



## Pebbles of Poetry: The Tōhoku Earthquake and Tsunami

Wagō Ryōichi

Translated and introduced by Jeffrey Angles

The poet WAGŌ Ryōichi 和合亮一 was living in Fukushima on March 11, 2011, when the Great East Japan Earthquake struck, sending the entire northeastern Tōhoku region into chaos. After spending a few days in a camp for evacuees, he began documenting his experiences in a powerful and poetic Twitter feed, which seemed to touch a nerve as the nation listened in horror to the stories of the survivors. Wagō's Twitter feed quickly earned over 14,000 followers, and his poignant, pithy statements were frequently retweeted by many others. In this feed, he writes about the sights with the earthquake zone, his horror at the devastation in Minami Sōma (a town where he had worked as a high school teacher), and the need for a new kind of direct and powerful writing to capture the realities of the destruction.



WAGŌ Ryōichi

The powerful and often epigrammatic statements in Wagō's Twitter feed have attracted much attention, appealing to a nation that, reeling from the disaster, began asking itself "Why me?" Poets have been reading Wagō's text live in poetry slams to raise money for the disaster victims. In May 2011, Japan's most important poetry journal, *Handbook of Contemporary Poetry* 『現代詩手帖』 republished it under the title "Pebbles of Poetry" 「詩の礫」 as the centerpiece of a special issue dedicated to the reflections of a group of poets from northeastern Japan who had experienced the disaster firsthand. (This issue was then followed by a second issue in June containing the post-disaster reflections of poets, writers, and intellectuals from across Japan and around the world.) One of Japan's foremost contemporary composers, Niimi Tokuhide 新実徳英, has set parts of Wagō's text to music in "Pebble Songs" 「つぶてソング」, which premiered in Tokyo on May 30, 2011. (The composer has filmed certain parts of the composition and uploaded it to [Youtube](#).) Wagō's text is currently being translated into Finnish and multiple other languages.

The text that follows is the first part of "Pebbles of Poetry." A slightly earlier version of this English translation first appeared on the website of [Handbook of Contemporary Poetry](#).

Since first writing this, Wagō has returned to his home in Fukushima and is rebuilding his life there. He continues to document his experiences and thoughts on his [Twitter feed](#).

... ..

The earthquake hit. I spent some time in an emergency evacuation area, but things have calmed down, so I have returned to go to work. Thanks everyone for worrying about me. Your words of encouragement are greatly appreciated.

Today is the sixth day since the disaster. My ways of looking at and thinking about things have changed.

Everywhere I go, there is nothing but tears. I want to write about this with all the ferocity of an Asura.

Radiation is falling. It is a quiet night.

What meaning could there be in harming us to this extent?



The meaning of all things is probably determined after the fact. If so, then what is the meaning of that period "after the fact"? Is there any meaning there at all?

What could this earthquake be trying to teach us? If it's not trying to teach us anything, then what can we possibly have left to believe?

Radiation is falling. It is a quiet, quiet night.

We were told that when we come back in from outside, we should wash our hair, hands, and face. We don't have any water to wash ourselves.

I hear that no supplies have reached Minami Sōma, the city where I used to live. They say that's because no one wants to go into the city. Please save Minami Sōma.

What does your homeland represent to you? I will not abandon my homeland. My homeland is everything to me.

They say the radioactivity isn't enough to immediately cause abnormalities in our health. If we turn the word "immediately" around, does it become "eventually"? I am worried about my family's health.

Maybe so. There is a clear border between things and meaning. Perhaps one could even say that the two are even opposed to one another.

The day before yesterday, the corpses of a thousand people were washed onto the shores of Minami Sanriku, the same place I used to like to go to from time to time to get away from the heat.

If we are to search for meaning in all of this, it is probably not meaning we would find but, rather, something close to the darkness of non-meaning—that temporary stillness lodged inside whenever we look directly at things head on.

As I was writing this just now, the earth rumbled again. Everything shook. I held my breath, got on my knees, and glared at the trembling until it was over. I am betting with my life. In the rain of radiation, I am all alone.



Is there someone who is important to you? There are situations when you might lose them in an instant... If you just think about that for a minute, you realize the only thing you can do is to risk your whole being so the world does not rip them away.

With the spiritual power of a universe that pulls away from meaning, the world continues to support the extremes of birth and destruction, and thus continues to exist.

The high school gymnasium I loved so much has become a place to put all of the unidentified bodies. The neighboring high school building, too.

The earth rumbled again. This time, there was a lot of shaking. I rush down the stairs in bare feet, trying to get outside. That was near the place with the unidentified bodies I wrote about in my last post. But even if I rushed outside, the radiation would still be raining down.

"Don't like what I've done to you, eh? Bring it on, you're in for a world of hurt now."

The myth of absolute safety was not so absolute after all. Ōkuma, Hirano, Namie, Odaka, Haramachi. Fields, towns, sea. From Highway 6, I could see the light of the reactors at night.

I asked my parents to evacuate, but they said they didn't want to leave home. They said, "You go on your own." I choose my parents.

My family evacuated before me. There was a call from my child. As a father, aren't I the one who is supposed to make the decisions?

Yes, I am angry. I am really angry.

For what reason is life born into this world, and why does it leave, moving into death? What right does birth and death have to exist? By what right are destruction and rebirth wrought?

Missing people become missing only once a "missing person's report" is filed. If no report is filed, is a missing person who hasn't yet become a missing person not really missing?



**First Nuclear Power Plant. Police Warning: Entry Prohibited in Twenty Kilometer Zone**

I was in line for three hours at the supermarket. After they let us in, we were all struggling with each other to get things. An old lady was crouched down, looking none too energetic. She told me she was dizzy as a result of diabetes. I got some nori rolls, some white rice, and some yogurt from the shelf for her.

I asked the old lady. "Shall I call your family?" She told me, "I live alone." "Shall I take you home?" "I live nearby."

At 5 a.m. the next morning, I got in line to get some water. The line was already snaking around. About an hour later, a mixture of snow and rain began to fall. A boy smiled and told his father, "I woke up earlier than you, Daddy." Looking at his cute face, I wondered about the old lady, whether she was alright for water.

*Six days since the quake. I want to drink good coffee. I haven't had any. No prospect of having any either.*

The people continue to evacuate. I was in the emergency evacuation shelter so I know first hand, it is not easy where you are either. Let's all hang in there together.

At the emergency evacuation shelter, a young man in his twenties looked at the screen and wept, "Don't abandon the city of Minami Sōma." What expression does your hometown wear? Our hometown wears a twisted face, covered in tears.

More shaking. A very big quake. The big aftershocks they have been predicting all along may be on us soon. I ran to the bottom of the stairs, and as I reeled, I hesitated, worried about whether or not I should open the door. Outside, radioactivity rains down.

The gasoline is already gone. Will our water be gone? Will the food be gone? Will our hearts be gone? I am the only one in the apartment.

A rather long quake, shaking side to side. Shall I bet? Will you win or will I? "This time I'm about done, but next time, you're in for a world of hurt."

I believe it is our greatest wish for happiness just to be able to live the same way that we did up before all this.

I went out and received a bunch of onions. A whole box full. A middle-aged man in the neighborhood gave me some of what he had raised. But I don't like onions. I put the box down just inside my door and have been staring at it for ages. Until just a short time ago, I had my everyday life...

*Midnight. The sixth day since the quake. I wasn't telling the truth before. This time it's really the sixth day. In the coming five days, I want to settle this once and for all.*

The kitchen. I cleaned up the broken plates. As I put them in a box one by one, I felt miserable. For myself, for the kitchen, for the world.

There is no night without a dawn.

March 16, 2011

Jeffrey Angles is Associate Professor of Japanese Literature, Language and Translation Studies, Western Michigan University. He is the author of *Writing the Love of Boys: Origins of Bishonen Culture in Modernist Japanese Literature* and translator of Tada Chimako, [多田智満子, Forest of Eyes: Selected Poetry of Tada Chimako](#) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010)

Recommended citation: Wagō Ryōichi, *Pebbles of Poetry: The Tōhoku Earthquake and Tsunami*, *The Asia-Pacific Journal* Vol 9, Issue 29 No 4, July 18, 2011.

Article on related subjects:

**Takayanagi Katsuhiko, [A Journey Along the Destroyed Oku-no-Hosomichi \(Narrow Road to the Deep North\)](#)**

Created by Datamomentum