

Photographing Loss



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Some books break your heart with their beauty; others break your heart with their sadness. *Mighty Silence: Images of Destruction* does the latter. In these days immediately following the highly destructive Oklahoma tornadoes of 2013, ripped homes, buildings, and schools are on our minds. This beautifully-produced book showcases many striking photographs of the Tohoku region of Japan where the massive tsunami struck two years ago.

The photos are large, some even opening into more than a two page spread. But the main thing that struck me about them is how seldom they include any people. I noticed only one person in the whole collection, a solitary utility repairman high in a crane over demolished houses and smashed cars. Animals are mostly missing also, except for one murder of crows crisscrossing the wires of one empty city, and a strange cat with radioactive-mutated whiskers near Fukushima.

In this collection the themes of loss and chaos are emphasized because most of the photographs are printed in black and white, or more accurately in shades of greys. What stands out in many of them are great billowy clouds--some bright white, others storm-cloud threatening. One photo shows a massive train balanced on the tops of small graves, the silver bowls left by families for offerings to the dead half-full of rain.

The photographer, famous in Japan for his fashion and art photographs, grabbed his camera twenty days after the tsunami hit and drove north from Tokyo. In the preface, he describes how after first leaving the car, he could not take a single picture. Instead he stood in a field weeping. His photos of witness are not merely sad; they also depict the tremendous power of nature. Several people writing in the introductory text comment about how important it is that we learn from this overwhelming disaster, that we don't forget. These photographs will certainly allow no forgetting. For a nonfiction account of the aftermath of this tsunami, try Gretel Ehrlich's *Facing the Wave: a Journey in the Wake of the Tsunami*. Ehrlich writes movingly about nature and has had a long relationship with Japan and its people.

Posted by Dory L. on May 23, 2013

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[Nonfiction](#)

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[Mighty Silence : images of destruction ; the great 2011 tsunami of east Japan and Fukushima](#)

Links

- [1] <https://mqpl.info/blogs/love-reading/photographing-loss>
- [2] https://mqpl.monroe.la.us/search/searchresults.aspx?type=Books&term=idm=4788867215079%20or%20sp=4788867215079&by=KW&sort=RELEVANCE&tm_source=blogpost&tm_medium=publicist&tm_campaign=blogpost
- [3] https://mqpl.monroe.la.us/search/searchresults.aspx?ctx=1.1033.0.0.7&type=Keyword&term=erich%20and%20magen%20of%20the%20great%20sea%2011&sortBy=RELEVANCE&tm_source=blogpost
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- [5] <https://mqpl.info/blogs/blog>
- [6] <https://mqpl.info/category/blogs/information-answers-reviews>
- [7] <https://mqpl.info/category/reviews-subject-matter>
- [8] <https://mqpl.info/reviews/46657174>