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# Ten Years After Fukushima

by Yoko Tawada

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*Translated by Elizabeth Sun*

What is the half-life of Caesium? 30 years? How long does it take Plutonium to decay in half? 24,000 years? Uranium takes as long as 4.5 billion years. I cannot bear this idea. I close my eyes, defiantly telling myself that everything is forever contaminated anyway. "Forever" means "an eternity." The idea of eternity is more bearable than a concrete high number; that is why I seek refuge in this eternity, an era for which no one is responsible anymore. This way, I do not have to act because it is too late anyway. I allow myself to retreat into my four walls—a private life of reassurance and sweet melancholy.

But what would it be like if I were to look the frightening figures directly in the eye? If I were to incorporate uncomfortable words like Caesium or Plutonium into poetry? Paul Celan, who would have turned 100 about three months ago, allowed terms from the fields of medicine or chemistry to enter his poems. This occurred while he dealt with the catastrophes of human civilization.

What is the half-life of memory?

When the "core" of 2011 melted down, we were all deeply shaken and developed an unfathomable fear--it was not just fear of radioactivity, but much more. What kind of core had melted at that moment? The core of trust for continuity, without which we cannot put strength into our daily work, cultivate human relationships, or build a house, a school, a business. The atomic machine can destroy the meaning of life at any given moment and thus, it always contaminates us inwardly—through its existence alone.

What is the half-life of my memory? In a deserted neighborhood in Fukushima, two years after the Super-GAU, I saw newspapers dated from 3/11/2011 stacked up in a small office, never delivered. Should they lie there for another 24,000 years, unread and unnoticed?

You cannot go on living with horrors in your head. To repress them, they are loaded into black plastic bags or secretly thrown into the sea. Is the ocean a giant washing machine that can clean so much deadly and poisoned dirty laundry? By no means. The world's oceans are like a highly sensitive network of nerves that have been 46 billion years in the making. The great water torments itself in a constant attempt to rebalance, but the rate of poisoning is increasing drastically.

No substance disappears by silencing it to death. Once a harmful message is sent out, it remains in the world. It decays only very slowly, and the rate of decline stagnates, as we

know through the measure of half-lives. We will always be surprised by the aftermath of past disasters, again and again. We have already contributed enough. Why continue to run this machine of annihilation? It promises more profit, brings glamor and allure to economic growth, and generates additional energy for distraction and consolation, but in exchange, our lives become a senseless waiting, where we can do nothing but count down the remainder of half-lives. We are already deeply in debt.

We must immediately stop this powerplant of destruction.