

Hope

Medoruma Shun

Translated by Steve Rabson and with an introduction by Davinder L. Bhowmik and Steve Rabson

Introduction

On June 26, 1999, the Asahi, a major Japanese newspaper, published a very short story by Okinawa's most critically acclaimed writer of recent years, Medoruma Shun. The brevity of this piece belies its impact on readers. Unsettling in both form and content, the story depicts the constraints of everyday life in Okinawa, a small island on which nearly 75 percent of Japan's United States military bases sit on less than one percent of Japanese soil. It is here where, owing to the terms of the United States-Japan Security Treaty, Okinawans have since the end of the Pacific War lived with violent crimes and deadly accidents endemic to the vast U.S. military presence. In this story, the infamous 1995 rape by three U.S. military servicemen of a 12-year old Okinawan schoolgirl serves as a backdrop. It is a fictional expression of the powerlessness many Okinawans feel, long oppressed by the governments of Japan and the United States, and of the extreme action one individual takes in response to this lack of power.¹



Medoruma Shun at Henoko

"Hope" drew much criticism in Okinawa when it first appeared, published not by the local press, but in a mainland newspaper. Since its translation, the reaction has been decidedly mixed in Japan and elsewhere. Okinawan author Nomura Koya called it "the first post-colonial work of Okinawan literature." American scholar Norma Field's response, "to kill a child is to kill the child's mother, too"² gives one pause, as does the story's grim concluding scene in which a group of middle schoolers repeatedly kick a burning lump of flesh. The youth violence that ends the story confirms Okinawa Governor Onaga's calling the United States-Japan Security Treaty a "myth" following news of the most recent military-related sex crime to take place in Okinawa: the arrest last month of a former U.S. Marine for the rape and murder of a twenty-year-old woman. Those who condemn "Hope" for violating Okinawa's centuries old principle of non-violence underestimate the effects a literally toxic military presence in Okinawa has had on its youngest, and most disaffected, citizens. "Hope" is reprinted here from the anthology *Islands of Protest: Japanese Literature from Okinawa* (University of Hawaii Press, 2016).

Hope³

It was the lead story on the six-o'clock news. The small child of an American soldier had been missing, and today the corpse was found in the woods not far from the Koza city limits. All eyes of the customers and employees in the diner were glued to the television screen. The marks of strangulation had been found on the

body, and now the prefectural police were using evidence from the abandoned corpse in their search for the murderer. After reciting these details, as usual in "crime stories," the report moved on to interviews of people on the street. "Now I'm afraid to let my kid walk around outside. Even Okinawa's becoming a dangerous place." When she saw the woman of about fifty who appeared on the screen, the waitress yelled out gleefully, "Hey, it's Fumi. Look! She's on TV!" A fat woman wiping the sweat off her face came rushing out of the kitchen, but the screen was already showing something else, and both women groaned in disappointment. Now the reporter was commenting on the killer's declaration that had been mailed to the office of a local newspaper. Next to him lay a copy of the evening edition with a photograph of the declaration on the front page. What Okinawa needs now is not demonstrations by thousands of people or rallies by tens of thousands, but the death of one American child. It had been written in menacing red characters with sharp angles and straight lines.

A taxi driver slurping a bowl of Okinawan noodles grumbled, "They better nab him quick, and give him the death penalty." "Yeah, 'cause this'll hurt business too," the waitress chimed in. "The tourists won't come here any more." After panning pictures of the woods and Koza City from a helicopter, the report continued with statements by the governor and high U.S. and Japanese officials. They expressed "outrage" and "revulsion" at a crime targeting an innocent child. Stifling a laugh, I shoved a spoonful of curried rice into my mouth. There was no way their pompous pronouncements could hide their exhaustion and bewilderment. That Okinawans—so docile, so meek—could use such tactics was something the bastards had never even imagined. Okinawans were, after all, a people who followed their leaders, and, at most, held "anti-war" or "anti-base" rallies with polite protest marches. Even the ultra-left and radical factions staged, at most, "guerrilla

warfare" that caused no real harm, and never carried out terrorism or kidnappings against people in power, or mounted armed attacks. Okinawans were like maggots who clustered around the shit of land rents and subsidy monies splattered by the bases. And Okinawa was called "an island healed by the love of peace." It made me want to puke.

I left the diner, crossed the pedestrian bridge at Goya Corners, and walked along Airport Avenue. Orders must have come down restricting all military personnel to their bases. No American soldiers in civilian clothes were out walking the streets. A camouflage-colored jeep drove past. A patrol car, its red alarm light gyrating, was parked in front of the gate at Kadena Air Base. High above a row of poinciana trees, a white crescent moon hovered like the fang of a poisonous habu snake. I stopped and stood for a moment. Only the worst methods get results, I muttered to myself. On the other side of the street, a television camera was swiveling. I turned onto a side street and was careful not to quicken my pace as I walked back to my apartment. From the refrigerator I took out a can of iced tea and drained it in one gulp. Then I sat down at my desk and wrote the address of the newspaper office on the envelope I had put there. Opening one of the drawers, I took out a small cellophane bag containing strands of straw-colored hair. The child's face in profile came again before my eyes.

The kid had been sleeping in the back seat of a car parked in the supermarket parking lot.

A white woman who looked only about twenty yelled several times, but the kid didn't wake up.

After she went into the market alone, pushing a shopping cart, I tossed my empty iced tea can into the trash bin and walked across the parking lot. I got into the car that had been left idling with the air conditioner on, and pulled out onto the prefectural highway. I drove north for about fifteen minutes, then turned off into

the woods on the north side of a municipal housing project. Only after the car began rattling along this bumpy road did the kid wake up. When I heard crying from the back seat, I stopped the car. Turning around, I saw that the kid had gotten up and was trying to open the door. He was a boy and looked about three. I quickly parked, turned around and tightly grasped his little crying and screaming body. As I finished strangling him from behind, something burst in the back of his throat and a gob of filth dribbled onto my arm. I wiped it off with the kid's shirt, and started the car again. I drove around to the rear of the woods, and parked in the shadows of an abandoned pig shed. After wiping the steering wheel and door handles with my handkerchief, I moved the kid to the trunk of the car. Then I twisted some strands of his straw-colored hair around my fingers, ripped the hairs out, and folded them up in my handkerchief. All over my body, covered with sweat, goose-flesh had broken out. On my way out of the woods, I buried the car keys and, after walking to the national highway, transferred taxis twice on the way back to my apartment.

and, even when I opened the windows, my sweat kept pouring. I took the envelope containing the hairs to Naha city and dropped it in a mailbox. On the way back I stopped at the seaside park in Ginowan. This had been the site of that farcical rally after the twelve-year-old girl was raped by the three American soldiers, when 80,000 people gathered here but could do absolutely nothing. Now it seemed so long ago. I had finally done what I'd thought about doing that day as I'd stood on the edge of the crowd. I felt no remorse now, or even any deep emotion. Just as fluids in the bodies of small organisms which are forced to live in constant fear suddenly turn into poison, I had done what was natural and necessary for this island. When I reached the center of what had been the rally site, I poured a bottle of gasoline syphoned from the car on my jacket and pants. The fumes stung my eyes. Then, taking a hundred-yen cigarette lighter from my pocket, I spun the flint-wheel. Flames sprang up in the darkness, and, toward the walking, tumbling fire a group of middle school students came on the run, then cheered as they took turns kicking the smoking black lump.

The air conditioning in my car had little effect

Steve Rabson is Professor Emeritus, Brown University and an Asia-Pacific Journal Contributing Editor. A former U.S. serviceman in Okinawa, he is the author of [The Okinawan Diaspora in Japan: Crossing the Borders Within](#), University of Hawaii Press.

Davinder L. Bhowmik is associate professor of Asian Languages and Literature at the University of Washington and a specialist in modern Japanese and Okinawan literature. She is the author of [Writing Okinawa: Narrative Acts of Identity and Resistance](#). With Steve Rabson she is the coeditor of [Islands of Protest: Japanese Literature from Okinawa](#).

Notes

¹ From Davinder Bhowmik and Steve Rabson, eds., *Islands of Protest: Japanese Literature from Okinawa* (University of Hawaii Press, 2016), "Introduction," p. 1.

² Personal communication. May 10, 2009.



³ *Islands of Protest*, pp. 21-24. Reprinted with the permission of University of Hawaii Press.