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Sowing Seeds to Save the Planet: Environmental Issues in the Poetry of Nanao Sakaki

Richard A. MAHER

惑星地球を救うために種を蒔く： ナナオサカキの詩における環境問題

リチャードA. マハー

*Niijima Gakuen Junior College
Takasaki, Gunma 370-0068, Japan*

Abstract

Amid the whirlwind of postwar modernization, Nanao Sakaki found inspiration in the wild and became one of Japan's great voices for the environment, working tirelessly to enlighten the Japanese public about the government's anti-environmental policies and attempting to change those policies through poetry and grass roots activism. Flavored with a unique brand of crazy wisdom and wit, his poetry addresses the beauty of the natural world and disappointment about humanity's lack of concern for the environment. This paper examines Sakaki's environmental themes, especially his objection to river dams, coral reef habitat destruction, and nuclear energy. Although he expresses disappointment, he does not completely despair. By calling attention to our threatened environment he becomes a voice for the earth, hoping to inspire others to renew their bond with the landscape and save the planet.

要 旨

戦後近代化の中、ナナオサカキは野生の中でインスピレーションを得て、日本の環境の偉大な声の一つとなった。彼は政府の環境破壊政策について日本国民を啓発するために不断の努力をし、詩や草の根活動を通じて政策を変えようと試みた。ユニークで風変わりな知恵と機知で味付けされた彼の詩は、自然界の美しさと人類の環境への懸念欠如についての失望に真正面から向き合うものとなっている。この論文では、サカキの環境テーマをめぐり、特に河川ダム、サンゴ礁生息地の破壊、そして原子力への強い懸念について検証する。彼は失望を表明してはいるが、完全に絶望しているわけではない。脅かされた環境に対しての注意を喚起することによって、彼は自分自身が地球の声になり、人々に景観とのつながりを蘇らせ、惑星地球を救うことを願っている。

I. “The Well Never Dries Up”

The poet Nanao Sakaki strove to make sense of the world’s rapid advance for more than half a century. He developed a profound love for art, literature, foreign cultures, and the natural world, and all the while deepened his understanding of his homeland and fostered relationships with like-minded Japanese and other antiestablishment thinkers overseas. Amid the whirlwind of postwar modernization, Sakaki found inspiration in the wild, far away from the bustle of urban growth. In time he became one of Japan’s great voices for the environment, working tirelessly to enlighten the public about the government’s anti-environmental policies and attempting to change its agenda through poetry and grass roots activism.

Flavored with a unique brand of crazy wisdom and wit, Sakaki’s poetry addresses his major interests: travel and cultural understanding, simplistic living, the beauty of the natural world, and disappointment about humanity’s turn away from the environment. He wrote in both Japanese and English, once claiming that the English versions were never translated, but instead underwent “transformation” (Lawless 152). His collected poems in English, republished in *How to Live on the Planet Earth* (2013), employ refreshingly simple language that reflect his modest, rural upbringing and unpretentious worldview. The first half of “Let’s Eat Stars” serves as a succinct introduction to Sakaki’s main concerns about eco-indifference in contemporary Japan (*How to Live* 173):

God made
Sky for airplanes
Coral reefs for tourists
Farms for agrichemicals
Rivers for dams
Forests for golf courses
Mountains for ski resorts
Wild animals for zoos
Trucks and cars for traffic tragedies
Nuclear power plants for ghost dance.
Don’t worry, children!
The well never dries up. (ll. 2-13)

The poet chronicles a world gone amok due to hyper-development, humanity’s

insatiable appetite, and a general lack of respect for the natural world. The litany of grievances is arguably heavy-handed, but the chiding sarcasm – especially in lines 2, 12, and 13 – softens the scorn while humorously putting contemporary society’s excesses into perspective. The poet raises real concerns about the future of the planet should humanity continue to overindulge. Through a series of close readings this paper will examine Sakaki’s environmental themes, especially his objection to river dams, coral reef habitat destruction, and nuclear energy. Although he expresses disappointment, he does not completely despair. By calling attention to our threatened environment he becomes a voice for the earth, hoping to inspire others to renew their bond with the landscape and save the planet.

II. “All Miracle”

Because of his love of and deep respect for nature, Sakaki is arguably Japan’s most important environmental poet of the 20th century. Although he repeatedly criticizes the Japanese government’s anti-environmental policies, he devotes much more effort to celebrating natural landscapes. The poet confessed, “I’m crazy for wild landscapes; always I wish to see the desert or volcanoes – big spaces, pure like empty mind of Buddha,” and longtime friend, Kazurou Kawamoto, noted that the “poems are absolutely based on his deep knowledge of natural science” (Lawless 197, 87). At heart, Sakaki was a naturalist, who often carried binoculars and frequently stopped to closely observe and make notes about the flora and fauna when he was on nature walks. Another friend, Noike Motoki, reflected, “By placing himself in nature every day, he absorbs knowledge and nourishment from it” (Lawless 108). Sakaki firmly established his bond with nature by immersing himself in its midst, and from these experiences he gained an alternate perspective that is often overlooked or forgotten in the modern world.

Without a doubt, a spiritual mindset informs the poet’s view of nature; he recognizes the connection between the natural world and the Divine, and therefore, interprets the landscape as being sacred. The short poem, “Miracle,” explicitly states so:

Air, wind, water, the sun
all miracle.
The song of Red-winged Blackbird

miracle.

Flower of Blue Columbine

miracle. (*How to Live* 166, ll. 1-6)

Challenging the postwar industrialization and modernization known as the “Japanese economic miracle,” he insists that the biosphere and everything in it are the real miracles. Sakaki goes beyond simply recording the observable world and becomes a spokesperson for the earth. His poetry is a kind of written and aural Dharma preaching to anyone who opens herself to it.

By extension, the act of composing verse about nature is also spiritual. He told Jirka Wein, “I like writing poetry, it makes me peaceful, just like meditation. And it is a chattering with nature” (Lawless 33-34). The wild helps the poet focus his mind and serves as his muse. Recalling a discussion with Sakaki about the sources of poetic inspiration, Steve Brooks provides insight.

Nature, beauty, source of Poetry. Two sources we have. One is our own, deep into our being. The other, nature. These two are not separated. Always connected, communicated. Without nature our inner beauty is completely gone, and, if we have great insight without nature, nonsense! No meaning! ... So poetry is ... using language always touching some depths and then coming back to human society. (Lawless 169)

Humanity’s very existence depends on the biosphere not only for the sustenance that it provides, but for its beauty, of which we are a reflection. The Buddhist notion of compassion extends beyond mankind to every aspect of the earth. Via his subject matter and a “right mind, right action” lifestyle Sakaki trumpets his connection with the earth and transmits the Dharma.

III. Divorced from the Natural World

Yet, all is not right in the world because humanity has lost touch with the natural landscape. On his travels Sakaki notices this disconnect in various countries, but he focuses mainly on his native land. Written in 1979, “Future Knows” recounts some observations about our break from nature (*How to Live* 59). “On a starry night / At a camping ground in Japan / A nine-year-old boy from Tokyo complained, / ‘Ugly, too many stars’” (ll. 7-10). Due to light pollution, the night sky’s illuminations have been significantly dimmed, and in large cities the twinkling heavens are all but lost. What

delighted humans and informed us of our place in the cosmos for millennia has disappeared over the course of a handful of generations, much to our detriment. Most people can name only a few constellations. That anyone could even consider stars to be “ugly” is beyond comprehension, and explicitly using the word makes Sakaki’s point painfully clear. The poem continues with another prescient example about a boy and his pet beetle, which, even today, are popular among kids. After playing with it for a few hours he takes the “dead bug / To a hardware store, asking / ‘Change battery please’” (ll. 15-17). Mechanization has even encroached upon the simple pleasure of having pets. The attitudes of children like these must have been hard to understand for someone who grew up in rural Japan before World War II. The poet offers no commentary; he does not need to. Clearly, society’s “progress” disturbs him, and the poem’s tone laments both our severed connection with nature and the manner in which the gap continues to widen.

This separation, however, is not limited to the younger generation; adults have distanced themselves from the natural world as well. “Forevergreen” tells a tale of suburban perversion (*How to Live* 71).

In a new town outside Tokyo
Housewives wanted seriously
To have green stuff in their yard.
But trees shed leaves – much trouble.
So they planted evergreen plastic trees. (ll. 2-6)

The poem then goes back 150 million years and depicts a dinosaur’s death and subsequent transformation into oil. “Then, God metamorphosed him into plastic. / In Tokyo, he now stands, a tree, never shedding leaves” (ll. 17-18). Ironically, Sakaki links the plastic tree, something totally divorced from nature, to pristine prehistory before humanity made its mark on the earth. The poet’s wry style both reprimands the modern mindset – not wanting to be bothered and a propensity for instant gratification – and pays homage to the exploited landscape that feeds contemporary society’s insatiable appetite. In cities and suburbs towering trees are rarely found outside of parks, temples, and shrines. Although it is true that contemporary residential lots in Japan are small, it is merely an excuse for the dearth of tall trees. I’ve been told the reason is troublesome upkeep. The fake tree is a satirical symbol, but in reality there are countless places where plastic “bamboo” fencing and artificial turf are preferred to the real things. Therefore, Sakaki’s point of view is

poignant. The “plastic tale” is briefly interrupted by a well-known anecdote about the tea master, Rikyu, who instructs his son to sweep the garden. After the son finishes, Rikyu shakes a tree and more leaves fall on the freshly swept garden. The tea master teaches the simple beauty of the earth, and while Sakaki implies the same lesson, the episode also functions as an elegy for nature and old ways. The tale not only juxtaposes time, it further exposes the shallowness of the modern era by recalling an age and a figure that the Japanese traditionally revere. That time, the Edo period, is also contrasted with primeval nature; even by the 16th century the landscape had been tamed. The poet points out the error of our ways, yet he does so playfully, rather than didactically. Deftly employed humor undercuts a sharp assessment of contemporary society; it is one of Sakaki’s weapons, and his charm often masks biting critique.

“Clock” employs a digital watch, still relatively novel in 1982, as a metaphor for society’s decline (*How to Live* 93). The poem laments the extermination of “our sister mammals; / flying squirrel, river otter. Kappa or river monster / and Yamanba or mountain witch,” and bemoans that they have been replaced by “salary, house rent, monthly installment, tax, debt, fine, / ... / pet graveyard payment, car license number, postal code, / telephone number, passport number ...” (ll. 5-7, 19-22). Humanity has cast aside wildlife and traditions and replaced them with a slew of numbers and monetary obligations, what Stephen Kuusisto calls “post-modern folly” (Lawless 75). All the while the clock ticks:

no dial-plate
 no minute-hand, no hour-hand, 1 2 3 ...
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 1 2 3 ...
 soundless, continuous landslidings in these days. (ll. 10-13)

The stanza, which serves as a refrain, is repeated midway through the poem with an additional line, “no eyes, no nose, no ears” (l. 26). Akin to a digital clock with no hands, our senses have been stripped by a daily grind that is becoming more and more divorced from both the natural world and the traditional myths by which we once made sense of it. The repetition of digits hints at the imminent computer age and its impersonal code of endless zeros and ones. The poem’s central image also alludes to the Doomsday Clock; the idea that the world is slowly heading toward some kind of global catastrophe. As time marches on, Sakaki acknowledges that the clock cannot be turned back nor stopped. The tone is not necessarily hopeless, but

the protagonist resigns himself to the passage of time. While Sakaki often offers advice or promotes change, “Clock” is more prophetic.

IV. Chronicling the Devastation

The postwar “economic miracle” dealt a terrible blow to the country’s ecosystem, and the poet made speaking out against environmental horrors one of his main missions. Ecological destruction is one of Sakaki’s major themes; images of environmental degradation pepper his canon. Flying into Nagoya in 1992 he observes, “Poorly wooded hillsides, greenhouse farms, golf courses ... / Kii peninsula? Yes. / Passing through heavy gray smog / Toward the invisible airport” (*How to Live* 195, ll. 51-54). Themes of deforestation and overdevelopment reverberate in “Somewhere on the Water Planet,” written during one of the poet’s many river walks (*How to Live* 191). The protagonist reflects, “Under a roaring tsunami of golf balls / Many time-honored beech forests are drowning today” (ll. 32-33). As he watches a fisherman’s line he wonders, “Is that a sweet-fish, or a bubble of toxic waste-water?” (ll. 38). Sakaki has no qualms about calling attention to the scarred legacy left on Japan’s landscape due to the lack of regulatory oversight. Recounting a hike in the mountains of Nagano Prefecture, “Who Comes to Us” reports the discovery of a dead tanuki that is attributed to a “twentieth century ruin: / Industrial-waste dumping ground” (*How to Live* 187, ll. 44-45). Although the environmental movement has made some progress, to Sakaki’s dismay, the marring continues. Consider the following ironic jab. “Today an ancient shrine in Nara / wants to cut down its sacred grove / for a tourist parking lot” (*How to Live* 167, ll. 21-23). The notion that a Shinto institution – caretaker of a religion that not only respects all life, but holds that all living things have the same spirit of God – baffles Sakaki and leads him to conclude that the Japanese have deviated from “the original Shinto.” He adds, “due to industrial progress we have forgotten our true traditional culture” (“Guardians” 36). The Nara shrine quip immediately follows a short stanza noting that the USA refrained from bombing Kyoto and Nara “in reverence for / their temples, gardens, and spirit,” provoking the reader to ponder whether that spirit still exists in the hearts of Japanese (ll. 19-20). The juxtaposition is a dagger to the heart of the country. The poem’s title, “Oh My Buddha,” expresses the poet’s shock and disappointment that the country has not learned from its decades of

mistakes. In another instance, “Perennial Treasures” considers a host of problems (*How to Live* 222).

By the beginning of the 21st century
Japan, my mother land will be
The number one junkyard on planet Earth
 – Tokyo Tower, Nagara River dam,
 Fast breeder reactor Monju
 & Nagano Winter Olympics
Leaving such a mess behind
Who can die in peace? (ll. 38-45)

Clearly, the disrespect shown to the environment during the country’s rush to modernization leaves Sakaki dumbfounded and troubled. No matter how minor, chronicling ecological damage is an attempt to clear his conscious. And chronicle he does.

While some poems merely mention environmental calamities, others showcase them. The four-page “In the Twenty-First Century” serves as a comprehensive summary of everything that the poet finds wrong with the world; over the course of ten eleven-line stanzas and a shorter eight-line conclusion it airs a dirty laundry list of contemporary society’s ills (*How to Live* 233). Naturally, all of the poet’s environmental pet peeves are included. Honorable mentions go to the overuse of paper products, cement tetrapods, exhaust fumes, agrochemicals, and the overproliferation of golf courses (ll. 24-29, 66, 70, 72, 91). The damning eighth stanza focuses on problems that are dear to Sakaki’s heart.

In the twenty-first century
We’re going to have no big construction companies
 no corruption
 no estuary dams
 no bullet trains
 no superhighways
 no pH-neutral detergent
 no bright city lights
 no industrial waste disposal sites
 no river sludge
 no acid rain. (ll. 78-88)

On the surface, an overwhelming negative tone prevails; the constant drumbeat of “no” hammers home his disapproval. But because the poem proclaims that the ailments will be eliminated within 100 years, there is a glimmer, albeit faint, of hope, although the sarcasm is impossible to ignore. Any hint of optimism, however, descends into catastrophic doom in the tenth stanza, in which we see the consequences of our folly.

In the twenty-first century

We're going to have no smile on children's faces
 no bird songs
 no earthworms in the fields
 no dragonfly nymphs in the river
 no mushrooms in the forest
 no fish in the coral reefs
 no sun in the deserts
 no cloud shadows on the ground
 no color in the rainbows
 no stars in the Milky Way. (ll. 100-110)

The first two lines of the apocalyptic final stanza hit rock bottom: “Everything will disappear / From planet Earth” (ll. 112-113). Utter dejection permeates the lines, however the unrelenting negativity becomes absurd after a point. The insane scenarios presented in the poem reflect the lunacy of corporate and political policy concerning the environment. Despite it all, the final lines take an optimistic tone, “But somewhere – / Wind speaks” (ll. 114-115). All hope is not lost, but the poem serves as a cautionary tale about the dangerous course of over-mechanization and blatant disregard for the planet. By cataloging society’s myriad ailments, Sakaki attempts to jolt the reader into thinking about the consequences in the hope that she will join conservationists and change the cursed fate of the Earth.

“All’s Right with the World” explores the idea that humanity has abandoned the natural world (*How to Live* 74). The poem serves as a rebuttal to Robert Browning’s “Pippa’s Song,” whose celebrated last lines act as a prologue: “God’s in His heaven – / All’s right with the world!” Sakaki’s narrative finds God alone in a village on Monday morning. As the week progresses and the area is explored, He discovers the complete absence of animal life. Things worsen steadily. By Thursday morning there are “No flowers, no vegetables, no trees” (l. 31). The repetition of “no”

emphasizes the loss of life. On Friday the “Mountains and rivers are gone” and by Saturday, “Our planet, the mother earth, is gone forever” (ll. 40, 45). Each day a phone call is made to a series of caretakers – the police, the zoo, a psychiatrist – and the result is always the same: “no answer” (ll. 6, 15, 24, 33, 42, 49). After each phone call there is a chorus stating what is on TV – a different program each day – and Robert Browning’s refrain, “God’s in His heaven – / All’s right with the world!” The sarcasm bites; despite the disappearance of the natural world, we can always count on the television to comfort us. In the final stanza God walks to an empty church; just as humanity has neglected the earth, it has abandoned its spiritual roots as well. Sakaki’s message is clear: while the biosphere slowly disappears we remain oblivious, anesthetized by technology. One can only wonder what the poet would make of the constant media barrage delivered via smart phones. Technological advances have numbed us to the collapse of the planet and lulled us into indifference. Without enough of us looking after the earth, it is vanishing before our eyes.

Evidence of environmental degradation can be found all over what Sakaki refers to as “Earth A.” “Rowing in the Snow Ocean” imagines that there are really two earths – A and B – and that long ago Earth B drifted to the other side of the galaxy, remaining pristine (*How to Live* 132). We inhabit Earth A, which is “a megaslum of several billion robots, / [that] blushes with shame whenever a rainbow appears / because her original beauties, the green mountains / and blue waters are gone forever” (ll. 12-15). The poem ends with the protagonist hoping to hitchhike to Earth B via Halley’s Comet. The idea that Sakaki has given up on Earth A is a sad one, but once again, his sense of humor and silliness – including a request for an immigration visa – undercut the severity of the message. Sakaki longs to return to the pristine beauties of the wild, although he recognizes that it is all but impossible to turn back the clock. Nevertheless, he is determined to do all he can to preserve what is left on Earth A until he can make the jump to hyperspace.

V. Battling the Construction State

“All’s Right with the World” and “Rowing in the Snow Ocean” present harsh exaggerations of environmental destruction, but they reflect Sakaki’s deep concern about the deteriorating state of the planet. Some of his most passionate work

addresses habitat destruction at home. There is no doubt that the Japanese landscape has been tarnished by excessive use of concrete. Indeed, the construction industry was a major contributor not only to the postwar boom, but to the hyper-development that occurred during the seventies and eighties. Maggie Suzuki explains:

the oligarchic Japanese establishment is bolstered up to a gothically horrifying degree by public works construction such as dams and land reclamation, so much that critics call Japan “the Construction State.” Wrapped in a collusive fog of controlled information, politicians, bureaucrats and the private sector embrace the public works juggernaut as a blanket panacea. (Lawless 113)

Sakaki understands the damage that has been done and vehemently speaks out against the concreting of the country. In “Autobiography,” he notes that he has “Survived ... / Bullets, starvation & concrete wastelands” (*How to Live* 198, ll. 4-5). Paving over the natural landscape is equated with the war and the extreme poverty that his homeland faced in the years after it ended. In “Strange, Strange,” a series of questions about the state of Japan as it approaches the new millennium, Sakaki ponders public works projects: “In the public construction enterprise / Somebody makes big money & breaks down the earth. / Why do you call it public?” (*How to Live* 277, ll. 12-14). He bemoans the moral bankruptcy of both government-sponsored environmental destruction and the construction industry’s avaricious exploitation of natural resources. In addition to grumbling, he is quick to note the foolishness. Reminiscent of the plastic tree in the suburban garden, the seventh stanza of “April First 1997,” a collection of quips in honor of April Fools’ Day, lampoons the Construction State:

The Ministry of Construction who
already filled up Tokyo Bay
with earth & rocks from Mt. Fuji
will build up another Mt. Fuji
with ferro concrete for a tourism complex. (*How to Live* 244, ll. 25-29)

Abandoning all rationality, Sakaki dials the absurdity “up to eleven”; the poet understands that humor can be more effective than constant scolding. The overt silliness of the preposterous scenario mirrors the madness of government policy. Although the sarcastic ridicule is amusing, after more serious consideration, it is

disheartening that the Construction State systematically destroys the landscape.

In particular, many of the country's riverbanks and much of its coastline has been covered in concrete under the guises of erosion countermeasures, flood control, and protection against tsunamis. Sakaki decries the devastating effect that it has had on wildlife. "Five river otters survive on Shikoku's rocky shore, / runaways from contaminated rivers. / - to exterminate the rest / Tokyo government already concreted / more than half of Japan's sea coast" (*How to Live* 167, ll. 5-9). The use of "exterminate" condemns government policy as criminal for its ecocide and speciescide. The poet, however, was not one to simply expose environmental woes in books and poetry readings; he took the fight to the locales that were being exploited and supported groups that objected to the concreting of Japan's landscape.

The environmental movements that opposed construction of dams on the Nagara and Yoshino Rivers were especially dear to Sakaki. By the 1980s the Nagara River was the last river on Japan's main island of Honshu whose flow had not been obstructed by a dam. The government sold the project to the locals as flood prevention, but its real intention was to supply water for industrial use. Although local conservationists and fishermen objected, construction began in 1988 and was completed in 1994. During these and the ensuing years Sakaki protested against the dam. By that time, having witnessed the government's disregard for nature for more than three decades, he had developed a special loathing for the bureaucracy, noting, "They pay no attention to real farmer, real fisherman, real forest. They have no love of forest or ocean. Just bureaucrats. My job is how to help these real farmers & fishermen get together" (Lawless 159). He did this not by organizing protest gatherings, but by walking along the banks of the Nagara River from its headwaters in the mountains to its mouth at the ocean, exploring it and learning from it. When he was asked about his intentions, he replied, "my own idea is: walk and touch the river. Become kappa, the river goblin. Sing and dance with the river ...feel something, that's enough" (Lawless 104). And walk he did; between 1990 and 1997 he did no less than eight river walks. During these walks Sakaki met locals who were interested in his unique brand of activism and heard a lot of stories about the happiness that the Nagara River had brought them. After a few walks people began to recognize him and some welcomed him to their tables and offered accommodations. Through these interactions Sakaki was able to build relationships and talk honestly about the consequences of damming the river.

Written during his third walk, “Somewhere on the Water Planet” pays tribute to the Nagara River, but it really serves as a metaphor for the importance of all rivers: “In the beginning / There was a forest, a beech forest. / The forest gathered rain & divided rivers. / Rivers that nourished all breathing creatures” (*How to Live* 191, ll. 1-4). As the poet walks he chronicles the various lifeforms that he encounters and ponders the water that has run freely for millennia: “This is a flow – / Binding forest to ocean or yesterday to tomorrow” (ll. 34-35). The lines acknowledge the connection and interdependence of all lifeforms on the planet. The poem concludes with a tender wish: “someday, from the ocean, from tomorrow, / Countless whales will swim up the river / To revisit the ancient beech forest” (ll. 39-40). Since the dam was actually built, this will not happen any time soon, but the poet remains optimistic that someday the dam will be dismantled and the Nagara River will flow freely once again.

As he so often does, Sakaki avoids overt didacticism and undercuts the seriousness of the dam via humor. Riffing comically on the Seven Gods of Fortune mythic folktale, there is an episode in “Doctor Big Black Coming” in which he imagines himself as one of the seven (*How to Live* 229). The gods are often depicted on a raft, so Sakaki sets the “seven wise people” on one at the site of the Nagara River Dam.

These seven wise people came
To an agreement that
Nagara River Dam should be preserved forever
As a memorial to the monumental silliness
Of Japanese in the twentieth century. (ll. 24-28)

Using the familiar legend makes it easier for Japanese to swallow the unexpected proclamation. Once again, the poet skillfully points out the folly of a government that claims to be helping its countrymen as it systematically engages in habitat destruction, and he goes one step further by insisting that the Japanese people bear some responsibility for letting it recur decade after decade. Rather than feel indignation, a deft touch allows the reader to chuckle at the irony as the dam truly has become a symbol of misguided, wasteful government spending. Alas, by the time he wrote the poem the dam had already been built, but the massive opposition it provoked played a part in influencing government decision-making in future water works projects.

In the mid-nineties, a similar proposal was being floated for the Yoshino River in Shikoku's Tokushima Prefecture, where a man-made rock estuary had existed for centuries. Having been invigorated by the resistance to the Nagara River Dam, local activists galvanized the opposition and demanded a referendum on the construction of one at the mouth of the Yoshino River. Although more than half of voters rejected the project in 2000, the government insisted on proceeding with construction until the Koizumi administration's policy of downsizing public works projects was implemented mid-decade. The environmental movement had actually put the brakes on the central government's long-standing damming policy.

Naturally, Sakaki took part in the opposition. Since the river stretches for almost 200 kilometers, it already had been dammed several times, and walking its entire length is nowhere near as simple as hiking along the banks of the Nagara River. Still, he did walk stretches of it, communing with the flow and joining hands with the local opposition. Yet again, the river becomes his muse and inspires two poems. Both sing the praises of the river and contemplate the ecological implications of dam-building. Written near the end of 1996, "Don't Cry Yoshino River" traces the timeless flow of the "holy water" from its mountainous headwaters, over "numberless falls," and through "terracing rice paddies" to "the end of an epic journey" where it returns to "Mother Ocean / Now and always" (*How to Live* 237, ll. 5, 12, 14, 30, 32-33). Sakaki's reverence for the river is strong; it "Is a flow of spirits / Offering generously / Its beauty; its strength and its richness / To all beings" (ll. 26-29). Clearly, the river is worthy of our respect.

Despite the enthusiasm, however, the poem takes an unexpected turn as the poet imagines the river's tragic fate.

Under the foot of the magic dam
All disappears ...
From the tidal flat the fiddler crab
From the beach the whimbrel
From the binoculars the osprey
From the future the birdwatcher. (ll. 38-43)

The proclamation sounds apocalyptic, yet as scientists study the consequences of river dams the ecological repercussions are becoming clearer; decreased flow volume, deteriorating sediment quality, increased plankton growth, and other factors all contribute to the decline of river ecosystems, and consequently, impact larger

species, including humans. The catalog of extinction starts with the humble fiddler crab and works its way up the food chain. Written a year and a half later, “Fine Blue Sky Over Yoshino River” shares a similar tone, opening optimistically with the same fiddler crab existing harmoniously with the skylark above (*How to Live* 267). Once more, Sakaki ponders the dam’s construction and wrestles with even larger implications.

If they build the dam,
I’m afraid
The concrete wall might bring with it
Hatred, anger,
Flood, drought, starvation,
Discrimination, war. (ll. 10-15)

While “Don’t Cry” focuses mainly on species loss, “Fine Blue Sky” addresses the human condition. By the late 1990s the Japanese people had awakened to the habitat destruction perpetrated by the government, and tempers were flaring on both sides. Certainly, starvation and war are extreme prophecies, but the poet offers cautionary advice about unintended consequences. Both poems are exercises in mindfulness; by suggesting such horrors the poet motivates the reader to contemplate deeply how our actions effect not only the environment, but humanity.

Despite the gloom, both poems end with hope. The catalog of species annihilation in “Don’t Cry” can be averted if humanity changes course. The poet asks, “What destiny awaits him tomorrow?” (l. 49). Sakaki is not completely fatalistic. Instead, via the question he challenges us to ponder how our relationship with the biosphere can be strengthened. The poem’s final lines recall the poet’s earlier proclamations, this time emphasized with exclamation marks: “You are holy water! / People call you a river! / People call you Yoshino River! / Don’t cry Yoshino River!” (ll. 50-54). Sakaki remains steadfast that better judgement will ensue and that the river will prevail. According to Sakaki, “You must believe. ... If you give up, you can’t write a poem. You can’t sing a song. I sing songs always. It means there is hope” (*Mountains* 130). Likewise, following “Fine Blue Sky’s” cataclysmic soothsaying, an auspicious tone takes hold. “Flow, flow in peace / Sing, sing your song of love / Play, play your beautiful music of landscape / Until the last day of the universe & the eternal” (ll. 18-21). Sakaki remains an eternal optimist and ultimately puts his faith and trust in the river itself. By aligning himself with the environmental movement, by listening

to and learning from the river, and by raising his voice against environmental destruction, the poet is able to influence the fate of the landscape.

VI. "Me, Coral – a Miracle"

In addition to his concern for Japan's rivers, protecting the coral reefs of Okinawa, particularly at Shiraho, was another priority. Located off the island of Ishigaki, the Shiraho reef stretches twelve kilometers, supports over 100 species of coral, and has "the largest, oldest colonies of blue coral in the northern hemisphere" (Suzuki). While walking along the beach and talking with the locals in the early eighties, Sakaki learned about the threat to the reef ecosystem. The Okinawan government aspired to build an airport on top of the reef, and although the villagers had been protesting for years, it intended to start building mid-decade. Since local opposition had not swayed the government, Sakaki looked to his friends outside of Japan for help. In early June 1988, with the help of many in the Beat community, a poetry-reading benefit – the Eco-Poetry Round-Up – was held in San Francisco to widen awareness about the environmental calamity.¹ Soon after the event, the government postponed construction, and in the spring of 1989 it decided to move the airport from the reef to an area further inland. Yet the coral remained threatened. When airport construction finally began in 2006, red soil runoff pollution contributed to its deterioration.

Since Sakaki held that the poetry of the earth is found in nature, he believed that increasing awareness about the threat to Shiraho's coral reef was a solemn duty. It features prominently in the drama "Wildcat Island" and lines about it are scattered in poems written in the eighties and nineties (*Let's Eat Stars* 104). One of the earliest mentions of the reef is in the 1986 "Come Come Rain," in which the sound of rain inspires a meditation about the earth (*How to Live* 121). Repetition of the mantra "I listen to rain falling" anchors the protagonist in the present as he drifts through time and space contemplating the planet's myriad problems, including the reef: "I listen to rain falling / on a coral reef, of Ishigaki, Okinawa" (ll. 20-21). The rain falls like somber tears. Considering the numerous woes addressed in the poem, one might expect a despairing conclusion, but the final lines offer a positive contrast: "In the rain / there runs a thunder's laughter. / Come, come rain!" (ll. 30-32). The thunderbolt not only jolts the poet back to the present, but shifts the poem's tone as

well; the rain transforms into cleansing water, washing away the gloom. Despite the pitfalls that the earth faces, Sakaki again looks to nature to rectify the injustices inflicted by humanity. He remains optimistic that the wrongs can be righted.

The poet was not always so sanguine; lines in “Oh My Buddha” are more bearish (*How to Live* 167).

With the help of a starfish, the crown of thorns,
Japan destroyed ninety percent of her coral.
Here, another Kamikaze project
– last motherly reef of Okinawa
may soon be buried
underneath a new tourist airport (ll. 10-15)

This stanza, one among a litany of environmental injustices, admits that blame for the reef’s deterioration partially lies in the hands of tourists, who overburden the island’s natural treasures. At first glance, it also acknowledges nature itself, the starfish infestation, as an accomplice. However, digging deeper reveals that outbreaks of this species of starfish are often caused by agricultural fertilizer runoff (“Crown of Thorns”). For hundreds of years the villagers lived harmoniously with the reef, but with the reversion of Okinawa to Japan in the seventies came increased development and farming that negatively impacted the ecosystem. Sakaki aims his harshest indictment at the government; just as it sent kamikaze pilots to their doom, the airport is a death knell for the coral reef, and by extension, the people of Ishigaki Island. Yet Sakai’s anger never lasts long. Akin to the Nagara and Yoshino River dam cases, he speaks out by drawing attention to the lunacy of government policy that prioritizes development over the environment. In the final stanza the poet mocks governmental folly with his own, declaring that the Japanese Air Force is building a base in Yosemite National Park. Again, a warped sense of humor undercuts the poet’s rage, making the bitter pill easier to swallow.

Sakaki’s wrath is rarely long-lived. Instead, he acts as a positive voice for the planet, hoping to inspire awareness about the earth and the problems that it faces. He spoke to Trevor Carolan about the poet’s responsibility to the landscape. “Real compassion goes beyond human society – it extends to animal life, trees, water, stones. If we think this way it becomes easy to relate to the environmental movement. Buddhism says we are all the same” (Lawless 199-200). Appropriately, he becomes the landscape in 1989’s “A Dance of Coral” (*How to Live* 261).

Me, coral – a miracle.
Born in a warm ocean, grow and become a bone.
The bone changes into a stone,
 an island, a dream then the sun.
The sun transforms into wind, Buddha then God.
God metamorphoses into sea-weeds.
Sea-weeds raise a tiny blue planet, the earth.
The earth now brings up life on it.

At the end of the journey the earth goes back to coral. (ll. 1-9)

The poet ventures beyond our own planet into the realm of the cosmos and challenges us to see the macrocosm in a single coral stone. The poem tells a creation myth in which the entire universe can be traced to a solitary stone and its endless transformation of successive rebirths from one entity to another. Along the way it – and by extension we – becomes God, the wind, and the earth until it regenerates as coral, where upon the cycle repeats *ad infinitum*. Sakaki insists that the reason the coral reef at Shiraho is so important lies in the interdependence of all life: “In a labyrinth of coral reef, / Human history circulating” (ll. 27-28). Sakaki uses the simple organism to teach the mysteries of the universe. At the end of the poem, teary-eyed with both glee and sadness, the protagonist envisions that “every being could dance together” (l. 34). Saving the coral reef saves ourselves. Hopefully, understanding that we are all one in the cosmic cycle of consciousness empowers the reader to engage the natural world and unite in opposition to its desecration.

Truly alarmed by humanity’s pivot from nature, Sakaki employs poetry to speak out against environmental injustices. Proclamations against systemic ecosystem destruction caused by damming rivers and neglecting reefs bear some fruit not only due to government policy changes, but more importantly, because the Japanese people have begun thinking more deeply about the landscape and the consequences of overdevelopment. Effecting real change regarding nuclear power, however, would prove to be more difficult.

VII. “A Powerful Material Force”

When he was seventeen, Sakaki enlisted in the military, something all Japanese males were obliged to do at the time. Believing it to be the most progressive branch, he joined the navy and requested to be assigned to the radar unit as he thought there might be a chance to learn something about science. Eventually, he was stationed on the island of Kyushu at Izumi Air Base, from which kamikaze attacks were staged during the last year of the war. Because Izumi is only 87 kilometers from Nagasaki, he had distinct memories of feeling the ground shake and seeing the mushroom cloud on the morning of August 9, 1945. Naturally, the experience profoundly affected his views about nuclear war, which extended to nuclear power as well, and he maintained a vehement objection to both for the remainder of his life. Having witnessed the horror and the aftereffects of that fateful morning, it is understandable that nuclear issues feature in his work.

Sakaki described the nuclear bombings as “a powerful material force,” and from experiences during the war and its aftermath two main messages stuck with him: life and death (Lawless 39). Although he did not participate directly in armed combat – Izumi was, however, targeted by conventional bombs – he was no stranger to death, especially considering that many of the pilots that were stationed at the base never returned. Since war leaves a lasting impression on everyone it touches, even forty years later he cannot forget it. The short poem, “Indian Summer,” wedges the lines, “Today / Somewhere / Somebody / Makes a nuclear bomb / Just to kill you” between tranquil late summer images of a robin and dandelions (*How to Live* 158, ll.4-8). Even by themselves the lines are jarring, but all the more because of the juxtaposition and the peaceful notions that the title evokes. The reader’s shock mirrors the surprise felt by the Japanese people after the atomic bombings. In typical Sakaki fashion the lines are rather absurd, which not only reflects nuclear weapons themselves, but the added insanity of stockpiling thousands of them. One wonders about the poem’s inspiration. The location where it was penned is uncited, but based on the date and series that it is grouped with, it is reasonable to conclude that it was conceived in the American Southwest. Nukes manufacturing, testing, and storage sites in the region probably inspired the lines, as may have Ronald Reagan’s recently-unveiled “Star Wars” program. Nevertheless,

the poet remains haunted by his memories and the knowledge that the war machine marches on unabated. Clearly, the lessons of history have been forgotten, and just as he protested against river dams and the destruction of the coral reef, Sakaki feels obligated to dissent against WMD. Speaking about nuclear power and nuclear weapons, he told James McCarthy, "They are too dangerous. I saw – and I feel a responsibility for that. If you see something, you have a responsibility" (Lawless 154). Lines in "Break the Mirror" reflect this thinking: "Singing against nuclear war – / I'll never be tired of life" (*How to Live* 142, ll.16-17). So does a stanza in "In and Out":

Stand up to Nuclear War!
To protect Universal Citizenship of All Living Things,
To have all our life and death in peace,
Stand up to Nuclear War! (*How to Live* 157, ll.14-17)

Poetry is Sakaki's soap box. He speaks not only for humanity, but for all living things. However, when it comes to nukes, war is not his only concern.

Lacking fossil fuel resources, the Japanese government, with the blessings of the United States, invested incredible money and effort into nuclear power to meet its ever-increasing energy needs. From the early seventies through the mid-nineties the government promoted nuclear power plants in depopulating, rural coastal areas. It won over skeptical communities by offering hefty subsidies and public work projects and by promoting the myth of safety via pro-nuclear op-eds and fielding like-minded candidates who would approve power plant construction. By the late 1980s, Japan had close to forty reactors scattered across the country, and since nuclear power was a strategic priority more were in the works.

Sakaki's aversion to nuclear power stemmed from his objection to nuclear weapons. He told Peter Warshall, "Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Chernobyl and Manjusri, all related." "The Battle of Toads," a surrealistic tale about eco-damage, links atomic power and the weapons, envisioning dire consequences (*How to Live* 105). In one scene Hitler, Truman, and Stalin parade with "nuclear warheads on their chests as glorious medals," and they are followed by "great leaders of nuclear, electric industry world, / Just like holy men, all naked in full radioactive ash" (ll. 51, 53-54). The bandwagon is joined by "rather shady scientists, tricky journalists, / Intellectuals and a huge number of middle-class opportunists," who walk smiling, "hand in hand ... in the ruin of World War III" (ll. 56-58). The figures in the parade demonstrate the evolution of the nuclear energy safety myth from the military and

the government to the private sector, and although Sakaki predicts an apocalyptic ending, in the short term the perpetrators and their accomplices emerge victorious. The fate of the landscape and the people is clear; the main beneficiaries of nuclear power are the elites and the connected. In the poet's view, government collusion with corporate Japan, an entity often referred to as Japan Inc., can only end tragically. The poet talked with Warshall about the shift in public opinion. "Thirty years ago, nuclear power was kind of great vision. Maybe we can control. Only good way we can use. Many people have such a dream. But slowly they found reality. It's not true. Too dangerous to be handled. So better keep out. Very simple." Sakaki has the last laugh. Near the end of the parade marches a group of regular folk wielding simple tools – an axe, a loom, a hoe, a guitar, a fishing spear, and a drum – signaling his faith in grassroots movements. Armed with "a homemade tofu-bomb," Sakai brings up the rear (l. 64). The silliness and self-deprecation deflate the real horror of a worst-case scenario and replace it with a more hopeful vision. In the battle against the "nuclear village," people power and poetry are viable weapons.²

Sakaki also uses iconic imagery to make his point. Channeling Hokusai, "Red Fuji" perverts the famous wood block print's spectacular view: "Across the smoggy bay / A nuclear power plant" (*How to Live* 178, ll. 11-12). Referencing the classic work of art reminds the reader just how badly nuclear power plants taint Japan's traditional landscape, and in doing so, strikes at the heart of those yearning for age-old beauty that has been lost. As Stephen Kuusisto puts it, Sakaki "has absorbed the lessons of recent history: there is no more reverence for life in Japan, Inc. than there is at Manzano mountain, New Mexico, where the military stores its outdated nuclear weapons" (Lawless 75). Read in this light, the poem indicts governmental folly for its corruption of the country's traditional values and serves as an elegy for Japan's classic aesthetics. A stanza in "Oh My Buddha" takes a similar approach: this time with the ancient capital. "Kyoto is now 'protected' / by thirteen nuclear power plants / within a radius of one hundred miles" (*How to Live* 168, ll. 24-26). The lines caustically mock official policy by twisting its risk-free propaganda. Intentionally not bombed during the Second World War, it is ironic that the country's own government could be responsible for the destruction of Japan's spiritual heart. Even should a nuclear disaster not occur, the poet cautions against another consequence, albeit a much less dramatic one: "Stone age Japanese never know Atomic Energy. / Now nuclear power plants are / poisoning modern Japan to a slow death" (*How to*

Live 277, ll. 15-17). These final lines in “Strange, Strange” demonstrate how far the country has deviated from its bucolic past. Seen in the light of the Fukushima disaster, it is an eerie omen. By using idyllic images, such as Mt. Fuji and Kyoto, to tug at the heartstrings of the national psyche, Sakaki attempts to jolt the people from their apathetic slumber in the hope they will understand and confront the dangers posed by nuclear energy.

Written in 1994, “Venerate Three Treasures” is Sakaki’s sharpest critique of nuclear power (*How to Live* 213). The three treasures are the Buddha; the Dharma, the teachings; and the Sangha, the Buddhist community. Here, Manjusri, the embodiment of all the Buddha’s wisdom, is sent to Wakasa Bay, about 100 kilometers north of Kyoto. Manjusri, rendered “Monju” in Japanese, is also the name of the experimental fast breeder nuclear reactor in Wakasa that is supposed to burn plutonium, along with reprocessed uranium, and produce more fuel than it consumes. The bodhisattva

Takes the place of a fast breeder reactor
Extinguishes the hell’s flame of Plutonium
With his own blood & tears,
And illuminates the gloomy world
With his boundless compassion. (ll. 32-36)

As a result, the reactor’s triple threat – radioactive contamination, nuclear explosion, and atomic bomb – is neutralized, and the god of wisdom “save[s] all sentient beings” (l. 8). Tragedy is averted, however, the poet solemnly admonishes that the

red blood & black tears
Trickling from the ringed skulls of
Hiroshima, Nagasaki & Chernobyl
Will tint the horizon
Until planet Earth’s last day. (ll. 47-51)

Mirroring the illusory thinking of the nuclear village, the poem serves as a tongue-in-cheek fairy tale on several levels. First, Sakaki takes aim at the plant’s name itself. He once mused, “Why have they used, in Japan, Manjushri Bodhisattva as the name of the fast-breed nuclear reactor? The most dangerous reactor? So if they were, in Canada, to use a name for their fast-breed reactor should it be Jesus Christ? How would you feel?” (Lawless 179). The absurdity that a group of connected, old men in Tokyo opted to name the plant after the God of Wisdom is

not lost on the poet. Also, aside from the bombastic sacrilege, the poet argues that the name was chosen to mask the dangers posed by risky, unproven technology. Moreover, located so close to Kyoto – the heart of Buddhism in Japan – it is ironic that the city could be wiped out by a reactor named after a bodhisattva. Finally, one can infer that even religion cannot save Japan from itself. Although he was raised in a Buddhist family, the poet had quite a few reservations about the current state of the faith in the country. While such an interpretation may be off the mark, the paradox that it presents makes for interesting thought. Via fanciful stories and a sharp wit, Sakaki pushes boundaries and challenges us to contemplate the status quo regarding nuclear power.

Monju also features in *How to Live's* next poem, "Anyday," which takes place after the protagonist visits the fast breeder reactor and the nearby Mihama plant (216). The Wakasa Bay area in Fukui Prefecture, north of Kyoto, hosts six nuclear power plants with a total of 15 reactors. It is "the largest concentration of nuclear power plants in the world" ("Nuclear Energy"). While he waits on a platform at the nearby Tsuruga Station, "GWOON BALI BALI / A GREAT EXPLOSION / A blinding FLASH and a deafening n o i s e" (12-14). Thinking the worst – in that flash of a moment he relives the fateful morning of August 9th – he is relieved that it is only thunder and lightning, and not "a bursting atomic energy plant / YET" (ll. 20-21). The title explicitly connotes the possibility that a nuclear accident could happen any day. Indeed, considering Japan's frequent earthquakes and not uncommon volcanic eruptions, it is difficult to understand government, and especially, public support for nuclear power.³ Knowing how attuned to the planet Sakaki was, the thunderclap may have foreshadowed the Great Hanshin earthquake that occurred just four days later, which is mentioned in the final stanza, or the nuclear disaster that would take place in sixteen years.

Had he been alive, it is not difficult to imagine Sakaki's take on the events of March 11, 2011 and the subsequent fallout. Following the 9.1 magnitude earthquake and the 15 meter tsunami that inundated the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant and caused three of its reactor cores to meltdown, large doses of radiation were released into the atmosphere and the Pacific Ocean. Three investigations determined that the disaster was "man-made" and related to the nuclear village's "network of corruption, collusion, and nepotism" ("Fukushima"). None of this would have surprised the poet; he had abandoned any confidence in the nuclear village

long ago. But he also believed that the Japanese people bear some responsibility. When asked by Peter Warshall about why the public still wanted nuclear power despite the geological dangers, Sakaki replied that he had made the same inquiry. “Mostly no answer, just to keep silence. [sic] Especially bureaucrat and energy company. ‘This is not my job. It’s national decision. Not my own decision.’ Everybody escaping.” Loathing the customs of keeping quiet and deferring to authority, the poet rebels by addressing the elephant in the room. Sadly, had there been more outcry, the tragedy might have been averted.

VIII. Swimming against the Stream

Since Sakaki wrote scores of poems celebrating the wild and humanity’s connection to it, the more combative verse cannot be summarily dismissed as a curmudgeon’s rant against modernization. His critiques express genuine frustration about his compatriot’s obliviousness to the plight of the landscape; the verse is a call to action, screaming “wake up before it is too late.” Despite hints of despair, wit often saves the lines from becoming overbearing. Returning to the April Fools’ Day dictum, he predicts:

Before the year 2997
the Ministry of Agriculture & Fishery
will bring back the whole afforestation
of Sugi, Japanese cedar into the perfect
natural forests, & the revitalized woods
will be the eternal sanctuary for the wild beings. (*How to Live* 243, ll.15-20)

Sakaki’s facetious 1,000 year timetable for replacing the cedars planted after the war with natural mountain flora rebukes the follies of forest mismanagement and overreliance on cheap imported lumber that has led to the deterioration of the country’s woodland. Tellingly, he speaks for all “wild beings,” rather than for humanity alone. The poet sees the big picture and encourages the country to entertain the same vision. Instead of desponding, Sakaki playfully remains hopeful about revitalizing Japan’s ailing wilderness.

As one of Japan’s largest bastions of untamed back country, Sakaki was quite fond of the northern island of Hokkaido. He celebrates its landscape: the ice floes on the Sea of Okhotsk, the Shiretoko Peninsula’s primeval forest, the snowy peaks of

Daisetsuzan; its animals: grizzly bears, spawning salmon, woodpeckers, and butterflies; and its people, including artists, frontiersmen, and the indigenous Ainu. Because its climate, geography, and sheer vastness mark it as a biosphere unique from the rest of the country, it comes as no surprise that “Manifesto” declares five times: “Hokkaido island will be an independent country” (*How to Live* 124, ll.1, 8, 12, 16, 20). He envisions the rugged outback of Hokkaido as a woven utopia of beauty unencumbered by the rot that has infested contemporary Japan:

This island is made as a garland
No nuclear power plants
No agri-chemicals
No big corporations
No authorities
No arms.

We call this island Moshiri, the Peaceful Land –

after the Ainu’s name. (ll. 23-30)

Here, the repetition of “no” has positive connotations, distinguishing Hokkaido from the rest of the country. And although the manifesto reads like a pipe dream, the poet’s vision is theoretically conceivable because the island retains the original soul of Japan via its distinct ecology and the environmental mindfulness of its inhabitants, who possess the spirit of the Ainu people. The poet embodies this same spirit and envisions that the islanders will tap into it when confronted by ecological horrors. Sakaki hopes that doing so, even one step at a time, will help the people reclaim the land from Tokyo’s grip, and once again transform Hokkaido, and eventually the entire country, into the nation of *Moshiri*.

Sakaki was an anti-establishment firebrand, who spent the better part of fifty years speaking out against ecological destruction at home. Moreover, he dared to point out the country’s other social sicknesses; truly, a rare breed in Japan. He confessed that while everyone knows about the problems – habitat destruction, the dangers of nuclear power, and the collusive network of corporations, government officials, and special interest groups – they pretend to know nothing and opt to keep quiet, thereby allowing the exploitation to continue (Warshall). Despite good intentions, his actions had consequences; he was, and still is, not widely known nor accepted by mainstream Japanese. Undeterred, he led the fight in verse.

“Bikki Salmon,” about the Ainu artist, Bikki Sunazawa, serves as an apt metaphor

for Sakaki's environmental *modus operandi* (*How to Live* 175). The identical first and penultimate twelve-line stanzas imagine various people: the artist, the poet himself, Ginsberg, Snyder, Issa, and Lao Tsu; animals native to Hokkaido: the Black Elk and the Ezo wolf; mythical creatures: Yamamba and Ainu goblin, Koroppocl; Maitreya bodhisattva, and the Northern Cross as salmon. Standing on the concrete banks of Hokkaido's Teshio River, which has been "straightened and strangled by man," the protagonist celebrates the wild landscape's flora and fauna before focusing on the salmon that have returned to spawn and die (l. 18). Sunazawa too has reached the end of life, and – reminiscent of the poet becoming a coral stone – the artist symbolically transforms into Bikki salmon. Amid the discarded household appliances and toxic chemicals in the river, the salmon swims: "Against the flow of poison / Against the flow of decay / Mumbling Heart Sutra" (ll. 58-60). Like the salmon, poets, artists, and conservationists swim against the forces that are destroying the environment. Though progress may be incremental, it is steady and unwavering: "In this crooked generation / Salmon moves straight forward" (ll. 62-63). Sakaki believes that eco-activism not only makes sense, but yields results as well. Reflecting upon his involvement with the preservation of the Shiraho reef, he said, "At the end of [sic] the government gave up. So the poet has a little power" (Lawless 176). As the salmon lays its eggs and passes on, the poet sows his seeds in hope that one day they will effect change. Sakaki's poetry generates interest in the natural world, encourages the Japanese people to renew their bond with the landscape, and inspires all people to join in the crusade to save the planet from ourselves.

Notes

¹ The hastily-arranged Eco-Poetry Round-Up was held on June 3, 1988 at San Francisco's Palace of Fine Arts Theater. More than 1,000 people attended the event, which featured readings by Sakaki, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, and Joanne Kyger. It raised \$4,000 and attracted both local and Japanese media interest.

² The "nuclear village" is the name given to the group that staunchly promotes nuclear power in Japan. It includes advocates in the parliament, bureaucracy,

utilities, business and financial sectors, academia, and the media. The term is “convenient shorthand to describe a powerful interest group with a specific agenda, one that it has effectively and profitably promoted since the 1950s” (Kingston).

³ After costing taxpayers more than a trillion yen and operating for a mere 250 days, the Japanese government decided to decommission Monju in December 2016: twenty-two years after the reactor achieved criticality. Meanwhile, a government committee on fast breeder development agreed to pursue construction of a new experimental reactor.

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