

# Beneath Wind and Rain

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

This is no place to be. Hammerblows of wind smash across the harbor's waters, roaring as they explode the tops off frenzied, jagged, murky waves. Spindrift swirls into driving rain—which is “falling” horizontally—and they merge into a stinging maelstrom of liquid slingstones. Trees bend and twist under this relentless assault of maddened air and ocean; many are skeletal, most of their leaves and some of their branches having been torn away long before. Outside the harbor, huge foaming breakers thunder across the coral reef and reach high up onto the sloping sandy beaches and steep promontories, casually flinging boulders of coral well beyond the normal high-water mark. The powers of the wild wind and open ocean combined inspire wonder and fear, but even here within the breakwater's normally sheltering embrace, the dervish-dancing sea is crazed and unpredictable. I venture close to the harbor's edge, and angry waves—smaller but surely as wild as those brethren lashing these islands' outer shores—claw at me. I am doused, saturated, dripping; the savage salt spray reaches everywhere, soaking everything. At the end of the pier, a dredging barge barely rides the maddened, swirling water. Unearthly groans and squeals rise even over the great deep moan of the wind; the barge's mooring lines curve slack and then thrum taut in an alternating yet rhythmless sequence. Will she tear loose? Will she capsize? Three helmeted, raincoated figures scurry over her dark rusty deck and superstructure, bending every effort so that such will not happen. They shout at each other, but the wind snatches away their syllables and renders them mute. This small island of Zamami, just off the coast of Okinawa, is normally a picture-postcard study of verdant hills set in clear blue coral-studded waters. But wild winds are up, and the aquamarine shallows, blue skies, and visions of subtropic island paradise are now the

stuff of fiction. The islanders are all indoors, most watching television and playing video games between power blackouts, some others imbibing the powerful local tippie called *awamori*. Traditional island houses are low and squat, with roof tiles firmly set in place by rounded fillets of rocklike plaster. A wind-driven tile can be a deadly missile. The word typhoon itself is taken from the Japanese: *taifu* literally means “great wind.” Their season begins in the summer, as equatorial depressions move northward, gathering power from the heat and moisture of the tropical sea. A stream of warm oceanic water called the Black Current—Kuroshio in Japanese—is their usual path; the relationship of these storms to a warm-water current is a parallel to that of hurricanes and the north-flowing Gulf Stream that washes the eastern coast of North America. Not all the depressions become full-fledged typhoons, and not all of these find their way to Japan. The movements of high-pressure weather systems push most them off to either the east, where they ravage the far-flung islands of the northern Pacific, or to the west, where they strike the Asian mainland. But every year, a number fall directly upon Japan, where they wreak a seasonal—though expected—havoc that unflinchingly takes a toll in life and property. Okinawa and Kyushu have the highest occurrence of these storms, but no place in the archipelago is immune; dying typhoons occasionally slash across the breadth of Japan's northernmost large island of Hokkaido, far from the warm waters of the south. But those are far thoughts: as I hunker down at water's edge, soaked and wind-flogged, my world begins and ends as each wave smacks into the camera's waterproof housing. I really shouldn't be out here. JJI

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