

## Murakami and the Celebration of Community

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### Abstract

In *An Account of My Hut*, a 13th-century classic of Japanese literature, Kamo no Chōmei honors the Buddhist practice of non-attachment, of stripping down to the basics and releasing one's illusions that physical comforts, especially a large home with servants and multiple rooms, will bring permanent happiness. Whirlwinds and earthquakes remind Chōmei of the fragility of the world, and in beautiful prose he tells of his retreat from the planet's material lures. At last, at the age of 60, he leaves virtually everything and everyone behind to build a simple mountainside hut, a human "cocoon," a place where he is less afraid to face unpredictable natural disasters and a constant lack of solidity. He asks for nothing; nor does he want for anything. Centuries later, another great Japanese author, Haruki Murakami, also offers counsel to a nation in the wake of disaster, the earthquake that struck the city of Kobe in 1995, killing over 6000 human beings. Though it is fiction, Murakami's *After the Quake* is as well an attempt to provide real-life Japanese with a way forward, though his argument seems contrary to Chōmei's sense that since nothing beneath our feet is solid, all must be forsaken. In fact, Murakami worries that Japan has lived for far too long in the Chōmei-like spirit of distrust (however understandable) and isolation; he counsels a new beginning, one steeped in the hope of community and in the beauty of family.

*Keywords:* Chōmei, earthquake, family, Japan, Murakami, trauma

In *An Account of My Hut*, written in the year 1212, Kamo no Chōmei<sup>1</sup> recalls a series of natural disasters that destroyed pockets of Japan across his life-time: a great fire, a whirlwind, a famine, and “the great earthquake of 1185, of an intensity not known before. Mountains crumbled and rivers were buried, the sea tilted over and immersed the land. The earth split and water gushed up; boulders were sundered and rolled into the valleys” (1955, p. 203). The physical world, Chōmei explains in his *Account*, might at any moment rise up like a living nightmare and, in a relative instant, kill the life-long efforts of men and women—and smash to pieces the men and women themselves.

As Japanese-literature scholars know, Chōmei’s old-age response to that lack of stability is to renounce the world, retreat, and embrace seclusion. He had spent the early years of his life in a palatial ancestral home, which he eventually lost to political upheaval. Chōmei thereafter lived in a modest-sized cottage, but in his declining years—when he writes *Account*—he chooses at last to accept what he calls “the fragility of . . . [his] life” (ibid., p. 206): he builds and moves into a hut, “like the cocoon spun by an aged silkworm. This hut is not even a hundredth the size of the cottage where I spent my middle years” (loc. cit.):

Only in a hut built for the moment can one live without fears. It is very small, but it holds a bed where I may lie at night and a seat for me in the day; it lacks nothing as a place for me to dwell. The hermit crab chooses to live in little shells because it well knows the size of its body. The osprey stays on deserted shores because it fears human beings. I am like them. (ibid., pp. 209–10)

One could describe Chōmei’s pessimistic reaction to a life-time of disasters as the maudlin depression of a Thoreau-like curmudgeon, a man who bears the mark of crushing disappointment. In fact, some of my Chicago-area students contend that Chōmei looks like a modern-day sufferer of post-traumatic stress disorder. He is, those students claim, like a U.S. soldier freshly back from the front lines of Iraq or Afghanistan—but disengaged, morphinelike, permitting no one and nothing to approach his heart.

I try in those teaching moments to point out the Buddhist-minded beauty of Chōmei’s *Account*, and of course my students listen with respect. Some are even persuaded to agree, but another part of me privately, silently suspects that my students’ initial skepticism of Chōmei is not entirely off the mark. Chōmei is no nihilist, but his detachment unsettles the soul—or at least it seems not to apply to the complicated lives so many of us experience in the twenty-first century. Chōmei’s retreat into mountainside privacy works for him, perhaps in part because he

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<sup>1</sup> 『方丈記』 *Hōjōki*, 鴨長明 Kamo no Chōmei.

has, as he says, no family, “no ties that would make abandoning the world difficult,” nothing “to cling to” (ibid., p. 206). But many or most of us do indeed have “ties.” For example, as students respectfully like to remind me when we read and discuss *Account*, I have a wife and two small children; no matter how weary I might be of the world, I cannot retire to a mountainside hut, and I understand this to be true, as well, of virtually everyone I know. And thus does a thinking reader of Chōmei’s “Account” wonder: how should one respond to disaster, even a life-time of it? If we are without the luxury of building a simple hut, ten feet square, and spending the remainder of our days in a state of divorce from the world—if, for example, we have family members and loved ones and friends who depend on us—what can we reasonably feel, and what can we sensibly do?

Those, I believe, are the questions that Haruki Murakami confronts in his small collection of stories titled *After the Quake*, first published in Japanese in 2000.<sup>2</sup> *After the Quake* is of course not the only book in which Murakami wrestles with how one might continue to live (with at least a modicum of passion) in the wake of disaster—he pursues that theme, or a cousin of it, in much of what he writes: especially, and aggressively, in his most remarkable novel, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, a veritable labyrinth in which the main character, Toru Okada, or Mr. Wind-Up Bird, “must move beyond escapist detachment” (Welch, 2002, p. 58). But Murakami’s *After the Quake* was principally triggered by the earthquake that rocked Kobe, Japan in 1995, and “Murakami’s reaction to the . . . Kobe earthquake was real—its epicenter, in fact, was directly under his neighborhood in Ashiya ” (Strecher, 2002, p. 213). In other words, *After* is Murakami’s ostensible “earthquake book,” perhaps his most succinct investigation into how we must, in the wake of the kind of trauma that Chōmei laments, continue to build and live meaningful lives. In *After*, a small but electric collection, Murakami offers advice that transcends the spirit of Chōmei’s *Account*. It will not do, Murakami counsels at last, to recoil from the world, especially as the world has a way of continuing to pester one’s door, regardless of whether he or she retreats. Murakami understands and even sympathizes with the post-earthquake, post-traumatic temptation to surrender to solitude, even emotional anesthesia—but he asks gently that we resist this temptation. Most of all he predicts that we can find little or no true peace in a state of disconnectedness. Though he offers no guarantee, Murakami suggests,

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<sup>2</sup> 『神の子どもたちはみな踊る』, *Kami no kodomo-tachi wa mina odoru*, 村上春樹 Murakami Haruki. Translation published in 2002: note that the author insisted that the English title be all-lowercase (*after the quake*).

rather, that we might locate something as grand as salvation, modest in form, in reconnection not only with nature but also, and especially, with our fellow human beings.

In that spirit, and in the interest of space, let us look at three of the six stories that make up *After*—the first, the third, and the last.

### “UFO in Kushiro”

The opening paragraph of “UFO,” the collection’s leading story, provides a clear portrait of disengagement and emotional paralysis:

Five straight days she spent in front of the television, staring at crumbled banks and hospitals, whole blocks of stores in flames, severed rail lines and expressways. She never said a word. Sunk deep in the cushions of the sofa, her mouth clamped shut, she wouldn’t answer when Komura spoke to her. She wouldn’t shake her head or nod. Komura could not be sure the sound of his voice was even getting through to her. (Murakami, 2002, p. 3)<sup>3</sup>

The Kobe earthquake has just occurred, and the narrator, in that passage, describes its numbing effect on a young Tokyo couple, Komura and (especially) his unnamed wife, who is entirely drugged by the earthquake’s television coverage and non-responsive (“mouth clamped shut”) to her husband’s attempts at communication. Even her physiology seems comatose: “she stayed rooted in front of the television from morning to night.”<sup>4</sup> In his presence, at least, she ate nothing and drank nothing and never went to the toilet. Aside from an occasional flick of the remote control to change the channel, she hardly moved a muscle” (p. 3). Before a full page passes by, and as spouses sometimes do in Murakami’s fiction,<sup>5</sup> Komura’s wife vanishes from her husband’s life: she returns to her parents, who live “way up north in Yamagata” (p. 3), taking most of her things and leaving her husband an ice-cold good-bye note:

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<sup>3</sup> Hereinafter citations consisting only of page numbers refer to this work.

<sup>4</sup> Television in general fares poorly in Murakami’s writing, not only in *After the Quake* but, as well, in his larger novels: *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, for instance, in which a malignant brother-in-law (Noboru Wataya) deftly exploits television for purposes of demagoguery, to lull viewers into a kind of semi-consciousness—and television also permits the same character to deliver encoded messages meant to terrorize the novel’s protagonist.

<sup>5</sup> One of Murakami’s interviewers claims that the author’s work contains “two distinct types of women”: “those with whom the protagonist has a fundamentally serious relationship—often this is the woman who disappears and whose memory haunts him—and the other kind of woman, who comes later and helps him in his search, or to do the opposite—to forget. The second type ... tends to be outspoken, eccentric, and sexually frank” (quoted in Murakami 2009, p. 353). I feel that that oversimplifies and ignores, for example, *After*’s “Thailand,” in which the lonely, embittered female lead fits neither of those categories. (See Hansen, 2010, for more on the diversity of female characterization in Murakami.) At any rate, Komura’s wife clearly belongs to the first type, the type that “disappears.”

*The problem is that you never give me anything, she wrote. Or, to put it more precisely, you have nothing inside you that you can give me. You are good and kind and handsome, but living with you is like living with a chunk of air.* (pp. 5–6; original emphasis)

Komura's wife's catatonic fixation on the earthquake's after-effects remains a puzzle. The narrator tells us that "she had no friends or relatives who could have been hurt in Kobe" (p. 3), and there is little evidence that she is an especially sympathetic soul, one who weeps at the suffering of strangers. The above-quoted note suggests, indeed, that for her it is not difficult to be blunt to the point of semi-cruelty, but in fairness there are no suggestions that she is fundamentally vicious. We know little of her at last: only that her relationship with her parents and siblings is strong, that she spent a good portion of her courtship and marriage wearing "a sullen expression" (p. 5), and that she cheaply values her bond with Komura, abandoning her life with him with the apparent ease of a phantom. It is possible that Komura's soon-to-be ex is, in the earthquake's aftermath, beset by a Chōmei-like existential crisis: the sense that there is no solid footing in the world, nothing of any permanence or substance; thus, she moves backward to the nuclear family of her childhood, the only semi-solid "space" upon which her heart can depend. But once more, we know little about her past, her present, or the reason(s) why she loses herself so completely in the television coverage of the earthquake's destruction.

Of Komura, we know somewhat more, but not a lot more—Murakami's narrator is careful to keep the reader largely unfamiliar with him. After his wife's disappearance, Komura is at the center of each page of "UFO," though he himself seems to have no "center," no purpose or rootedness. In real-life terms, his wife's above note is likely too harsh; it seems unfair to conclude that he or any person is little more than "a chunk of air." However, Komura does in fact strike the reader as being somewhat ineffable (i.e., as difficult as air to pin down): he is a salesman in the neon intensity of Akihabara, but we do not learn that he is committed to the products he sells or to his customers, whose "wallets were bursting with ten-thousand-yen bills, and everyone was dying to spend them" (p. 4)—and thus does he illustrate the disembodiment (from product and public) that Marx (2017) warns us of in his *Manifesto*. He has a likable personality, but there is no evidence of even one close associate or intimate friend. He puts "a small amount of sugar in his coffee" (p. 10), but he tastes almost nothing. He is due for a vacation, and even requests one, but we find that he has no particular place to go.

And since he lacks a destination, a co-worker—"a bachelor, three years younger than Komura" (p. 7)—asks Komura to hand-deliver a mysterious package to Kushiro, in Hokkaido.

Having nothing better to do with his week-long vacation, manifesting a kind of drifter's indifference, Komura blandly agrees: "Hokkaido in February would be freezing cold, Komura knew, but cold or hot it was all the same to him" (p. 8). He lacks any noticeable agency, even the small initiative required to account for his own airfare and accommodations, which the aforementioned co-worker, named Sasaki, both arranges and pays for. Instead of *going* to Kushiro, in other words, Komura is carried or directed there—and he is content to abide by that direction and to deliver the package, which weighs "practically nothing," a box somewhat "like the ones used for human ashes, only smaller, wrapped in manila paper" (p. 8), to Sasaki's sister and her friend, who are waiting for him at the Kushiro airport. Soon, but not because of any initiative on Komura's part, the three of them—Komura, Sasaki's sister, and her friend Shimao—find themselves at "a nearby love hotel. It was on the edge of town, on a street where love hotels alternated with gravestone dealers" (p. 16). The stage is set for the story's eerie final scene.

Komura and Shimao are alone in the hotel room (Sasaki's sister has exited the stage, taking with her the package that Komura delivered). The two are lying on an "absurdly big bed" after trying unsuccessfully to have sex (p. 16). An instance of sexual dysfunction "had never happened to him before," the narrator explains, but it appears that Komura's potency has been compromised, somehow, by images of the earthquake's destruction:

what he had been thinking about was the earthquake. Images of it had come to him one after another, as if in a slide show, flashing on the screen and fading away. Highways, flames, smoke, piles of rubble, cracks in streets. He couldn't break the chain of silent images. (p. 20)

There is of course good news there: Komura, who earlier on seemed untouched by the "far-off monotonous echos" of the news reports concerning the earthquake (p. 9), is human after all. He is penetrable—a feeling, complicated human being who cannot remain unmoved by the mass suffering in Kobe, and who is gradually less consumed by his own problems: namely, his wife's departure and her painful good-bye note. Therefore, the reader is perhaps not altogether displeased to learn that Komura is unable to have sex with Shimao, but when the latter tries to soothe his ego with well-meaning teasing—and especially when she interprets the mysterious, almost weightless package that he has just delivered to Sasaki's sister as the "the something that was inside of you" (p. 22), the yet-unidentified essence of him that, given away, cannot be gotten back—Komura experiences an adrenaline-rush of rage:

Komura lifted himself from the mattress and looked down at the woman. Tiny nose, moles on the earlobe. In the room's deep silence, his heart beat with a loud, dry sound. His bones cracked as he leaned forward. For one split second, Komura realized that he was on the verge of committing an act of overwhelming violence. (pp. 22–23)

He does not attack Shimao, thankfully. Murakami has a penchant for easily overlooked, quietly decent and finally non-violent male characters, and Komura is one of these: “He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The huge bed stretched out around him like a nocturnal sea” (p. 23).<sup>6</sup> But beyond that, there is little in the way of concrete resolution. As Shimao correctly tells him, “you’re just at the beginning” (p. 22), and the reader, too, is “at the beginning,” unsure of precisely how to unpack the ending of “UFO.” We can be guardedly certain of but one thing: that a little growth, a bit of healing, does occur in Komura’s heart: but no more than a bit. He remains alone, even in the physical company of Shimao. On the over-large bed, he is very small and only beginning to find his way, which is dark and yet-uninterpreted (“nocturnal”), vast and potentially fatal (a “sea”).

To be fair, “UFO,” notwithstanding its blatantly depressing overtones, does feature glimpses of the redemptive power of human connectedness; it is not merely confusion and disconnection. Komura’s wife’s return to her parents is a subtle invocation that something—namely her original family—still matters to her, even after her near-bodily plunge into the 24-hour news cycle. As well, Komura, the main character, is described early on as a kind of former playboy, “tall and slim and a stylish dresser,” a “salesman at one of the oldest hi-fi-equipment speciality stores in ... ‘Electronics Town’” (p. 4); yet, he prefers his quiet marriage to an “ordinary”-looking wife (p. 5), and perhaps this, together with the collective gravitas of the earthquake’s widespread damage, helps to explain his failure to experience an erection with Shimao, a woman whom Komura has known but a few hours. To put it another way, Komura does not lament the loss of his free-styling youth: he is happy to have concluded his bachelor days. He “always felt his tension dissipate when he and his wife were together under one roof; it was the only time he could truly relax. He slept well with her, undisturbed by the strange dreams that had troubled him in the past. His erections were hard; his sex life was warm. He no longer had to worry about death or venereal disease or the vastness of the universe” (p. 5).

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<sup>6</sup> All of the principal male characters in *After* are fundamentally decent; equally, all are either somewhat or exceedingly lacking in confidence. All possess rather decidedly non-aggressive natures. Matthew Carl Strecher (2002) speaks to the like-minded heroes of Murakami’s novels, but the same could probably be said of the protagonists of his short fiction: “If one has encountered the Murakami hero in one novel, one knows something about most other Murakami protagonists as well” (p. 213).

Actually, and somewhat conversely, the mere fact that Komura even tries to have sex with Shimaō is arguably a positive sign that the main character is not solely an embodiment of isolation. Sex is plentiful, sometimes strange, but often life-affirming in Murakami's fiction (see Hurlow, 2015). Sex, says Murakami, is “a kind of soul-commitment. If the sex is good, your injury will be healed, your imagination will be invigorated. It's a kind of passage to the upper area, to the better place” (2009, p. 353).

But more generally, “UFO” obviously begins Murakami's collection in a state of malaise, with many questions and few or no answers—and, as well, in a state of detachment, with an abandoned husband, otherwise virile, who is suddenly unable to communicate sexually with another woman: unable, that is, to take the just-referenced “passage to the upper area, to the better place.” Yet at the same time, for a brief moment, he seems all too capable of extreme violence (the ultimate form of non-communication) against that same woman. While that violence does not occur, nothing particularly redemptive fills the void, and the hopeful reader is eager to turn the page.

### “All God's Children Can Dance”

One way of coping with loneliness and despair, or the despair of loneliness, is of course to give way to substance abuse—to binge. And that is precisely how the curtain rises on a young man named Yoshiya, the main character in “All God's Children Can Dance,” *After's* third story, which in this writer's view is as good as any piece of short fiction across space and time. “Yoshiya woke with the worst possible hangover,” the narrator begins:

He could barely open one eye; the left lid wouldn't budge. His head felt as if it had been stuffed with decaying teeth during the night. A foul sludge was oozing from his rotting gums and eating away at his brain from the inside. If he ignored it, he wouldn't have a brain left. (p. 47)

By drinking so heavily (and repeatedly), even to the point of memory loss, Yoshiya might be hoping to dodge a handful of concerns: his weird, hyper-Freudian relationship with his youthful and beautiful mother, for instance. His mother's sex appeal is frequently referenced in “God's Children.” She is profoundly enigmatic: a Christian believer who is, in the story's present tense, on an altruistic missionary venture to Kobe to assist the victims of the earthquake. However, she also “walk[s] around the house wearing skimpy underwear—or nothing at all,” her “great figure” fully on display (pp. 49–50); and “whenever she felt lonely at night she would crawl under ... [Yoshiya's] covers with almost nothing on,” thereby confounding her grown



son: “He would have to twist himself into incredible positions to keep his mother unaware of his erections” (p. 50).

There is no doubt, again, that Yoshiya’s messy co-existence with his mother—at once innocent and disturbingly sexual—is partly what induces him to drink so heavily. But he faces another, more pressing difficulty: “Yoshiya had no father” (p. 51). His mother—with the help of a well-meaning but distracted family friend and surrogate father-figure, Mr. Tabata—has informed him that God, literally, is his father: he could not (his mother argues) have been fathered by the obstetrician whom she had been dating at the time of Yoshiya’s conception: “His contraceptive methods were absolutely foolproof!” (p. 56). She casts herself as a kind of modern-day Japanese Virgin Mary, and Yoshiya as an actual (not merely symbolic) child of God, telling her son, “your father is our Lord. You came into his world not through carnal knowledge but through an act of our Lord’s will!” (p. 56). She adds, bizarrely, that Yoshiya’s large penis is supposed proof: “‘Your big wee-wee is a sign,’ his mother used to tell him with absolute conviction. ‘It shows that you’re the child of God’” (p. 65). But even as a child, even while he loves his mother too much to debate with her, Yoshiya quietly disbelieves that he was immaculately conceived. “His mother’s faith was absolute,” Murakami’s narrator reasons, “but Yoshiya was just as certain that his father was the obstetrician. There had been something wrong with the condom. Anything else was out of the question” (p. 56).

As so many of Murakami’s characters do, that obstetrician possesses a physical attribute that sets him apart. He is missing a right earlobe: “A dog chewed it off when he was a boy” (p. 54). And Yoshiya, after forcing himself to rise and spend a day at work on “wobbly legs” (p. 49), is astonished to see an older man with a missing earlobe later in the evening, as he returns from work (the story’s present-tense plot-line spans less than 24 hours). Knowing the tale of his probable biological father’s damaged right ear, Yoshiya aggressively begins following the man, confident that the latter is indeed his father. He follows him on the train. He follows him in a cab. At last, he follows him on foot, past scrap yards and through the byways and alleys of a deserted Tokyo district. He does not know what he might say to the man, should he catch up with him. But he finds himself unable to stop his pursuit, and the entire second half of the story becomes both an interior Jungian journey toward the parental archetype and, more literally, a suddenly invigorated young man’s hot, maze-like search for his real-life father.

Iconically speaking, at least, few things capture the father–son bond with its joys and its losses more than the game of baseball, so it is unsurprising that this is where Murakami ends

“God’s Children”: with baseball, very late on a freezing February night. Just as he failed to catch fly ball after fly ball as a non-athletic, clunky youth, Yoshiya fails ultimately to catch the man without a right earlobe. Chasing him through a gap in a sheet-metal fence, Yoshiya finds that the man has vanished “without a trace” (p. 63), and that he himself is standing “in a baseball field, somewhere way out in center field amid a stretch of trampled-down weeds” (p. 62). He is disconcerted and deflated—and for a moment, so too is the reader. It is another familial breakdown; Yoshiya is another semi-orphan in a (very) long line of children without parents in Murakami’s fiction,<sup>7</sup> another permanent break in the chain. For that instant, in fact, he is a poster-child of orphanhood: a now-solitary son whose well-intentioned mother is too immersed in her religious convictions to be of much emotional help to him, and whose father leads him to but then abandons him at the ballpark. Yoshiya seems no better off than Komura: far from home, stranded, surrounded by the vastness of yet another “nocturnal sea” (p. 23).

But then, after approaching the pitcher’s mound, Yoshiya begins—first slowly, then with increasing intensity—to dance. He feels certain that somebody (perhaps the man with no earlobe, the man who might be his biological father?) is watching him: “His whole body—his skin, his bones—told him with absolute certainty that he was in *someone’s* field of vision” (p. 66; original emphasis). But he does not care—“Let them look if they want to, whoever they are. All God’s children can dance” (p. 66)—and this, again, is precisely what he does:

He trod the earth and whirled his arms, each graceful movement calling forth the next in smooth, unbroken links, his body tracing diagrammatic patterns and impromptu variations, with invisible rhythms behind and between rhythms. At each crucial point in his dance, he could survey the complex intertwining of these elements. Animals lurked in the forest like trompe l’oeil figures, some of them horrific beasts he had never seen before. He would eventually have to pass through the forest, but he felt no fear. Of course—the forest was inside him, he knew, and it made him who he was. The beasts were ones that he himself possessed. (p. 66)

In “God’s Children,” and especially in the outstanding passage just above, we see that Yoshiya somehow possesses the agency that Komura lacks: Yoshiya wills himself to follow the man with a missing right earlobe; and when he cannot catch up with that man, he wills

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<sup>7</sup> The majority of *After’s* characters are noticeably separated from their parents. Junko, the young female protagonist in “Landscape with Flatiron,” has run away from home, apparently because his daughter’s pubescence triggered her father “to look at her in a strange new way” (p. 33). Moreover, Miyake, the middle-aged gentleman who artfully builds beach-fires and platonically befriends Junko, has abandoned his wife and children, who may or may not have survived the recent quake in Kobe (Miyake shows little interest in finding out). The childless female protagonist of “Thailand,” *After’s* fourth story, also lacks a healthy connection with her mother (her father passed away in her youth). And as I discuss below, the protagonist of “Honey Pie,” *After’s* final piece, is decidedly cut off from his parents.

himself to dance, despite the fact that his college-era girlfriend told him, once upon a time, that “he looked like some kind of giant frog when he danced” (p. 65). There is no Disney-style ending to “God’s Children”: Yoshiya is alone throughout, and likely fatherless forever, but his ability to self-direct seems to leave him grounded (quite literally: he is in step with the “rhythms” beneath his feet) rather than adrift. As he dances, he understands that there is trouble in abundance in his future: he must “pass through the forest,” walk a gauntlet of “horrific beasts” he has never before seen—as each of us, at one time or another, must. Moreover, Yoshiya is aware that the ground beneath his feet could break apart and swallow him and everyone and everything he knows: “it struck him what lay buried far down under the earth on which his feet were so firmly planted: the ominous rumbling 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” (pp. 66–67). Yet, the hopefulness of the last pages of “God’s Children” once more signals a rootedness on the part of the formerly rootless Yoshiya: a clear departure from the gloominess that concludes “UFO.” Frog-like Yoshiya—who “tr[eads],” but who is also “graceful” (p. 66), one of Murakami’s numerous Faulknerian paradoxes—is finally in sync, in his middle twenties, with the music of the unpredictable earth on which he dances; and he begins to impose his own improvisations onto that music: his own “diagrammatic patterns and . . . variations” (p. 66). Like an emerging jazz artist, in other words, he is beginning to find a voice of his own. He employs trauma, as Strecher (2002) astutely observes, as a means of forging a “radical transformation of identity” (p. 214).

So the ending of “God’s Children,” especially when considered alongside “UFO,” features a positive trajectory and more than a glimpse of optimism in the form of a young man who begins to accept his allegedly clumsy body and his lack of a biological father—and who begins as well to make peace and even identify with the too-often-inexplicable, sometimes-unjust universe. That universe is “inside him, he knew, and it made him who he was” (p. 66). Though over-optimism is unwise, one does not suspect, upon finishing “God’s Children,” that Yoshiya is about to build a mountain-side hut and renounce the world.

### “Honey Pie”

Despite those improvements in Yoshiya’s psyche, however, he is strictly speaking still alone—as my above-mentioned students, ever on the lookout for a palpably happy ending, complain. The ending of “God’s Children” marks the halfway point of *After*; by now, there has been real

progress toward community (a young man's re-communion with both himself and the earth), but there is more development needed, and more ahead: development that is most apparent in the book's final story, "Honey Pie." The Kobe-born protagonist—a 36-year-old fiction writer named Junpei, a man who has coveted the warmth of family all of his adult life—finally seizes human connectedness in its fullest form, intending never to let go.

The title, "Honey Pie," refers to a story that the creative Junpei fashions to soothe four-year-old Sala, the precocious child of his long-time best friends, Takatsuki and Sayoko. Sala's dreams are haunted, eerily and almost nightly, by the television coverage of the Kobe earthquake: "Sometime after midnight she gets these hysterical fits and jumps out of bed. She can't stop shaking. And I can't get her to stop crying," explains Sayoko, Sala's mother:

"I think she saw too many news reports on the earthquake. It was too much for a four-year-old. She wakes up at around the time of the quake. She says a man woke her up, somebody she doesn't know. The Earthquake Man. He tries to put her in a little box—way too little for anyone to fit into. She tells him she doesn't want to get inside, but he starts yanking on her arm—so hard her joints crack—and he tries to stuff her inside. That's when she screams and wakes up." (p. 119)

Sayoko, whose marriage to an unfaithful Takatsuki has recently ended, now relies upon Junpei as "the only one who can calm ... [Sala] down" with his make-believe tales (p. 118). The story that Junpei tells Sala, this time, involves two bears, Masakichi and Tonkichi: Masakichi is an expert at collecting honey; Tonkichi, Masakichi's best friend, has a talent for turning Masakichi's harvest into "crisp, delicious honey pies" (p. 147), though circumstances sadly force the two bear-friends apart.

"Honey Pie" begins, then, with yet another reference to divorce (Takatsuki and Sayoko's); it begins, as well, with yet another sign of the psychic after-tremors of the Kobe earthquake, the television coverage of which chills the blood of adults and children alike. But even from the outset, there is a new mood compared with *After's* previous stories: we see that each principle adult in "Honey Pie" possesses a native appreciation for friendship and intimacy, platonic and romantic. They fail as much as they succeed in realizing that appreciation, but the fact that it is present, from beginning to end, signals that *After's* sixth and last story, even prior to its redemptive conclusion, is peopled by healthy souls, and that it therefore departs from "the general malaise" that characterizes much of the rest of the book (Strecher, 2002, p. 214).

The story's three adults—Junpei, Takatsuki, and Sayoko—have been close friends since their freshman year of college. In a chunky flashback, Murakami's narrator explains that years before, upon first meeting Sayoko at Waseda University in Tokyo, Junpei "knew that this was

the girl he had been searching for. He had never fallen in love until he met Sayoko” (p. 122). However, the assertive and outgoing Takatsuki, who remains Junpei’s closest friend, “was the first to make a move” (p. 123). Initially, the loss of Sayoko plunged Junpei into zombie-like despair, to the point of skipping classes and nearly dropping out altogether; but he gradually adjusted. Already inclined to view himself over-critically, he began to accept his friends’ love affair. He even, with time, experienced his own relationships with women who could not, in his mind, compare with Sayoko. Similarly, he accepted Takatsuki and Sayoko’s post-graduation marriage, resigning himself to a lifetime of second place. And later still, a bachelor and hard-working writer gaining better-than-average reviews, Junpei gladly welcomed Takatsuki and Sayoko’s charming daughter, Sala, into his life: “The four of them were an odd pseudo-family” (p. 134).

But now, Takatsuki and Sayoko’s marriage has ended, Sayoko is a single mother, and Junpei’s thus-far barely passable bachelorhood is becoming emotionally untenable. When the earthquake strikes, the latter is too estranged from his Kobe-based parents to call them, to see if they have survived (“[t]he rift was too deep” (p. 138)), and he worries in a near panic that he has no one to protect, perhaps no one, even, for whom he owns the right to grieve: “Junpei felt an entirely new sense of isolation. I have no roots, he thought. I’m not connected to anything” (p. 138). In fact, and in important ways, he is reminiscent of Komura (from “UFO”): Junpei is far more defined, but both are men without women,<sup>8</sup> and men without families; both are compliant (at times exceedingly so) rather than dynamic when it comes to conducting their lives. But what sets Junpei apart at last is that he, unlike Komura, perceives the destruction in Kobe as a call to action, and his urgency reaches a pitch when his first-ever, long-awaited sexual interlude with Sayoko is abruptly interrupted by four-year-old Sala, whose night-terrors have grown worse: the “Earthquake Man” who visits her dreams is now attempting to stuff not only her but “everybody” into his box:

“He came and woke me up. He told me to tell you. He said he has the box ready for everybody. He said he’s waiting with the lid open. He said I should tell you that, and you’d understand.” (p. 145)

Sala’s nightmares, brought on by reports and images of ruin from a real-life box (i.e., the television); the recently divorced Sayoko’s lonely, transparent desire; his own creeping

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<sup>8</sup> This, *Men Without Women*, is the title of Murakami’s 2014 collection of short stories—and the well-known title of a Hemingway collection, too.

desolation, coupled with the shame of knowing that he himself, in his passivity, is chiefly responsible for his lack of “roots” (the story makes it clear that Junpei could have had Sayoko all those years before, when they first met: Sayoko preferred him over Takatsuki, but Junpei “just didn’t get it” (p. 144))—these things, together, send an electric charge coursing through Junpei. He decides at last, nearly 20 years after meeting her, to ask an obviously willing Sayoko to be his wife:

As soon as Sayoko woke in the morning, he would ask her to marry him. He was sure now. He couldn’t waste another minute. Taking care not to make a sound, he opened the bedroom door and looked at Sayoko and Sala sleeping bundled in a comforter. Sala lay with her back to Sayoko, whose arm was draped on Sala’s shoulder. He touched Sayoko’s hair where it fell across the pillow, and caressed Sala’s small pink cheek with the tip of his finger. Neither of them stirred. He eased himself down to the carpeted floor by the bed, his back against the wall, to watch over them in their sleep. (p. 146)

For Junpei, the earthquake therefore prompts positive rather than neutral or backward action. As the story (along with the larger book) concludes, he is poised to create a family—a non-traditional family to which he is already fiercely committed, a family already firmly grounded upon years of friendship and genuine love: a family “to watch over.” Perhaps my only gentle dispute with Strecher, an invaluable Murakami scholar, is rooted in his contention that the stories in *After* are “really about darkness, alienation, and flight from Kobe” (2002, p. 197). It is true that the Kobe-born Junpei has no intention to return to his hometown, and no intention, sadly, to rekindle relations with his parents or even to check on their post-quake well-being. It is not quite true, however, to say that Junpei (or the larger collection, *After the Quake*) embodies “flight from Kobe”: Junpei does not seem to be running in fright or drifting away from person-to-person connectedness after the fashion of Kamo no Chōmei. Rather, he flies *toward* that connectedness; and, albeit briefly, before the two are interrupted by Sala’s report of another earthquake-man nightmare, he literally, sexually connects with Sayoko—an improvement over Komura’s sudden sexual bankruptcy at the end of *After*’s first story, “UFO.” Junpei is poised, even, to become a somewhat different writer, and he begins this effort straight away by imagining a fresh and happier ending for the bear-friends he devised for Sala, an ending in which “Tonkichi and Masakichi never had to separate again: they lived happily ever after in the mountains, best friends forever” (p. 147). The very last passage of “Honey Pie” reads as a near-manifesto of newfound agency and grit, the likes of which the reader of *After* has not seen in any earlier story:

Sala would be sure to love the new ending. And so would Sayoko.

I want to write stories that are different from the ones I've written so far, Junpei thought: I want to write about people who dream and wait for the night to end, who long for the light so they can hold the ones they love. But right now I have to stay here and keep watch over this woman and this girl. I will never let anyone—not anyone—try to put them into that crazy box—not even if the sky should fall or the earth crack open with a roar. (p. 147)

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I have argued that *After* was composed with a lesson in mind, something to teach the Japanese people, just emerging at the time of the book's appearance from the "lost decade" of the 1990s, suffering from Strecher's "general malaise", stricken by the bubble economy—and oppressed most of all, perhaps, by a Chōmei-like sense that the ground beneath their feet might at any moment liquefy, that they might be swallowed whole by something mammoth and disastrous, like the hell-bent Worm featured in *After*'s most well-known story, "Super-Frog Saves Tokyo." What remains, then, is to address any doubt my reader may have that literature can play a role, however small, in soothing a nation and suggesting to its people that agency is preferable to passivity, that meaning can be found in community, despite the enduring paralysis of Japan's economy in the 1990s, despite the Kobe earthquake, despite the baffling terror of Aum Shinrikyo's mid-1990s "doomsday" attacks<sup>9</sup>—and more recently, despite the 3.11 quake that birthed the tsunami that devastated the Tohoku region, claimed thousands of lives, affected millions more, and generated infamous nuclear havoc in Fukushima. What remains, in other words, is the matter of whether art has any influence at all in actual experience—whether Murakami's message in *After* can, at last, sink in and reverberate across Japan.

While it will never do to deify the Shakespeares and Tolstoys—the Kawabatas, Ōes, Murakamis, and all the rest—neither will it do to surrender entirely to a categorical distrust of such writers or of literature more generally, to give way to a trendy dismissal of artists across the Humanities as little more than fallible products of their places and times. Murakami offers, in *After*, a message worth heeding; more than that, I believe that readers of *After* are capable of and sometimes intent upon locating that purpose—or, at least, that upon cracking the spine of

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<sup>9</sup> Murakami devotes an entire work of nonfiction to the 1995 sarin-gas attacks: *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche*. *Underground* features interviews with victims and with members of the apocalyptic cult that launched the attack.

*After* or any other work, a reader does not solely pursue historical or theoretical understanding or a chance to unearth the author's biases and deconstruct the author's efforts, as important as these ventures surely are. The act of reading occasionally ministers to the spirit; perhaps it taps Jung's collective underpinnings and does so no less than does music at its pinnacle, a stunning work of visual art, or a deeply moving film. That writers as capable as Murakami can and do offer sound advice, advice regarding how one might navigate the path toward becoming a complete human being, is well known. Still, it sometimes bears repeating.

Turning to the related matter of whether literature is reflective of or influential in life, I find that I cannot trace this question to an unimpeachable conclusion. It is true enough that for close to 30 years of college-level teaching, I have borne witness to literature's power, its resonance in what my students call "real life." I have watched so many students grow—I have seen them expand their world-views and even their moral compasses—from reading, thinking about, and finally writing about the likes of Faulkner, Baldwin, Morrison, Murakami, and more.<sup>10</sup> My students have wrestled the destructive effects of alcoholism, and they are children who have been betrayed by sometimes-narcissistic parents, as is oppressively the case in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. They have lost and then regained siblings, as is beautifully the case in Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues." They have never been slaves, but many have felt the stings of racism and in some cases even the enduring scars of rape and dehumanization, as befalls so many of the characters in Morrison's *Beloved*. They have found, lost, and re-found love, covering actual and psychic miles along the way, as is the case with the persistent main character of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. Those students have located deep connections and paths of healing through reading, considering, and responding to literature.

Yet that is anecdotal; it cannot stand as scientific proof of literature's connectedness to life. Besides, most of my students, even the best and most openhearted among them, have been more or less compelled—by their parents, the arc of traditional American education, the specter of a future without a college degree, or all of these and more—to take my classes. The point is, how many of them would have freely stepped into my classrooms? How many were dying in the first place to read plays, poems, and stories and then unpack these in seminar-style discussions and in essays and exams? I will not say none at all; but my reader might understandably resist

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<sup>10</sup> And by the way, all of the just-mentioned Western writers are, like Murakami, proponents of community; all expose the dangers, either physical or psychic or both, of a life of isolation — and this suggests that Murakami, in *After*, takes up and expands upon a Western (or global?) literary theme.



an over-emphasis here on what students at any level can gain from literature, since students almost everywhere are not necessarily, or not always, in Humanities-driven environments by choice.

Of course the real question is whether literature, which for better or worse is largely ensconced in the global academy, has much to say to those who dwell beyond academia. I think it does; I believe again that the arts possess spectacular potential for anyone truly receptive to them. But I grant, too, that there is a divide between the academy and the larger populace. For example, poet and critic Dana Gioia (2002) laments that most Americans are sadly unfamiliar with poetry, past and especially present. Speaking primarily of verse in the U.S., Gioia points out that there is an abundance of creative writing going on, perhaps more than ever before. But poets, he says, write mainly for other poets, and thus there is “little coverage of poetry or poets in the general press”, a steep decline in “general readership”, an increasingly “inward” focus (2002, p. 2), and, at last, a kind of “clubby feeling” in which poetry matters, yes, but too frequently only to those residing squarely within the aforementioned subculture (ibid, p. 7). Once more, Gioia’s argument ostensibly concerns a single genre, poetry, and his contention seems confined to North America, but one can perhaps extend his remarks to fiction and the other genres—and one might also apply his remarks, making necessary adjustments along the way, to other nations, including Japan.

Yet Murakami does not easily fit the type of writer that Gioia has in mind: the product (and the property, so to speak) of the academy’s many outstanding MFA/creative-writing programs. Murakami seems indeed to be difficult to categorize. There is a uniquely broad Murakami appeal—and yet he is also a recent Nobel finalist, unequivocal evidence of how respected he is in the highest echelons of the global intelligentsia. There is, in other words, a well-known and diverse international popularity where Murakami’s works are concerned. And of course he is exceedingly popular in Japan, even while Japanese book sales in general have softened in recent years. Consider, for instance, reports of devotees lining up outside of Japanese bookstores on the release dates of Murakami’s books, including his 2013 novel, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* (which, by the way, responds to another national event, the 3.11 crisis that led to the Fukushima disaster):

Just after midnight on April 12 [2013], when the sales embargo was lifted, some people were seen reading copies on a street outside a Tsutaya bookstore in the Daikanyama area of Tokyo, while the social-

networking service Twitter was abuzz with fans' thoughts on the long-awaited story. ("Mystery fuels", 2013)

Similar accounts are abundant, suggesting that Murakami fires imaginations across varied spheres of class, education, occupation, age, national identity, and more—and this seems important here. Somehow, even in translation, Murakami speaks in a literary language that millions can understand. Gioia's argument is that excellent literature is still being produced, but few outside an elite, academia-informed community are listening—few are even offered the *opportunity* to listen. But something else, something unique, seems to be at play with respect to Murakami. And to varying degrees, depending on the book, that has been the case since his literary arrival several decades ago. Many are clearly listening to him; and my hope is that they are listening carefully, and listening especially to his celebration of community.

### Conclusion

Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl (1984), in *Man's Search for Meaning*, underscores human beings' responsibility, both during and after trauma, to *choose* a way forward: to refuse to surrender to despair no matter how difficult the circumstances.<sup>11</sup> That, I argue, is the spirit that emerges, gradually, believably, in Murakami's *After the Quake*, a book that departs from the self-imposed isolation that characterizes Chōmei's "Account." Psychologically speaking, *After* is a Frankl-like book that begins and ends with worrisome boxes: first, the television set that renders Komura's wife bodily and emotionally lifeless in "UFO in Kushiro"; then, the unidentified, seemingly empty box that Komura himself hand-delivers to a co-worker's sister in a far-away city; last, the "Earthquake Man's" macabre, coffin-like, "crazy box," which waits ominously for bodies in "Honey Pie"—although the latter box, as I have argued, is finally repudiated by a newly inspirited Junpei. A box is an enclosure, a way of preserving dystopia, a way of containing, but *After* is about emancipation from enclosures—leaving the hut, rejecting surrender, venturing into the vulnerable open space of human feelings, *choosing* to risk human connectedness, similar to the way in which Murakami himself, who had been living abroad through the first half of the nineties, "decided to return to Japan permanently and face the ghosts of Japan's past through a variety of works that considered the contemporary cultural vacuum" (Welch, 2005, p. 58). For Patricia Welch, Murakami's "protagonists are ordinary individuals"

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<sup>11</sup> Frankl decidedly stresses the power of choice and argues boldly that the most imprisoned, most victimized, among us can still choose what to do, psychologically, with suffering.

who “can do extraordinary things if they live their lives meaningfully” (ibid., p. 59). And Welch seems to have Junpei in mind when she adds that Murakami creates characters who are “finally alive to their emptiness and the interconnectedness of being,” and are finally prepared to “take the tentative first steps that might enable them to conquer their emptiness within and reach out to others”. They are characters “whose struggle, though lonely, is not in vain—characters who do, in fact, try to forge meaningful connections in their lives and with others around them” (op. cit.). Strecher, who is otherwise a bit more bleak than Welch about the Murakami landscape, adds that after the mid 1990s, Murakami’s work is populated by characters who become “more demanding, more insistent on having answers to the pressing questions in their lives” (2002, p. 213).

None of the above is meant to disparage those who cannot find a way out of post-traumatic despair. Frankl, in *Man’s Search*, is firm on that point; most Holocaust victims, he says, succumbed to lassitude and never found a way to exercise their humanity, their power to choose. It is cruel indeed to withhold extraordinary compassion for them or to over-critique those who cannot “forge meaningful connections”, to hold at arm’s length the innumerable souls who cannot find a path beyond trauma. The point, instead, is to celebrate Haruki Murakami’s life-affirming portrait of “ordinary individuals” who *do* find that path, since they provide a hopeful lesson for us all.

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