

GANBARE!

WORKSHOPS ON DYING

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GANBARE! WORKSHOPS ON DYING

KATARZYNA BONI

Translated from the Polish by Mark Ordon



Since March 11, 2011, *Ganbare!* has been the most commonly repeated word in Tōhoku, the northwestern region of Japan destroyed by the tsunami that same year. It's displayed on billboards alongside roads, printed in local newspapers, and voiced by government officials, artists, journalists, and volunteers.

All of Japan is calling: *Ganbare!*

Give it your all! Hang in there! Fight! You can do it!

Ganbare, Tōhoku!

The line between needing encouragement and needing help is very thin. As the Japanese would say: *giri giri*.

Sometimes, *ganbare!* will motivate you to act. Sometimes, when you hear *ganbare!*, you feel very lonely.

Give it your all. Hang in there. Fight.

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GANBARE!
WORKSHOPS ON DYING

Japanese Tales of Horror

During the Edo period, when Japan, having concluded that the world had nothing to offer, voluntarily sealed itself off from the outside, people would play “A Hundred Tales of Horror” on summer nights. Once the heat would recede and you could finally breathe normally, people all over, be it in peasant huts, merchant homes, or in castles, would get together in a dark room, with croaking frogs and buzzing cicadas in the background. The players would sit on tatami mats around a low table with one hundred lit candles. One at a time, they would tell stories of revenge-seekers from the grave, disfigured ghosts, haunted houses, mountain monsters that would kidnap women, or icy maidens who would tempt men and kill them with their frozen breath. Of phantoms tormenting the living, detached ears and bodies painted in protective spells. Or of disembodied heads flying through the night, looking for human blood to quench their thirst. When a player finished a story, one of the candles was extinguished, making more room for ghosts in the space. People believed that the ghosts would appear in their midst when the last candle went out.

Garbage

In 2012, garbage started to wash up on the shores of Alaska. Among the tangled mass of Styrofoam, canisters, fishing nets, and cracked beams, beach-goers found objects from a different reality.

A plastic sandal.

A porcelain bowl.

A protective helmet.

A lighter.

A wooden figure of a warrior.

A bottle of shampoo.

A volleyball signed with blue marker.

A child's shoe, its laces still tied.

Sharpened pencils.

One freezing February morning, David Baxter found a yellow buoy in the sand that bore a black Chinese character, 慶. He decided to find its owner.

Newspapers reported how, fifteen months after the tsunami, in the city of Minamisanriku, 430 kilometers north of Tokyo, Ms. Sakiko Miura took out a bank loan and opened a new restaurant. The tsunami had wiped out her original restaurant, Keiemeimaru, along with her house and the ocean-front districts of the city. Ms. Miura learned from a television program featuring David Baxter, who lived in Alaska, that he had found a decorative buoy with the name of her restaurant printed on it. The character painted on the buoy—慶—is the first of two *kanji* of her husband's name: Keigo. He died over thirty years ago, leaving Ms. Miura on her own with

four children. She worked odd jobs at local restaurants. After her fortieth birthday, she took a correspondence course and finished school. When she was fifty, she opened her own restaurant, Keiemeimaru, which only served specialties from the local market: fish, salmon roe, and other seafood dishes. Ms. Miura's new restaurant is the only building standing in what was previously a residential district of Minamisanriku. Old neighbors, all scattered about in temporary housing, get together here. The yellow buoy sits on a table against the wall. Next to the buoy are flowers and a picture of David Baxter. David Baxter also found seven other people whose things he picked up at the beach. Other objects are waiting for their owners. Pictures are available on a web site called *Tsunami Return*. Among the recent patrons at Ms. Miura's restaurant were David and his family.

The City That Is Not There

The ground is brown and sodden, gouged by muddy ruts created by passing trucks. Fences, cranes, diggers. Enormous conveyor belts and pipelines resting on five-meter-long supports bring soil to the shore from the mountains one kilometer away. A large-scale construction site.

There was a city here once.

Rikuzentakata.

There were rows of two-story houses with gardens, where plum flowers would blossom in early spring and hydrangea would appear in summer; where maple leaves would shine red

in the fall (the leaves are fragile and small, different than what we're used to); and where pine needles protrude from the snow cover in winter.

It was all there. Now it's gone.

There was the main shopping street, with its white arcades protected from the sun and rain by a roof. The locals would call it *shatto dōri*, from *shut*—closed, and *dōri*—street. Young people were leaving for big cities. Old people no longer had the strength. More and more stores were going out of business, leaving nothing but empty pavilions with white arcades.

It was all there. Gone now.

There was a port where small fishing boats would anchor. Rikuzentakata lived off the sea. Tuna, sea bream, butterfish, amberjacks, seaweed, scallops, sea urchins. And those oysters! Meaty and full of flavor.

It was all there. Now it's gone.

There was an elementary school, middle school, high school, town hall, pharmacies, a hospital, a private dental clinic, a baseball stadium, a shopping mall, restaurants, a gas station, a flower shop, railroad tracks, a train station, a small sake distillery, a baker, a tatami mat manufacturer, a coal producer, a few processing plants, a playground, and a preschool.

It was all there. Now it's gone.

There were meadows on a hill encircled by dogwood and azalea, where the entire city would watch a fireworks display in the summer.

It was all there. Now it's gone.

There were gates, fences, gardens, walls, roofs, streets, windows, shop displays, closed shutters, bus stops, sidewalks, and trees.

It was all there. Now it's gone.

There was a city with a population of twenty-four thousand.

It was all there. Now it's gone.

And there was the forest. Seventy thousand pine trees growing on the sandy shore. The smell of pine needles mixed with the sea breeze. People would make special trips here. For a walk among the trees.

It was all there. Now it's gone.

Only one pine tree survived. It was still alive a year after the tsunami, but its roots died in the salt-drenched soil. Experts inserted a steel scaffolding into the dead stump. Twenty-seven meters high. They added artificial branches and leaves made of synthetic resin. It looks like it's alive and well. It will remain standing. The mighty pine tree. The symbol of the city of Rikuzentakata, which will never give up. I always get lost here. My GPS is useless. The new roads haven't been added to the map. But it does show gas stations and grocery stores that no longer exist. I follow the road from the sea to the hills. I retrace the path of the tsunami, which reached ten kilometers inland. I see that there are still houses left standing on the slopes; the wave didn't reach them. And stretched out across the hilltop and on its other side is the temporary city. The town hall, built of connected metal containers, and container restaurants. Container complexes. No distinguishing marks. Down on the shore, work is in full swing. They have to raise the shore by a few meters before they can build a new city here. They're transporting soil from the hills on long conveyor belts. They'll open stores, pharmacies, dental clinics, fruit and vegetable stores, and flower shops close to the sea. And they'll build two protective walls right on the water. The first will be three and

a half meters high, the second twelve and a half. And there will be a memorial facing the ocean on top of it. They'll plant seventy thousand pine trees all around. There will be a forest here again in fifty years. A single building remains on the giant construction site: a long apartment block close to the shore. It is five stories high with balconies separated by railings. The glass doors on the fifth floor are closed. Laundry is still set out to dry on one of the balconies, on a plastic rack with many clothespins. Yet from the fourth floor down, all you see is chaos. Broken glass, moldy mattresses, tree branches stuck in the window frames. At the bottom, there's an upended washing machine, and a pine tree stuck in a window, roots and all. The stairway is blocked by a telegraph pole. It's twisted sideways, so you have to bend down to go up. Wires hang from demolished ceilings. Broken dishes are strewn over the floors of apartments, and knives are stabbed into walls. On the topmost floor, cups were left on the tables, ironed clothes were hanging in the closets, and the beds were neatly made. The first wave was the strongest. It ricocheted off the hillsides surrounding the plain on which Rikuzentakata stood. The wave moving in from the sea isn't that terrifying; you're able to float on its surface. But when it recedes, it sucks everything in. Everything whirlpools. The second wave was the highest. It was the wave that pulled people from the rooftops. Some of them survived; they climbed the chimneys. The town hall employees—126 people—were standing on the roof of the building with water up to their ankles. Another two meters and the sea would have pulled them in as well. There were ten, maybe fifteen waves. Who was counting. People said that from a distance the water was rolling over to the point that you saw the bottom of the sea at times.

The first wave is just water—dirty, gray, and foamy. But each consecutive wave contains more and more cars, parts of houses, television sets, tables, chairs, kitchen stoves, mailboxes, bathtubs, street lamps, broken porcelain cups, plush armchairs, tea kettles, toothbrushes, and photo albums. A wall of water with everything that made up the city just a moment earlier. Dead fish, dogs, and people. The ocean backed off from Rikuzentakata at five in the morning. Those people who didn't have the time to run to the hills and weren't pulled in by the water spent the entire night on rooftops. They said they had never seen so many stars in their lives. And when the sun finally rose, they saw rubble covered in sludge. There were no gates, fences, gardens, walls, roofs, streets, windows, shop displays, closed shutters, bus stops, sidewalks, or trees. Only the sky. Intense, blue. Beautiful, they said.

Of the twenty-four thousand inhabitants of Rikuzentakata, seventeen hundred people died. The tsunami changed something that had always been the same—the appearance of the shore. Entire sections of land, where gas stations and produce stores used to stand, were taken by the water. Today the city ends abruptly. The waves took out the trees that screened the villages from the sea; now the inhabitants of those places, even those who don't live that close to the water, are constantly plagued by harsh winds. Cold gusts that smell of the ocean and freeze you to the bone. The wave washed away the round pebbles from the rocky beaches. People remember perfectly the sound those pebbles made when they were shifted by the water. It was a high, whirring sound. Since the tsunami, the only thing they hear is a dull, rattling noise. The rocks don't look the same, the pebbles on the beach don't sound the same,