

The Human Dam

Setoguchi Chie, translated by Brian Burke-Gaffney

I was very depressed as I left the house and started down the hillside. It was the house where I had sought refuge with my children after evacuating the city during the war. I had come to fetch our winter clothes, only to be told by the owner of the house that they had been stolen in the confusion after the atomic bombing. I had had no choice but to turn away empty-handed.

“Maybe I should go back and ask him if that big parcel I saw in the corner is our clothing,” I thought to myself as I sauntered along the narrow path behind Fuchi Shinto Shrine. “I should have come and asked for our things right after the bombing. I guess it was my own fault. If I had taken time from work and come I wouldn’t have had to listen to that man say, ‘If you leave something unattended for more than ten days, it should be no surprise when it disappears.’” But the pangs of remorse made me remember how lucky we had been to survive. I shifted to a fatalistic point of view and made up my mind to forget about the whole affair as quickly as possible.

Noticing the ruins of the steel works below me in the valley, I examined the demolished steel forge inside the twisted frame of the building as if looking at atrophied entrails through the ribs of a dead animal. The factory had sent flames to the sky for three days after the bombing. But the embers were cold now, just as the screams of anguish that had echoed in the factory were no longer audible. Only the relentless summer sun was the same, beating down on the grass, trees and rocks stained a strange grey-brown hue.

The city of Nagasaki was a monotony of rubble as far as the eye could see. The surrounding mountains managed to maintain some dignity, although only beyond a certain distance. Buildings had been completely leveled except for a few stubborn concrete carcasses that stood tottering in the wasteland. The only movement in the whole panorama was a scattering of people trudging along the road and one or two rickety trucks whipping up clouds of dust.

Half way down the winding mountain path, I stopped and bent over with my hands on my wobbly knees. “Hot!” I muttered, breathing hard, when suddenly an intensely unpleasant sensation shot up my spine. I had been experiencing these symptoms for several days. I felt extremely lethargic, and I was having trouble urinating. There were no trees or thickets, and so I had to search until I found a rock big enough to hide myself. I crouched down and passed water. The urine was murky and amber-colored. I tried to squeeze it all out, straining my abdomen muscles, but I could still not achieve a feeling of relief. For a week and a half since the explosion I had been walking almost 20 kilometers a day through the ruins, oblivious to the danger of residual radiation. I was working all day and getting only three or four hours of sleep. It was obvious that if I kept up this pace I would soon collapse. I had become keenly aware of the limits to my strength. “It’s already August 18,” I murmured to myself.

The bodies of dead pupils from the school where I taught had been collected for the most part, but now an increasing number of students who had no visible injuries were dying. They followed the same steep downhill course, developing a fever, losing hair in big handfuls, and then emitting thick blackish blood from the gums. Finally, one after another, they sputtered hysterically in the throes of fever and died. There were others who suddenly and mysteriously panicked and then locked themselves up in toilets or closets. The school dormitory had had to be closed temporarily, and I

was beginning to receive word that the young girls who had gone home to recuperate were also falling ill in alarming numbers.

Injured people were dying by the hundreds in the relief stations scattered throughout Nagasaki. The corpses were being collected in garbage trucks and cremated en masse in schoolyards and other open areas. The bodies were dragged off the mats in the relief stations and, already stiff with rigor mortis, thrown with an echoing thud into the bowels of the garbage trucks. The next patient was then carried into the station and laid down for treatment on the mat occupied only minutes before by a corpse. Trapped in these ghoulish circumstances, the injured and uninjured alike became callous if they did not die or go insane first.

I had still not focused clearly on the fact that Japan had lost the war. Even on August 15th when the voice of the Emperor—which sounded all the more sad for its slightly effeminate tone—came across the air waves announcing Japan's surrender, the tears I shed did not exactly connect with the problem of what would happen once the war was over. Dragging my feet heavily down the hillside path, I thought gloomily about wandering through the corpse-strewn streets of Nagasaki and worried about how we were going to spend the winter without our clothes, but even then I was in a kind of mental fog and lacked a keen sense of reality.

I continued my zigzag trek through the ruins, trudging slowly beside the dry river bed behind the former Takenokubo Steel Works and negotiating the piles of rubble on the stone foundations where houses had once stood. Both the river and the roadside were still scattered with corpses. Dead for 10 days, they were infested with maggots now and dripping a foul liquid. Huge swarms of flies buzzed about. Wielding a towel like a mace I swatted them off my back, head and face as I passed. Among the corpses I noticed the carcass of a horse, the exposed abdomen and rib cage of which were occupied by a colony of plump maggots squirming about with astounding vitality. The colony was so large that it bulged beyond the original dimensions of the horse's underparts. Why such eagerness? A sickening feeling crept up from my stomach to my throat and made me spit, but it was more than nausea. It was as though the agony of being alive had condensed to liquid form and was slowly seeping into my chest. The maggots ravaging the horse somehow transformed into a mass of bitterness that threatened to overcome me.

I quickened my gait, as though fleeing from a hidden pursuer, but came to a halt after arriving near the former Chinzei Middle School. At the side of the road I noticed a young boy standing beside a dead tree about two meters in height. The vision made me stop in my tracks. His legs were spread open in a running posture and his hands were thrust forward as though about to grasp something. It was the corpse of a boy frozen like a statue. Looking more closely I saw that there was a dead kitten clamped to the tree with its face turned toward the boy. It was scorched and covered only in the frizzled remains of fur. The kitten had obviously jumped up onto the tree to avoid the boy's advances at the moment of the atomic bomb explosion and, without disintegrating or falling down, continued to glare with eyes frozen forever in the direction of the boy.

The boy, cat and tree were like illustrations in an action cartoon made blurry by the sweltering sun and the all-pervading destruction. The pine needles and slender branches were burned off, but the characteristic pine bark remained like charred fish scales. The boy's shorts were burned to his buttocks. He had no external injuries, although his hair was frizzled and his body was hideously bloated. His skin glistened as though smeared with oil and was stretched so tightly that it seemed

ready to burst at any moment. His feet looked like they were nailed down. The mystery that he had remained standing despite the ferocious atomic bomb blast only enhanced the unearthliness of the vision. It was a miracle: a boy and a cat standing delicately in the wake of a cataclysm that had been fierce enough to crush rocks and twist iron pillars like strands of taffy. Perhaps a sort of wave had formed in the blast wind and formed a perfect vacuum around the boy. In any case the result was an apparition so bloodcurdling that it bordered on the enchanting. The summer wind was blowing. I stood there in brief, bizarre juxtaposition to the boy and the cat, the shimmering waves of heat tainted with the stench of death.

Although the majority of injured people had been interned in makeshift hospitals, many unclaimed bodies had been left to decompose in the rubble, some still wrapped in bed quilts. The whole hypocenter area was strewn with the dead. I wondered how on earth they were going to dispose of all the bodies. Would they just be left there until the sun, wind and rain reduced them to invisibility? The war was lost and finished with. It was a relief to throw off the air-raid hoods and to walk outside without fear, but what were we going to do? There were no prospects whatever for the future. The horizon was bleak. It was all I could do—and all I could think of to do—just to swing the towel and ward off the flies. The sky was blue and beautiful now, liberated from the scourge of air-raid sirens, but below it was a picture of hell that seemed to stretch endlessly. The misery of the people of Nagasaki was sewn forever into the seam of these two contrasting strata.

As I gazed at the boy and the cat I was overcome once more by the urge to urinate, and so I squatted down and passed water at the roadside. I was like a dog. The sharp pain in my urinary tract made me feel as though the only thing I was capable of doing properly was respiration.

“As long as you stand you will be a monument to the horror of war,” I said to the boy before turning away. “No, even when you decompose and not a trace remains of your body you will be a monument to war. If, like the immortality of your spirit, the human race can always remember the atrocity of what happened here, you will be an eternal monument.”

I passed by the entrance to Shiroyama Elementary School, where water was shooting up in fountains from the ruptured water pipes. A fine spray wafted in the air and held a beautiful glimmering rainbow, but it drifted down only to wet the corpses rotting on the ground and to seep into the barren soil.

After a while I arrived in the Ohashi area. I had crossed Ohashi Bridge every morning for the past three days. The parapets had been stripped off by the blast and the bridge was now little more than a rough slab of concrete. The river was filled with corpses, just as it had been yesterday. Piled up one upon another down the banks and into the water, the bodies protruding from the river were dark brown in hue and glistened in the sunlight while those submerged were puffed up and ghastly white. Some were still dressed in the fragments of red, black and blue clothing and presented a startling assortment of colors. Hundreds and hundreds of them sprawled over each other in a chaotic mass that formed a great dam of death in the river. It was a dam made from the bodies of fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters.

“A human dam! A human dam!” I was nearing the limits of my endurance. I had resigned myself to the pain and to the exasperation of having to submit passively to this unspeakable carnage and destruction. Who on earth masterminded the atrocity of blocking a river with human corpses? People were saying with sighs of relief that the war was over and that the world was at peace, but

could any among them sit back and say calmly that this human dam was the price we had to pay for it—that war, bloodshed and human dams are inevitable?

I stood on the great slab of naked concrete that had once been a bridge and stared down at the corpses in the rippling river water, absentmindedly swinging the towel around to keep the flies off my back, off my head....

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