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AT LEAST AT HOME

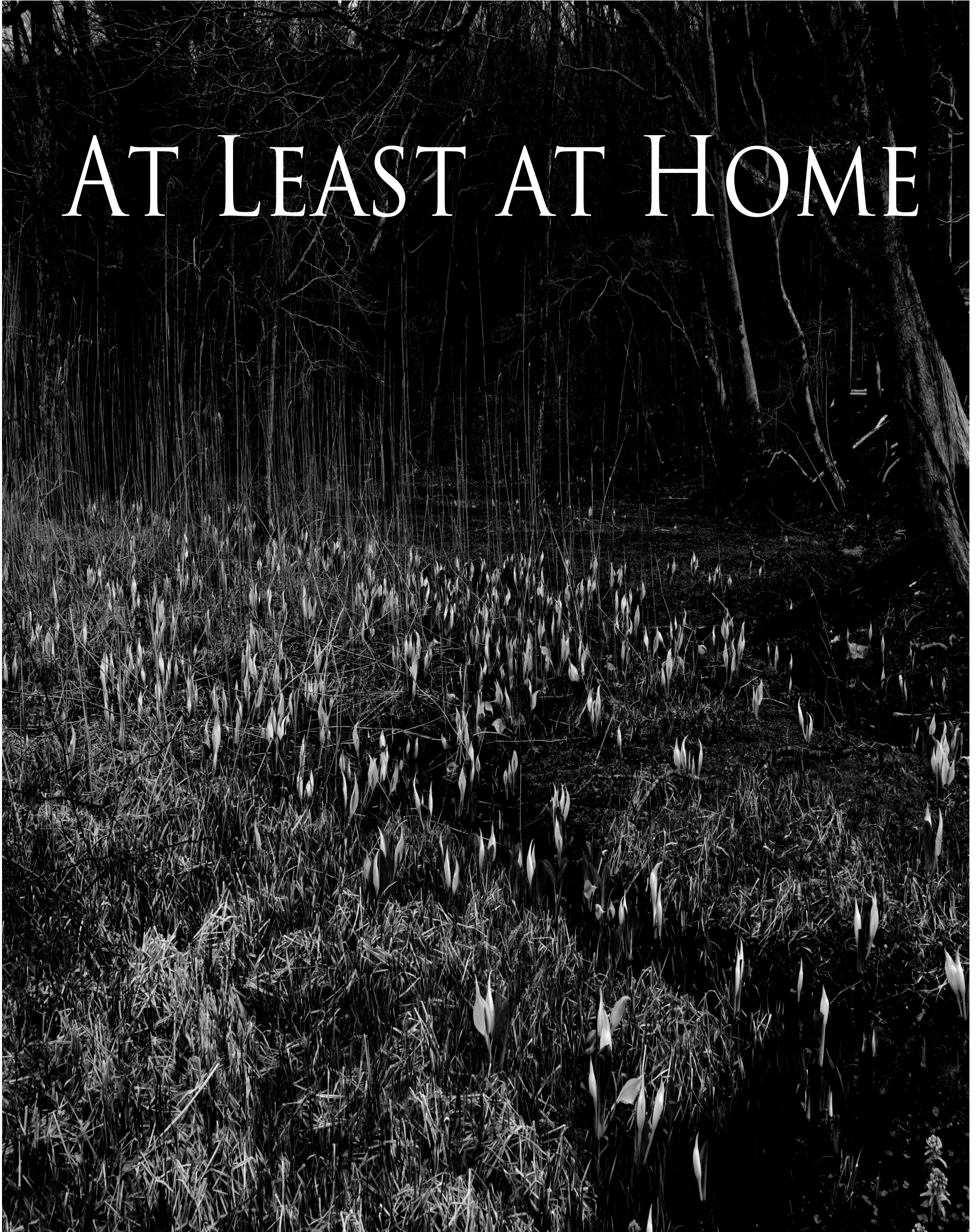




PHOTO & TEXT
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Entire Village
of
Iitate
Evacuated

Hiso District,
Iitate Village

Satoru Nakajima

May 2011

The nuclear accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station triggered by the Great East Japan Earthquake released large amounts of radioactive material into the skies above. The quiet village of Iitate, despite being situated over 20km away, was severely contaminated due to its downwind location at the time of the accident. Radiation levels reaching near 20mSv were recorded throughout the village resulting in the area to be designated as a "planned evacuation zone" in April 2011.

"People disappearing from a village... no one might live there again". Those thoughts led me to visit the village for the first time in May after the accident. The nuclear fallout did not make the village look any different from normal. The fresh green leaves sprouting from the trees looked beautiful. The cool wind breezing through the plateau stretching from the Abukuma mountain range felt refreshing. But most of the villagers had already evacuated leaving behind only those with some business to tend to like the dairy farmers looking after their cattle. I met eight groups of people and was able to photograph them along with the surrounding scenery.

After six months, the untended rice fields and vegetable gardens became covered in weeds, and the houses were becoming overrun as well. One could definitely see the change that took place since the habitants left. I kept visiting the village and photographing the same places. At first, the view just kept deteriorating. As time went by, the decontamination began, and the weeds were all mowed down. The topsoil in the rice paddies were replaced with new soil, so at times, the area looked unnaturally flat and empty. There were times when huge sacks of contaminated waste were stacked there too.

Now, after four years, I contacted the people I had first photographed and found that all of

them were still living away from the village in other cities and towns of Fukushima prefecture. Some continued to stay in the temporary emergency shelters. One had given up dairy farming. Others had resumed their business or had purchased a new home where they had evacuated. All of them, depending on their unique situation, were going on with their new lives. Upon learning that Satoru Nakajima from the Hiso district, and Harunobu Kanno from Nagadoro had passed away, I could not help but realize how long the past four years must have felt for the people yearning to return home.

I first met Nakajima four years ago while he was walking by his home. This April, I learned from his wife, Yoshiko, what had happened to him during the following years.

In Iitate, Nakajima and his wife had been living with his son and his family. After temporarily evacuating to Saitama after the accident, they moved into a rented home in Fukushima City. Life away from home became prolonged, and hoping for a stable life, the family decided to build a new house in Date City. On January 11th of this year, Nakajima and the other family members gathered around his kimono clad granddaughter at the newly finished house. It happened to be the day of the traditional *Seijin-shiki* when twenty year olds celebrate coming-of-age, and the family took a group photo before the granddaughter left for the ceremony. "I'm going to take a nap", Nakajima later said and retired to his bedroom. He never woke up. While living in Iitate, Nakajima used to grow vegetables, rice and tobacco. He was the kind of man who had to keep busy with physical tasks, but after evacuating, he had nothing to do. His family started worrying how he seemed to lose energy by the day. The death of his



SERIES
FUKUSHIMA

January 2015

Nagadoro District,
Iitate Village

Harunobu and Tsuru
Kanno

May 2011



beloved dog he took for walks every day kept him indoors even more too. "Let's go home soon, shall we". He kept saying, longing to return to Iitate. But when the actual opportunity arose for short visits, all he could do was to stare helplessly at the weed covered farmland. "How he must have wanted to go back. If at least he could have died in his own home", Yoshiko says as she quietly gazes at the family photo they took that day in January.

"This house, I built it all by myself", Harunobu Kanno proudly said when I met him in front of it back in 2011. He was about to evacuate with his wife, Tsuru, to a *ryokan* in Fukushima City. Sugano was a carpenter and left his ancestral house to start his own business at the age of twenty-five. He built the house and tilled the land in front of it to grow garlic and beans. But in July 2012, due to the accumulative amount of radiation reaching above 50mSv, the Nagadoro district where he lived became the sole area within Iitate to be designated as a "difficult to return zone", basically forbidding entry.

Tsuru remembers how when the two married, times were still tough and finding enough food to eat was still difficult for many. "There wasn't even a wedding. I was half dragged over here" she says. Harunobu worked as a carpenter and Tsuru as a construction worker. On the side, they grew vegetables and began growing rice. She remembers only how they struggled to earn a living. And just when they started considering a more relaxed lifestyle, the nuclear accident

happened. In the autumn of 2012, Harunobu, who would always just tough it out instead of whining, suddenly seemed as if he was starting to put affairs in order and also reminisce of the past, something he rarely did. Nonetheless, he never let slip any words of regret or bitterness until the very end. "He always held everything inside, all on his own. I can't imagine how crushed he must have been", Tsuru said as she gazed at the overgrown garden during one of the few visits to Nagadoro.

Harunobu had been suffering from terminal cancer, and his visit to his home in Nagadoro in June 2014 would be his last. Confined to a wheelchair with tubes protruding from his body, the stay lasted only 2 hours. One week later, he was hospitalized again and passed away at the hospital.

Living in the mountains had its inconveniences, but there were many pleasures as well. Things like collecting mushrooms and wild vegetables and catching fish from the river. Above all, the place was where the two were born and had also spent their entire lives. The village was their home. Tsuru has been living in temporary shelter for a long time now, and does not expect to be able to return to Nagadoro. She sometimes goes back to do some repairs and cleaning. She will place a bowl of rice in front of the house altar, spend some time in the house full of memories which she built with her husband, and go see him at the grave where he now rests. Tsuru remembers how he would say from his hospital bed, "How nice it would be to spend just one night at home". But even the simplest of wishes do not come true in Iitate.

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