

War's End (3 Days After Hiroshima)

Maureen Hurley

What happened to pilot Major Charles Sweeney
after he dropped *Fat Man* on Nagasaki?
Did he think he could turn the B-29 Silverplate bomber,
Bockscar, around in the wild blue yonder, then fly back
on empty to Tinian, largest airbase in the world,
as if nothing had happened? After all, he'd practiced
13 trial runs, and 3 dress rehearsals. Shame to waste all that...
The Great Artiste wasn't ready, so he swapped planes.
Ground crew warned him the reserve fuel pump was bad.
The mission was moved up two days because of a typhoon.
Nearing the 11th hour, mad Sweeney circled three times
looking for a gap in the clouds, but he was low on fuel,
so his original target, Kokura, with its venerable castles
obscured by clouds, was spared to live another day.
A fuel pump sealed the fate of Japan's window to the world.
Nagasaki, home of M. Butterfly, became the hired *wife*, Plan B.
Tapping the fuel gauge, Sweeney ignored orders. Flying blind,
he could've aborted, but he bombed Nagasaki anyway,
when it appeared through a curtain of clouds like a mirage.
Looking over his shoulder, the pilot who leveled Nagasaki,

saw an iridescent lightning-infused cloud rising
faster than Hiroshima, more intense, more angry,
at once breathtaking and ominous.

Unable to reach Iwo Jima, he crash-landed
on Yontan Field, in Okinawa, two engines, dead.

The plane hovered on the edge of the cliff like a tired gull.

An officer shouted, *You fucked up, didn't you, Chuck?*

Another said, *We had the wrong guy flying the plane.*

Even *Enola Gay's* pilot Paul Tibbets went a little mad.

But Sweeney, who commanded the last atomic mission,
maintained to his dying day that he'd made the right decision.

*I took no pride or pleasure in the brutality of war,
whether suffered by my people or those of another nation.*

*Every life is precious. But I felt no remorse or guilt
that I had bombed the city where I stood.*

Did we also drop evacuation leaflets, like paper doves,
or was that another story of a story told after the fact?

After Tokyo, Hiroshima, then Nagasaki. Emperor Hirohito said:

We must now bear the unbearable and endure the unendurable.

A hundred thousand gone. According to the Manhattan Project,
it was a smashing success. But Shiva was unleashed,
and a hundred thousand more burned from within.

The voices of the *hibakusha* sang a silent aria of grief.

Oppenheimer invoked Vishnu:

I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.

No matter that the Japanese, already defeated,
had surrendered, *de facto*. But we taught them
a lesson, not once, not twice, but three times
for Pearl Harbor. And we taught them again.

Again and again.

Poet and artist **Maureen Hurley** lives near the coast in Northern California where she teaches children poetry through California Poets in the Schools.

Author's Note

Hurley's uncles served in the army and navy; one built Liberty Ships at Marinship in Sausalito. Her father served in the Coast Guard, and a cousin, a mathematician, worked on the Manhattan Project. Her neighbor, a ship's captain, was torpedoed in the Mekong Delta incident. She remembers ducking under her desk as atomic bombs were being detonated in Jackass Flats, NV. Her algebra teacher was Olympic runner and gold medalist Archie Williams, famed Tuskegee airman who trained fighter pilots.

These fragments of personal history inform her writing. Her poems have appeared in *Atomic Ghost: Poets Respond to the Nuclear Age* (Coffee House Press, 1995), and myriad periodicals. Hurley was co-editor of *Tracks in the Widest Orbit: Collected Poems of J. H. Montrose* (Russian River Writers' Guild, 1985). Montrose, a WWII pilot, shared his observations of the Bikini Island nuclear tests with Hurley, and he told her how he flew over Japan dropping leaflets warning them of the Hiroshima bombing. Maureen grew up piecing together fragments of war stories. Poet Jane Hirshfield, who taught poetry to cadets at West Point Military Academy, suggested she submit her poems to journals that address war and its consequences.