My Aftermath: John Hersey, My Father, and the Rewriting of *Hiroshima*

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I retired from teaching during the early onset of the pandemic; as a result, cleaning out my office often felt like a forced evacuation: coming in at night, masked up, quickly pushing handfuls of books into boxes to be silently carried away. But unexpectedly, this task came to seem like a reprise of an experience I had long forgotten. As it happened, some of the books I was now selecting to keep were ones I had myself extricated from my parents' library when, in the mid-1970s, my mother announced she had finally decided to sell our suburban Connecticut home. Just as I had been about to head off to graduate school, she asked me if I wanted to take away a few books from our living room—before, she said with an eyebrow raised, she dumped them in a bin at Goodwill. I remembered now that her gentle threat had many layers: for one thing, I was now being invited to take ownership of books that had long been off-limits. Always tightly packed in shelves set high over a built-in couch, they had intentionally been placed, or so I had always felt, above a small child's reach. Though I was by then in my mid-twenties, I felt that the room still carried the aura of adult territory: of being asked to report on school days, lectured to, or exhibited at cocktail parties and then escorted away, hands on my back.

But the main reason I hesitated was that almost all the books on those shelves had belonged to my father, who had left for New York City following my parents' recent and decidedly unamicable divorce. Back then I could still see the gaps where his fingers had felt their way in, probably in haste, grabbing only the volumes he could tuck under his arm. Nevertheless,

there I was too, now, standing on a ladder he had abandoned, sliding out a few titles that I vaguely recognized—one of which was a copy of John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946), adorned with a black and white photograph of a mushroom cloud on its faded beige cover. Many of the authors I ported away that day dealt with World War II and its many meanings: Bill Mauldin, Ernie Pyle, Herman Wouk and others. But after the point in time where, so improbably, I had indeed become a college teacher, *Hiroshima* would become the text appearing most often in my classroom.

The copy of *Hiroshima* that I toted away that day, however, has since acquired a strange historical status. On the one hand, that slim, portable paperback—the Bantam "Pathfinder" edition, then priced at all of fifty cents—is a reminder of one of the few stories in American publishing history that has the status of a legend. Following its publication in (and taking over the entire contents of) *The New Yorker, Hiroshima* famously became a mass-market blockbuster right out of the gate: read aloud for four hours straight on the radio; given away by the Book-of-the-Month club; translated across the globe. On the other hand, that 1946 version is not the one you now typically order from Amazon or find at your local bookstore. Rather, the text now in circulation is the one that Hersey published for the fortieth anniversary of Hiroshima's bombing, and which also includes a final, 61-page section entitled "The Aftermath." That's because Hersey had returned to Japan in the 1980s and contacted as many of his original sources and characters as he could. "The Aftermath" updated his readers on what had happened to each of his *dramatis personae* in the four decades since their unimaginably horrific experience.

This split in *Hiroshima*'s publication history also turns out to be more than a book collector's curiosity. *Hiroshima*, of course, regularly makes its way into the "Top 100" lists of the most

enduring works of American nonfiction. Once in a while, it appears very near the top of such lists. Yet it has always been a little odd that the various panels of judges involved so rarely clarify which version of Hersey's report they are honoring, given that there's a lot to indicate Hersey wrote his "Aftermath" edition to revise the original version, not just to reissue it. For example, he didn't simply write a new anniversary introduction; nor is "The Aftermath" attached as an epilogue, though it was misreported as such. Rather, his 1985 edition slots his additional material as a new fifth chapter—one that adds about sixty percent to the length of the entire original report.

I may be unduly sensitive to such things because of my family's unusual connections to Japan, to John Hersey, and to *Hiroshima*'s subject in particular. That's because, as it happens, Hersey's life and that of my father shared some startling points of convergence. Both Hersey's parents and my father's, first of all, had been part of the American crusade of Protestant missionaries that, working with agencies like the YMCA and the American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society in the early twentieth century, had set out to evangelize the world, as it was said with such hubris, in their "generation." My father's parents had taken their first born two-year old to Japan, just a few years before Hersey's missionary parents had gone to China, where John of course would be born. One of my uncles was born in Japan, and another almost died there from a childhood illness. In addition, my oldest brother put into ports of Japan while serving in the Navy during the Vietnam war, and I myself went—utterly accidentally—to Tokyo as a high school exchange student in 1968. On top of all that, there were many other parallels running right through my own childhood. Both John Hersey and my father, having repudiated their parents' faith while attending Ivy League colleges (Yale and Princeton, respectively), returned to the US after World War II to set up their careers in and around Manhattan; both built

avant-garde, modernist houses in Connecticut's posh Fairfield County, very near Long Island Sound; both began to raise respectably sized families of three children. Once settled there—and I will try to convince you this is more significant than you might think—the pastime that absorbed both men for much of their Connecticut years would be racing and cruising in sailboats. If you go online, chances are that you can find a 1948 *Life* magazine photo (by Peter Stackpole) of Hersey at the helm of a boat with his two boys, in a harbor I myself raced from many times.[1] When I recently showed the picture to my wife, she said she could have easily mistaken it for my father and his sons, not Hersey and his.

The last parts of that list may simply seem a set of coincidences reflecting the affluence of the aftermath era that Americans have come to call the Cold War. But here's something a bit more unsettling beneath all that. As I began to teach *Hiroshima* in the 1980s, my father's mother sent me a large manila envelope stuffed full of letters written by my father during World War II, revealing that, previously unbeknownst to me, he had been stationed as part of the Navy fleet waiting off Japan's shore during the very days that Harry Truman had decided to drop the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima (and another stronger one, of course, on Nagasaki). Drop Bombs on the country, you see, where my father had himself lived as a child, and on a people once so central to the lives of his parents, to whom he was writing those letters. I now realized that my father had been, or so it has often been claimed by Truman's defenders, part of the invasion forces whose lives might well have been spared by the dropping of the Bomb. After receiving those letters, I even began to imagine that there was a small but not insignificant chance that I myself might be alive in part due to Truman's unthinkable decision. But whether or not that was the case, my father, sadly, never shared with me a story of any kind about his childhood time in Japan. In fact, he had never told me a single thing about his Navy years, either, and certainly

nothing about the pivotal moment to which history had brought him.

Of course, what we make of war, and war of us, is always full of silences, unfathomable pain, experiences beyond explanation. Gulfs across generations, between veterans and the home front, and between fathers and sons can seem especially beyond navigation: my father was a veteran of the so-called Good War, and I myself—exempted from its notoriously bad sequels by age, social class, lottery number and much more—never served in the armed forces. But that's precisely why my father's convergences with John Hersey's life and career still pull at me—because before those letters arrived in my own suburban home, so much of my understanding of World War II and its aftermath had necessarily come to me through books. Books like *Hiroshima* that, as if reprising the hubris of American missions, aimed to define the imponderable moment my father had passed through. Moreover, as the Cold War went on, Hersey also attempted to revise our memory of that moment's meanings a second time. And yet, he did so in ways that we rarely seem to talk about.

I.

Though John Hersey has often been remembered as the reporter first on the scene of Hiroshima's destruction, recent scholarship has significantly diminished that claim. Trained as a "re-write" man who would be plagued by plagiarism charges and libel suits, Hersey notoriously relied on assimilating others' accounts into his own.[2] What really distinguished the original *Hiroshima* was the sensation of its *New Yorker* publication, and the form in which he and his editor William Shawn chose to cast the disaster. As is well known, instead of breaking in with external commentary or historical background, Shawn and Hersey decided to keep the reader's

eye confined to the immediate experience of six survivors—five Japanese civilians and one German Jesuit—in the hours and days immediately following the dropping of the Bomb. And for the most part, Hersey refrains from telling us anything they don't know. He refuses to tell us why the Bomb was dropped, or what the American rationale might have been: that is all left unspoken and offstage, confined via the modernist technique often dubbed the "chapter zero" effect. What we follow, instead, are the reactions of Hersey's six *hibakusha* ("bomb-afflicted persons") to the "silent, noiseless flash" of the Bomb and the devastation that has ensued: buildings leveled or on fire, the wounded wandering about in shock, many of them wondering if they've been doused by gasoline or blasted by bombs bundled together for greater destructive force. And rather than hearing scientific data about the effects of radiation, we watch flesh starting to slide off people's hands like discarded gloves, blank stares of doctors gazing at their patients' thermometers, and the "panic grass" (66) and "feverfew" (66) plants that rise inexplicably from the "reddish brown scar" (67) of the blast zone. The most that the original *Hiroshima* does to look ahead is to coldly record, in strategically placed parentheses, the yardage that each of Hersey' main characters had been from Ground Zero—measurements probably derived from scientists later arriving to survey the scene. Throughout, the commoners of Hersey's cast—ministers, doctors, a female office worker, and a widowed seamstress—remain, by and large, stoic and unknowing. In the 1946 edition, his Japanese protagonists even apologize to strangers if they appear to be making their suffering more important than others'.

Of course, not every reader has liked the original book's spare, strategically withholding style. To some, Hersey's technique actually minimized the awesome power of the Bomb and avoided the crucial political and humanitarian issues of the Allied decision to use it.[3] A key part of that decision, we've long known, was to demonstrate the Bomb's power for its emerging Cold

War rival, the Soviet Union. Others have seen Hersey's cast as too-perfect victims, drawn in stoicism that can seem ethnocentric and even Orientalist. (His report itself uses the word "Occidental" [36] to explain the shock of his Jesuit figure, Father Kleinsorge.) But despite these critical debates—and lately, again, concerns about how deeply Hersey relied on others' accounts, and on military-scientific public relations—the public perception of Hersey's book has remained pretty steady over the years. When "The Aftermath" chapter was added in 1985, reviewers pro and con typically greeted the new edition as simply a reissuing of the original. For example, historian Richard Rhodes, who complained that Hersey was still "dodging" the big issues, also described the new edition as simply finishing off the classic version from "the same point of view."[4]

II.

In fact, however, "The Aftermath" altered the classic edition in fundamental ways. The most obvious change was in how Hersey revisited his cast of six. Instead of weaving them together again, in his new chapter he broke their stories into linear, individually segmented profiles, retracing each life over the four decades that had passed. Much like a coda that changes the impression of the whole, his "Aftermath" chapter also contained several new italicized passages between paragraphs that, a bit like news headlines, bluntly recorded how nation after nation had since joined the nuclear club. We can also hear a more intrusive, sarcastic tone in how Hersey now portrayed one of his original six, Kiyoshi Tanimoto, the Methodist minister who had led off the 1946 edition. In the original *Hiroshima*, Tanimoto comes across heroically, rushing about in aid of complete strangers, ferrying them to safety across Hiroshima's Kyobashi River or

providing temporary shelter in an adjoining city park. In the Aftermath edition, however, Tanimoto—who has appointed himself to memorialize Hiroshima's holocaust—has become something of a pawn and an opportunist. In one of Hersey's most macabre episodes, Tanimoto visits the US, and is enticed onto the stage of the NBC show "This is Your Life" to relive his historic experience. In following, Hersey quotes Tanimoto delivering a prayer to the US Congress in person, thanking God for building "'the greatest civilization in human history'" and making Japan one of its "'fortunate recipients'" (140). After forty years, Hersey's "Aftermath" more than suggested that its author was fully aware that the original edition's impact had been all but silenced by US censorship and disinformation.[5] In a brutal understatement, Hersey closes his new edition by saying that Tanimoto's "memory, like the world's, was getting spotty" (152).

Meanwhile, this scathing portrait of Tanimoto also points to how Hersey had altered his view of Japanese society. In the 1940s, Hersey had exhibited what historian Robert Westbrook has described as the American propensity to view Japanese citizens as, in the collective, willingly giving over their fate to their Emperor.[6] In the 1980s, Hersey now flipped that idea on its head, and became one of many American commentators who viewed the rising materialism of Asian societies as a loss of their distinctive cultural identities. Hersey also had quite personal reasons, it seems, for this turnabout. As biographer Jeremy Treglown has recently reminded us, about four years before "The Aftermath" edition had been released, Hersey had returned to China's Tientsin (now Tianjin), the city of his birth, and—for another *New Yorker* four-part series—re-traced his childhood in China.[7] In part, of course, what Hersey was doing was looking back on the legacy of his own missionary parents; the result, however, was a newfound anxiety about Asia and its relation to the West.

In the part of this profile devoted to his parents, Hersey struck a note of loyalty. Even though

across his writings you can finding knowing asides about missionaries' sly ruses to reel in young converts, or about their consorting with wealthy donors, in this *New Yorker* series readers now found Hersey insisting that his parents had been "as much interested in the quality of life of the people they served [in China] as they were in converting them." And so, he emphasized the Social Gospel roots of his parents' cause, and their efforts to pass along good middle-class habits of "Mind, Body, and Spirit" valued by the YMCA—as well as attending to important matters like mass literacy, physical education, and scientific farming. He even imagined his mother, a middle school teacher for a time, leaning over the shoulder of the young Zhow EnLai, the pragmatic first Premier of the People's Republic, and the man soon to be memorialized by some Tiananmen Square protestors. Hersey's antennae were also on alert for anything that might make a mockery of his parents' dream. He therefore worried over the consumer passions that, in the 1980s, he now saw sprouting all around Tientsin. And it was especially interesting how he articulated that fear: the Chinese, he wrote, hopefully could resist the lure of a mindless mimicry of Western consumer societies. But some of the Japanese, he said, were starting to demonstrate a desire to be "as much like Americans as possible." Case in point, just ahead in the revised *Hiroshima*, the apologist Tanimoto.

Hersey thus proceeded to forever alter the image of Japan that his modern readers of *Hiroshima* would take away. Resetting the compass, for instance, "The Aftermath" also added a description of the new, more metropolitan Hiroshima: he called it "a city of strivers and sybarites" carousing under English-lettered neon, blissfully unaware "that nameless souls" of the past "might still, all these years later, be hovering there, unattended and dissatisfied" (109). A few of Hersey's original six survivors drive ultra-flashy cars, cultivate American clients at new golf clubs, and stop talking about the very event to which *Hiroshima* had linked them. In Hersey's

telling phrase, it is as if "a gaudy phoenix" had "arisen from the ruinous desert of 1945" (109).

The same mixture of the gaudy and the macabre informs Hersey's new description of the joint American and Japanese campaign, chaperoned by Tanimoto, to bring the so-called "Hiroshima Maidens"—young women still afflicted by the Bomb's aftereffects—to New York City hospitals for treatment and remedial surgery. (Some of these women, in fact, were temporarily housed in my Connecticut hometown.)[8] Hersey's bitter feelings about US-Japanese relations—and, indeed, about the makeover of History signified by the repairing of female bodies in Manhattan's media spotlight—culminates in the scene in which he describes Tanimoto's own daughter as she submits to a medical examination in the US. Horrific as it is, the scene requires quoting at length:

> As usual, [Koko] undressed in a cubicle and put on a white hospital gown. When she had finished going through a battery of tests, this time she was taken into a brightly lit room where there was a low stage, backed by a wall marked with a measurement grid. She was stood against the wall, with lights in her eyes so glaring she could not see beyond them; she could hear Japanese and American voices. One of the former told her to take off the gown. She obeyed, and stood there for what seemed an eternity, with tears streaming down her face.
>
> Koko was so frightened and hurt by this experience that she was unable to tell anyone about it for twenty-five years. (149)

In such a scene, Hersey in effect offered up a scaled-down recreation of the original Bombing and its attendant horrors, but now with an international parable of complicity. Once again, a common Japanese civilian is put in the crosshairs of American technological might; using the vocabulary of war itself, Hersey writes that Koko is subjected to a "battery" of tests, pinned to a measurement grid that is her own new Ground Zero. And then Koko faces a silent flash, as much

as her father had. But now, supposedly under the banner of international cooperation, what we see is actually something like a re-traumatization. As if she were being subjected to an invasive rape examination, Koko is rendered mute for decades. Sliding in a word that called up both American consumerism and Cold War political demonstrations, Hersey even calls the examination room a “stage”—we might say "This is *Her* Life," a tragedy turned to horrid farce.

III.

So, there you have it: Hersey’s “Aftermath”—but what about my father’s? What did he carry away from his Navy experience, especially that moment in 1945? What awe or suffering, what sense of American power and Japanese pain? What sense of himself and the world going forward from that moment?

Here’s the central paradox: despite his silence on his past, it always seemed to me that war had made the man. Even as a child, I could sense it in the way that he carried himself—for instance, in his tall, slim body in his Navy uniform, in the wedding photograph perched so proudly on our family piano. He had been what in World War II they called a “90 Day Wonder,” snapped up for an accelerated officer's “V-7” program not long after graduation. He would take his new bride with him to Annapolis, where he received additional training in navigation, ship operations and communications. Then he would ship out, eventually serving on destroyers in both the Mediterranean and Pacific theaters.

Even after the war, if you looked through our few family albums, that’s how you’d see him: standing tall, a light shadow on his chin, lifting his face up with a wry, confident, worldly smile, his already thin hair swept back, as if still scanning from the bridge of a ship. At times, he would

hang a cigarette from tightened lips, and accordingly speak from the side of his mouth, Bogart style. He always liked friends with names like “Smitty” or “Wally” or “Buzz,” the names I could hear in the World War II movies running—it seemed like every day—on our black and white TV. My father didn’t need to be reading George F. Kennan or to admire Henry Kissinger to give voice to Cold War “realism.” Though his smile could open when he was carrying a cocktail or telling an off-color joke to a pretty girl, most of the time he liked to remind his listeners, voluntary and not, of his resolute acceptance of a laborious and violent world. When a gentle, longhaired cousin of mine made the mistake of raising the war in Vietnam while visiting our dinner table, the young man came away with a dressing-down that included, naturally, statistics on the number of Americans dying in automobiles every year.

My father’s grim, risk-acceptance approach to living also made its way into his parenting skills, such as they were. For instance, on one of our family sailing trips, he headed *towards* a small squall on the horizon, just to test out his mastery of “battening down” and making it through. On another vacation, he came across an old Navy handbook dedicated to research on shark attacks, one of the many traumatic signatures of sea battles in World War II. After dinner, we would huddle on a couch and leaf through experiments that documented a shark’s typical behavior—for example, what it did after locating its prey (circling in a malevolent figure-eight pattern, as I recall). Unless, however, my father loved to say, “the shark hasn’t read the manual.” (That’s a joke about the Navy, too, by the way.)

What’s striking about this ingestion of the Navy man image is that my father, following his own father’s itinerant, preacher’s path, had grown up mostly in virtually land-locked parts of the America he returned to: after Japan, in rural East Texas, suburban New Jersey, and inland Southern California. But after the war, settling down by the water—to smell salt air, he later

said—became his new plan: right as I was born, he moved back East to Connecticut's shoreline, joined a four-partner architectural firm, and made navigation his defining passion. To be sure, for my father sailing was often less about racing or cruising and more about spending lavish attention on every craft he owned. The more varnishing there was to do, the happier he seemed, and the more carefully we stepped around the work spots. One of Hersey's novellas, *Under the Eye of the Storm* (1967), depicts a man who is the same way; his wife calls him "Dr. Meticulous."[9] Even the home that my father had designed sometimes struck me as not unlike a destroyer itself, long and linear, but now beached on a New England hillside. An endless tinkerer and project finder, he would decorate that house's walls with navigational charts, and put a full array of meteorological devices—anemometer, barometer, weather radio—surrounding them in yes, that living room of books. He made sure to spiff the classical brass of each device, as if they were always calling out for polishing. Before long, there would even be a ship's clock on that cabinet that—no, I'm not kidding—would ring its bells regularly throughout our house, around the seaman's ritual of four-hour watches.

Orderly: that was the kind of day my father liked, and that the Navy seemed to have given him. His lesson to me, alas, was to stay ever alert, as if you were constantly reaching for your binoculars and sextant, tools he secured in leather or wooden cases with his name branded on them. But his world remained cut off from the very history that had so remade him. And it didn't stop there. About ten years ago I also discovered that the job he had held before coming to Connecticut had actually been in Los Alamos, where he had gone to design housing in the wake of the Manhattan Project. But he never discussed that experience, either. It was as if the war instead operated more like a divider that dictated which filters he could use to let the past in, or not. Undeniably, part of that was a victor's privilege; Hersey's six survivors, let along thousands

of Japanese citizens, had far less choice.

Looking back now, I also see that my decision to start teaching *Hiroshima*, again in its "The Aftermath" edition, began at just about the lowest point of my relationship with my father. Initially, doing that fed into much of the developing anger I felt towards his silences and his dinnertime bully pulpits. As I became a father myself, I wanted to know more about *his* parents, especially their work in Japan. In contrast to Hersey's mood of reconciling with his parents' life mission, however, my father continued to sneer at what he saw as his parents' outmoded piety, sentimentalism, and parsimony. Indeed, following one of many disastrous family gatherings, he confessed to me that he had actually hated his own father. Setting himself off from his parents, he increasingly preferred to display the lifestyle that his profession and Manhattan afforded him. He joined a shiny new office in midtown, gained a membership in the Century Club, and—after remarrying—vacationed on Fire Island the Hamptons. I reduced my visits to him to annual holiday pilgrimages, mostly waiting those hours out in a state of numb evasion.

Unsurprisingly, then, when that sheaf of wartime letters arrived on my doorstep, all I could see in them was the man I was now turning away from. I focused on the parts where he had maundered on about his Naval skills, or made disparaging remarks about "dirty" "Moslems" [sic] in North Africa, or "little Japs" in their foxholes. The younger man seemed only to be auditioning for the postwar one I would find so suffocating. For instance, after Japan had surrendered, and his destroyer had sailed with the conquering fleet into Tokyo Harbor, he had even been so emotionally oblivious as to lecture his parents not to "let anyone say anything against MacArthur," and to tell his mother and father "I have some pretty definite ideas on how we should deal with Japan during the next fifty years or so." Even more brutally, he had announced on V-E Day that "I can't help but admire the fashion in which the Italians handled Mussolini when

they finally caught him." Worst of all—*there it was*—one of his letters actually allowed that dropping the Bomb was something he and his shipmates might well have embraced because it meant ending the war sooner.

Rising from the ashes of war also, again, meant forgetting the parts of his own childhood in Japan—or, at least, talking about them with me. I remembered bitterly that when I had gone to Japan myself on that exchange program in 1968, he had somehow neglected to mention that he had ever lived there. Now, at the start of the 1990s—not coincidentally, having just become a father myself—I felt that searching out his history might merely deplete my own. I put those letters away. No second edition for us. Or so I thought.

IV.

After my father died in 2001, however, my daughter, with the sweet wisdom of a twelve-year-old, conspired with my wife to place those letters in a new scrapbook. They were now adorned with shimmering fluorescent stickers and of course the requisite amount of glitter, with hopes of filling the emptiness that was coming over me again. It's always been hard to mourn someone who leaves you with so few landmarks of his life. Nevertheless, I've recently been trying to take that scrapbook's incongruous brightness as my cue. And to try, where I can, to allow my father's war to come to me.

A bit of this change had already been reflected in how I found myself unconsciously paying more attention to Hersey's "Aftermath" edition after my father's death. Hersey's own memory now suddenly seemed pretty spotty, too. Looking at his account of his parents' missionary work, for example, I began to feel that Hersey never seems to have considered that they had

contributed to the forward-looking modernization of Asia that he now disdained. "The Aftermath's" charge of Western mimicry on the part of Japan now seemed contradictory, even hypocritical. After all, it is a charge the conquerors have long laid at the feet of the conquered, as if—having been brutally forced to emulate their colonizers—they are faulted for doing so and yet never doing it well enough. There was also something a bit incongruous for a resident of Fairfield County to criticize the Japanese for their consumerism, and wish that they would just—well, stay Japanese.

Not coincidentally, I also started asking my students to attend less to Hersey's own Olympian voice and more to the everyday stories of his six survivors that leaked through "The Aftermath." I wanted my classes to track not only how those figures survived the horror of those first days but how they experienced, in the four decades following, a broad and quite human panorama of emotions about it. Yes, some of them do exhibit what seems like the willful forgetfulness of consumer euphoria or a restored profession, much like what I had seen in my father and others in his generation. But those survivors also experience sorrow, pride in their self-reliance, a nagging need to atone for mistakes they've made in parenting or simply in taking care of themselves. Importantly, as if rebelling from Hersey's project, four of his six figures actually resist being cast as showcases for the Bomb's impact and the tying of their life's meaning simply to that one moment in time. One victim, Toshiko Sasaki, notably believes "too much attention has been paid the power of the A-bomb, and not enough to the evil of war;" others feel trapped into constantly being asked to call it up. One doctor in *Hiroshima* is said to be living "enclosed in the present tense." When I was younger, I would have told my students that such a man was in denial. Now, I started to see that he was trying to take back the things that the war had threatened to take away. Maybe even holding onto them *too* tightly, if that

makes any sense. In that way, it wasn’t really a present tense at all.

Likewise, when I began to reopen my father’s wartime letters again, I tried not just to read the original *Hiroshima* into them. Instead, I tried to hear some of the anxieties and fears, and—here was one big surprise—even some of the futility and disgust my father had felt about the war effort before Japan's surrender. After all, he had been only twenty-six in 1945, deeply enamored with his new bride, and yet saddled with the knowledge that their first child, my oldest brother, had been born while he was away at war. (When he would come home after it was over, family legend has it that the toddler called my father “Bill” because that’s how everyone in the family had been referring to him, while he was gone. The name stuck: we would never call my father “Dad,” the name he had used for *his* father). His letters also show that, while at sea, my father had clearly been afraid that his dream of being an architect was in jeopardy. Warding off the threat, he and my mother played a game together in their correspondence, designing the dream house they would finish building, yes that destroyer on a hillside, just two weeks after I was born. And for all the stories his siblings and others would later tell about his perpetual aloofness, in 1945 and 1946 he was still a son who dutifully wrote to his mother and father about every other week, and like most men and women at war in those days, hungered for the news anyone could send him. And it turns out being a 90-Day Wonder of a Navy officer didn't always give him the status he would later claim, either. For example, he also spoke of a phase of feeling emasculated on the ship itself, where fresh-faced officers in his division were called, as one letter tells his parents, "The Radio Girls" or even "the Radar Queens" by the more seasoned gunners’ mates and their boilermakers, below.

And maybe my father wouldn’t have any stories of battle scenes to tell me because there were so few to tell. Though he spoke in one letter about having served in “two wars,” not one, he

added, “I really haven't been in the thick of either.” As best I can tell, his overall experience seems less like what I had been see in those war movies of the 1950s, and more like what writers such as Lee Sandlin, Elizabeth Samet, and so many others have described: a fearful waiting out of the war’s final campaigns as their brutality only worsened and their strategic pointlessness became all the more apparent.[10] Though one letter speaks of having fished enemy combatants out of the water after an engagement—I don’t know if there were any sharks around—otherwise the letters give off the aura of a mind already setting itself at a distance, noting more the tedium and the irrationality of military routine than relishing the prospect of a fight. Even his solitary description of battle is cast ironically, as if breathing in relief and, again, gratitude for having mostly missed out on its violence. It happened when his ship had been assigned the bombardment of a railway bridge along the Italian Riviera. "We had to go in pretty close to the beach to get within range and the German 88mm coastal batteries landed some salvos pretty close aboard,” he wrote his parents. “I thought that afternoon would never end. [But it] all seems so stupid and worthless because everybody knew that particular front never would amount to anything. And how ironic it would be to take a hit on our last day before going back to the states. But we didn't. A mighty cheer went up when the piper cub which was spotting for us said we had demolished the bridge and the mission had been completed.”

Reassigned to the Pacific, these feelings of futility only grew. As far as defeating Japan went, he eventually confesses to his parents that his own ship had actually been anchored for much of the time hundreds of miles away, off a lonely atoll closer to Micronesia. Using the all caps typescript that would haunt his handwriting for life, he now found kinship with his youngest brother, then serving as a pilot, but it was only a bond of shared futility. “THIS WHOLE WAR HAS GIVEN [MY BROTHER] A PRETTY BUM DEAL . . . BUT I'M SURE [HE] DOESN'T LOOK ON [HIS

EXPERIENCE] AS SOFT OR DESIRABLE. AND I DON'T EITHER. IN SPITE OF [MY WIFE AND SON], I ALWAYS THOUGHT THAT IT WAS PRETTY POINTLESS BEING IN THE NAVY UNLESS I WAS WHERE I THOUGHT I COULD DO SOME GOOD." But now, he admitted to feeling "useless." The main motif running through these is the desire to be home with his bride and his child, to start his life up again.

V.

Aftermath is a well-chosen word on Hersey's part, of course. With its latter half teasing us with the rationality of mathematics, the word plays with our desire for the past to lead to the present, and for consequences to connect back to causes. Nevertheless, like the eerie *Hiroshima* phrases "feverfew" or "panic grass," the word inevitably connotes events that linger unresolved, even situations where the now and the then can seem indistinguishable. Maybe the way my father had continued to emblazon his Navy-trained persona, as if fashioning a harder exterior from the charge of "softness" that had actually haunted him in the war, had all been simply an affectation—he wouldn't have been the first veteran to try that. Or perhaps I was projecting my own insecurities onto him; I wouldn't have been the first son to do that. But I also saw that his spit-and-polish "realism" was a blustering aftermath that rubbed away any memories that actually threatened it. Indeed, that reshaping—perhaps a residue of that mental "compression" that historian Gerald F. Linderman has described among World War II veterans[11]—may have affected how his memory worked as a whole. My father could break out in tears at a song, or at the incantatory naming of a Texas river he had known as a teenager—but the stories behind those flashes of emotion wouldn't ever come out. And yet, and yet: when his first stroke took

him to a hospital, and a second one down for good, I also found myself touching the top of my head with the tips of my fingers, just as I had seen him do, near the end. At times, I think that one of the memory spots I was trying to touch, in both our beings, was the place that only gets brief mention in his letters: the fact that he was returning to Japan, where I would go—or is it had gone? —in 1968.

What the letters told me was that Japan first reappeared to him in 1945 as a distant coastline, shimmering within that set of binoculars he would forever keep in our house. The outlines of the landscape struck him then, as it would me from an airplane, as "fantastically beautiful," standing clear of what he strangely called the "frontier" violence of the war—perhaps meaning the dark nights of shore raids and bombing that obliterated so much. For whatever reason, continents seemed to be moving strangely beneath him. "It is so different from taking a trip on a train; on a train there are telephone poles and cornfields and grade crossings and dingy little yellow railroad stations constantly flying past your nose to let you know you're changing longitude and latitude." "On a ship," however, "you are at a certain place; you steam for several days or weeks and you're suddenly somewhere far removed. You aren't very conscious of the distance traveled; only of the time elapsed in the changing positions of the stars in relation to the dim nocturnal horizon." Whatever was taking hold of him, or what the stars told him, it brought both emptiness and pleasure. For all their beauty, the circles of coral now surrounding him struck him as like a "fishnet . . . simply a lot of holes tied together with a piece of string." Even so, he began to fill in the negative spaces with the names of places: "I found myself saying those names over and over under my breath and enjoying each one like a young boy with a lollipop . . . Do you remember that little seaside place we used to spend some time in the summer," he wrote his mother and father, "the place [his brother and sister, twins] first learned

to walk?" (Takayama, it seems.) "I guess you know what kind of memories ran through my head," he writes –of a "treehouse, the pink walls in the dining room, the Japanese cook who had bird dogs and a shotgun, playing around a couple of old Army railroad cars down by a rocky river bed, and a cannon which went off to announce new each day."

It's unclear whether this flood of nostalgia was just a way of not thinking about what the Allied bombing had just done, or about the "frontier" of violence that was beyond his imagining and anyone else's. After all, both editions of *Hiroshima* pushed that older Japan into a chapter zero, too. But this wasn't my father's Conqueror's voice lecturing his parents on the spoils of war. On the contrary: his imagination was transforming that machinery of violence: his belligerently named *destroyer* itself, now beached under moving stars; navigational charts of strategic targets transmuted into memory holders; the loud cannon, once carrying violence into the darkness, now accommodating itself to the order of peace, a routine of comfort. Clearly, the aftermath was already on his mind. Once ashore, he eventually took a walk in Tokyo's Hibiya Park, the same place one of my grandfather's parishioners, having become a grandfather himself, would later escort me. My father refreshed his spirits by seeing that Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel had escaped destruction, and even took time just to eavesdrop on the conversations of young Japanese men and women, or G.I.'s with dictionaries in their laps—and then talk to a Japanese sailor who was just, like he was, envisioning "happy days" again "now that the war was over."

Of course, there was still the official business of what we call "the Occupation," a military coinage that is its own euphemism.[12] But the single longest story in my father's letters—about a strange excursion he took while briefly stationed at a seized Japanese Naval Air Station at Tateyama—captures something else about that moment. The story is in fact more than a little uncharacteristic of him: my father rounded up a small party of enlisted men and ambled, without

a superior's permission, outside the airbase into the surrounding territory. As if pulled forward by something he couldn't understand, he entered a small surrounding town, whose residents slowly began to peek out from behind fences and doorways to cautiously approach his group; then, abruptly, a small counterforce of Japanese soldiers appeared. "Before I could do much worrying about how far we wandered from our own forces," my father wrote, the soldiers "all came to attention and saluted me smartly. I recovered just in time to return their salutes and assume a facial expression which I hoped would combine both dignity and friendliness." As if the formal salutes broke the tension, the rest of the townsfolk then came out of hiding, and lined the way, bowing to the Americans as they walked by, making my father feel "sort of sheepish." Finally, as if signaling the end of the dream, a US Army contingent arrived on the scene and sent my father's group scrambling back to their ship. The Army forces then took up the task, my father now writes in scare quotes, of beginning to "occupy" the town. But his ship was ready to sail home.

VI.

There are days, I'll admit, when I think that this last episode—my father's foray into rehearsing the Occupation of Japan, and yet feeling useless again—is a bit absurd, a little like something out of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), or even Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s *Slaughterhouse-5* (1969). Or maybe it's me who is Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, swept forward and back in History by my father's letters, unable to sift out his younger self from the imponderable violence of war. In its very title, *Slaughterhouse*-5 of course named that violence in ways my father never would, or never could. On the other hand, Vonnegut's novel was also the one novel—the only book—that my father

and I came to love in common.

During the war itself, it's also possible, actually, that my father had already been anticipating the postwar world by reading John Hersey's *A Bell for Adano* (1944)—a novel that, incidentally, was also in my parents' bookcase when I returned to it that day in the mid-1970s. Hersey's third novel—its own 80th publication anniversary behind us, with *Hiroshima*'s now upon us—features an Italian-American major returning to his parents' homeland, taking up the role of a beneficent, plebian occupier. Hersey's mythologizing of this secretly repatriated everyman—who is contrasted, incidentally, with a brash Ivy League-educated Navy Lieutenant fresh out of a V-7 program—shows us that the mythology of the "Good War" was being fashioned even before combat had concluded. But as easy as it has been to poke holes in Hersey's allegory of occupation, underneath it are more convoluted layers: not a small amount of distaste for military arrogance, for instance, counterbalanced by a reverence for common citizens and soldiers on all sides. And for all its limitations, *A Bell for Adano* expresses a desire much like what my father expressed in postwar Hibiya Park. Hersey's democratic hero simply wants to re-open his coastal Italian town's harbor so that its inhabitants can fish again, reunite with their loved ones, and go back to their everyday lives.

We all know that Hersey and my father came home to an aftermath world that was neither so simple nor so placid, and in which forgetfulness and silence took many forms. And to a dawning era in which, as Hersey's revised edition of *Hiroshima* tried to grapple with, a new spirit of striving and sybaritic consumerism often collaborated with sham spectacles of reconciliation and peace. And, as Hersey saw, more nuclear proliferation. But perhaps that is also a way to understand the ways that my father, as much as he clung to his Navy persona, also tried to salvage more private routines of order: those evenings when he bent over his architectural

drawings, scanned his navigational charts, or—down in the lower decks of our home—became lost in his woodcraft. And, too often, over time, lost to his family, too.

As a reminder of a past and a person that I can never fully recover, I've kept a boat ladder he refashioned into a portable bookshelf, and a few watercolors he framed by hand, encasing bright colors and whited absences into order and calm. In the middle of our living room, my wife and I have also placed a small captain's table he built in his retirement, and in which he embedded some architectural medals whose full meanings to him I also may never know. He inlaid these prizes in the table's mahogany darkness, as if they were markers of having come ashore again, having reclaimed his craft. But in a certain light, just barely afloat above the table's surface, they can do little more than take their place in history's fishnet, atolls in an otherwise silent sea.

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Notes

[1] The photo can currently be seen at https://images.google.com/hosted/life/946f04f099579941.html. Accessed November 16, 2024.

[2] For a full account of Hersey's habitual rewriting, and the indebtedness that bears on *Hiroshima*, see Susan E. Swanberg, "Under the Influence: The Impact of Johannes A. Siemes, SJ's Eyewitness Report on John Hersey's 'Hiroshima,'" *Literary Journalism Studies*, Vol. 13, Nos. 1 and 2, June and December 2021, 130-161.

[3] The two most frequently cited instances of contemporary criticism came from Dwight MacDonald, "Hersey's 'Hiroshima,'" *Politics*, October 1946, 8, and Mary McCarthy. Mary McCarthy, "The Hiroshima *New Yorker*," *Politics*, Oct. 1946, 367. All citations in text from Hersey's *Hiroshima* come from the (New York: Vintage, 1985) edition.

[4] Richard Rhodes, "Hersey still dodging the issue in epilogue to 'Hiroshima,'" *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 4, 1985.

[5] On the success of that campaign of censorship, see Susan Southard, *Nagasaki: Life After Nuclear War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 150-53.

[6] Robert B. Westbrook, "In the Mirror of the Enemy: Japanese Political Culture and the Peculiarities of American Patriotism in World War II," in *Bonds of Affection: Americans Define their Patriotism,* edited by John Bodnar (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 211-230.

[7] Hersey's "Homecoming" appeared in four installments in *The New Yorker* starting in May 2, 1982, and continuing each week. "Hiroshima: The Aftermath" also appeared in the July 7, 1985 issue. "Homecoming" sets the table for the first pages of Jeremy Treglown, *Mr. Straight Arrow: The Career of John Hersey, Author of 'Hiroshima'* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2019).

[8] As recounted in Rodney Barker, *The Hiroshima Maidens: A Story of Courage, Compassion, and Survival* (New York: Viking, 1985).

[9] John Hersey, *Under the Eye of the Storm* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 4.

[10] Lee Sandlin, "Losing the War," available at https://www.leesandlin.com/articles/LosingTheWar.htm, and Elizabeth D. Samet, *Looking for the Good War: American Amnesia and the Violent Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2021).

[11] Gerald F. Linderman, *The World Within War: America's Combat Experience in World War II* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 208. Linderman describes this process of receiving so little information about the outer world that caused the sense of "home," utterly contingent upon letters received from the home front, to diminish and wane, feel ever more distant, seem all the more at risk (306-315). I have also benefitted greatly from Howard Mansfield, *I Will Tell No War Stories: What Our Fathers Left Unsaid about World War II* (Essex, CT: Lyons Press, 2024). See esp. 129-130.

[12] Hersey has of course been connected to the ideology of the Occupation in Italy: see Susan L. Carruthers, "'Produce More Joppolos': John Hersey's *A Bell for Adano* and the Making of the 'Good Occupation,'" *Journal of American History* vol. 100 no. 4 (2014): 1086-1113.