

## **A Poetics of Hiroshima**

**by William Heyen**

Imperial Air Force pilot Sachio Ashida, unable  
to fly over the burning city to report  
to his superiors what had happened to it,  
landed his plane, borrowed a bicycle,  
and pedaled into it. He'd remember  
a woman in front of her smoldering home,  
a bucket on her arm. Inside the bucket  
was a baby's head. The woman's daughter  
had been killed when the bomb fell.

This is atrocity. You've just now descended  
from a stanza wherein a baby's head –  
were its eyes open or closed? – was carried  
in a bucket by her mother.

An Imperial Air Force pilot stopped his bike  
in front of what had been her home.  
I've wanted us to breathe ashes and smoke,  
but we cannot. This, too, is atrocity.

What's true for me is probably true for you:  
I'm tired of trying to remember this.  
Somewhere in Hiroshima the baby's head  
is dreaming, wordlessly. No, it is not – this, too,  
is atrocity. Ashida went on  
to live a long life. He felt the swing and weight  
of that bucket on his arm. No,  
he did not. He did. He sometimes dreamed himself  
pedaling backwards away  
from that mother. I don't know whether  
he did or not. Meanwhile,  
we rave about the necessity of a jewel-center in every poem.  
I've used a baby's head  
in a bucket on her mother's arm. Whether  
this is art, or in the hands of a master could be, or whether  
art is atrocity, or not, I'm sick of being,

or trying to be, part of it, me  
with my weak auxiliary verbs which vitiate  
the jewel-center, me  
with my passives, my compromised stanzaic integrity,  
my use of the ambiguous “this”  
which is atrocity. No, it is not. It is.

For years my old high school coach visited my home  
with dahlias in a bucket,  
big red-purple and blue-purple heads  
my wife and I floated in bowls on our tables.  
Have I no shame? This, too, this story  
that evokes another, this narrative rhyme, this sweet  
concatenation of metaphor,  
is atrocity. Coach fought on Iwo Jima  
for ten days before and ten days after  
the flag-raising on Mount Suribachi.  
He returned there fifty years later, brought me  
a baby-food jar half-filled  
with black sand from one volcanic blood-  
soaked beach. He did. But at Marine reunions,  
he couldn't locate any of his buddies  
from his first outfit. No, he could not.  
He once laid out on my desk aerial photos of runways  
the Japanese used to “wreak havoc” – his words –  
and said that hundreds of thousands of GIs would have died  
if HST had not given the order.  
As a participant in necessary atrocity, I agreed.  
I still agree. But it doesn't matter if I agree –  
what matters is whether poetry itself agrees. Incidentally,  
Ashida was in training to become  
a divine wind, a kamikaze.

1945. I was almost five. Col. Tibbets named  
our *Enola Gay* for his mother.  
The 6<sup>th</sup> of August. Our bomb, “Little Boy,” mushroomed  
with the force of 15 kilotons of TNT.

“A harnessing of the basic power of the universe,” said HST,  
as though the universe were our plowhorse.  
In the woman’s home, her daughter was beheaded.  
I don’t know if Ashida learned exactly how,  
though we and the art of atrocity would like to know.  
In any case, what could this mother do?  
She lifted her daughter’s head. She laid it  
in the aforementioned jewel-center.  
She was not thinking of the basic power of the universe.  
Did she place oleander blossoms on her baby’s face?  
Did she enfold her daughter’s head in silk, which rhymes with *bucket*,  
and *sick*, and *volcanic*, and *wreak havoc*?...

(Buckets appear often, as a matter of fact,  
in the literature of exile, for example  
in Irina Ratushinskaya’s prison memoir *Gray is the Color  
of Hope* – coal buckets and slop buckets,  
ersatz food placed in what were toilet buckets.  
“Time to get up, woman. Empty your slop bucket.”  
Irina drags her bucket daily to the cesspit.  
She doesn’t know if she can ever become a mother.)

Ashida attained the highest black belt, went on  
to coach the American Olympic judo team.  
He did. I spoke with his daughter  
at an event where I received a poetry prize,  
a check for a thousand George Washingtons  
and an etched glass compote  
for a book on the Shoah. I said I once heard her father  
lecture on Zen – the moon in the river,  
River flowing by that is the world with its agonies  
while Moon remains in one place,  
steadfast despite atrocity.  
I remember that she seemed at ease,  
she who had known her father  
as I could never.

While teaching at the University of Hawai'i,  
I visited Pearl Harbor three times, launched out to the memorial  
above the *Arizona*. Below us, the tomb  
rusted away – a thousand sailors,  
average age nineteen – for nature, too, is atrocity,  
atoms transformed within it, even memory.  
We tourists, some Japanese, watched minnows  
nibble at our leis.

No, we did not. This was my dream:  
I knelt at a rail under a Japanese officer with a sword,  
but now there are too many stories for poetic safety,  
for stanzaic integrity – woman and daughter,  
Ashida at his lecture, my high school coach carrying heads  
of dahlias grown from bulbs  
he'd kept in burlap to overwinter in his cellar,  
even persona Heyen at Pearl Harbor  
above the rusting and decalcifying battleship that still breathed  
bubbles of oil that still  
iridesced the Pacific swells as jewel-centers iridesce  
our most anthologized villanelles...

A bombing survivor said, "It's like when you burn  
a fish on a grill."

I end my sixth line above with the word "home."  
My first draft called it the woman's "house," but *home*  
evokes satisfaction, *mmm*, a baby's  
contentment at the breast, the atrocity  
of irony, and *home* hears itself in *arm*, and *bomb*, and *blossom*,  
and looks forward to *shame* and *tomb*.

I cannot not tell a lie.

Apparently, I am not so disgusted with atrocity  
as I'd claimed to be – my atoms  
do not cohere against detonation, but now time has come – listen  
to the *mmm* in *time* and *come* – for closure,  
as, out of the azure,

into the syntax of Hiroshima, “Little Boy” plunges –  
I’ve centered this poem both to mushroom  
and crumble its edges –  
and “Fat Man,” 21 kilotons of TNT,  
will devastate Nagasaki. What is your history? Please don’t leave  
without telling me. Believe me,  
I’m grateful for your enabling complicity.  
I know by now you’ve heard my elegiac é.  
I hope your exiled mind has bucketed its breath.  
I seek to compose intellectual melody.  
I fuse my fear with the idea of the holy.  
This is St. John’s *cloud of unknowing* in me.  
This is the Tao of affliction in me.  
Don’t try telling me my poetry is not both  
beguiling and ugly.

“There was no escape except to the river,” a survivor said,  
but the river thronged with bodies.  
Black rain started falling, covering everything, the survivors said.

I have no faith except in the half-life of poetry.  
I seek radiation’s rhythmic sublime.  
I have no faith except in atrocity.  
I seek the nebulous ends of time.  
This is the aria these cities have made of me.  
I hope my centered lines retain their integrity.  
I have no faith except in beauty.