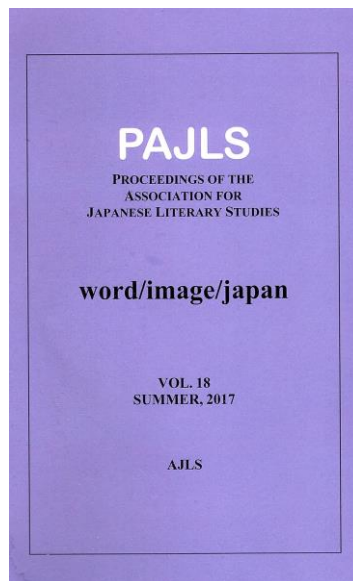


“When Words Fail”

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## WHEN WORDS FAIL

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Kawakami Hiromi may have been the first to write about a bear in a radiated zone, I am thinking of “Kamisama 2011”, but there are many animal stories: Furukawa Hideo’s horses *Umatachiyo*, *Soredemo hikari wa muku de*, Kimura Yūsuke’s post-apocalyptic cows and fish (*Seichi Cs* and *Isa no Hanran*), and, while tangential to 311, Tawada Yōko’s polar bears (*Yuki no Renshuusei*). I have been thinking about animals a lot after the triple disasters, thinking about the ways that Japanese novelists have been trying to get animal voices onto the page, thinking about how many of the representations are animal based. Coming at these texts from this side, the reader’s side, brings questions, none of them new: How does one represent the seemingly unrepresentable, be that the scale of disaster, or be that what animals are thinking? Post-3.11 fiction writers in Japan have brought these issues together: the experiments of fiction are employed to give voice to animals; those animals are used to narrate the disasters. It’s kind of a doomed project. This is just one way in which “words fail” to refer to my title.

It’s an ancient conundrum: how does one express the inexpressible? How does one represent what is, by definition, “unrepresentable”? This covers everything from the unknowable inside another human being’s head, to representing what might be going on in a non-human being’s head, i.e. an animal’s head, to the inexpressible of a disaster’s magnitude. Or, in the case of nuclear disaster like that represented by Fukushima (with resonances to Hiroshima and Nagasaki) how does one make visible the invisible—namely, radiation?

There are also the questions that accompany disaster and trauma: What art can one produce? How might such imagination be mobilized in the face of the inexpressible? Why even bother? I borrow from Randy Malamud, writing about knowing, and not knowing, animals (to reference the title of his chapter) who begins “The relationship between people and nonhuman animals is codified in social culture as hierarchical and fundamentally

impermeable: we are in here, they are out there” (3). Nonetheless, from that foundation, he proposes a possibility that strikes me as relevant and useful in this context: “The empathizing imagination can be enlisted to enhance the awareness of sentient, cognitive, ethical, and emotional *affinities between people and animals*” (9, *Italics original*). “Empathizing imagination” is key in this. He proposes “empathizing imagination” as a way to bridge the human/non-human divide; the suggestion being that it should not be impossible to employ the immense human brain powers at our disposal and imagine, if not exactly or precisely, certainly in a way that is compelling, and conveys with some level of believability, what another creature is thinking. That, after all, is what fiction does.

But the impossibilities abound, seem insurmountable. Imagining and representing disaster is impossible; representing the subjectivity of non-human beings is impossible, me imagining *your* subjectivity is impossible and I know some of you, but we keep working at it anyway. “Empathizing imagination” across the human/non-human divide provides a tool, offers a means, for representing animal subjectivities; similar work of imagination also suggests a means to represent the inexpressible of disaster. It seems to me that a number of these Japanese writers propose ways that imagination—representing animals—may also be the means to represent disaster.

Imagining and imaging disaster in Japan—to think more explicitly about the title of this conference—is done in various ways. Writers do it via words; Furukawa uses words in a maximalist way, writing in torrents, but it is not enough. Even with the deluge of words, it is not enough to get the “image”, to convey the images, to represent the experience. His frenetic writing highlights the anxiety of insufficiency: The frenzied trying, the incessant attempts, the compulsive nature underscores the impossibility of putting words to, and thus capturing, the “image.”

Furukawa’s *Horses, Horses* is an account of a Furukawa narrator on a road trip, with three others from his publishing company, back to Fukushima in the summer following the disasters. It is a fascinating, complex, convoluted, often inchoate, rich stream of narratives. It is reportage of what he sees. It is a tale of the area. *Horses, Horses* is also in interaction with an earlier

novel of his, *Seikazoku* (Holy Family) that is still clearly very much on his mind. So much so that one of the main characters of that earlier long novel appears in this work, takes up residence and propels the plot. The fact that this brother is a time traveler brings this tale—which Furukawa insists is all true—into the realm of magical realism. It is also a tale about the horses of the title, for they also get speaking roles.

But at this point I want to come back to a scene early in Furukawa's book that captures the image/word torrent: The Furukawa narrator is glued to the incessant flow of disaster footage on TV, on March 11. He should look away, he tells us, but he cannot; he should close his eyes, but he cannot; he should get some sleep, but he cannot. His eyes should be dried out from not being closed, but they are not; in fact they are pouring forth a torrent of their own, of tears. The Furukawa/narrator, born in Fukushima prefecture, based in Tokyo, and on March 11 in Kyoto gathering materials for a novel, should be writing, but he cannot, for he cannot stop watching the images, even as the shaking continues. He should perhaps be home with his family, but he cannot. Here are the images, here are the words, here is the Japan of our conference. How to get that reality onto the page. Is it even possible?

So why all these animals? Furukawa provides a key here as well. I quote from an interview he gave earlier this year: "Novelists can't write realistically about human society while they're inside it [...] so I write through the eyes of dogs, cats or horses—animals that depend on humans for their existence—to depict reality more accurately" (Kosaka). Furukawa's statement shows him to be compelled by a "reality" he wants to depict "accurately." This begs a philosophical question and poses a technical problem: not simply what is reality and how might we represent it, but, more to my focus, how does one give voice to animals?

The answer Furukawa suggested here is of holding a mirror before nature not to reflect what *is*, but to reflect what *might* be. Furukawa presents human and non-human beings which do not simply speak, but which narrate past and future lives. While his *Horses, Horses* "begins with Fukushima" (to quote the subtitle added in English), it is an animal tale. At novel's end we discover

that the horses have been given voice, and we find a landscape where horses (and cows and dogs) are central while humans inhabit the margins. Furukawa's title points to the horror of not knowing, of not being able to sense: the horses understand that shifts have taken place, that the grass they eat and the ground they stand on, that the light that warms them contains something that has changed—at least we imagine that we know that they understand this; by the same action—imagining that we actually understand—we know what they cannot fully know, that in the pristine light of a crisp morning that the radiation that flows, like light, and threatens every aspect of existence is less visible than the streaming light that brings beauty to this scene. But it also brings guilt, for this scene underscores how we humans have brought an inexplicable horror to a scene that should simply be beautiful. Further, it is a horror, radiation is, that we can't really describe to ourselves, much less to these animals standing in it. Telling animals about radiation—this would be impossible. But to my greater point: here is where the two vectors converge, for while Furukawa is imagining animal voices, the same “empathetic imagination” that allows it provides the tool to represent the trauma, but only to us human readers.

Or, as J.M. Coetzee has the son of his eponymous character Elisabeth Costello, in a cycle of brilliant tales explicating, among other things, a novelist's relationship with animals, a novelist's relationship with issues related to representing animals in fiction, that is, the novelist's son expresses this about his mother, on this point: “But my mother has been a man, . . . she has also been a dog. She can think her way into other people, into other existences. I have read her; I know her. It is within her powers. Isn't that what is most important about fiction: that it takes us out of ourselves, into other lives?” (23). There is pushback from his interlocutor, as there would be, who responds that since *he* is a man, and while he feels that she has gotten the man part accurate, it remains the case that his mother “inhabits her character as a woman does, not a man.” The same holds true, more so, of course, about the animal characters: the characterization of animals seems plausible and convincing, but who would really know?

Kimura Yūsuke gets at some of this in his *Sacred Cesium Ground*, a compelling tale that follows a woman travelling from

Tokyo to volunteer at a cattle farm known, in the novel, as “Fortress of Hope.” It closely aligns with an actual place and a group of farmers whose activism has been the source of extensive coverage in Japan—this is clearly referencing 希望の牧場 and the cast of eccentric and fascinating characters whose activism and choices have been widely covered. Here the imaginative mirror is held up to not just the humans, to capture the relationships and subjectivities of the humans, but also of the relationships between humans and animals, and among the animals themselves, in this now-nuclear landscape. More than once, Sendō the farmer, expresses the ways that his future and fate is now tied to that of the animals. It is no different than the animals. He and his cattle, that is, have come to occupy the same position, at least vis-à-vis human society and the government, in the shadow of the radiation. “I have chosen to bind my fate with that of these cattle,” he exclaims at one point. Many will know this story, which follows much actual history: In the days following the disasters farmers were told to evacuate the vicinity of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. Expecting to return in a few days, they supplied extra food and water to their livestock. Days passed and they found that they had actually been forced to abandon their farms and animals; they were not allowed to return. Thus, even now, five years later (in the time of the novel), many farms in the region have cattle stalls with mummified carcasses of animals that starved to death. Sendō, the farmer of the fictional “Fortress of Hope,” like the farmer Yoshizawa of the actual “Hope Ranch,” in his eccentric stubbornness and visceral distrust of the government, refused to leave in the first place. (An historical aside, Yoshizawa’s father was originally displaced from Tohoku and went to be a farmer in Manchuria, only to be abandoned by the government in the postwar repatriation. The roots of this action are deep. There is a long history of broken promises resulting in forced evacuations of farmland, just as there is a long history of why nuclear power plants would be placed in this region in the first place.) The historical Yoshizawa continued to feed his animals. Further, as time passed, he began to care for cattle that had escaped neighboring pastures and were looking for food. At every level, of course, in both the novel and its real world parallel, we are discussing doomed, futile, activity. Radiation levels are

mortally high. “Chernobyl” is a constant point of reference. I expect, but never find, references to Ōe Kenzaburō’s Hirsohima, or Paul Camus’ Oran. At any rate, and further, there will be no economic return on these cattle. As a reader, we begin to wonder if the tale is one of horror: radiated cattle being fed radiated feed by radiated humans, none of which know when, or how, or even if, it might end.

The female narrator, who has gone to volunteer at the ranch, somewhat rashly, is deeply moved by the experience, her first experience, of sharing space with real animals. In a powerful, although not particularly unusual turn of fictional events for this sort of tale, at the end of a strenuous, physical day feeding cattle she returns to her hotel room. She contemplates dinner. The options would seem to be convenience store bentō, cup ramen, neighborhood ramenya, or gyudon restaurant. The realization of what the latter entails renders her weak-kneed and she nearly collapses. Why? Because, and I quote “With saying ‘I want to eat,’ and I know there is nothing surprising in this, but I clearly had never even bothered to give a thought to the poignant living feelings of them [i.e. the cows she has shared space with all day, had breathed the same fetid air as, had contributed to the airs’ being fetid all day, in the same animal way as they had, had a profound experience, that is, of shared animalness]. ... They [she continues], same as me, carry passions and energy, feel love and fear and pain, do the best they can just to keep on living” (38). Again, not a surprising realization, but one that gestures towards how the empathizing imagination in this might work.

The next scene in the novel is her recollection of being yelled at by her husband (fleeing domestic violence is one subtext of this tale), ridiculed for her food choices, clumsy in her habits as she drops her rice bowl and cannot clasp her chopsticks, to realize, to wake up, as do we, that she has dreamt herself into the body of a steer. This dreaming oneself into the position of the animal carries with it fears of ostracism and ridicule; it is akin to the terror of radiation. The world has changed in profound ways: the human/non-human divide has become invisible, as has that other source of fear, radiation. It also seems resistant to representation.

Much of these novels seem motivated by a desire to capture the radiation, the thing most on our minds, the thing invisible, the

thing that renders everything different while nothing seems to be different. In Furukawa's response we come to feel "In the End the Light [of a crisp beautiful fall morning] Remains Clear" even though we know it has been muddied and blackened by radiation. In Kimura's tale it is the experience of animal and human both being abandoned, equally ostracized, for the same reasons.

So, in a kind of conclusion, I show you photographs by Takeda Shimpei, from a project called "Trace." Photos: photos that look to me like those Hubble telescope images of the cosmos, like telescopic views of the universe. But they are attempts to make visible the invisible of radiation by a process he calls cameraless photographs. He has written: "Seeing data documenting radiation in the air, soil, and ocean did not feel real." (qtd in Morse, 89). This led him to try and document it in some way. His way is not words, but photographs. I find Takeda's "photography" worth putting into quotations because he often foregoes the camera and works with direct exposure to photo paper. So too here.

These are actually soil samples on which has been laid photographic paper and exposed. The light is a record of the radiation in the soil. What has been imaged, however, is the invisible menace, a beautiful killer infused in soil. Image, not words; imaged, not described; photos of the invisible. The pull is in opposing directions: a picture that looks to be a camera aimed at the sky and recording the most expansive of vistas turns out to come from a piece of paper lying on the ground, a focused imprint of the ground beneath us. For Takeda this approach holds the promise of the direct, the unmediated, the real: "I thought that any change perceived in an element as primal as a particle of earth could potentially lead to a picture of the aftermath in the most direct manner" (89).

This is an attempt to forego imagination entirely and to convey, somehow, something real, an attempt to short circuit, or get around, the entire issue of impossibility of representation. I am intrigued by the cleverness of it. It requires a different kind of imagination. Maybe I am just jealous of the possibilities afforded by a different, non-word-based medium. How do we imagine, and represent, what cannot be, it seems, fully imagined or represented? If words fail, are we better served to try representation without



words, as in the case of Takeda's photographs? Or, to give the words to other beings, such as the animals as John Treat suggested in last night's keynote? This feels like a literary question, one that novelists, for sure, are grappling with, one that is getting overlap, or traction, for post-disaster novelists, especially, but it remains an open question.

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