

COMMENTARY BY EDWARD A. DOUGHERTY

Memories of the Future: The Poetry of Sadako Kurihara and Hiromu Morishita

As an invocation, I'd like to begin with a poem by Hiromu Morishita.

Hiroshima

Watch dutifully
with your eyes.

Here, something happened that shouldn't have.
Here now, something irreparable continues.
Here tomorrow, signs of everyone's destruction
may appear.

Don't watch with one eye.
Don't watch with your arm or with your head.

With the heart of one who endures despair.
(Morishita, Bradley, and Dougherty 14)

Writers of atrocity—and I will focus on the atrocity of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima—overcome the powerful urge of silence; they are, in the words of Minako Goto’ “reopening the grave” which they have “tried to cover for good.” She goes on to say, “To reach into what lies at the base of consciousness, to retrieve it and turn it into words, is painfully difficult to endure” (qtd. in Treat 29). Because their endeavor is so arduous, they appeal to their readers, as Morishita does in this poem. They request that we offer our “cooperation in a special relationship” as John Whittier Treat puts it in his excellent study *Writing Ground Zero* (32). This cooperation requires that we listen with “the heart of one who endures despair.” Mediated by the imagination, this special relationship has two hallmarks: compassion and what Treat calls an “ethical restraint, a sort of respectful restraint from naively ‘understanding’ what we read” (33).

Why this special relationship among author, reader, and subject? Perhaps the reasons are obvious to anyone interested in this topic enough to take up this essay, but allow me to sketch them out briefly because they are aspects that define the experience of writers of Hiroshima, and other atrocities.

To simplify the matter, several forces compound to make “the project of telling” (Treat 29) so difficult. First is the magnitude of the event. While contemporary nuclear weapons use “Hiroshima” as the unit of measure, what happened in that city on August 6, 1945 and afterwards was unprecedented. The instant the bomb exploded a few hundred feet above the city, a ball of fire expanded 60-100 yards across reaching temperatures of 54,000 degrees Fahrenheit, on the ground it is estimated that it was 10,000 degrees. For comparison, iron melts at around 2,800 degrees. These heat rays rolled out over the region ahead of blast-force winds that leveled all wooden buildings in a 1.2 mile radius. People in Miyoshi—a city more than 35 miles away—report seeing the flash, hearing the explosion, and feeling the concussion. Then the fires. They raged for days, smoldering long after.

Feel the exactitude of documentation? The scientific precision? The technological wonder? As our attention turns in these directions, we face away from the human dimension. It is imaginative literature that returns us to that level.

Unseen, of course, was the radiation, a whole new component to any weapon, one which kept emerging mysteriously in new manifestations: first as acute sickness and messy death in the months as summer turned to autumn and winter, then in the years that followed as leukemia and later still as solid cancers (Kosakai 31-33). Another contrast to conventional bombing is how the weapon arrived. Instead of huge aerial raids where planes passed over in waves, their thrumming in the air a warning, the atomic bombs in many ways came—literally—out of the blue.

A single bomber. A single bomb. The explosion's suddenness and simultaneity were dumbfounding. It seemed everywhere in the city at the same time, but each individual experienced it as a direct hit on his or her neighborhood.

And this marks the other aspect of this event's hugeness: the scale of human suffering. The number of dead the witnesses saw, the monstrous burns and bloating bodies of those still alive, their insistent and unanswerable appeals for help from all sides, the rapid-moving fires that so many writers could only compare to Buddhist hell paintings. Since the weapon had never been used before, it made no sense and it fit no pattern of warfare, let alone other ordinary human experience.

Writing about the scale of the event creates anxiety about the writer's ability to convey the experience because of the complexities of both the experience and its emotional impact. Hiroshima poet Koichi Tokuno said that he had "doubts over whether...the reality of that day....can ever be communicated by literature to third persons...No matter how much one writes, one is left with the feeling there is more to say" (qtd in Treat 27). In a similar vein, Sankichi Toge, one of the most famous Hiroshima A-bomb poets, wrote in 1951, "The bigger the event, the less we are able to recognize that, no matter how many people wail their laments, we will never come to terms with our truest feelings" (qtd in Treat 26). As we see in other attempts to write atrocity, language itself becomes suspect. Hiroko Takenishi asked, "What words can we now use, and to what ends? Even: what *are* words?" (qtd in Treat 27). The truth of the event is betrayed by the language, as Shiro Ozaki wrote, "One has so many things to say, but speaking always feels like a lie" (qtd in Treat 28).

And yet, in and through these problems of expression, writers did indeed put words to paper. Paradoxically, it was that magnitude that also urged them on. Sadako Kurihara, writing in 1985, explains it this way: "People who have witnessed such tragedy must tell of it. That is the responsibility, the duty that survivors owe to those who died" (Minear 18). For her, "the atomic landscape...does not allow me to rest" (Minear 17).

Because we still live in this atomic landscape, locating ourselves in relation to Hiroshima informs our current experience. Treat creates a helpful taxonomy of atomic bomb writers that is both chronological and conceptual. The first generation's work attempts to "convey the un conveyable" (21) of what happened and how it felt. These writers suffered through doubt to record their experience, transforming it into literature in all its forms. They also had to contend with the US Occupation and its censorship, which restricted mention of nuclear weapons. The second generation could build on their work to document the ravaging

experience and so could “treat the bombings as a social or individual inner problem often touching on broader political or social issues” (21). The contemporary generation turns more philosophical, to explore “culture reeling under the impact of twentieth century violence” (22). The two writers I am focusing on belong to the first generation by birth but deserve wider attention because they also entertain the concerns of all three.

In the same way that the Peace Museum in Hiroshima collected artifacts from sewing needles fused together to a piano daggered by glass shards, from a child’s lunchbox to the famous watch stopped at 8:15, Hiromu Morishita’s poem “Fossil of Fire” focuses on a single object to glean from it some semblance of meaning.

Fossil of Fire

This is alas
human karma
sticking and clinging to each other.
Reddish-brown roof tiles burnt and melted. Black soil.
The kneaded folds
nearly bury human bones.
Pure white pain
as if just discovered.
Lump of bone. Powdered bone.
Human collage
kneaded into melted soil
and pasted with ceramic fragments.

The white cavity
gaping in weathered time
forms a fossil and permanently retains
the human tragedy which entered the human skull
and was burnt into its memory.
(Morishita, Bradley, and Dougherty 20)

This image-based meditation embodies the immediacy and distance that mark this poet’s work. While Sankichi Toge, Tamiki Hara, and Sadako Kurihara all composed poems documenting the horrors they witnessed that day, Morishita was only a mile from the hypocenter and most of his classmates and teachers with

him were killed. He was 14. He says, “All these sorrows came to me all at once” (Morishita par. 1). The physical distance from the flash of those other poets—as well as their difference in age—provided them with emotional distance while his proximity forced him to live for survival first. Only later could he reflect on August 6th formally, as in this poem. Here, he is philosophical about “human karma” and “weathered time,” but he also creates a symbol, not out of the “natural object,” as Ezra Pound exhorted, but out of a strange “collage.” He meditates on how the material nearly obliterates the human, and yet the memory, the story and its testimony, endure as fossils endure. Returning to the human scale is essential because, as Kurihara observes, both the Holocaust and atomic bombings resulted from a dehumanizing logic; she says, “Mankind stopped being mankind and completely became a machine” (qtd in Treat 10).

Like Kurihara, Morishita’s sense of duty compels him, as a man and as an artist. He says, “thinking of this sudden change in fate at the moment of the bombing, as if we were thrown into a smelting furnace...I strongly felt that we who survived the atomic bombing should do something for those suffering so much, and should appeal to people everywhere to understand the disaster that befell Hiroshima so that it might not ever be repeated” (par. 2).

Also like Kurihara, he has been an outspoken advocate. He joined a world peace mission in the early 1960s, organized by Barbara Reynolds, was President of a national teacher organization to help educate about the atomic bomb, and is currently the chairman of the World Friendship Center, a community peace organization jointly run by American volunteers and a Japanese board of trustees. My spouse and I served there for two and a half years where I met and worked with Mr. Morishita. I was fortunate to also meet Kurihara before she died; she was a much more political activist than Morishita (or I). I recall fondly that I was introduced to her on the street near Peace Park, where she was wearing a sandwich board, gathering signatures on petitions against nuclear power. She was already into her 80s at the time.

Although she published a substantial body of work, it appeared in mostly regional and local venues. Nevertheless, she is famous for two poems. The contrast between the two works shows the evolution of atomic bomb literature generally, as Treat laid out in his three generations.

Until recently, Kurihara was best known in Japan for “Let Us Be Midwives!” published in *Black Eggs*, her 1946 collection. American censors deleted stanzas and whole poems from the book before publication, and because of an earlier run in with Occupation officials, she herself cut additional materials out. The whole of

the 1942 composition “What is War” was scribbled out, except for the title. It ends: “At home they are good fathers, good brothers, good sons, / but in the hell of battle, / they lose all humanity / and rampage like wild beasts” (53). She could speak of these two worlds because she was no stranger to political intrusion: her husband, who was conscripted in 1940 and sent to China, came home and spoke freely of the Japanese brutalities in Shanghai and was arrested the very next day. Historian Richard Minear, Kurihara’s translator, says that it was an “act of courage even to commit” some of her poems to paper during the war (28). Her poem “Let Us Be Midwives!” was allowed in *Black Eggs* and is the one she is most known for within Japan. It reflects her vision of a culture based on humanistic values, not power and economic oppression. Because of its remarkable optimism, it became a hopeful rallying cry for survivors, peace groups, and others.

Let Us Be Midwives!
—An untold story of the atomic bombing

Night in the basement of a concrete structure now in ruins.
Victims of the atomic bomb
jammed the room;
it was dark—not even a single candle.
The smell of fresh blood, the stench of death,
 the closeness of sweaty people, the moans.
From out of all that, lo and behold, a voice:
“The baby’s coming!”
In that hellish basement, at that very moment,
a young woman had gone into labor.
In the dark, without a single match, what to do?
People forgot their own pains, worried about her.
And then: “I’m a midwife. I’ll help with the birth.”
The speaker, seriously injured herself,
 had been moaning only moments before.
And so new life was born in the dark of that pit of hell.
And so the midwife died before dawn, still bathed in blood.
Let us be midwives!
Let us be midwives!
Even if we lay down our own lives to do so.

Even in work this soon after the cataclysm, she is bending her poem to achieve her vision. First, she took liberties with the facts: the midwife survived and lived until she was 65, but more importantly the poet's staunch will to live rises to what her translator called "the structure of thought." In her own introduction to the 1946 edition of *Black Eggs* Kurihara dismissed poetry of mere feeling, so prized in Japanese sensibilities, in favor of the "unity of ideas," for "behind the emotions of human life lie the ideas that are the essential pillar of human life" (Kurihara 45). And for her, this structural idea was primarily a "longing for a society not based on power" but "freedom and love and a peaceful society" (45). Resisting Japanese Imperial culture prepared her to unravel the subsequent nuclear culture and continue to envision one built on other values. She is also resisting the Japanese literary tradition of misty suggestion, broad implication from precise imagery, resulting in her poetics built of statement and repetition, suited to the slogan and tending toward the didactic. Nonetheless, her vision is deeply human. She wrote in 1972 that "Experience has to rise to the level of antinuclear ideas, and ideas must descend to the depths of experience where hatreds eddy; without mutual verification, both will harden, and it will be impossible to carry forward a living movement" (Minear 19). This "living movement" is of course political and involves petitions and marches, treaties and elections, but it also involves the revolution of the heart to soften hatreds both personal and socially constructed.

Her other famous poem, "When We Say 'Hiroshima,'" which she is known for most *outside of Japan*, deals with perceptions of World War II, initially an Asian war, its aggressions and atrocities. It confronts the hatred that people in Korea, China, the US, and many other nations harbor because of Imperial Army behavior during the war. To take on such themes also requires courage. It necessitates feeling from the other's position. One brave *hibakusha* told me as we stood near the Peace Park monument to Korean victims, many of whom were rounded up and shipped off to Japan as forced labor, "We must remember that for many Asians August 6th means a day of liberation."

Consider this: Urged by the hoarse pleas of the dying, the haunting memories of family members vomiting blood and an eerie black foam as they died, and all the other perplexing, haunting scenes, both Morishita and Kurihara wrote poems to express these images as a warning to all of us because "Here tomorrow, signs of everyone's destruction / may appear." Unlike Holocaust survivors, such testimony was not met with outright denial but justification. Arguments about just desserts. And this becomes another layer in what urges writers to silence: personal experience

tangles into political strategy and historical interpretation, national cause and call for reparation. Kurihara's poem takes these arguments on directly.

When We Say "Hiroshima"!

When we say "Hiroshima,"
do people answer, gently,
"Ah, Hiroshima"?
Say "Hiroshima," and hear "Pearl Harbor."
Say "Hiroshima," and hear "Rape of Nanking."
Say "Hiroshima," and hear of women and children in Manila
thrown into trenches, doused with gasoline,
and burned alive.
Say "Hiroshima,"
and hear echoes of blood and fire.

Say "Hiroshima,"
and we don't hear, gently,
"Ah, Hiroshima."
In chorus, Asia's dead and her voiceless masses
spit out the anger
of all those we made victims.
That we may say "Hiroshima,"
and hear in reply, gently,
"Ah, Hiroshima."
we must in fact lay down
the arms we were supposed to lay down.
We must get rid of all foreign bases.
Until that day Hiroshima
will be a city of cruelty and bitter bad faith.
And we will be pariahs
burning with remnant radioactivity.

That we may say "Hiroshima"
and hear in reply, gently,
"Ah, Hiroshima."
we first must

wash the blood
off our own hands.

To many readers, it may seem easy to confront Japan's war history this plainly and clearly, but it too has a cost. Periodically, some nationalist leader in Japan calls the Rape of Nanking a fabrication. In fact, the Mayor of Nagasaki—a "politician with impeccable conservative credentials," as Norma Field puts it in her astounding book *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor* (180) —was nearly assassinated in 1990 by right-wingers for saying that "the emperor does bear responsibility for the war" but was allowed to become the new Constitution's symbol instead (179). Kurihara herself received threatening phone calls for statements and poems along the same lines. Wherever religion and nationalism converge, there is a mania that can kill.

So why risk all this? Why face the perennial failure of language to adequately deal with reality? For these poets dealing with these subjects, why re-open the grave and entertain their ghosts? Why subject oneself to the censorship and self-censorship of political authorities to remind people of things they don't want to think about? Why open oneself to accusations of profiting from one's pain or writing what cannot be considered "real literature" anyway because of its themes? Why get tangled up in such complex and difficult issues?

Galway Kinnell, speaking in July 1983 at a gathering of writers in Hiroshima, admitted that by its fundamental nature poetry of nuclear age is complex: "the subject is very difficult, inherently very difficult. If a poem is to be useful, it has to give hope, but if it is to be realistic, it has to cause despair. Despair is built into the subject" (168).

Walter Benjamin's angel of history, the guiding image for Carolyn Forché's 1994 collection, faces the past which is "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage" at his feet as a storm from Paradise "propels him into the future." While the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki came at the end of World War II, they were also the birth wails of the Nuclear Age and our current Age of Terror. With every warning about weapons of mass destruction, I remember that Kurihara said: "Hiroshima is the futurescape" (35). In an age of despair over the environmental situations as well as the political wars on terror, our hope is threatened. Are we, the readers and writers of the 21st century, willing to address ourselves to these same questions and engage in "useful literature"? As poets of witness continue to remind us, these events are neither settled nor gone. Not the Holocaust, not the atomic bombing of populated cities, not atrocity, and not its censorship.

It is Imagination, that elusive intelligence, which helps those of us who didn't have to experience such extremity firsthand to remember the future. Imagination is necessary, therefore, not only to listen to their testimony but to understand our own role in history, our force in culture, and our duty both to the dead and to the living. And so by facing the past and reading poetry like Sadako Kurihara's and Hiromu Morishita's, we learn the power and limits of Imagination, that critical and compassionate faculty, and return to the scale of human beings.

Note

1. I have reversed Japanese names to conform to the Western standard of given name first followed by family name.

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