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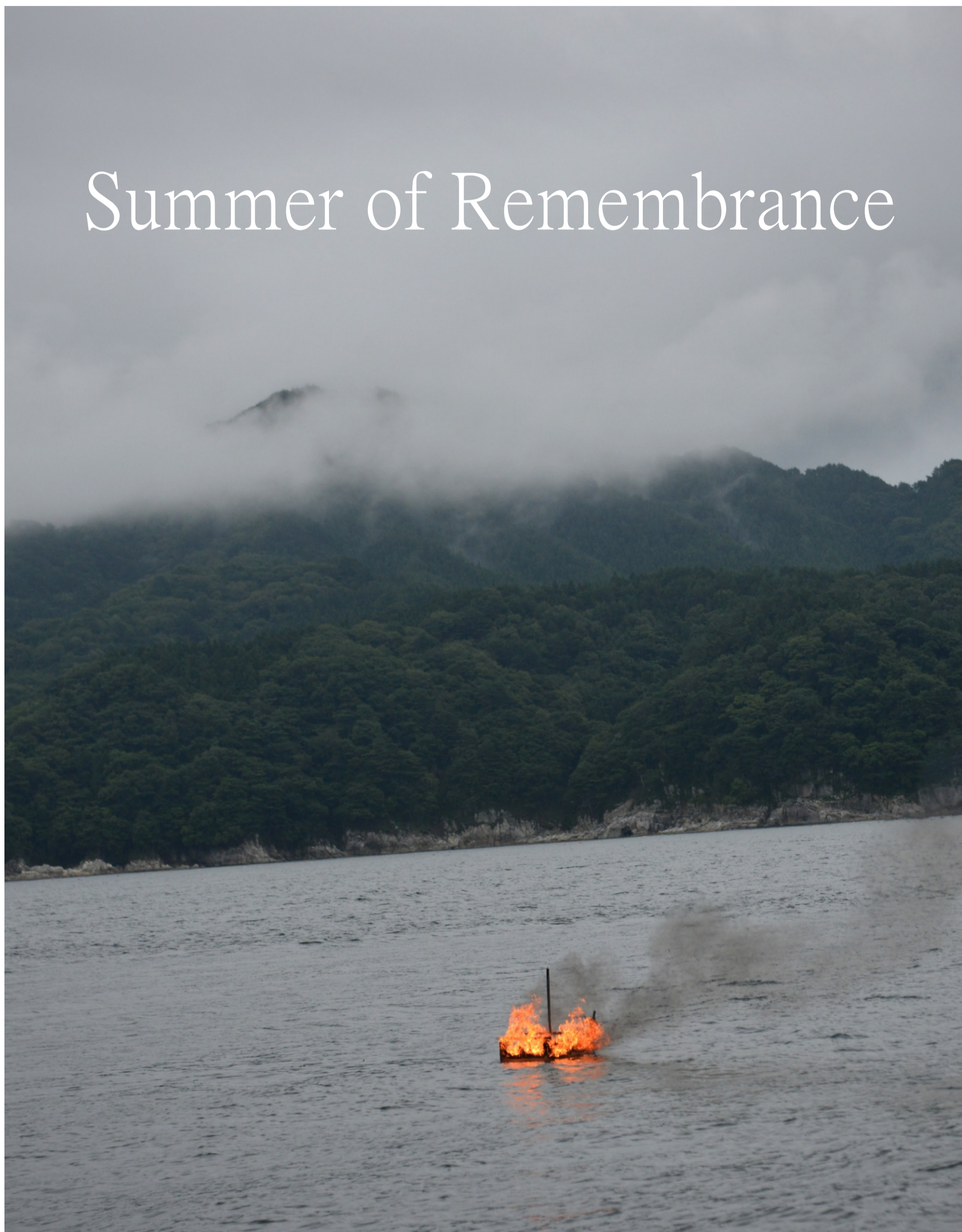
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Summer of Remembrance





**SERIES
FUKUSHIMA**

PHOTO&TEXT
BY YUKI IWANAMI

TOHOKU region, Japan - The annual festival of *Bon* in Japan is when the spirits of their ancestors are said to return to the mortal world. Family members return to their home towns to visit their ancestral graves, and when the time comes for the spirits to return to the afterlife, bonfires are lit to guide their way. The sight of families carefully washing the tombstones, paying their respects and praying among the buzz of cicadas is a solemn but lively summer feature seen across Japan's countryside. But for the *Bon* here in Ookuma Town, Fukushima, the houses are empty and only a soft wind blows among the gravestones.

"Hey, how were you!" When 74 year old Tsuneko Nemoto is greeted by her longtime neighbor, a soft smile

Tsuneko and Kazunori Nemoto pay their respects in front of the grave where generations of their ancestors rest. Part of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station can be seen in the background

appeared. Tsuneko and her son Kazunori, 40, evacuated to Kanawaza after the nuclear accident, and for the first time in several months, had come home for the *Bon* to pay respects at their ancestral grave. Tsuneko's husband also rests there.

After visiting the grave, Tsuneko checked in on her house in the Ottozawa district of Ookuma, the place she had lived her whole life until the accident. The house was covered in grass, and inside, belongings and furniture were still scattered about. It was apparent that the house was slowly falling apart. She gazed at the empty road in front of the house and remembered how the children would ride their bicycles there. After leaving the area, she realized for the first time that this was the only place she felt at peace. She would never force her son or grandchildren to do so, but that does not change her determination to one day return where her husband rests. "Whatever it takes, I will return. So look after this place for me until then, will you now?", Tsuneko quietly asks him before leaving again.

In the Ukedo district of Namie Town, Fukushima, Chiyoko Wakase, 81, Mitsuko Kodaka, 77, and Hiroko

Sugiyama, 74, walk among the rubble left behind by the tsunami. The three sisters had come for *Bon* prayers at the grave of their baby sister who died when she was still thirty eight. The sisters grew up in Ukedo, but Mitsuko now lives in Hiroshima and Hiroko in Tokyo. Chiyoko returned to Namie after marrying, but was forced to evacuate to Koriyama because of the nuclear accident.

Their home town was ravaged by the tsunami, and the nuclear accident has prevented normal access since. Hiroko could not bear to see what had become of the place, but after noticing through television footage that their family's gravestone was still standing, was drawn back to the place. She finally mustered the courage and decided to visit with her sisters for the first time since the disaster. The house was where the three sisters always gathered with their children during summer vacation, spending time riding out to sea on their boat where they would enjoy the cool breeze. Her heart ached when she saw with her own eyes for the first time, how her hometown had completely changed.

At Renjoji Temple in the center of Otsuchi Town, Iwate, the local women were chanting scriptures in front of a



6 month old Raiki, the son of Shuichi Kuramoto who let me on his boat to photograph the lantern ceremony at Kichijoji Temple in Otsuchi Town Kirikiri. The name Raiki originated from *furaiki*, the colorful flags fishermen wave upon returning with a good catch



Members of the Kichijoji Temple chant and walk by the former Otsuchi town office and head toward the fishing harbor



Chiyoko Wakase searches for her sister's grave which was caught in the tsunami. Flowers were placed on many of the graves during the *Bon*



In some of the communities, the pastime of lighting fireworks along with the bonfires is popular

Bon Festival Four Years After

Buddha statue enshrined by a makeshift shack. The original temple had burned down after catching fire from flaming debris pushed inland by the tsunami waves. The chief priest Yoken Kito, 57, barely managed to save the main Buddha statue through the priest's quarters. He has been practicing at the prefab makeshift temple for a long time, but construction of a new one is planned to be finished by next year.

It was his routine to visit households along with the parishioners to chant during the *Bon*, and though the annual observance was interrupted after the disaster, resumed last year. Wearing clerical outfits and banging drums, the women walked among the empty town where houses once stood and reached their last stop, the fishing harbor. There, the *Funakko-nagashi*, a

ceremony where a small boat escorting the spirits is launched to sea, was also performed. Priest Kito and the members of his temple chanted scriptures from a fishing boat while the smaller boat, drifting out on the currents, was set on fire. A flame erupted in the same harbor the tsunami had swept in over 3 years ago.

During *Bon* in Otsuchi, it is customary to greet, then send off the ancestral spirits by lighting bonfires in front of houses and graves. The rebuilding of both have been painstakingly difficult. So this year again, only modest flames could be seen waving forlornly among the rows of temporary housing and toppled grave stones. (Reported in 2014)

Translation by Taro Konishi



A family pay their respects at a washed away grave in Koganji Temple in Otsuchi. The graves behind them have been removed, and work was being done to elevate the area



Residents light a small bonfire at a temporary housing complex in Otsuchi



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