way to think about this non-Tokyo space. For a parallax reading from the American south one might look to the Kentucky fiction, *Silas House*.

Horses, Horses opens with a conversation between two brothers. We will soon deduce that the two brothers are actually characters from the other Furukawa novel mentioned above, but no matter:

There’s this scene:

An older brother questions his younger brother. He wants to know,

–What if there were this extraterrestrial, and the extraterrestrial is riding in a UFO, and this UFO is outfitted with a stereo system: what kind of music would you have the extraterrestrial play? Flying through the air, there, what would you want him to listen to?

The younger brother cannot answer, so he changes the question (1).

³ McKnight, Anne. *Nakagami, Japan: Buraku and the Writing of Ethnicity*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

The answer to this question will be “Strawberry Fields Forever” because it sets up a chain of associations, namely to the rugged shores of England—which cannot help but associate to an island nation at the edge of rough seas—that the orphanage called “Strawberry Fields” looked out on, and to another association which becomes the main point here, an association to the “UFO Friendship Center” that evidently really exists near Nihonmatsu, in one of the hardest hit areas of Northeast Japan. The point is the way that this work assumes a multi-dimensional universe that is apprehended, sensed, experienced, in multiple ways: to wit, a universe in which characters from a separate novel can have a conversation about non-human somethings—extraterrestrials—and that this conversation is audible and, indeed, sensible, and one step further, not a sign of madness. That’s just the first paragraph.

Further scenes record the assault on the senses that was 3.11. First there is the voice from outside that commands one—Furukawa—to go and see the site of disaster, and, by implication, to put himself in harm’s way, to risk exposing himself to radiation. What, and from where, is this voice? How, exactly, is it heard, apprehended? Second is the way that the effects of the disasters disrupt, overwhelm, and overload the circuits of, as it were, the visual capabilities of the narrator. The world Furukawa describes is one where sight is primary. Sound will also play an important role, but there is little here of taste, smell, or touch. Of the senses, eyesight is primary, almost exclusively so. Hearing is important, but only to hear the sounds of humans—and that primarily in the form of speech—and then to hear the sounds of animals, also as a sort of speech, communication, but also in absence: the quiet of a post-disaster landscape is often commented on, especially sounds of birds, or the lack of bird cries, or times when the caw of crows is the only sound in a wide windswept landscape, which underscores the uncanny environment of things that should not be.

At this juncture, of course, grows the uncanny awareness and freakiness, the horror really, of knowing that the most ominous aspect of these landscapes—the radiation—the thing that we should be fully attuned to and pay special attention to, the quality of this landscape that we know, rationally, cerebrally, via information gleaned through sight and sound, is precisely the thing that we have no sensory apparatus for. These qualities--the inability to sense radiation, the impossibility of humans to register a human-made thing, the way that it exceeds or defies detection by the senses—parallels the ways radiation defies comprehension by all living creatures. To hint at the conclusion: if this is true for the humans, who “know” of the radiation albeit not viscerally or physically, how much more is this so for the non-humans—namely the horses for which the region is so well known—who clearly sense that something is amiss, for whom the stress of displacement and trauma is revealed in loss of hair, or compulsive pacing, who therefore “know” that the world has changed on them, but cannot discern what it is that has changed and have no means to process the information. (The means is an important and oft-used word in this work, pointing not simply to the sensory organs, which exist, but the means to receive the information, which apparently do not.)

In all cases, it—the sensory information—is too much in quantity, and always moves too fast. Furukawa has always written and performed in a deluge of words which itself seems perfectly matched to the tsunami. Perhaps this is why Furukawa

was so well-tuned to take this on in response. I am never entirely sure where the actual tsunami resides in this work: in the surreal landscape wiped clean by the waves of water, the oppressive and unending video of surging water, or in the bulldozing rush of words that is Furukawa's style.

To return to the text, back to eyes: "Now the surface of my eyeballs is totally dried out. More like the dam has burst, actually" (3). This captures some of the irony and non-sense, the contradictory nature of so much of this: that there is both deluge and desert, both overwhelming and emptying, both too much water and dry barrenness, both drowning and thirst. There is both inundation and cleaning out; there is too much to process and too little means to respond. Senses and mental capacity are not up to the task. The sheer force of the triple disasters of March 11 threatens the dissolution of sense and sensibility. And if that is the situation of the humans, what of the non-humans?

Humans, at least, have an idea, some mental sense, if not a physical sense, of what has happened and what is, quite literally, "in the air." The ways that radioactivity is man-made but impossible for humans to sense is one of the driving horrors and incomprehensibilities underscored in this work. It leads to a loss of function: For example, while walking among the damage at a fishing area the four travelers find they are rendered speechless. The word they later put to it is "aphasia." With no words available, there are no means to express what is right there before their eyes.

This is catastrophe and disaster as limit experience, marked, for one, by the boundaries of sensibility. It is disaster as black hole, the whirling vortex that threatens to suck all into its middle, to wipe and leave blurred, to leave a smudge across the frame of existence, distort and render unreadable the lines of experience. And in so doing, in erasing all sense and sensibility, it eradicates any confidence we might have in our senses. What we see and are experiencing seems impossible, seems to defy physics, the experience is surreal: the *experience*, contrary to any sense, of things that simply should not be: ships on roads, boats on schools, surging waves that could carry professional surfers through rice fields. And if that is the case, what does the breakdown of sense mean for us as human beings, what does it say about the embodied experience of the world? Among other things, it washes away the foundations of meaning and experience, collapses the pillars of identity. Moreover, what does it mean to the animals with a different play of senses—at least we assume they sense things differently. Or can they be calm in the face of it because they know and sense more, or is it perhaps because they know and sense less?

The point of Furukawa's title is the horror of not knowing, of not being able to sense: the horses of the narrative understand that important shifts have taken place in the world, but standing in the flawless and pristine light of a crisp morning, there is no way they can know, no way they can sense, the radiation that flows, like light, and threatens to melt all connections of sinew, bone, and muscle, threatens to dissolve any possibility of lineage and shared memories.

Furukawa is imagining this catastrophe as a wiping clean: a reboot, a restart, a re-set. The threat is not just the dissolution of sense, but the dissolution of the ability to narrate histories—and the history he has in mind is one driven by the bloody tales the region has to tell of humans, but also as the title leads us to expect, of horses,

especially, but also dogs, cows, and birds, which, like Furukawa's family, like the brothers of *Holy Family*, are all disrupted, share histories and parallel stories, have been pushed under or cut out by the centers of power, and all have now been displaced by this disaster. We encounter many of these varied characters in the opening scene: humans, the narrator, the extraterrestrials, and the brothers from *The Holy Family*, the sense of place signified by Tohoku. Much of this work is concerned with the unearthing, literally, and the re-telling, of histories. In that dimension, the stress and trauma experienced by the horses is one in a centuries-long history of trauma, narrated here in the moves from battlefield to battlefield, and the trauma of participation in battle. What the horses don't know about the present is made the more tragic by the comparison to what they do: the histories of the region. They carry within them the histories and narratives, marginalized, of this region. I will summarize these developments quickly.

We encounter the horses to realize that they are refugees from disaster as well, the horses bearing the stress of displacement on their bodies. They too have been evacuated. Non-human characters and non-human refugees alike are traumatized and scarred. Humans and horses alike share a history of being treated by the centers of power as instruments, peripheral, and not as full agents.

One of those stories is told by a white horse near the end of the narrative, which marks the beginning of a new storyline, one which is not completed in this tale. This is a tale that begins with history as remembered across generations of horses. A sacred horse from a shrine in Sōma, this region which has the character for horse in its name. This horse begins telling its story; it is a Sengoku era war horse, dispatched into meaningless battle, and retaining the scars of combat. The abandoned horse is now looking for food; avoiding humans; coming upon a cow stranded in an abandoned barn, the cow freed, into what should be a pastoral scene: horse and cow placidly eating in the pasture as the light falls around, light that nourishes the grasses, grasses that nourish these characters, the horse and the cow. This pastoral scene contains, of course, what the horses do not know: the ominous death that is all around them that they cannot sense. Rain falls and it is not cooling and life-giving; it is deadly. The light falls on a beautiful morning, enriching the grasses that will enrich the horses; it too is deadly. These are contaminated, haunted scenes, indeed, the very opposite of what they seem to be. The narrative continues:

About three kilometers to the east of this is the shoreline. The seabirds are calling. But nothing is dying. Death definitely exists, but in this moment, death is not at work. In this moment, at least, the ominous death is not at work (140).

“In this moment, at least”: Which is to say an ominous future portends, a future of stories yet to unfold. This pristine scene is beautiful: it is visible, sensible to the narrators and the horses, but the danger of it cannot be sensed, for there are no means to sense, to apprehend it. For Furukawa, this marks a beginning, a “ground zero,” for the stories and histories to come.