Perspectives

March Eleven: “What If...”

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On the day the earthquake was said to have moved Honshu some 2.4 metres east and shifted the earth on its axis by an estimated ten to twenty-five centimetres, I was on my way back to the United States from Tokyo, having boarded what turned out to be one of the last flights out of Narita airport. Barely had I reached home when I intuitively did something unusual: I went online to check the news. Why I suddenly felt the need for information on world events right after an exhausting travel abroad still remains puzzling to me today.

The very first images I saw were the bird’s-eye views of the tsunami relentlessly swallowing up everything in its passage in Tohoku’s Iwate Prefecture and the Sendai area. Fear struck my heart and I quaked in silence as I watched the water unleashing its massively destructive force on such an unimaginable scale. Cars, houses, boats, buildings, seawalls, and fields, all signs of Man’s material achievement turned into mud and refuse at high speed. The shock left me speechless, sleepless, frazzled, and strangely dysfunctional. The next few days were spent in a frenzy of email-writing in the attempt to reach out to friends in Japan. Amidst the more reassuring replies that trickled in, stories of the missing and the disappeared emerged as joy and grief mingled in floods of tears.
among those directly affected, raising the alarm about the dire conditions of the Fukushima victims. (“We couldn't stop crying. We had never seen anything like this before.”)

The March Eleven events have come to be known as The Triple Disaster, whose rippling effect spreads far beyond Japan. The naming at first seems to say it all: the quake, the wave, the meltdown, then, the cloud, the emanation, the contamination. But as survivors often insist, the truth is always beyond what can be said about it. Names are first and foremost guesses on reality. Whether in daily actions or in situations of calamities, infinite are the manifestations of these basic elements of ancient cosmology—earth, water, fire, and air. No definite boundary could be set up between the internal and the external, the individuated body and the world. The line between what is natural and what is Man-made continues to be vigorously contested among environmental and political analysts. (Certain Japanese experts raised questions as to the nature or the cause of the colossal earthquake also called “the 3/11 seismic terror,” which they had gone to great length to prove why it was suspiciously “unusual.”) Fear has given way to bitter frustration as the disaster draws out with no happy ending.

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The perspective of the northeastern coast of Honshu being pulverized and the sight—for hundreds of miles, of towns and villages being engulfed, devastated, and washed away—may remain engraved in our memory, but what turns out to be most perturbing are the barely visible details in the margins of media coverage and the largely invisible (or not-yet-not-fully-becoming-visible) scope and consequences of nuclear threat. In the footage of the tsunami sweeping across properties and fields shot from the height of a helicopter, what sets this viewer on edge every time she returns to it is not only the core content of the images as described above, but also the details caught on camera at the border zone of the screen—the boundary events, both in time and in space.

While like a beast, the humongous wave ravages everything in its course, one catches a glimpse, at the margins of the frame, of the nearby traffic still rolling unknowingly as if nothing is happening, of the cars freezing in the middle of a street, then in a futile gesture attempting to escape by speeding abruptly right or left, making crazy choices and driving towards their own demolition. One also sights the tiny silhouette of a man standing still on a bridge, looking at the violent flow of destruction beneath him as if he was too stoned to react, as if he was on safe ground, as if the bridge was not going to give way... all the while, another man driving a truck suddenly stops, gets out of the vehicle, then walks