

Hideo Furukawa

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# The Little Woods in Fukushima

translated by Kendall Heitzman



Note from the editor: In the summer of 2020, the novelist Hideo Furukawa walked through his home prefecture of Fukushima, traveling more than 360 kilometers on foot, meeting people along the way and listening to them talk about how the 2011 triple disaster affected their lives. In 2021 Kodansha published *Zero F*, a book-length report of the experience. The first chapter of *Zero F* appears here in translation.

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ON DECEMBER 15, 2019, we took my mother's remains to the gravesite as part of the forty-ninth-day services. I was the one to carry the urn that held her bones from the family house, where the Buddhist services had been held, to the cemetery where the Furukawa family plot is located. It was only 500 meters. The cemetery is just to the rear of the village. Most of the people in attendance went by car, but my wife, my sister-in-law, one of my nephews, and I went on foot. My sister-in-law led the way. There were rules, so we learned, about how to proceed through the village. "Hideo," my sister-in-law said, "the dead have their own route." Meaning that the four of us—or the five of us, I should say, counting my mother's bones—took a course through town that followed the rules of the world beyond and was completely at odds with what we did in our everyday lives.

A number of rituals had to be performed at the gravesite as well as on our way there, but I was still in an emotional state, so I don't quite remember what I did with whom or where. What was the sequence of events when we offered the ceremonial sake at the entrance to the site? The image that *is* burned in my mind is of the moment the gravestone was moved off the pedestal, revealing the cavity beneath, where the bones were placed. My grandmother's bones were there. They had been interred at the end of 1999, and that time, too, it had fallen to me to carry them to the grave. Before my grandmother's death, the family tradition had been simply to bury the bodies—meaning, in my bloodline, no one had been cremated before then—so in truth, there was no one but my grandmother in the family ossuary. Her bones were entirely a product of the twentieth century.

Such old bones, I thought, studying them. *It's been a long time, hasn't it, Gram?* And then the new bones were added to hers. My mother's twenty-first-century bones were poured—and "poured" really is the best verb to describe their kinetic energy—into the ossuary. It was over in a moment, but the afterimage is seared into my own visual repository.

When this was done, I headed back to the house with my sister-in-law and the others. This time we took the street that ran through the village in a straight line, cutting across the cemetery to get there. "Look," said my sister-in-law. I looked. "The graves in this section are all new," she said. "Every single family's." Even as she was saying this, I realized that they were all in mint condition, so to speak. The surfaces as smooth as a mirror (on the headstones), the carefully tended plots (one for each family), the sense that everything here was pristine . . . it all clicked into place for me. I understood exactly what I was looking at.

As anyone doing the math will have deduced, eight years and nine months earlier there had been a monstrous earthquake, which had toppled many of the gravestones in this cemetery. What might surprise you is how they were first put back together, using things such as instant adhesives, available in any store, for emergency quick fixes. Later they were properly replaced, but perhaps this is something that only happened at my family's cemetery. Suffice it to say that from then on I thought a lot about the plight of people who felt they had to do something about the family grave as quickly as possible, and were willing to go to such lengths to do it.

I could see my family house up ahead, at the end of the road. The first thing that came into view was the no-longer-used workshop (there is another workshop in a different location that is still called the "new workshop" despite having been there for forty years), and next to it a little clutch of greenhouses with plastic-sheet siding. Behind the workshop were more of the same kind of semicylindrical greenhouses, all in a row. My family grows shiitake mushrooms. They work at it 365 days a year. This is their entire livelihood, and between my father and my older brother, the business has continued for two generations now. The moment I saw the "old" workshop, all kinds

of memories from my youth came flooding back. Long ago, it had housed a number of dryers, used to produce dried mushrooms, that whirred continuously, even through the night. Under the eaves of the workshop was a recently acquired—and by this I mean “something we shelled out a lot of money for”—automatic packaging machine. We would be out there packaging mushrooms (on trays for shipment) until eight, nine, ten at night. I was in third grade when it happened: I was helping with the work, feeding trays into the packager on a conveyor belt in my clumsy way, when one of my little thumbs got caught in the belt. If you visualize the end of an escalator when it reaches the next floor, and what would happen to a finger that was swallowed up by (“sucked up in”? “caught up by”? or perhaps I could just say “mangled by”) the gap, you’ll get a sense of what I faced. But my older brother managed to shut off the machine at the last second, and then put the belt into reverse. Thanks to him, to this day my left thumb continues to be happily attached to my hand.

Even as I describe these things, though, I doubt my own memory. Was I really only in third grade? It didn’t happen when I was in fourth grade, or even fifth? Maybe when I was in third grade the work that happened under the eaves of the old workshop was

the prep for mushroom drying (in which we spread them over wire netting), and the automatic packager didn’t arrive until later. Why I doubt myself is that, although my father would always say, “I started producing mushrooms when I was thirty,” which led me to place it in 1966 or 1967, right before I was born or while I was a baby, my brother now swears, “No, I think it was before that, maybe two or three years earlier.” Now that I think about it, it takes two years from the time a fungal strand is inoculated for the first flush of shiitake to appear. Considering that this was how shiitake were cultivated at the time—by growing them on decaying logs—perhaps by the time the initial crop was developed, harvested, and brought to market, my father really was thirty years old. Memory is more than mere data. Even if we don’t intentionally lie, our memories can be unreliable.

The important thing is that I was born into a family of shiitake cultivators.

And also that when I was born, I was surrounded by cut timber, fungal filaments, and the forest.

**IN THE TERMS OF THE TRADE**, shiitake are classified as “forest products for special use.” They aren’t considered agricultural products. Because they are



a separate classification, I was conscious of the fact that I was born into a forestry family. Chestnuts, walnuts, wild vegetables such as *takenoko*, *koshiabura*, *fukinotō*, and *warabi*—all are forest products, as are shiitake mushrooms. And so, I defined myself as a child who was raised by forest products, things that come from the trees, the groves, the woods.

I still do. Even after leaving Fukushima when I was eighteen, and even after the events of March 11, 2011, when Fukushima became famous as a disaster site, I still do.

**MY HOMETOWN**, the city of Kōriyama in Fukushima prefecture, was a weak 6 on the Japan Meteorological Agency's seismic intensity scale. Eleven municipalities in Fukushima registered as a strong 6, but none of them approached the devastation in Kōriyama in terms of the number of houses that were deemed "completely" or "half" destroyed: 2,732. That number appeared in the *Mainichi Shinbun* on May 6, 2011; I was so interested that I saved the clipping. It reads: "In this year's earthquake, damage such as the collapse of houses and other buildings was particularly devastating in areas that were once part of Lake Kōriyama, an ancient body of water that is thought to have occupied inland areas of central Fukushima prefecture 100,000 years ago, according to research conducted by Tatsuya Kobayashi, 23, a native of the village of Tamagawa in central Fukushima and a graduate student in geography at the University of Tokyo." This "Lake Kōriyama" is "thought to have been largely filled in with mud 23,000 years ago, and sometime after that, what remained became swamp-land." The largest number of building collapses in Fukushima prefecture was on tableland where the foundation was thought to be generally solid.

After the earthquake—or rather, after the nuclear meltdown—all kinds of figures were thrown at us, trading in orders of magnitude, such as, for example, plutonium-239 having a half-life of 24,000 years, while uranium-238 has a half-life of 4.5 billion years. I was made to look at the same kind of numbers—the reckoning of *tempus fugit*—in regard to my childhood home. When I went to the house for the first time after the disaster, a geological formation

from 100,000 years ago had me saying, "This is awful. This . . . this is awful." The city authorities had determined that the main house was "half destroyed." The entryway was intact, but taking just a single step inside, you could see that of the four walls of the main room, two were no longer there. What remained were a number of exposed posts and beams, and the floorboards—which had caved in. My mother and sister-in-law came out to greet me. (As I mentioned above, my mother is no longer with us.) Something my sister-in-law said at the time left a deep impression on me: "If this entryway had collapsed, the house would have been considered 'completely destroyed,' and we would have received a fairly large compensation."

In a later development, even the "half destroyed" determination was revoked (as I understand it, the area of the destroyed portion of the house as a percentage of its total footprint was recalculated), and we received nothing by way of compensation. But now the interior of the house from the entryway on back has been beautifully remodeled. Already, I have to really focus my mind to conjure up how it looked in ruins; that horrible image exists nowhere else.

**OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS**, people have asked me the same question again and again: "After such a terrible disaster, I really thought Japan would change. For sure, I thought, Tokyo (as the capital, as the place that consumed all of that electricity produced by the Tokyo Electric Power Company's Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant before the meltdown) would change. But nothing changed. Japanese society, the Japanese people, changed absolutely nothing about their lifestyles. Mr. Furukawa, how can this possibly be?"

*I wish I knew.*

Or else I reply along the lines of, *It is human nature to forget . . . whenever possible.*

But now that I am writing this out, the writer in me wants to do everything I can to get it right. So I'll try to answer properly. I have two ways of getting at this clearly and concisely. The first is to say that Japan (meaning, the Japanese people) has no sense of tenacity—at least not when it comes to the tenacity required for deliberative thinking. The second is that

the media bear responsibility. The so-called mass media were too quick to cater to the desires of their masses, who are inclined to feel that Heaven is boring and Hell is thrilling. I harbor the same inclinations myself. If you assume Heaven to be “stories about recovery” and Hell to be “stories about disaster areas and entire prefectures that are struggling to recover,” you’ll get a pretty good sense of the situation. To be fair, there were quite a few stories about recovery, but they were formulaic and trite, because, after all, boredom is the province of the divine. If, on the contrary, there are forebodings of even greater tragedies on the horizon for the affected areas, now *that’s* news worth watching. The moment the masses hear that things might get even worse for these people, they will feel the frisson of morbid curiosity. Two problems emerge from this. One is that, while it is true that a certain amount of thrill can bring interest to a story, when that thrill crosses the line into actual fear, people’s minds snap shut.

Deliberative thinking, for the most part, is rooted in the everyday. The everyday is another way of saying “that which is continuous.” But newsworthy events are the manifestation of the *non*-everyday—the continuous everyday’s polar opposite. “Continuous,” on the other hand, is intimately connected to “tenacity”—they are practically synonyms. So why did people stop thinking about March 11 and its aftermath? The reason is written into the logic of how news is generated.

But this leads us to a second problem.

We have established that utter fear was the driving force behind forgetfulness. Now, I could follow this up with, well, if that’s the case, then what we need is news programming that will strike only a *little* fear into people, but if it is true that most people don’t want this (and I’ll go ahead and say they do not), then it is even more the case that the mass media are fundamentally incapable of providing it. That said, someone will try. There are surely people of that mindset in the news profession. Some of the really hard-charging journalists. I have no doubt. But I don’t believe that this is my role (not to any significant extent, anyway). I have no illusions about that. Even if I were to try to get involved in that way, I am, in the end, a novelist.

To write novels is my main order of business. And so, as one of that breed known as writers, I will say this instead. In spite of myself—look, I didn’t see this coming either—here is what I will proclaim: If something’s tragic nature is emphasized, and it is widely recognized that there is value in depicting it as a tragedy, and it is then abandoned *for the very reason* that the tragic narrative was so desired, then maybe I want to write a tragedy, too.

In the end, I fight the battles that I am destined to lose.

It’s in my nature.

In April 1955, Albert Camus gave a lecture in Athens entitled “On the Future of Tragedy.” As Camus defines it in this talk, tragedy requires two opposing forces. Each has a claim to legitimacy, each has its own rational justification. This is so interesting. It’s like a description of the face-off between advocates for nuclear energy and the anti-nuclear movement. Camus sums up the situation by saying that “the perfect tragic formula would be: ‘All can be justified, no one is just.’” Interesting, interesting. I have nothing but respect for Camus (as a novelist, as a dramatist, *as a person*), but these words that he left to posterity certainly feel overwhelming.

Actually, I’m feeling a little too overwhelmed by these words. Let me start the story of my own family’s tragedy with a selection from something a little more approachable than Camus.

**YŌKO HANO IS A MANGA ARTIST** living in the city of Shirakawa in Fukushima prefecture. I don’t know her, so I was surprised to learn that, like me, she had grown up in Nakadōri (the central region of the prefecture), in the village of Nishigō, and that her family cultivated shiitake. I was even more surprised to learn that she has published a manga in which the main character is the son of a shiitake producer: *Chainsaw Rhapsody*, the second volume in her series *The Spring It Started*. I will here reproduce for you in its entirety the dialogue that is to be found on pages six and seven (together with some “stage directions”). A high-schooler is riding his bicycle and talking with his close friend on his cell phone. The friend will someday take over his family’s dairy farm.

Meaning, he'll be a dairyman. Which would make the main character a mushroomman, I suppose.

April 4, 2011

Ken'ichi [the main character]: Yeah, for a long time now we haven't been able to ship anything. Supposedly it's going to open up again on April 10.

Genta [the friend]: Whaa—? Are you going to be OK, Ken'ichi?

Ken'ichi: Sure . . . You're the one I'm worried about, Genta. You're throwing out milk every day, right? Even though we're 80 kilometers away, that radioactive stuff came floating toward us.

Genta: Things have to be tough for shiitake, too, I imagine?

Ken'ichi: Yeah. We lost the *roji*\* crop for the spring. [\*outdoor cultivation of shiitake]

Genta: Man, those are the most delicious.

Ken'ichi: It's outside. Absolutely everything is radioactive outside. We know from that nuclear accident in the Soviet Union, for a short time the milk is polluted, but the mushrooms are a problem for a long time. Well, in one sense, it's making stars out of us.

The two are seventeen or eighteen years old. When I came across this manga, I admit I got goosebumps all over.

I CAN'T REMEMBER exactly when I decided that I needed to interview my brother. But according to my datebook, I resolved that I was going to write something about him about a month and a half before my mother died. At that point, I didn't realize what was going to happen just a few weeks later: my mother's death. I wouldn't learn that it was on the horizon until nine days later (this I am also pulling from my datebook). I should say that my mother had been

in a nursing home for a number of years at this point. Her body had grown weaker over time, and now she was bedridden, as they call it. It was the onset of depression that had led to this decline. It got to the point where she couldn't eat anything. They inserted a feeding tube that goes through the abdominal wall directly into the stomach. But nine days later, I heard from my brother that she was vomiting the nutrient mixture she was getting through the tube. So clearly the feeding tube had to go. The facility would not take any measures to extend her life—the directive we all agreed to when she was first admitted. I got a phone call to the effect of, *What do you think, Hideo, we need to make a decision.*

I made the decision, and my other siblings made the decision. There are three of us: my older brother and me and a sister in between us. My sister and her husband produce rice and strawberries for a living. They are a full-time agricultural household.

We were told that once nutrition was no longer provided through the feeding tube, we should expect my mother to pass in the next week to ten days; the next few days were horribly stressful. That probably goes without saying. I went up to see her briefly during that window. It was on that trip that I said to my brother, "I want to interview you. Once things quiet down, obviously." I remember being in a very frazzled state of mind. Or perhaps I was utterly calm. Memories are not to be trusted.

In the event, my mother hung on for another twenty-five days before passing away.

They were strange days for me (and my wife), as we stood by in Tokyo. To make matters worse, the day after my mother died, my wife's father had a stroke. It felt as though the world was falling apart. It seemed to us that during those twenty-five days my mother's *death* was being drawn out. But she showed no cognizance of this. She had no way to show any cognizance of this. She was simply doing what she could to *live on*. I would be lying if I said that what I had taken to be an extended death didn't start to instead seem like an extension of life. I can't yet say what it might mean for a pregnancy to be extended, or for a baby to be given a reprieve. I don't have the words to explain it.

For a long time, I had steered clear of interviewing my brother (or any immediate blood relative) for the simple reason that it might cause alarm. Cause alarm to me, that is. It struck fear somewhere deep inside me, in my inner recesses. Mainly because, *as soon as I start thinking about him, I'll end up having to take a long, hard look at myself*, I thought. I knew that *once I do that, I will have no choice but to write about it*. I'll say it again: a writer is a writer by nature. And that's why I was dodging this one. Of course, I understood full well the terrible predicament that the 2011 earthquake and tsunami had left shiitake producers in, and I knew what other difficulties others with crops were facing. I felt it in the hollows of my hands. And yet, I couldn't speak on their behalf.

No way. Absolutely not.

Let me say something very simple here. I'll start with something clear and concise: I knew that if I were to shout out, in the wake of the Tōhoku disaster, "I stand here in support of my homeland, Fukushima prefecture," I would have to say as a precedent to that, "I loved my life in Fukushima." In the event, I did declare my support for the homeland. And the moment I did so, I shoved my own feelings into the classified files of my soul.

*I am being completely logical about this, man . . .* is what I think.

*Ah, I used to be so logical about this, man . . .* is how I shift this sentiment into the past tense.

Here I am now, moving forward with this sentence by sentence, and all that I can reasonably predict is that my discretion will go directly out the window. If I move ahead with writing about my older brother, this will certainly be the case. If I wish to tell the story of my brother, the purveyor of shiitake mushrooms from Fukushima, I will undoubtedly be ambushed by an urge that compels me to write about myself. I accept this truth with a hearty Fukushima, "Sounds about right. Whatcha gonna do?"

But before we go there, what if I reveal memories such as this one—and not just the memory but the entire scene it evokes. My mother had a license to operate a forklift. Behind our house was a submersion tank, a pool of water into which are submerged hundreds or even more than a thousand bolts (the cut

logs of unprocessed timber on which shiitake fungal filaments are grown). This process, called "shocking" the log, requires a forklift. My mother was really good at operating it. In my early childhood, she would get up before five in the morning and work until after eleven at night. She was that kind of person, and it was that kind of family operation. And most of what she did was manual labor. I think of my mother as having been an extraordinary woman. Therein lies my respect, my love.

I have absolutely no doubts about the veracity of these feelings.

**WHEN I WAS BORN**, my older brother was eight, and three months later he turned nine, which would put him in third grade at the time. When I was born, the smell of the fungal filaments permeated everything in the vicinity and there was rich, organic soil in the forest. But this hadn't been the case for my brother. When my brother, Kunikazu Furukawa, was in first grade, our family decided to pursue shiitake production as the family business. At that moment it was still more a venture than a family business—they started with the idea that it *could* become the family business. They acquired 1,200 bolts and inoculated them with shiitake fungal strands. These bore mushrooms two years later. By the way, the fungal strands are inoculated into the bolts in spring (March or April), so as the shiitake operation grows, spring becomes "inoculation season," which can take an entire month. There are a huge number of bolts to be treated, and a correspondingly huge number of people—including temporary hires—doing exactly that.

The bolt starts out as a round log not quite a meter in length, maybe 90 centimeters. We use a power drill to bore holes into it, and then a hammer to pound small dowels called "plug spawn" into the holes. Over time, the fungal strands will colonize the inside of the log, turning it into the aforementioned bolt—a magnificent mushroom-growing log.

I have already said that my family cultivated shiitake year-round, 365 days a year. The spring that my brother was in first grade (meaning, right before he became a second-grader by the Japanese academic calendar), they first experimented with inoculating

logs with shiitake spawn. Two years later, the first flush of shiitake appeared. Meaning, it was only after this that year-round cultivation became possible. Meaning, the same time I was born.

People generally understand that farming households have busy seasons and slack seasons during which farmers can do other kinds of work, and that this pattern produces a need for migrant workers, or seasonal labor. But not so with us. Our circumstances were horrid. Three hundred and sixty-five days a year, without a break. To be exact, every four years it was three hundred and sixty-six days a year without a break.

My older brother, Kunikazu, took over the business in the spring of 1976, after he graduated from high school. He was eighteen, and I was nine. And my sister was fifteen—the gap between her and my brother was three years, and between her and me was six years.



To me, my brother was always a giant. He was tall, so much taller than I was. Obviously. My father was stricken with polio when he was two years old, which left him with a bad leg. He was registered as having a disability. Never once did he carry me on his back. It was my brother who did that. He gave me piggyback rides (in standard Japanese, *onbu*), spun me around, played with me. That's what made me think of him as a giant. In March of my last year of junior high, when I was fifteen, my brother's first child was born. It was a baby girl, meaning I had a niece. But although technically my niece, she really felt like a much younger little sister to me. I gave her piggyback rides (which we called *oburu*—perhaps our dialect, I am realizing now), gave her milk (from a bottle, of course—I would heat up water and prepare the formula), change her diapers. I thought of my niece as a younger sister, in the same way that I thought of my older brother as a father.

Well, let's put a lid on all of this talk about me, and get back to Kunikazu.

This is the interview I conducted with him in January 2020. Since the forty-ninth-day services, another forty-two had passed.

“WE HAD CONVERTED over to 100 percent mushroom beds. You thought it was the year before the earthquake? No, no—it was earlier than that. We started experimenting with shiitake mushroom beds in 2000. We were still doing the log inoculations. At first, we were doing a ratio of half the shiitake from the bolts and half from the mushroom beds. You're probably wondering why we started doing the mushroom beds in the first place, so I'll try to give it to you in a proper order. At any rate, if we hadn't switched to 100 percent mushroom-bed cultivation, it would have been completely hopeless. I mean, we *did* switch to 100 percent mushroom-bed cultivation, and it was *still* completely hopeless.”

My brother Kunikazu was explaining to me how he had narrowly escaped having to shut down the business.

I mistakenly believed that the family mushroom business had entirely switched over to mushroom beds in 2010. That was not the case. Through a series of twists and turns—well, through a process of trial and



error to which they felt driven by external forces—they converted at an earlier point to using exclusively mushroom beds. I left home in March 1985, during the inoculation, in the time when humble logs become bolts, so I don't know a thing about cultivation using mushroom beds. I couldn't even tell you the basics. But I know that it doesn't require setting up bolts in the woods (in specialist terms, "creating a laying yard"), nor is a crop exposed to the elements—meaning, it's not something that is done outdoors. Mushroom-bed shiitake are raised in greenhouses.

This became the difference between survival and ruin.

The situation was grave, I will note for the record once again. After the hydrogen explosions in the building housing the nuclear reactor at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant (on March 12, 2011, and again on the 14th and 15th), mushrooms were considered "dangerous for consumption." Perhaps the situation would be better described by saying *Fukushima* mushrooms were considered to be dangerous for consumption. Information on which agricultural, forestry, and marine products easily absorb radioactive material such as cesium was instantaneously made available to everyone at that time. Among forest products, there were a variety of mushrooms and edible wild plants being tracked. I had a real sense that shiitake were, in a word, feared, so they couldn't be sold, and prices plummeted. I could feel that reality even from Tokyo. In any case, there was an active effort to avoid stocking the region's goods, so there wasn't anything from Fukushima on the supermarket shelves even if people were willing to buy them.

And, for shiitake cultivated outdoors, there was also a restriction on shipping them.

This began on April 10, 2011, when the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare announced that they had "detected radioactive cesium at levels that exceeded provisional regulation levels in shiitake grown in Iitate village, Fukushima prefecture." Three days later, the shipment of shiitake that had been cultivated outside in any of five cities, eight towns, and three villages in Fukushima prefecture was prohibited. A limitation on intake was assigned to shiitake cultivated outside in Iitate village. On April 25, another city was

added to the list that prohibited the shipment of shiitake that had been cultivated outside, while another had its shipping restrictions lifted. But however you looked at it . . . however you looked at it, things were headed in a bad direction.

Shiitake cultivated in mushroom beds were allowed to go to market, but there was a problem.

I knew nothing, truly nothing, about mushroom beds, but I boned up for this very interview with my brother. They use something called a mushroom block as a sort of artificial log-*cum*-bolt. The medium is a nutrient source mixed with sawdust from broad-leaf trees and allowed to harden into a block. You will note that sawdust is a crucial component. Where was Kunikazu procuring his sawdust? In Haramachi. It is currently a ward in the city of Minamisōma, but until 2005 it was an independent city.

I imagine the factory was in the eastern foothills of the Abukuma Highlands.

If so, that would put it right next to Iitate village.

"If we had gone on like that, we would probably have been using polluted sawdust, stuff from a place with a high level of radioactivity. But we changed suppliers with unbelievable timing. In March—meaning, in March 2011—we had switched to a vendor in Marumori, in Miyagi prefecture. I thought it was a great stroke of luck. It was sawdust from outside the prefecture, so I thought we would be OK, we could continue on with our mushroom-bed cultivation, keep on trucking. And then the report hit."

"The report?" I asked.

"It was radioactive."

*Oh, man.* That was all I could say. The town of Marumori is the southernmost place in Miyagi prefecture, located along the lower reaches of the Abukuma River. Three months before this interview took place, it had been devastated by Typhoon Hagibis, so I recognized the name when he said it. *Oh, that place,* I thought. "That place" borders Fukushima prefecture. Right after the nuclear meltdown, the cloud of radioactivity moved in a northwesterly direction from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. And Marumori was *right along that path.*

"With that, I couldn't procure any more sawdust. I had some blocks that I had finished preparing

before all of this, and they fruited. So I was able to produce a crop of shiitake. And I was able to ship the shiitake. What I couldn't do is sell them. Even though, of course, there was no trace of cesium on them, there wasn't a thing I could do to sell them. And I couldn't prep any more mushroom blocks. Finally, in the fall—”

He's talking about the fall of 2011.

“—I managed to buy some sawdust from a place in Yamagata. But it was sawdust made for harvesting nameko mushrooms. It's different. It's just a little different. OK, it's completely different. Here was another problem. So we got hit with this double whammy—no one to buy them, no way to prep the beds, so *it was all completely hopeless* that year.”

I figured it wouldn't do to try to drag anything more out of Kunikazu, so I used my standard, “Oh, man,” with a groan. Then I straightened my back and repeated it a few times, dragging out the last vowel each time: “Oh, maaaaan.”

“At the end of the year, we received a settlement from the power company. With that, somehow, some way . . .” he said, bringing the narrative of the hardships of 2011 to a close for the time being.

From there, we went back to the time when my brother Kunikazu was a young man and I was a child, nine years younger than him.

**NO ONE REALLY KNOWS THIS**, but 71 percent of the total surface area of Fukushima prefecture is forest. It boasts the fourth-largest total forested area in all of Japan.

No one really knows this, either, but in 2010 Fukushima prefecture ranked seventh in timber production, and first in the number of logs supplied to other prefectures for mushroom cultivation.

And no one really knows this, but in that same year, the amount of fresh shiitake produced there was seventh in the country.

No one really knows this except for my brother and me, but when we entered the little wooded area where we had the laying yard for the bolts (we had created a number of these “wood in the woods” areas), there were squirrels, there were bamboo partridges, there were pheasants.

Perhaps this is something that only I would remember, but I loved everything about the plug spawns that we used to hammer into the logs to inoculate them: their texture, their elasticity, their smell. I felt that I had a lot in common with these fungal strands. And then, the cut ends of the logs, their rings visible. In the spring, during the aforementioned “inoculation season,” a pile of the logs, well over 10,000 of them, would be stacked up in front of the work area at our house. This too was a forest. My own private forest. I would even go into this cultivated forest from time to time and hide out for a while. Sorry, I can't go into details.

And yet, the family operation (and my role in it) was just *brutal*.

My older brother, Kunikazu Furukawa, took over the business in 1976. He was eighteen. Did he do it because he was so attracted to the cultivation of mushrooms? “Nope,” Kunikazu answered straight out. To begin with, he said, the family business was *brutal*. Where have I heard that before? In our house, children were laborers. That is a brutal life. “Sundays were depressing,” Kunikazu says. At the time, there was still school on Saturdays; it hadn't yet been cut down to five days a week. Sundays were depressing because physical labor was waiting for him on his one day off.

Best not to get him started on long holidays, or the lack thereof.

But, he took over the family business. The shiitake operation had been scaled up in size, and my father had come to the determination that “if things carry on like this, you should be able to live a pretty secure life well into the future.” He had ordered Kunikazu to take it over. At the time, Kunikazu had nowhere to escape. His little brother Hideo, on the other hand, *would* have a place to escape. But at the time I was nine years old and figuring out life.

To be sure, life was on the upward swing. In 1979, we built a new house (the one where the main room next to the entryway was “half destroyed” on March 11, 2011).

In the mid-1980s, the winds of change reached our house.

Dried shiitake produced in China began to flow into the Japanese market.

My brother stopped producing dried shiitake. It wasn't worth it anymore, he said. They focused exclusively on fresh shiitake, but from a financial perspective, they were feeling the pinch.

In 1992, my father was still alive and well, but he handed over financial control of the business to my brother.

In the following year, fresh shiitake from China entered the Japanese market.

My brother had a bad feeling about this.

In 1997, the supply of fresh shiitake from China suddenly increased. Kunikazu described this as landing with a *whomp*. At this point, domestic fresh shiitake went into free fall.

In 1999 and 2000, imports of Chinese shiitake continued to rise. The family's losses increased, and their debts mounted.

"That's why we turned to mushroom beds," he said. Kunikazu, my brother.

The operation shifted away from inoculating logs. At first, they did half bolts and half beds. They started out by buying prefabricated mushroom blocks that had already been inoculated, also to minimize the initial risk. "The cost of production went down, and the yield went up, so we switched over completely to bed-mushroom cultivation. At first we were buying the mushroom blocks, but we did some research, and starting in the spring five years later, we began producing our own mushroom blocks."

This was in 2005.

Earlier than that, in 2001, government safeguards were implemented, in the form of emergency restraints on imports, measures to protect domestic producers from sudden increases in imports of designated products. Fresh shiitake, spring onions, and tatami rushes were all three protected.

Between 2001 and 2005, deflation steadily chipped away at the business. And yet, it somehow picked up. "Have we finally achieved altitude now?" Kunikazu dared to wonder.

In September 2008, a financial crisis on a global scale peaked with the collapse of Lehman Brothers. Another serious blow.

They rode out that storm.

And then came March 2011.

WHEN I DID THE MATH to figure out how old my brother was when it happened, I realized that he was the same age as I was now, interviewing him: fifty-three.

I'LL TELL YOU ABOUT my mother's wake. What happened at the wake for the mother of my brother, Kunikazu, and me, Hideo, and my sister. . . well, this piece isn't about my sister, so I won't give her name.

I went around and poured sake for the people who came, table by table. I came to the table for my mother's relations. My father's side of the family was much more active in our lives. So, truthfully, I am not all that close to my mother's relatives.

"Hey, Hideo, have you heard this one?" a cousin asks me.

*Maybe I know it.*

"It's about when your mother learned that she was pregnant with you."

*Maybe I know it.*

"She came to consult with my dad. 'You're my big brother, what do you think—should I have this baby? We're so busy with the shiitake. I don't have any time to look after a child. But I'm pregnant. Should I keep it?' she asked him. And my dad said, 'Yeah, you should.' Did you know that?"

*I know it.*

I didn't know that I had been saved by my uncle like that.

I was hearing that part for the first time. But I knew it.

When I was maybe thirty-two or thirty-three—my memory is a little fuzzy on this—I was riding with my wife in the car my mother was driving, and she confessed this for the first time. I was going to abort you, she told me. She said that she thought it would be impossible to raise me, so that's what she was thinking of doing. The version that I heard from her was, "Grandma said to me, 'I'll take care of it,' so I had you." In the end, I have to think that I was born after receiving a reprieve from my grandmother and uncle.

My sister (who was at the same table, paying the same courtesy-in-a-bottle to the relatives as me) didn't know the story. My brother still doesn't know, I imagine. It's possible he will learn about it for the first time when he reads these words.

I WAS CLUMSY, not fit for manual labor—in other words, completely unsuited for the job. I made mistake after mistake. I injured myself time and time again.

Over spring break at the end of my first year of junior high (at the end of which I would begin my second year of junior high), when I was in the middle of inoculating a log, I bashed my own finger with the hammer. The index finger on my left hand. I was forced to leave the front lines of the war known as “inoculation season.”

There was another time in the summer of the same year. I was transporting bolts into the forest, driving a three-wheeled truck (designed for forest work, the brand name was Derupisu). At the laying place in the mountain forest, in a little wooded clearing, I gunned the Derupisu by accident, and drove it straight into a tree. I didn't have the presence of mind to hit the brake, I panicked so much. I took a blow to my ribs on my left side. Naturally, I was reprimanded. My father gave me a good dressing-down. My father's scoldings were of a category all their own. He had the pride of a person with a physical disability, so when someone without his disability couldn't do something that he could (pull his own weight), he chalked it up to laziness. I have no good counterargument here.

I didn't add a lot of value to our family business.

Every time I was told I was inept, the words had the power of a curse.

I can give you some other good examples. As a child I was afflicted with chronic sinusitis. I was always sitting in some corner of the house, my nose dribbling. My aunt admitted later that until I went to school, quote, “I thought you were a moron.” I was hyperactive, I had my own mixed-up sense of how the world worked . . . let's see, what else? I'll add that I was frail, and I had asthma. There was a certain couple who hadn't been able to conceive a child who said they were interested in adopting me. But it didn't happen. I don't know the particulars of why it fell through. I had the feeling that there was something about me (innate to me) that was off-kilter. As I said, I was figuring out life.

I'm sure I was in second grade the time I left our house, walked away from the village, crossed some rice paddies, and just kept right on walking. A missing persons report was filed on me.

When I was in sixth grade, I contacted relatives who were living in Yokohama, in Kanagawa prefecture, to consult with them about possibly going to junior high in one of the Yokohama public schools. But my dreams of getting out that way didn't come true.

About this phrase, “getting out.” I wanted to get out of my house. “I wanted to get out of my house” meant “I wanted to get out of Fukushima.” I wanted to leave Fukushima behind me. Looking back, I can see that I already felt that way as a second grader.

**MY BROTHER**, Kunikazu Furukawa, even today cultivates shiitake. He also has a *kikurage* mushroom crop. Demand for *kikurage* is on the rise.

Back to 2011. To the days just after 3.11. Kunikazu wasn't able to sell any shiitake outside of the prefecture, so he sold where he could in the area. He sold them at direct distribution outlets run by Japan Agricultural (JA) Cooperatives and at various stores in a supermarket chain based out of Kōriyama. Both of those routes suffered from a dearth of mushroom buyers. The people of Fukushima prefecture were not interested in buying any scary shiitake, which along with other mushrooms had become synonymous with “radioactive contamination.” The economic damage was increasingly dramatic.

“When there was news of a suicide in the village of T—,” Kunikazu began, naming the place in question. A full-time farmer in Fukushima prefecture saw no hope for the future and had killed himself. “I was pretty . . . pretty shocked. I just thought, when things come to that, what happens?”

He was delicately glossing over something. He was saying in a roundabout way, if he were to make the same choice, what would happen? And, of course, what I take from that is about humans in general: When an option you hadn't particularly thought a lot about is shoved in your face, you suddenly realize that it exists as an option. Information expands your options. When said information is the fact that someone out there chose death, you can choose it, too.

But I don't know anything about the person who committed suicide in the village of T—. There were bigger stories (in terms of their shock value), such as when an organic farmer in Sukagawa City

committed suicide late in March 2011, or when a dairy farmer in Sōma City did the same in June of the same year. The former was a good friend of my sister and her husband.

#### ABOUT MY SISTER.

I'm not researching her story, so in principle, I feel I shouldn't write anything about her. I'll just say one thing, which is related to my own story. There were no books in our house. There was nothing "literary" to speak of, nothing enriching, nothing like a set of great works of literature. My brother has also said this, but we never had any picture books in our lives when we were children. I first encountered an actual book during the winter I was in second grade. I took a book that belonged to my sister, then in her second year of junior high, and read it. It was a work of children's "literature" by Satoru Satō, called *A Little Country No One Knows*. In it, there is a little hill, meaning, a little woods, and an imaginary, happy country. To put it simply, I was on fire for this book. To the point that I danced through the flames. There was another forest in there, and it offered hope.

After that, reading became part of my life. I have since fostered the belief that, for me, books were a tool directly related to my survival.

I have never told my sister this. Anybody else probably would have.

**THE LAST THING MY** older brother Kunikazu talked about, starting with "And yet . . .," was how he decided in 2011 to continue on with the family business (in shiitake production).

"Mushrooms are a symbol of nuclear disasters, so there was no way that we could stop."

That was his declaration.

I was about to cry.

**WE HAVE THE FOREST.** We Furukawa siblings have the forest. We three siblings. And so do other sets of siblings out there. I left Fukushima of my own free will, so I think there is nothing that someone like me can say about life after the nuclear accident. Yet somehow I am in the position of cheering on Fukushima, to the point where I have spoken about

it publicly, both in Japan and abroad. I have kept on speaking my truth—or, at least, *a* truth. Now, as to where this work goes next. People might want me to tell my entire story in detail, but I would just point out that that isn't so easy. I understand this in the marrow of my bones. Since I know this is the case, isn't it best for me to switch modes at this point, to listen to other people tell their stories, and to listen attentively? It's possible I will get everything wrong, but even so . . .

Even so . . .

Even so, I am convinced that if all we do is adopt the stance that reconstruction should just be about getting things back to the "good old Fukushima" (of pre-March 11, 2011), there are things that will never be restored and there are people who will never be made whole again, so maybe (just maybe) something good can come from this modest contribution.

. . . *just maybe*, I think to myself.

I will leave it to my own clumsiness to take care of the rest.

February 2020 🐼

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Note from the translator: The quote from Albert Camus is from his essay "On the Future of Tragedy," published in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, translated by Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Knopf, 1968), p. 301.