Two Poems

Ann Neelon

The Children's Beauty

In front of his soldiers, the CO is weeping.
He can't stop. He's like a machine bleeping:
I can't die. I can't die. I can't die. I have three
beautiful children back home who need me.
When the bomb exploded, he'd been conducting a debriefing.

Sir, are you OK? The lieutenant is freaking.
He can't stop the strangeness from leaching
out of the vast, dark field of his CO's worry
in front of his soldiers.

In New Jersey, the CO's children are streaming
out of the schoolyard, like lambs bleating.
The lieutenant refuses to give in to pity.
He has stumbled into the territory of mercy.
The lieutenant takes over. The CO is weeping
in front of his soldiers.

Bread of Apocalypse

Note: inspired by the zuihitsu form, this poem attempts "to follow the brush."

"Why did the dead boy's father bury his tricycle?" my 10-year-old son asks in front of the rusty tricycle in the glass case at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum.

The question is like a riddle: *Why did the chicken cross the street? To get to the other side.* The father needed to get to the other side of his grief.

"Yeah," my 12-year old son cuts in. "Why did he bury it? He didn't have to bury it."

Once, happiness was a house in which lived two small boys. One's favorite color was red. The other's favorite color was yellow.

Red shirt, *yellow* shirt; *red* socks, *yellow* socks; *red* ball, *yellow* ball.

"I used to love to ride my tricycle. Another boy would have loved to ride one too. The father shouldn't have buried the tricycle. Why did he bury it?" the 10-year-old asks again.

Let's just say this son's obstinacy is legendary. Last week in the Shibuya subway station, we got nervous about the long line of *salarymen* in dark suits and ties forming behind him at the ticket machine.

Rational in his stubbornness, stubborn in his rationality, he refused to give up. His *aha!* ticket- machine moment would come if we would just leave him alone for two seconds.

I say maybe the father never found his son's body, so he decided to bury his son's tricycle instead. Many people who died at ground zero were simply carbonized in the fireball.

Oh Mom, the 12-year-old says. You don't think Buddhists bury their dead like Catholics, do you?

The Japanese painter Seiho supposedly clucked in front of the painting of a chicken one of his students had drawn because it captured the essence of chickenness so entirely.

Maybe the father buried his dead son's tricycle because burying it captured the essence of humanness so entirely.

"Mom, look! A cardinal," Red Boy would say. "At first, I thought it was a red-gloved hand sticking up out of the bushes, but then I said no, that can't be."

If Yellow Boy was in my lap, Red Boy would climb up into it too, and whisper into my ear: *now you have* two *nice boys*.

Hour by hour, our hearts are stirred up by the most ordinary things—for example, reading *Crow Boy* by Taro Yashima.

We loved Chibi, the Japanese boy who was so poor he ate the same lunch every day: a rice ball wrapped in a radish leaf.

"If there were no boys still alive in Hiroshima," the 10-year-old insists, "the father could have given the tricycle to a boy in Tokyo. There must have been lots of boys still alive in Tokyo. Wouldn't he have been happy to see a boy in Tokyo riding it?"

He has already mastered Japanese vending machines—from which he especially likes to buy beer for his father and chocolate Pokky sticks for himself—as well as Japanese recycling and its fastidious sorting guidelines.

"No, you can't put your camera batteries in that bin," he tells us. "That bin is only for lead acid. Yours are nickel cadmium."

"He should have had *another* son. Having another son would have made him happy. He could have given the tricycle to *him* and let *him* ride it," the 10-year-old says.

What if his wife was dead? the 12-year-old responds. Maybe he couldn't *have* another son.

Maybe the father is the woodcutter in Kurasawa's *Rashomon* sitting by the City gate trying to stay dry in the constant downpour of his grief.

Maybe he is the dead samurai, who can only speak from beyond the grave.

Maybe he is the notorious outlaw who has tricked the samurai off the mountain trail. Why should he, the father, live, and his young son die?

"Burying the tricycle was stupid. Burying it made it get all rusty. If he hadn't buried it, it would have stayed nice and shiny," the 10-year-old says.

For a few minutes after leaving the museum, we wander like exiles in the vicinity of Hiroshima Station.

The streetcar tracks back to the Hiroshima Intelligence Hotel seem to have dissolved in the rain.

Whenever it rained, Chibi wore a raincoat made of dried zebra grass.

The *salaryman* is about the same age a boy who was three years old in 1945 would be had he grown up to be a man.

He breaks off from the other *salayimen* in their cluster of black umbrellas and starts walking toward us.

Vroom, vroom! The dead boy is pedaling the tricycle of his father's heart so fast he's flying down the sidewalk—a maniac headed straight for us.

The *salaryman* speaks no English, and we speak no Japanese. We give him the card for our hotel. He recognizes the street. He calls the hotel to find out exactly which block it is on. He calls his wife to tell her he'll be late. It's like we're watching a Japanese movie without subtitles, and he is the star.

His black hair is sprinkled with grey, his black raincoat rumpled, his face tired, with a sheen like the one on the piece of origami paper I had folded and unfolded so many times as I was trying to learn how to make a simple crane.

Sadako, the girl whose statue is in the Peace Park, died of leukemia from radiation exposure after making 1,000 cranes.

Finally, the *salaryman* puts his phone back in his pocket and herds us through a tunnel to a streetcar stop. When our streetcar arrives, he gets on it. He won't get off until the driver promises to alert us when our stop comes up.

Maybe the father's outrage grows smaller in the distance with each passing year, like Mount Fuji the other day from the *shinkansen* bullet train.

Maybe it grows bigger. Maybe the father still experiences each pang of hope as a blinding nuclear flash.

Our sons are soon sitting in their pajamas on the hotel bed, with *A-bomb Drawings by Survivors* across their laps. It's the book we bought in the museum store.

Pointing to a drawing of victims by fire cisterns, the 12-year-old asks, "What does *this* caption mean: *Did they know that the pitiful countenances reflected in the red water were their own?"*

When Chibi got to the voices of crows in old trees, Red Boy and Yellow Boy always chimed in from deep in their throats: KAUUWWATT! KAUUWWATT!

Once, just as dusk was falling, I found my husband sitting backwards on a red tricycle abandoned on our lawn. It scared me that he looked so dejected. "It's not the end of the world," I said to him, meaning I still loved him no matter how many bills we owed.

I will fold the *salaryman*'s kindness into a butterfly, a fish, a star, a swan, a boat, a lotus flower.

The father is not a chicken. He is a featherless biped standing alone in the black rain.

Maybe before the father set out any further on his adventure of grief, he decided to unload his treasure quickly. X marks the spot where he buried the tricycle. Someday, when he was not under such duress, he would come back and dig up the precious jewels of his son's childhood.

"But why did the dead boy's father bury his tricycle?" my 10-year-old son asks again, but this time in a quivering voice, because he is crying now.

Ann Neelon is Professor Emerita in the English and Philosophy Department at Murray State University, where she received the Regents Teaching Award, directed the BA and MFA programs in creative writing, and edited *New Madrid* journal. A Returned Peace Corps Volunteer, she has continued to explore international themes in her work. For example, one of the poems here grows out of her exposure to Afghanistan through the deployment of her son post 9/11. The other dates to her assignment to teach Japanese poetry and poetics in a study abroad program for the Kentucky Institute for International Studies. Recent poems will appear or have appeared in *The Windhover*, Issue 29.2 (August 2025) and *These Traits Endure: Irish-American Research in the 21st Century*, edited by Sally Barr Ebest and Linda Dowling Ameida, Cambridge Scholars Press, 2026.