

Expressing the horror of Hiroshima in 17 syllables

David McNeill

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By David McNeill

Shigemoto Yasuhiko is recalling the day he first saw the incinerated city of Hiroshima as a 15-year-old boy.

“I had escaped the blast and I came to check on my friends,” he says. “I walked across this bridge and even five days after the bomb, it was covered with charred bodies. I had to step over them, but there were so many I walked on someone. The river underneath was full of people too, floating like dead fish. There are no words to describe what I felt.”

He looks down at the rebuilt stone bridge over the Motoyasu River, just yards from the iconic Hiroshima Dome, where foreign tourists laugh and pose for photographs in the blistering summer heat.

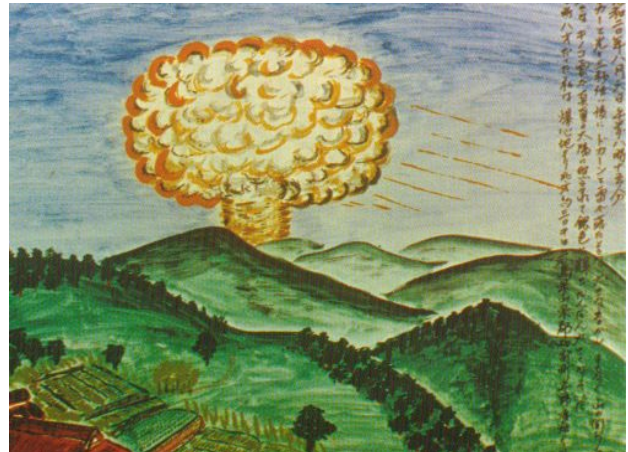
And with that, this modest retired schoolteacher, now an old man of 75, turns silent, lost in his

memories of the horrific aftermath of the nuclear blast on Aug.6th 1945; perhaps silently reciting one of his own poems:

Hiroshima Day –

I believe there must be bones

Under the paved street



Kumo no mine genshi gumo no gotoki kana

Cumulus cloud like the mushroom cloud

How are artists to record unspeakable tragedy? Primo Levi described the Holocaust in the detached prose of the dispassionate novelist; the Dadaists famously responded to the carnage of the First World War by retreating into surrealism; the horrors of the current conflict in Iraq may well be remembered in the future through the

Internet blog.

When Shigemoto began to write, aged 55, about the Hiroshima blast, in which half the children in his school died, he chose the shortest of literary styles: the 17-syllable haiku. He had spent years wondering why among the voluminous writings on the A-Bomb attack, there was little written in this most traditional of Japanese art forms.

At that time, few Japanese haiku poets wrote about Hiroshima, "perhaps because they thought it was too short," he says. "But I believe the shortness can be very profound. If you write well, the connotations of haiku, and the ability to stimulate the imagination, is very strong – not like a story at all."



Photograph by Jeremy Sutton Hibbert

The British poet James Kirkup, who has championed Shigemoto's work through two collections: *My Haiku of Hiroshima I & II*, says the brevity of the poems is "curiously touching". "Behind even the blackest images we can feel the

poet's deep sincerity, his conviction that his vision of Hiroshima is a unique one, to be shared with all the world in his own plain words."

Shigemoto reaches for his poetry book to explain what he means. "My aunt lost all six of her children in the explosion, and all her life she wandered around clasping a photo album of her family. It was filthy and battered from being in her hands for so long, and she cried when she looked at it. I wrote this poem for her."

Child in a photo
Old mother murmurs his name
Hiroshima Day.

Shigemoto's sparing, nonjudgmental observations in the classic haiku verse of 5, 7, 5 syllables and usually including a 'seasonal' word, are like snapshots of moments in time, and contrast starkly with the work of the most famous Hiroshima poet, Toge Sankichi, whose graphic epics leave the reader angry, wrung out. In Toge's famous August 6th he wrote:

Heaps of schoolgirls lying in refuse, Pot-bellied,
one-eyed with half their skin peeled off, bald.
The sun shone, and nothing moved



Suisoni shitai afururu entenka

Bodies fill the water tank under the scorching sun

Shigemoto says he respects Toge's 'direct' style, but wanted to do something different. "I'm not against direct messages, or political poems, but I'm not a politician. There are enough politicians. I'm a poet and the power of poetry is to make people think. I want people to silently contemplate, not shout at each other."

"People tell me that there is no message in my poems. I think that's good. I just describe what I see. I do this to heal myself, and somehow others get something from it. I don't want to preach to anyone. I only want to express that I'm still alive."

Like many who witnessed the bomb, Shigemoto survived thanks to blind luck and has spent the rest of his life wondering why; he was shielded from the blast while working in the hills around the city as his school friends, who were all killed, worked on a different detail in the city center.

The victims arrived hours later, "like ghosts" with arms stretched out in front begging for water. "They walked like that because the dangling skin would have stuck to their bodies." He says one of the ghosts called his name, but he didn't recognise his classmate because he was so badly burnt. "It is so strange and unexpected to be alive because I saw so many people die," he recalls. "It almost feels like a sin."

These experiences, which he calls "the most inhuman in the history of mankind," have been the motivation for most of his 160 poems, but in September 2001, Shigemoto was stirred by another mass-killing as he watched hijacked planes sail into the World Trade Center. The result was a set of haiku dedicated to the people of New York, including this one:

Chill wind

Blowing through the ruins of
New York skyscrapers

Unlike some victims of the A-bomb, he appears utterly without malice or anger toward the US, and his poems brim with as much joy in the simple pleasures of living, as they do in the memories of death. There are even unexpected shards of humor, such as his observation of people 'licking popsicles' and being 'bitten by mosquitoes' as they gaze up at the Dome.

Still, he professes wonder at the American

reaction to 9/11. “Americans were terrified by what happened, but not by Hiroshima. Which was the most terrible?”

At the end of a long interview, and a day with the Independent photographer posing in the heat next to the city’s sites: the Dome, the Peace Park Memorial, and the famous Hiroshima tree, blasted bare by the force of the blast, but now a thriving symbol of new life, Shigemoto looks exhausted beneath his eager-to-please smile.

“Like most people my age, I don’t want to remember,” he says. “It makes me sad and tired, but our lives are getting shorter and we have to speak out. Most people today do not know or have forgotten what happened.

When I walk around this city today I see young children playing beneath the cherry blossoms. They have no idea.

And he reads another poem.

The children hunting
a cicada – not seeing
the Atom Bomb Dome

Shigemoto Yasuhiko’s website (<http://www.fureai-ch.ne.jp/~haiku/>) can be found here. His books, *My Haiku of Hiroshima I & II*, are both published by Keisuisha.

This is a greatly expanded version of an article that appeared in The Independent on August 4, 2005. David McNeill is a Tokyo-based journalist and a coordinator of Japan Focus. Posted at Japan Focus August 4, 2005.