

## Chapter 7

# Nature and Disaster in Murakami Haruki's *after the quake*

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Ishigami Gen'ichirō was at his apartment in the Kobe foothills when the Great Hanshin Awaji earthquake struck on January 17, 1995.<sup>1</sup> Like most people, he was awakened by the early-morning shaking and rushed outside. From the appearance of his neighborhood, at first he judged that it was not a major disaster. But that initial assessment changed as he ventured downtown. Passing the Japan Railways line that runs through the city, he began to see more damage: telephone poles broken in half, buildings collapsed, and an apartment building whose first floor had been crushed. Ishigami, a postwar author of Dazai Osamu's generation, recounted this experience in the April 1995 issue of the magazine *Shinchō*, mere months after the disaster. The first part of the essay is replete with detailed descriptions of the crescendo of destruction as he moved through the city. Halfway through, however, Ishigami shifts from a description of the damage to a condemnation of the human treatment of the earth and suggests that the earthquake may have come from "The Earth's Wrath" or "Daichi no ikari," the title of the essay.<sup>2</sup> In this section of the essay, Ishigami cites James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis.<sup>3</sup> Lovelock hypothesized that the earth is one giant organism with interrelated systems keeping it in balance. As Lovelock has done across several books, Ishigami also proposes that humans are interfering with Gaia's equilibrium and compares humans to bacteria infecting our host with a long list of environmental woes from the destruction of tropical rain forests, damage to the ozone layer, and acid rain to nuclear testing and overpopulation.<sup>4</sup> For Ishigami, the earth's major cities become "malignant tumors," destruction of the tropical rain forests is a skin disease, and global warming a "fever." Earthquakes are included here as well. As Ishigami writes, "Earthquakes are the seizures of mother earth," suggesting that the Kobe earthquake might be linked to our destruction of the environment (237).



Although the scientific community has embraced some elements of Lovelock's hypothesis, Ishigami's insinuations are not based on science. For example, he states that underground nuclear testing could have caused the earthquake, but there is no causal link between the Kobe earthquake and any human action.<sup>5</sup> In fact, far from being a sign of a sick planet, earthquakes have happened regularly in the earth's geological history and considerably predate humanity. With a few notable exceptions, mostly localized in areas of wastewater injection or hydraulic fracking, earthquakes have not increased in frequency or power with the spread of human influence over the natural world. (Needless to say, when there are more humans in an earthquake-prone region, the destruction in those human communities is clearly greater.) Rather than making a scientific argument, Ishigami is using Gaia as a metaphor to suggest that the earth responds in anger to human-caused destruction. The consequences of human neglect of the earth's health are dire. In the final sentence of the essay, Ishigami writes: "Should our host Gaia perish, the result for us bacilli will naturally be self-annihilation" (237). Ishigami sees the earthquake as part of this annihilation and uses it to make an argument for environmental action. Yet there is a contrast between Ishigami's depiction of the earth as sick with fever and skin disease and his characterization of the earth's anger in the title of his essay. Sickness is weakness. But Ishigami's portrayal of the earthquake damage shows a strong earth, one that can punish humanity for our mistreatment of it. This implies that nature has agency and is powerful enough to strike back.

As the contradiction in Ishigami's essay suggests, natural disasters are a curious case for ecocritical exploration. They offer a lens through which to view nature, neither as something fragile that can be destroyed through human intervention nor even as an object of awe-inspiring beauty, but as a force beyond human control that can have a devastating impact on communities. Many representations of disaster focus on human suffering and the social responses afterward. But human suffering is only one side of the equation. This chapter is a foray into the other side: the power of nature. How have people represented the formidable forces behind disasters rather than their effects on human communities? Ishigami's portrait of an angry earth is one example. The idea of nature striking back, wreaking revenge on careless humanity, is not new. It is often evoked in natural disasters and sometimes used rhetorically to advocate for more environmental concern, as Ishigami does in "The Earth's Wrath." Yet depicting nature as something that "strikes back" also emphasizes an opposition between humanity and the natural world. There are other ways to consider disasters with a focus on the natural world that do not create a further rift.

In this chapter, I explore representations of the 1995 Kobe earthquake in Murakami Haruki's short story collection known in English as *after the*



quake and in Japanese as *Kami no kodomotachi wa mina odoru* (All God's Children Can Dance, 2000). This collection is far from consistent in its representation of the relationship between the human community and the natural world. While one story, "super frog saves tokyo," depicts the force behind the quake as a mindless beast striking out against humanity, the title story, "all god's children can dance," suggests a powerful way of conceptualizing earthquakes. This story decenters humanity by erasing the distinctions between humans and nature and further shows the earth as a creative force in its own right.

### MURAKAMI HARUKI'S AFTER THE QUAKE

Murakami's treatment of the earthquake first appeared as a series of stories in the magazine *Shinchō* in 1999, four years after Ishigami's essay. These were then collected into a single volume in 2000 along with an additional story, "honey pie." Each story is connected to the others by time—between the Kobe earthquake in January 1995 and the Aum subway gas attacks in March—and a distant relationship to the earthquake. None of the characters experience the disaster in any way, but the disaster looms in the background. This distant connection to the disaster mirrors the experience of the author. Unlike Ishigami, Murakami was not in his native Kansai when the earthquake struck and indeed had not lived there for some time. Murakami had left the area first for college in Tokyo and then for Europe in 1986 to evade his growing celebrity. In January 1995 he was at the end of an extended stay in America. He returned to Japan that year and has continued living in Tokyo since. Murakami's stories about the earthquake are also set far away from the actual event: Hokkaido, rural Ibaraki, Tokyo, and Thailand.

Despite the surface similarity in the protagonists' relationships to the earthquake, the stories in *after the quake* are rather diverse. In the first story in the collection, "ufo in kushiro," the wife of protagonist Komura leaves him following the earthquake because she perceives the emptiness inside him more clearly following the disaster. He then journeys to Hokkaido carrying a box that may or may not contain the something missing from inside him. The second story, "landscape with flatiron," is about two people, Miyake and Junko, making fires on an Ibaraki beach and talking about death. Yoshiya, the young man in the title story, "all god's children can dance," has rejected the religion of his childhood and seems unable to replace it. His ennui is shown through his lack of commitment to his girlfriend or his work. "thailand" follows a woman named Satsuki through Thailand as she comes to terms with a haunting event in her past. The protagonist of "superfrog saves tokyo," Katagiri, lives alone, rejected by his family; his life only seems to have purpose when



he is asked by a giant frog to help save Tokyo from a looming disastrous earthquake. Finally, "honey pie" depicts a passive writer who finally takes initiative with the woman he loves after helping calm her daughter, Sala, who has nightmares about the earthquake.

Each of the stories in *after the quake* is linked in multiple ways. The most obvious is the earthquake, but the connections are not limited to the disaster.<sup>6</sup> As Katō Norihiro points out, the specter of the Aum subway attacks looms over several of these stories as well.<sup>7</sup> Besides these overarching connections, there are overlaps between several of the stories. "ufo in kushiro" is linked with both "thailand" and "honey pie" through stories about bears.<sup>8</sup> Both Miyake in "landscape with flatiron" and the young Sala in "honey pie" share a fear of being put into a box (or a refrigerator in Miyake's case). The protagonist of "all god's children can dance," Yoshiya, is given the nickname "super-frog" by his girlfriend, connecting him to the eponymous frog of "super-frog saves tokyo" (both are *kaeru-kun* in the Japanese).

For many of these protagonists, the disaster seems to call attention to a lack in their own lives. The emptiness of contemporary life is a prevalent theme in Murakami's fiction, which is often concerned with alienated individuals and their place in society. Nevertheless, his protagonists differ in their responses to that alienation and to the other people around them.<sup>9</sup> As various critics have noted, there is a shift in Murakami's fiction from the self-absorbed protagonists of his earlier work (criticized by people such as Ōe Kenzaburō and Kuroko Kazuo) to more socially committed protagonists in the mid-nineties. Some scholars connect his shift to the 1995 earthquake and the Aum Shinrikyō sarin gas attacks along with Murakami's subsequent return to Japan, but others point to *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* as an earlier example, the majority of which was in print by the time of the quake.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of the actual timing, many see this collection as a move toward social engagement.

Despite Murakami's move toward more "socially committed" writing, acknowledged by several scholars, he has not seemingly made a similar shift toward greater concern with environmental issues in his stories.<sup>11</sup> While there are nonhuman animals in several of Murakami's works (especially cats), his protagonists are, almost always, urban, and he is rarely concerned with their relationship to their natural environment. As Karen Thornber writes, Murakami has "addressed human abuse of environments relatively tangentially" (71).<sup>12</sup> It is therefore mostly "tangentially" that critics are able to read his work for environmental themes. On the surface, at least, Murakami remains primarily interested in humanity.

The collection of stories in *after the quake* is similarly centered on humanity and related to issues of the environment only tangentially. Most of the protagonists of the various stories live in cities, and they all have a negligible



connection with the natural world and work in everyday middle-class jobs: Komura in "ufo in kushiro" is an electronics salesman; Satsuki in "thailand" is a medical researcher; Katagiri in "super-frog saves tokyo" is a bank employee. Yet each story shares a distant connection to a major *natural* catastrophe. As Jonathan Boulter notes, "The disaster is marginalized in the individual narratives, yet paradoxically and uncannily central to the text as a *whole*" (129, emphasis in the original). Nevertheless, the disaster at the center is rarely treated specifically as part of the natural world. There is little mention of faults, tectonics, ground shaking, or rock shifting. Rather, the earthquake is mostly an abstract idea, something indistinct that causes anxiety or harm.

Much scholarship on *after the quake* focuses on the social trauma of the earthquake. For example, in his book *Dances with Sheep*, Matthew Strecher writes that the characters in Murakami's collection "suffer from a kind of latent trauma that is triggered, brought to life, by the earthquake itself" (194). Strecher further sees *after the quake* as Murakami's attempt to show a perspective that differs from the narratives more readily available, in Strecher's words, to "reinvigorate the sense of *human* dimension that is frequently lost in conventional mass media reportage" (199, emphasis mine). Non-Japan specialists have similarly turned to *after the quake* as a way of discussing trauma. A practicing psychoanalyst has written about Murakami's insight into his field by drawing "analytic parallels" between "ufo in kushiro" and his work with patients.<sup>13</sup> The most thorough analysis of this kind is Jonathan Boulter's article "Writing Guilt," which reads *Underground* and *after the quake* as attempts to highlight the inability to write about trauma. All of these scholars share a concern with the effect of the earthquake trauma on these characters and how that distant trauma makes them acutely aware of their own malaise. But, as Yasemin Dayioğlu-Yücel points out, in this depiction of disaster, Murakami is "less concerned with nature's powers than with human wrongdoing" (119). It follows that most critics share Murakami's concern and emphasize the aftereffects of the disaster on the human community. While I would not disagree with scholars who claim that the focus of the book is human alienation, ignoring the role of the natural world in this series of stories misses an auxiliary theme. Rather than dispute the validity of these other perspectives, my goal here is to shed light on the representation of the natural world in the collection, including the earthquake.

### NATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN MURAKAMI'S AFTER THE QUAKE

Unlike explicitly environmentally concerned authors, Murakami does not have a clear agenda regarding the natural world present throughout his work.



Rather, he depicts nature in a manner that fits the demands of his narrative. This is clear from the lack of consistency in both his depiction of the relationship between nature and humanity and his treatment of nonhuman animals. *after the quake* is no different. Whereas most stories in the collection do have some relationship to nature beyond the disaster at the core, some see the natural world as adversarial and others as benign. Some stories depict nonhuman animals as wild and distinctly nonhuman and others anthropomorphize them. This range of representation highlights the ambiguity toward nature present in the collection.

For example, the second story in *after the quake*, translated as “landscape with flatiron,” emphasizes the adversarial relationship between nature and humanity. Miyake, a man who fled his family life in Kobe and took up residence in a seaside town in Ibaraki prefecture, makes a fire on a beach with his friend Junko on a cold night in February. Making bonfires is Miyake’s favorite pastime, and he often enlists Junko to help. The story, focalized through Junko, consists mainly of their conversation that night with some flashbacks explaining their friendship. Junko links the fires they make with her favorite Jack London story, “To Build a Fire.”<sup>14</sup> “To Build a Fire” depicts a man’s fight against the harsh realities of his natural environment, a common theme in Jack London’s fiction. In this case, the man is trying to light a fire in the unforgiving cold of the Yukon. Nature, embodied in part by the dog accompanying the man, is indifferent to human suffering. In Junko’s interpretation of the story, the man actually yearns for death but nevertheless fights to survive against what Junko characterizes as an “overwhelming adversary” (29/53).<sup>15</sup> This overwhelming power is the natural world that thinks nothing of the humans in its midst. The distant earthquake appears to be one such “overwhelming adversary,” but none of the characters directly encounter the raw power of the earth in the way Jack London’s character confronted the cold of the Yukon.

In contrast to the adversarial relationship in “landscape with flatiron,” the story “thailand” depicts that country as a place where humans and the natural world coincide, sometimes peacefully, other times with some friction, but never with the threat of death that accompanies disaster. In “thailand,” Satsuki, a thyroid specialist in Thailand for a conference, decides to stay longer in the country as a tourist and is shown around by Nimit, her driver-cum-guide. Nonhuman animals are frequently referenced, and they seem to be an everyday part of life: unemployed elephants roam the streets and monkeys reside in the hills. Although the elephants in the story cause disturbances, these conflicts arise from incompatibility with urban life, not inherent opposition to humanity. There is nothing like the struggle in the Jack London story. At the conclusion of the story, Satsuki, who has been burdened with hatred toward an unnamed man who wronged her, is taken by Nimit to a Thai



fortune-teller. This woman tells Satsuki of a snake who will visit her dreams. Like the elephants and the monkeys, this snake is nonthreatening. Rather, it promises to rid Satsuki of the hatred that resides in her heart.

Nonhuman animals appear in many of the stories, just as they do in "thailand," yet they are also ambiguous symbols that do not provide a consistent or stable image of the relationship between nature and humanity. This ambiguity is clear in the example of bears in "ufo in Kushiro" and "honey pie." In "ufo in kushiro," a woman named Shimao tells the protagonist a story about ringing a bell while having sex in the wild to scare away bears. The bell is a preventative measure against what Shimao considers to be an awful way to die, mauled by a bear in flagrante delicto. Bears are thus an external threat in the natural world, something that can harm the more fragile human body.

"honey pie" takes a completely different approach to the nonhuman animal: anthropomorphizing. The protagonist, Junpei, is a young writer who tells stories about bears to his best friend's daughter, Sala. The primary bear is Masakichi, a small bear that can talk and sells honey to people in town. Masakichi's friend Tonkichi is a stronger and wilder bear that catches salmon in the river.<sup>16</sup> Both bears can become friends with one another and they have an entrepreneurial spirit. In a further connection to the human world, Masakichi and Tonkichi's relationship also hints at the odd-couple friendship of Junpei and Sala's father, Takatsuki. In contrast to "ufo in kushiro" or Jack London's "To Build a Fire," as referenced in "landscape with flatiron," the largest threat in "honey pie" takes a human form. Although the hazards of the earth are clear in the televised news reports of the earthquake, young Sala fears the "Earthquake Man" who wants to stuff her into a box (also a fear of Miyake in "landscape with flatiron").

As the example of bears illustrates, this collection contains a range of representations of nonhuman animals. In the first story, "ufo in kushiro," the bears are truly wild. Their motives are inscrutable and they are a danger to humans. In "honey pie," the wild beasts that threaten to devour Shimao having sex in the forest are completely tame and anthropomorphized. Recognizing this range is crucial for understanding the story "super-frog saves tokyo." That story includes supernatural nonhuman animals from both sides of the spectrum: one is an inscrutable threat and the other a friendly, anthropomorphized creature.

### **"SUPER-FROG SAVES TOKYO"**

Unlike the other stories, a nonhuman animal, the eponymous frog, is a central character in "super frog saves tokyo." The protagonist of "super-frog," Katagiri, is a normal bank employee who is visited by a giant frog. This frog



predicts a massive earthquake that will happen in a few days unless Katagiri helps him defeat a giant worm below the city. Frog fights Worm in an epic battle, and Katagiri psychically cheers him on from within a coma. After Katagiri awakens, Frog visits him in the hospital, tells of their success in preventing the earthquake, and then abruptly dies; worms and bugs erupt from beneath his skin and consume him. Both the earthquake-causing Worm and the heroic Frog are nonhuman creatures, but it is clear that Frog, at least, is on the side of humanity.

Frog moves like a frog, croaks like a frog, and asserts emphatically that he is a frog. His otherness as a nonhuman is consistently emphasized by the narrative and by Frog himself. His physical properties seem to place him squarely on the side of nature. At the same time, he is anthropomorphized in his use of clear, polite language and his interest in human culture. Frog has a clear grasp of cultural propriety and asks Katagiri's forgiveness for intruding. Furthermore, his love of art, and frequent references to Nietzsche, Hemingway, and Russian novelists, signals his interest in the creative works of humanity.

Frog is a liminal figure, existing in-between the natural world and the human one. This liminal position is underlined by his characterization of himself as "a pacifist, loving art, living with nature" (100/165). As a liminal figure, Frog's existence undermines the extreme separation of nature from the human world some believe underlies our environmental crisis, the nature/culture binary. Despite this liminal position, we know that Frog sides with humanity because of his concern for the death and destruction that will happen in the human realm. There is no concern expressed for the animals or nature more generally, which would not be majorly affected by the foretold quake anyway. Frog mentions only human casualties. Thus, Frog's existence within the story dissolves the arbitrary boundary between humans and other animals. He is entirely a frog, yet acts human and cares for our species greatly with no evidence of concern for his own.

Within the story, Frog is contrasted with "Worm," who is associated with nature and is unconcerned with humanity. Frog describes Worm as a giant unthinking creature deep below Tokyo. "He goes on sleeping for years—decades—in the warmth and darkness underground. His eyes, as you might imagine, have atrophied, his brain has turned to jelly as he sleeps" (97/161). Worm absorbs "various rumblings" of hatred that cause his periodic violent shaking. Qualities that might make Worm more human, its eyes and brain, are gone, leaving nothing but a brainless creature, without agency, responding only to external stimuli. Worm is nature as unknowable, nature as threat, similar to the bears looming in the Hokkaido wilderness ready to pounce in "ufo in kushiro."

Frog and Worm show the two sides of cultural representations of nonhuman animals: external threat and shared "humanity." The anthropomorphized



Frog sides with humanity, and Worm, as nature, is depicted as brainless. Worm is a force that reacts to inputs, only these inputs are not human degradation of the environment, as Ishigami might argue, but hatred, something limited to the human sphere. Despite Worm's overwhelming rage and power, Frog is able to bring the battle to a draw, thus postponing the earthquake. This ending of "super-frog" suggests that nature can be controlled, can be placated. Yet the image of Worm as unfeeling nature remains powerful. Despite the human-induced anger of Worm and prominent role played by Frog, this is an anthropocentric story. Human life and culture are saved, other animals are ignored, and nature is just a big dumb beast.

As we have seen, *after the quake* does not paint a coherent portrait of nature throughout. If we examine the work ecocritically, an interesting trajectory becomes apparent. In the first two stories, nature is oppositional: the bears in "ufo in kushiro" and nature as an "overwhelming adversary" in "landscape with flatiron." By the final story, the lines between the human and the nonhuman become blurred in the anthropomorphized bears of "honey pie." In the middle of this transition is the title story, "all god's children can dance," which depicts nature in a manner distinct from the rest of the collection.

### "ALL GOD'S CHILDREN CAN DANCE"

The protagonist of this story is a young man, Yoshiya, who lives with his mother. She is a fervent devotee of a new religion and Yoshiya was raised in the religion with the unusual belief that his father was the god they worshipped, "O-kata" or "Him."<sup>17</sup> Despite this privileged position in the faith, Yoshiya found it hard to accept the strict rules and could not reconcile himself to the god/father who remained silent toward his son, and therefore left the faith. These details link Yoshiya and his mother with believers of the Aum Shinrikyō, the cult responsible for the March 1995 sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway system. Several scholars have noted the connection between this story and *Underground*, and Murakami has more recently dealt with similar themes in *1Q84*.<sup>18</sup> Like Yoshiya, Aomame, the protagonist of that novel, left a cultish religious group in which her parents fanatically believed.<sup>19</sup>

Yoshiya has an unusual relationship with his mother, who has a habit of wandering their apartment in the nude or in her underwear, even innocently curling up to him in bed on some nights, forcing her son to hide his erection. Yoshiya's incestuous desire and rejection of his faith in his supposed father clearly recalls Oedipus, as others have noted.<sup>20</sup> Yoshiya later learns that his actual father may have been a gynecologist missing an earlobe. On the day covered by the narration, Yoshiya spots a man missing an earlobe on the



subway and follows him onto a deserted baseball field, where he loses sight of the man. The inclusion of the baseball field at this climactic moment is important because Yoshiya's loss of faith comes after asking his father/god to help him catch fly balls when he was younger and receiving no reply.

Many of the critics exploring "all god's children can dance" interpret it through the lens of spirituality and the conflict between good and evil. In his book *Spirit Matters*, Phillip Gabriel, one of Murakami's translators, sees this story as signifying a spiritual quest for god or the transcendent from a place beyond organized religion (178). For Gabriel, Yoshiya reaches a "spiritual awakening" in the process of searching for his father, who may be God. Matthew Strecher's similarly emphasizes the spiritual awakening in his book *The Forbidden Worlds of Haruki Murakami*, this time to "the internal narrative and to the omnipresent Narrative" (136). This spiritual awakening emphasizes the self (the "internal narrative") in contrast to the organizing grand Narratives of religion and the state. Strecher finds "all god's children can dance" to be an early exploration of "deity" in Murakami's fiction that finds its most recent manifestation in *1Q84*.

Others analyze this story as exploring the evil within, as seen in Yoshiya's incestuous desire for his mother.<sup>21</sup> Kawai Hisashi, for example, sees Yoshiya as struggling between an external god that betrays him and his internal god. The former has a strict morality that would condemn incest, but his internal "god" contains both good and bad. Nakayama Sachie also explores Yoshiya's incestuous thoughts. For Nakayama, this desire is not necessarily evil or bad, but rather something dark. Nakayama traces a concern with "darkness" and the unconscious through other examples of Murakami's fiction and nonfiction where good and bad are not easily separated, with a notable focus on his works about Aum: *Underground* and *Underground 2: The Place That Was Promised*.

My reading of this story prioritizes the portrayal of the earth above themes of spirituality. Nevertheless, there is a connection between the darkness within humanity that Nakayama observes in "all god's children can dance" and that within the earth in the story. Both are not necessarily evil; rather, following Nakayama's analysis, this darkness is like the unconscious, which is sometimes ominous, but can also be a well of creative energy. In this way, the story offers a view of earthquakes that differs from the destructive rumblings of hatred beneath the earth seen in "super frog."

Yoshiya's interactions with the natural world contrast with those of other protagonists in *after the quake*. In the climactic moment of the story, Yoshiya dances alone in the baseball field. Without music to dance to, he "danced in time with the stirring of the grass and the flowing of the clouds." He feels that someone is watching him, but thinks defiantly, "So what? . . . Let them look if they want to . . . All God's children can dance" (66/108–109). The connection between dancing in time with the grass and the clouds and the final



sentence of that same paragraph suggests that the grass and the clouds might also be "God's children." The affinity Yoshiya feels with the natural world appears to be that of siblings of common paternity. The boundaries between the human and the nonhuman are erased in their imagined familial bond and shared movement.

As Yoshiya dances, he sees a vision of animals and "horrific beasts" lurking in a forest. The narrator points out that Yoshiya recognizes the forest as one within himself and the beasts "were ones he himself possessed" (66/109). It is a vision of the darkness within him. Here the external world of forests and forest creatures becomes Yoshiya's internal world. This gestures toward the unconscious, the darkness that Nakayama sees in this and other Murakami works. Yoshiya feels no trepidation about his need to pass through the forest and indeed recognizes it as a force that "made him who he was."

Acknowledging the darkness him helps Yoshiya see the darkness within the earth. Immediately after Yoshiya imagines the forest, he stops to consider the earth below him.

And then it struck him what lay buried far under the earth on which his feet were so firmly planted: the ominous rumblings of the deepest darkness, secret rivers that transported desire, slimy creatures writhing, the lair of earthquakes ready to transform whole cities into mounds of rubble. These, too, were helping to create the rhythm of the earth. (66-67/109-110)

Here, the dark elements of humanity and the earth—the dark rivers of desire, the writhing bugs, and the earthquakes beneath the earth's surface—are not merely destructive but also creative forces that contribute to the "rhythms of the earth." Yoshiya recognizes the darkness within the earth as similar to his own, but not the same. He appreciates both the dark forest within himself and the darkness within the earth as creative forces. Furthermore, these forces are not located in a creator/god, but within the earth itself and within himself as a human. They are not linked with the patriarchal creator O-kata.

### "NATURE" AS AGENT

The story "all god's children can dance" decenters the human and sees nature, and even earthquakes, as having the kind of creative agency that late eco-philosopher Val Plumwood theorized in her essay "Nature in the Active Voice." For Plumwood, "nature" includes rocks, oceans, all living things (including humanity), entire planets, solar systems, and the natural forces that govern them, and she grants each part a creative agency. Envisioning nature in this way combats anthropocentrism and creates a space in which to imagine humanity as part of a system of equals and not as master over the world.



Plumwood's essay is a critique of anthropocentrism she believes is inherent in both scientific objectivism and the "intelligent design" concept of creationists. Plumwood saw both scientific objectivism and the idea of a single unified creator as stemming from the same reductive materialism, made most famous by Descartes, that considers "the human species as uniquely conscious agents and reduces nonhuman forms to 'mere matter,' [quoting Descartes] emptied of agency, spirit and intelligence" (n.p.). This worldview fosters what Plumwood calls human/nature dualism by treating the natural world as separate from humanity and as an object rather than as an agent.

Scientific reductionism, she writes, "assumes a mindless meaningless materialist universe open to endless unrestricted manipulation and appropriation" (n.p.). She argues that scientific objectivism sees nature as a dead object of study, which responds only to stimuli. Creationists are similarly anthropocentric and reductive, but approach nature from a different viewpoint. For creationists, "meaning, intelligence and communicativity belong to the external driver, who is to be found only in the human or humanoid sphere" (n.p.). Thus, creationism grants to the creator a human-like centralized agency, consciousness, and intentionality, and the works of that creator have no agency in themselves.

Instead of creationism and scientific objectivism, Plumwood posits something she describes as an intentional universe. For Plumwood, "nature" is an organism. In this, her view is similar to Lovelock's imagining of the earth as an organism in his Gaia hypothesis, but Plumwood goes further by describing it as "a realm of *creative* and self-organising systems" (n.p., emphasis mine). She continues:

In an intentional universe we can have it both ways, a dispersed creativity and a decentralized intentionality. For this, we need to spread concepts of agency and creativity more widely into what we have thought of as the dead world of nature. (n.p.)

The concept of the intentional universe seeks a way to imagine nature—natural forces, nonhuman animals, and humanity—as creative. Everything is a creative agent with no hierarchical differentiation. This is a radical assertion, but one Plumwood considers ethically necessary.<sup>22</sup> She contends that thinking of nature as an agent could help humanity develop a more sustainable ecological consciousness.

In the conclusion of her essay, Plumwood sees a particular role for literature in conveying the ideas she proposes. She believes in giving nature back its voice through literature by "reanimating" matter. "In re-animating, we become open to hearing sound as voice, seeing movement as action, adaptation as intelligence and dialogue, coincidence and chaos as the creativity of



matter. . . . Above all, it is permission to depict nature in the active voice, the domain of agency" (n.p.). This is what Murakami's story does. It shifts from the ideas of Yoshiya's mother, which see the world as the creation of a being, to Yoshiya's revelation of the world as a creative agent.

The final sentences of Murakami's story depict nature in the active voice. There, Yoshiya kneels on the pitcher's mound after his dance. Yoshiya gave himself up to the flow of time. Somewhere in the distance he heard the faint wail of a siren. A gust of wind set the leaves of grass to dancing and celebrated the grass's song before it died.

"Oh God," Yoshiya said aloud.

The siren here is just something heard, but the wind is different. It has agency and the narrator uses the active voice. Wind causes the grass to dance and also *celebrates* the song of the grass (*kotohogu*). In this moment, Murakami gives the wind the ability to enjoy the dancing grass.

Yoshiya's final statement is ambiguous and perplexing. In Japanese it is only *kamisama*, a word for deity. The referent of *kamisama* is unclear. Is he referring to O-kata, or something else? If we consider the explanation of nature's creative forces in the previous pages and the wind celebrating the grass's song, it is possible to read this exclamation as a recognition and an acknowledgement of the divinity of the nature that surrounds him, a conception of nature as divine that supplants Yoshiya's forsaken father and shares the work of creation. Nature thus has a "dispersed creativity."

Although the belief in O-kata in "all god's children can dance" imagines a human-like conscious creator in the same sense that Plumwood sees as problematic, in the final pages of the story, natural forces take on the mantle of creation and usurp that role. By granting natural forces the ability to dance, celebrate, and create rhythm, "all god's children can dance" suggests a different conception of nature and earthquakes, one that gives nature agency and decenters the human. Creativity is dispersed throughout the world. It is in the wind and in the "nest of earthquakes" below the earth's surface.

For Ishigami, nature is something that can be harmed through human intervention, but also something that can strike out against humans. While the "nature strikes back" idea does give nature its agency, it also further separates the natural world from the human one. Other stories in Murakami's collection *after the quake* are no better. Many continue to separate the human realm and the natural one, often in opposition. In "all god's children can dance," however, nature is not crudely anthropomorphized. It does not lash out blindly, nor is it merely a destructive force. Rather, the story highlights the dispersed creative forces of the natural world that contribute to earth's rhythms. Humanity is only one creative force among many. With a perspective from



outside human society, even earthquakes can be seen as creative. Although they can destroy human communities, natural tectonic forces are responsible for the beauty of mountains and for the Japanese archipelago itself. Like humans and other creatures on its surface, like the grass in the wind, the earth can also dance.

## NOTES

1. This earthquake had a magnitude of 6.9 and caused approximately 6,400 deaths. It will hereafter be referred to as the Kobe earthquake, its more common English name.

2. Ishigami Gen'ichirō, "Daichi no ikari." *Shinchō* 92.4 (1995): 234–237.

3. Lovelock's first book-length exploration of his hypothesis was the 1979 book, *Gaia, a New Look at Life on Earth*.

4. Lovelock wrote that the earth suffered from "The People Plague," a chapter title in his 1991 book *Healing Gaia* (1991, 153), revised edition 2000. It is possible that Ishigami read this book by Lovelock in English, but the Japanese translation did not appear until 2003.

5. It should be noted, however, that human-induced earthquakes are possible, as William Ellsworth has shown in *Science*. Several recent earthquakes in the American Midwest, notably Oklahoma, have been linked to the use of hydraulic fracturing in the area. (See van der Elst et al. 2013.)

6. Yoshida Haruo claims that, for most of the stories at least, the earthquake is used for nothing more than to "add a bit of flavor to the development of the story" (217–218).

7. As Katō points out in his book *Murakami Haruki ierō pēji part 2*, the strongest connections are in "all god's children can dance" and "super-frog saves tokyo." In the former, not only is Yoshiya raised within a cult-like group, but the subway station where he sees the man missing an earlobe is Kasumigaseki, the focal point of the attacks. In the latter, Frog foretells a disaster coming to Tokyo from beneath the ground (108).

8. Katō also notes this connection (111). He also points out that there is a tangential reference in "super-frog saves tokyo." In that story, Frog resolves one of Katagiri's tough cases. The name of the company is Higashi Ōguma Shōji or "Eastern Big Bear Trading." Katō also has a chart outlining some key words that appear in the stories on page 127.

9. For one example, Matthew Strecher has characterized Murakami Haruki's central theme as "the recovery of the repressed individual in Japan's vaunted 'homogeneous culture'" (26).

10. Rebecca Suter discusses this shift in detail in her chapter "Beyond Kizuna: Murakami Haruki on Disaster and Social Crisis" in *Disasters and Social Crisis in Contemporary Japan: Political, Religious, and Sociocultural Responses*.

11. In his 1990 critique of the lack of social engagement in contemporary writers, Kuroko Kazuo mentioned environmental issues as something writers should be



concerned about (11). Kuroko singled out Murakami and Yoshimoto Banana. While Murakami's 2011 speech in Barcelona accepting the International Catalunya Prize grappled with issues of nuclear power and to some extent its impact on the environment, his post 3/11 work remains related to issues of the environment tangentially.

12. In her analysis of Murakami's 1985 story "The Elephant Vanishes," Thornber points out that there is little narrative concern for the well-being of the animal (398–399).

13. See Rosbrow 2012.

14. The most famous version of the story, and the one Junko clearly references, was published in *The Century Magazine* in 1908. Tanabe Akira discusses the connection between the two stories in his article.

15. All citations from Murakami's stories are given first with the translation and then with the original Japanese. In Japanese, this passage reads that the man "makes as his adversary an overwhelming thing." (圧倒的なものを相手に闘わなくてはならない。)

16. There is a lost opportunity for explicit environmental critique in the story "honey pie." The salmon caught by Tonkichi no longer come up the river, not because of human environmental degradation, but rather because they fear the bear's awesome fishing prowess. It is possible to read the decline of salmon as a metaphor for overfishing, but it is not obvious.

17. Although "O-kata" is gender neutral, it is clear from the story that this god is male.

18. Many have linked the entire collection to *Underground*, but for an example with this story in particular, see Nakayama Sachie and Tanaka Minoru.

19. Matthew Strecher has explored this connection in his book *The Forbidden Worlds of Haruki Murakami*.

20. See for example Boulter and Nakayama.

21. The term for this desire in the Japanese story, "lustful thoughts" in the English translation is 邪念 *jyanen*, which could be more directly translated as evil or wicked thoughts.

22. Evan Thompson, in his book *Mind in Life*, combines science and philosophy to argue that any living thing has a "mind." This idea is not as radical as Plumwood's and is still considered to be a minority view within philosophical thought. Recent empirical evidence lending support to Thompson has been shown in the work of Efrat Dener, Alex Kacelnik, and Hagai Shemesh, who have found "the first characterization of risk sensitivity outside species with nervous systems" in their study of pea plants.

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