

Waiting for the End: An Annotated Translation of “Hiroshima’s Last Day”*

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This article presents an English translation of the essay “Hiroshima’s Last Day.” Published by the Seoul-based magazine *New World* in January 1950, the work was the first widely circulated long-form account of the atomic bombings by a Korean survivor. Then as now, it offers readers a rare window into the complex experiences of non-Japanese individuals who, having endured the attacks, later had to navigate the shifting social and cultural currents of a postcolonial East Asia. The account highlights themes of memory, trauma, and solidarity, shedding light on the entangled forces of liberation and marginalization that shaped the lives of Korean atomic bomb survivors. In contrast to prevailing narratives in the postwar Korean press that localized the bombings as a Japanese national experience, “Hiroshima’s Last Day” foregrounds the broader, often silenced perspectives of colonized Koreans subjected to atomic violence. By making this work available in English for the first time, the translation aims to enrich the historiography of atomic bomb narratives as it documents the distinct resonances of Hiroshima’s devastation within a postcolonial lens.

Keywords: Korean atomic bomb survivors, Hiroshima accounts, postcolonial trauma, Cold War memory, modern Korean history

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Introduction

In January 1950, readers of the Seoul-based magazine *New World* encountered “Hiroshima’s Last Day.”¹ The essay was the first eyewitness account of the atomic bombings by a Korean survivor to be published on the peninsula. Written under the pseudonym Student Y, this unattributed work spoke to the experiences of thousands of Koreans who witnessed the bombings firsthand. Translated into English here for the first time, the story is stark and unresolved. It is an attempted narrative of the indescribable and a glimpse into a world forever split by the bombings between a liberated present and a colonial past.

Tens of thousands of Koreans were in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. Draftees and workers, students and migrants—the exact size of this population will never be known. Authoritative estimates suggest that 70,000 Koreans were subject to the bombings. Of these, only about 30,000 survived the immediate effects of the attacks.² In the years that followed, this population was excluded from most accounts. Rather than grapple with the empire’s complex demographics, early narratives of Hiroshima and Nagasaki construed the atomic bombings as a specifically Japanese experience. This descriptive trend was enmeshed in the politics of the Japanese Empire and the formations that came into being upon its collapse.³ The post-1945 period witnessed American and Japanese projects of repatriation designed to remove populations of Koreans and other colonial subjects from the former metropole.⁴ At the same time, new narratives of an island nation erased the stories of these groups from the history of the polity.⁵ Ushered off the stage and off the page, the social and epistemic marginalization of Koreans in Japan contextualizes their concurrent erasure

1. Y-Saeng, “Gwangdo choehu ui nal” [Hiroshima’s last day], *Sincheonji* 5, no. 1 (January 1950): 172–181.

2. Accurate data on Korean casualties from the atomic bombings remain elusive, largely due to the systemic discrimination directed towards Koreans in Japan. For a recent empirical study on Korean survivors of the bomb, see Hyung-Joon Jhun et al., “Biological Profiles of Korean Atomic Bomb Survivors in Residence at Daegu and Kyungbuk, Republic of Korea,” *Journal of Korean Medical Science* 23 (2008): 1090–1093.

3. Kurt Tong, “Korea’s Forgotten Atomic Bomb Victims,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 23, no. 1 (1991): 31–37; David Palmer, “‘The Straits of Dead Souls’: One Man’s Investigation into the Disappearance of Mitsubishi Hiroshima’s Korean Forced Labourers,” *Japanese Studies* 26, no. 3 (2006): 335–351; Hiro Saito, “Reiterated Commemoration: Hiroshima as National Trauma,” *Sociological Theory* 24, no. 4 (2006): 353–376.

4. Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *Borderline Japan: Foreigners and Frontier Controls in the Postwar Era* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

5. Andre Schmid, “Colonialism and the ‘Korea Problem’ in the Historiography of Modern Japan: A Review Article,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 59, no. 4 (2000): 951–976.

from the story of the atomic attacks. Recent decades have witnessed important shifts away from this trend.⁶ Nevertheless, the nationalization of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki attacks remains one of the most persistent features of the global story of the atomic bombings to this day.

This framing of the attacks was never solely the outcome of Japanese or American historical narratives. Actors in postcolonial settings like North and South Korea also took part. In these locations, both bomb survivors and postcolonial elites tacitly encouraged the erasure of peninsular voices from accounts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.⁷ Koreans who lived through the attacks often concealed their personal experiences in order to avoid stigmatization. Caught up in the midst of postwar repatriation and nascent Cold War violence, many elected to keep their exposure a secret. This silence only deepened as knowledge and rumors about radiation's potential health effects spread.⁸ Accompanying this trend was a tendency among intellectuals in places like Seoul and Pyongyang to sideline the violence of the bombings altogether. Writing in the midst of Japanese decolonization, authors in both North and South Korea tended to focus on what seemed to be the liberatory potential of atomic energy.⁹ Bracketed by these discursive trends, Student Y's commentary is a singular departure from how most peninsular readers were primed to consider a new atomic age.

Few outlets were better suited for this intervention than the magazine *New World*. By the time it printed "Hiroshima's Last Day," the publication was among the most popular on the peninsula.¹⁰ It had cemented its reputation as a

6. Lisa Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory* (University of California Press, 1999); Toyonaga Keisaburō, "Colonialism and Atom Bombs: About Survivors of Hiroshima Living in Korea" in *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*, eds. Takashi Fujitani et al. (Duke University Press, 2001), 378–394; James J. Orr, *The Victim as Hero: Ideologies of Peace and National Identity in Postwar Japan* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2001); Hiro Saito, "The A-Bomb Victims' Plea for Cosmopolitan Commemoration: Toward Reconciliation and World Peace," *Thesis Eleven* 129, no. 1 (2015): 72–88; Yuko Takahashi, "Identities Surrounding a Cenotaph for Korean Atomic Bomb Victims," *Korean Studies* 42 (2018): 64–87; Naoko Wake, *American Survivors: Trans-Pacific Memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

7. Derek J. Kramer, "Atomic Age Unleashed: Emancipation and Erasure in Early Korean Accounts of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Bombings," *Journal of Asian Studies* 82, no. 2 (2023): 144–162.

8. Gong Imsun, "Wonjatan ui maegaedoen segyesang gwa jaejiyeokhwa ui gyunyeoldeul: Jongjeon gwa jeonhu, Hanbando haebang(jayu) ui jogeondeul" [The mediated world picture of atomic bombs and ruptures of reregionalization: A condition for emancipation (liberalization) of the Korean peninsula in the postwar period], *Seogang immun nonchong* 31 (2011): 5–45; Wake, *American Survivors*.

9. Dongwon Kim, "Imaginary Savior: The Image of the Nuclear Bomb in Korea, 1945–1960," *Historia Scientiarum* 19 (2009): 105–118.

10. "Haksaeng saenghwal hyeontae josa" [A Survey on the Status of Student Life], *Gukbak*

forum for highbrow discourse and was a major venue for contemporary ideas, debate, and translation.¹¹ The many articles that *New World's* editors had already published on the atomic age were an expression of this role. In the winter of 1946, the very first issue of the magazine had taken up the topic through a special feature on the atomic bomb.¹² In the four years that followed, *New World* published over a dozen additional articles that returned to the topic. Atomic energy, atomic weapons, atomic war—all of these subjects were taken up as a distinctive point of concern for the postcolonial nation on the frontline of a new Cold War. Such a focus was well in line with larger trends in the Seoul-based press of the day. The post-liberation years were a time of active cross-pollination between aspirations for national autonomy and ambitions in research and development. With science and sovereignty blending into one, atomic technology emerged as an ideal shorthand for an author's faith in the promise of emancipation.

Korean writers were not alone in these musings. The massive power of atomic weapons and the vast resources that went into their development captured the postwar global imagination.¹³ Around the world, the topic emerged as a translinguistic metonym for scientific power. Discussions of objects and processes identified as atomic, frequently employed the language and imagery of the technological sublime.¹⁴ Postwar writers coalesced around tropes of divine intervention and transcendent might. Characterized as decisive, arbitrary, mysterious, and unimaginably powerful, such works presented the atomic bombings as akin to the spiteful power of an Old Testament deity.¹⁵ Likewise, the topic solicited corresponding binaries between utopic or apocalyptic futures, both fueled by the atom. Whether forecasting techno-destruction or an atomic Eden, writers

(December 1947): 116.

11. Yi Bongbeom, "Japji 'Sincheonji' ui maeche jeollyak gwa munhak" [The media strategy and literature of the journal *Sincheonji*], *Hanguk munhak yeongu* 39 (January 2010): 199–267.

12. Chae Jeongeun, ed., "Wonja poktan teukjip" [Special issue on the atomic bomb], *Sincheonji* 1, no. 1 (January 1946): 52–62.

13. Jacob Hamblin, *The Wretched Atom: America's Global Gamble with Peaceful Nuclear Technology* (Oxford University Press, 2021); Dick van Lente, *The Nuclear Age in Popular Media: A Transnational History, 1945–1965* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Matthew Jones, *After Hiroshima: The United States, Race and Nuclear Weapons in Asia, 1945–1965* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

14. David E. Nye, *Seven Sublimes* (MIT Press, 2022).

15. Yuko Shibata, "Dissociative Entanglement: US-Japan Atomic Bomb Discourses by John Hersey and Nagai Takashi," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 13 (2012): 122–137; Matthew Grant and Benjamin Ziemann, eds., *Understanding the Imaginary War: Culture, Thought and Nuclear Conflict, 1945–1990* (Manchester University Press, 2016).

grappling with atomic science and technology seemed most comfortable with the language of the sacred.

In Korea this lofty discourse was brought back down to earth by the realities of postwar violence. The Soviet testing of an atomic bomb in 1949 helped materialize a global bipolar dynamic that had been projected for years. By the end of the decade, forecasts of a World War III were common in the political analyses printed by the Korean press. At the same time, the promise of decolonization, the regional threat of recolonization, and the rise of Cold War logic as a mode of national liberation further pressed the story of atomic weapons into the service of geopolitical prognostication. Intellectuals in both Pyongyang and Seoul frequently figured the Korean peninsula as a catalyst for these processes. Divided into socialist and liberal camps, Korean writers took to viewing the peninsula as a microcosm of Cold War tensions, one where atomic weapons were an ever-present specter.¹⁶

The issue of *New World* that contained “Hiroshima’s Last Day” was characterized by these themes. Intended as a greeting to the start of a new decade, *New World*’s January 1950 edition centered on a half-dozen articles and translations grouped under the title, “On the Question of Atomic Power.”¹⁷ The contributions featured work by prominent Korean thinkers on the potential effects of the atomic age across various fields. These included the chemist and science writer Kim Dong-il, the broadcaster and public intellectual Yi Jeongseop, and the journalist and international relations specialist Pak Gi-jun. Supplementing this expertise were translations by two of the most renowned authorities on atomic power and its social and political impacts. The first was an essay by David E. Lilienthal, then head of the Atomic Energy Commission, and the second by the US Secretary of State James F. Byrnes. Taken together, these works situated “On the Question of Atomic Power” within the themes of weapons control, atomic diplomacy, energy revolution, and the character of Soviet-American research.

“Hiroshima’s Last Day” appears at the end of this parade of authority. In the context of the preceding works, the article offered an abrupt and personal denouement to what was, in many ways, a discourse shrouded in abstraction. Student Y’s contribution was neither the first nor the only personal narrative of the atomic attacks available to Korean audiences. Translations by American and

16. Derek J. Kramer, “A New Kind of Energy: Atomic Science in the Cold War Koreas: 1945–1958” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2021).

17. “Sinnyeonsi: Deokminsimsim” [New Year’s address: Virtuous people’s hearts], *Sincheonji* 5, no. 1 (January 1950): 6–7.

Japanese authors quickly appeared in Seoul in the years after 1945. Iconic accounts such as John Hersey's *Hiroshima* and Takashi Nagai's *Bells of Nagasaki* went through multiple reprints following their translation in 1949.¹⁸ Less famous accounts of the bombings also appeared in volumes like Pak Gyeongho's *The Secret Story of the Second World War* and Jeon Rim's *The True Story of Science and Defeat*.¹⁹ In the former, the story of the Hiroshima attack is told from the vantage point of airmen on the *Enola Gay*. In the latter, a translated narrative of the Nagasaki bombing is provided from the perspective of a Japanese schoolgirl. These accounts reflect the particular linguistic topography of Seoul after liberation. Despite the presence on the peninsula of thousands of Korean bomb survivors, English and Japanese translations remained the primary source of information about the attacks. Given this discursive pattern, Student Y's work was a notable articulation of local authority and knowledge regarding the bombings.

While deeply personal, "Hiroshima's Last Day" provides little detailed information about the person who wrote it. What we know of Student Y can only be gleaned from narrative and context. Part of the decades-long migration of Koreans to the Japanese metropole, the author was likely in his twenties. Residing in Hiroshima with his immediate family, Student Y bore markers of socio-economic status and advanced education. He lived in a two-story domicile with his mother, a younger sibling, and a nephew. Recently released from an extended stay in Hiroshima's Red Cross Hospital, Student Y had access to resources sufficient for specialized medical treatment and a prolonged recovery. Linguistically, the author was clearly comfortable in both Japanese and Korean. Student Y was also familiar with leading research institutions in the city and had the ability to both access and comprehend advanced scientific reports. The translated version of "Hiroshima's Last Day" offered here contends with this linguistic topography and academic register. The original text reflects the hybrid of Japanese and Korean expressions that characterized peninsular prose in the immediate post-liberation period. Footnoted explanations of terms and names are provided only when necessary. Student Y's stylistic use of punctuation is preserved as closely as possible. However, when necessary, the fragmented structure of sentences has been reorganized into paragraphs.

18. John Hersey, *Hiroshima* [Hiroshima], trans. Choe Deok-il (Jeong-eumsa, 1949); Nagai Takashi, *Janggi ui jong: Wonjatan ui matgoseo* [The bells of Nagasaki], trans. Yi Seungtaek (Sam-il chulpansa, 1949).

19. Pak Gyeongho, *Je 2-cha Daejeon bihwa: Jeonjaeng, gwahak, moryak* [The secret story of the Second World War: Warfare, science, conspiracy] (Sinmunsa chulpan-guk, 1948); Jeon Rim, ed., *Paejeon gwahak ui silsang* [The truth of defeat and science] (Goryeo chulpansa, 1950).

“Hiroshima’s Last Day,” like many accounts of the atomic attacks, can easily be read as a series of epilogues. The bombings marked the end of the war, of the empire, of the city, and of the lives of thousands. Yet Student Y often resists telling a story of closure. There is a suspended quality to his essay that prevents the destruction of Hiroshima from being relegated to history. For the author, the physiological presence of radiation and the psychological power of memory precluded the bombings from becoming merely a matter of the past. Meanwhile, for *New World’s* audience, the story carried a resonance of its own. In January 1950, “Hiroshima’s Last Day” appeared before readers already living in the midst of Cold War extremes. In just six months, that festering violence would burst out of control. In the context of “limited war,” as the Korean conflict came to be labeled, accounts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings were not simply retrospective—they came to populate active projections of a future atomic exchange. In this way, the specter of Hiroshima, for those who survived its terrors and for those who continue to read of its destruction, persisted—and persists.

Translation

A Korean’s personal account of Hiroshima’s end.

Hiroshima’s Last Day

.... a blue flash, as if I were plunged into the depths of the sea and struck head-on by a powerful lightning bolt—a crisscross of two sensations! The historic moment of the atomic bomb’s blast—at eight fifteen in the morning of August 6, 1945—the final trial of the Japanese Empire and its evils had arrived. By some miracle, I survived the tragedy of our age and returned to my homeland. This is an account of the abyss I experienced in Hiroshima on that day.

1

The people of Hiroshima knew nothing about the atom bomb until the moment of its detonation. No one had a clue. Then, moments later, the central metropolis of the city they called home was transformed into a brutal inferno. The bomb was dropped on August 6, 1945, at 8:15 in the morning, exploding with a blue flash. Earlier, at 7:00, the city’s air-raid warnings had been lifted and the all clear had been announced. Day and night, spotters stationed on top of the mountains around the city watched for aircraft. What in the world were they doing that

morning? Perhaps their worries over the final stage of the war were more than they could manage, and they had decided to just take a nap. At the time, my house was in a suburb a little off from the city. About ten days before, I had been discharged from the surgery ward of the Red Cross Hospital and was recuperating at home. On the morning of the 6th, I was resting in our second-floor main room. The previous evening, Ube in Yamaguchi Prefecture had been bombed all night. Since Hiroshima had also been threatened, it had been impossible to get any sleep. Finally, the air-raid warnings were lifted and there were no longer any sounds of explosions in the skies. At last, I felt a sense of relief and managed to fall asleep.

Suddenly, my eyes were blinded by a blue beam of light. It felt like I had fallen into the ocean's depths and at the same time had been overpowered by lightning. These interlaced sensations woke me from my sleep. A moment later (it is said to have been about a minute) there was a deafening roar that seemed to pierce my eardrums, and I lost consciousness. To this day, I still have no recollection of how I was able to push out from where I had been. Somehow I had gone from sleeping under that mosquito net to standing upright. When I came to, I discovered myself in the corner of an adjacent room. My body was rigid with pain, and it seemed that the force of the blast had blown open a shut door and thrown me all the way across the room. Just like that, the netting, my bed, even the air-raid hood I had on hand, were all gone. There were just heaps of wall plaster and shards of glass. The needlework that had been piled up in the room was now strewn all about and torn to shreds. The building was leaning to one side, the walls and roof were giving way. It seemed as if the whole house would soon collapse. Invariably, my mind went to my mother, sister, and eight-month-old nephew who were downstairs. I assumed that they were all dead.

Faced with such a tremendous shock, I felt no astonishment or fear. There was no room of thought for things like that. I was just paralyzed. My mind was blank like a fool's. The city of Hiroshima had transformed into a scene of complete destruction, one that stretched on as far as the eye could see. Without exception, the city's tall and solid skyline of buildings was flattened. Mountains and streams that were not usually in view were suddenly splayed before one's eyes. There wasn't a person to be seen or a sound to be heard. I was certain that everyone had been killed. Indeed, at that very moment, a hundred thousand people, each of a different age and background, died instantly. Those who remained were either missing or somehow injured.

The city was a picture of a healthy metropolis, then on the next page it was completely gone.... At this moment of its end, Hiroshima maintained the meditative calm of a corpse. An hour later, the whole thing was a sea of fire. No

one had the strength to stop it. For three days and nights, it burned until, finally, everything was completely gone. I came down the stairs, barely holding on, blood dripping from my left ear and down my spine.

2

Downstairs, all three of my family members had survived! My mother had suffered a contusion, the baby had lost two toes, and my sister was so seriously lacerated that her eyes looked like threads running across her swollen face. Later, after our family left Hiroshima for the countryside, we learned that she had been wounded in ten places across her body.

Less than thirty minutes after the blast, people began to take refuge in the communal cemetery behind our house. Already, red flames and smoke were becoming visible here and there throughout the city. It was the start of what would become a glittering inferno. Some say that the fire was caused by cooking flames as people prepared breakfast in their kitchens. According to others, the fire was started by the bomb itself. They said that the flash had caused the weeds at their feet and hems of their clothes to smolder and burn. People had no way of knowing what had occurred right above their heads. Most thought that the flash was caused by a gas tank exploding somewhere inside the city. Likewise, they could only conclude that the destruction of their homes had been caused by a direct hit from an incendiary or high-explosive bomb. Never mind the fact that there were no craters to be found in the ground around them....

The numbers gathered at the graveyard quickly grew, but none of those exhausted people said a word. We passed through the area and crossed the railroad tracks, coming out by the wide riverbank. What I saw there was so shocking it had no parallel. The scene left a mark that I will carry with me until my dying day. A man—clothes burned, skin dangling, flesh and bones exposed—trying to use his hands to stem the blood that poured from a child covered in burns. A woman, hair singed and clothes burned down to her underwear. A naked housewife, so caked in blood that she looked like a maniac.... People who no longer resembled human beings grouped together in broad daylight. All along the riverside they clustered in similar bands. At the same time, across the city, tens of thousands of people who had narrowly escaped instant death were buried under collapsed houses. Others were burned or wounded by the blast and unable to flee. As the fire demons advanced with every passing moment, these people struggled for life and then were roasted to death.

The injured who had gathered on the sandy banks of the river wore expressions of sorrow. It was as if they believed that heaven was punishing them for their sins. Silently, they lay down on the scorching sand, leaned against one

another, or crouched together in groups. Dozens of soldiers, all in a similarly strange condition, wandered aimlessly about on the hot, sandy ground. In uniform fashion, as if by some unspoken agreement, all of them had their combat caps on. Thanks to this their heads were mostly uninjured, but their lower garments were half-burned and missing, and none of them had shirts on. The exposed skin on their torsos had been burned off, revealing the raw flesh underneath. I asked one of the men how they had sustained such strange wounds. He said they had taken off their shirts while working on the grounds of the Hiroshima Elementary School. Suddenly—*beon-jjeok*—there was a flash of light, and their hair as well as their exposed upper bodies started to burn. The skin just peeled off and was gone. The soldier said that, “It felt like being covered in boiling rice porridge.”

By midday, those soldiers began to die off. One by one—*tak*—they would slump down and, just like that, take their final breath. At that time, the tides were out and the stream flowed with clear blue water heading towards Ujina Bay. The severely injured were lying on the sand flats, begging for something to quench their thirst. Unable to watch them suffer any longer, we started to bring them something to drink. However, it is said that burn victims shouldn’t have too much water, so in the end, we couldn’t even use that stream to offer them some relief. Without a parting drop to quench their thirst, boys and girls—here one, there two—became lifeless bodies. They silently lay by the water’s edge or over amongst the grass. Most of these young kids had been mobilized to build firebreaks downtown near the hypocenter of the explosion.

Eventually, everyone along the riverbank took on the appearance of goblins.²⁰ My sister and I both had swollen faces, and our clothes were sticky with blood. The motley crowds we were part of could not sit or stand in peace. The roar of the burning city swept over us, and fist-sized embers landed all around. Then, out of nowhere, a black rain began to fall. The cloudburst came like an explosion. At a spot a hundred and fifty meters downstream, this terrible whirlwind took flight. It pulled up giant trees by their roots and hurled them into the air. People who had been sheltering in the branches were tossed into the river by the force of the wind. Meanwhile, the blaze spread to engulf even the surface of the water.

After a certain period, a B-29 appeared in the sky. Among those who still had life left in them, there were murmurs that we were about to be strafed. However, the entire left riverbank was blanketed in an eerie silence, as if everyone had already abandoned hope. All bloodied, with their skin peeling off and without the strength to get up, they groaned under the heat of that day. They

20. 도깨비 (*dokkaebi*).

moaned as embers flew across the city, striking their bodies. Setting aside the idea of recompense for past evils, I couldn't help but be saddened by the thought of this miserable lot getting shot at on top of everything else. As that long summer day finally drew to a close and our surroundings gradually darkened, one could look past the river and see red forest fires burning here and there in the distant Chūgoku mountain range. It was only later that I learned radioactive materials had flown all the way there.

The red flames of the fire and the grayish hues of twilight were fierce and relentless.... Against this backdrop, along the vast and desolate riverbank, people continued to collapse one after another—*tak, tak*. Effortlessly, like shadows, people fell to the ground to remain like that for eternity, never being able to rise again. Without a drop of water to drink or a single hand to offer care.... As the night deepened, the tide began to flow back up the river. Countless bodies were swept away by the water. Those unable to walk had to avoid the rising currents by crawling up to the grassy berms and vegetable plots to pass the night there. Having lost their neighborhoods, homes, and even their spirits, the massive crowd of the displaced covered themselves with straw, tiles, and weeds, waiting for dawn to come. The breeze off the river and sea caused the temperature to suddenly drop, and those who were seriously injured or had lost a lot of blood shivered uncontrollably. This scene was not limited to where we were. Across the seven rivers flowing through Hiroshima and throughout the city's streets, corpses lay strewn about everywhere, obstructing one's path. The next day, the entire riverbank was choked with the stench of decaying bodies. That harsh August sun beat down upon it all.

As dawn broke, rumors began to circulate that the previous day's bombing had been carried out with a new German weapon and that people like the mayor, the inspector general, and Prince Yi Geon had all been killed.²¹ It was on this same day that doctors and nurses from the area around Hiroshima arrived to offer help. A makeshift awning was erected by the riverside, and the wounded began to line up for treatment. Unfortunately, the doctors had only mercurochrome and antiseptics on hand. So regardless of the injury, they would simply apply a small bit of red and white ointment. There was no follow-up though. Whoever received treatment that day did not get even a dollop of medicine the next. By the third day, we left the riverside and went in search of our house. Everything was burned to the ground without a trace. The entire city of Hiroshima had been reduced to ashes, while inside the shells of concrete buildings red flames still flickered.

21. It was the Korean royal Yi U not Yi Geon who was killed.

3

University professors from Tokyo and Kyushu, along with chemists, physicists, doctors, and newspaper reporters, all gathered in Hiroshima and began producing interim reports. It was around the time of Japan's surrender and the end of that tedious war that previously healthy people started to die miserable deaths from the atomic bomb disease.

Another city was destroyed! In peacetime, it had been home to four hundred thousand people. The plutonium bomb dropped on Nagasaki was even more powerful than the uranium weapon used on our city. It was said that temperatures at the hypocenter of the blast in Hiroshima reached six thousand degrees Celsius and an air pressure of fifty-three to as much as eighty tons per square yard. This meant the following:

- At thirty-eight yards from ground zero, the surface of a granite tombstone melted. (The melting point of mica is six hundred degrees Celsius.)
- At four thousand four hundred yards from ground zero, electric poles made from Chinese fir turned to charcoal. (The point of carbonization is two hundred and forty degrees Celsius.)
- At six hundred yards from ground zero, gray clay tiles melted. (The melting point is one thousand three hundred degrees Celsius.)

These kinds of observations were determined by researchers. Once more, it is said that an atomic bomb ten to twenty times more powerful than the two weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki is now theoretically possible to create. What follows are additional references to several interim reports by scholars on this new weapon.

- On August 20, a resident from the suburbs of Hiroshima came into the city to dig a grave. Upon returning home he developed symptoms related to atomic bomb disease and died. This person had only been three kilometers away from the hypocenter on the day of the attack and had not been wounded in the least.
- At the government administrative buildings, three kilometers from the hypocenter of the blast, countless fireballs were seen flying through the air on the day of the bombing.
- At the Hiroshima Institute of Technology, beams of light bunched together and transformed into what looked like arrows.
- Some people felt intense heat on their faces from the powerful light, yet afterward displayed no symptoms at all.

Do you know that radioactive materials follow a graduated pattern of accumulation as they scatter? In the days after the explosion, there was suspicion that comparatively strong radiation would not remain. Yet, at the site of the government

administrative residences, which had been directly beneath the fireball, measurements confirmed that relatively high levels of radiation persisted. Meanwhile, at the Hiroshima Institute of Technology, part of the anode on a rectifying vacuum tube had fallen off. It was also noted that flecks of stone and an electric clothes iron, which had been heated to a high temperature, had been inexplicably found at the author's house. It is presumed that these items came from the epicenter of the explosion. The rectifying vacuum tube and the iron [however] showed no signs of radioactivity. The realization of this fact leads me to believe that neutrons, gamma rays, electrons, X-rays, and ultraviolet rays, which were emitted because of the atomic bomb's uranium core, were scattered in all directions. At the same time, it appears that the destruction brought on by the force of the explosion caused material from the blast zone to be dispersed in all directions.

Two bombs were used in the attack. The first was estimated to have detonated at an altitude of six thousand meters. If the second blast had not been first triggered by the initial explosion, and thus detonated at a lower altitude, it would not have been completely effective. In addition to material from the blast zone, remnants of the atomic bomb itself also dispersed throughout the area. This flying material would have been heated to a considerable temperature due to external thermals and high-frequency electric heating. From this, it can be concluded that even individuals at a significant distance from the blast center could suffer burns and develop the atomic bomb disease. Recently, Dr. Masao Tsuzuki circulated a presentation stating that "radioactive materials were distributed relatively evenly." Based on this view, I consider the identified locations of dispersed materials to be unique points. Additionally, a research report by Dr. Fujiwara Takeo, a specialist on X-rays at Hiroshima University of Arts and Sciences, noted that "at the hypocenter, relatively high levels of radiation remained three days after the bombing. A week after the attack, there were sudden deaths reported among the soldiers charged with clearing bodies from the training grounds at the city center. This was caused, at that time, by these surrounding conditions and the negative impact they had on their health."

Dr. Masao Tsuzuki, an anatomy professor at the University of Tokyo, presented the following view. "What kind of force might have been generated at the site of the explosion on August 6? Although it is difficult to find a direct comparison, the power of uranium is equivalent to the alpha radiation produced if one hundred million tons of radium were placed five hundred meters above the ground. In general, what would happen if we brought in a total of one hundred million tons of radium? When we use such a large figure in relation to radium, which we typically measure in milligram units, we can get a rough idea of the scale. In the universe there are four types of powerful forces at work. The

first is the power of light and heat, which acts in a specific direction and generates a strong force as it reflects. The second is a mechanical force, which causes buildings to be destroyed and people to be thrown about. The third is an unknown force attributed to radioactive materials. The fourth is simply referred to as an unknown force, as it remains, at least until now, unknown to this day.”

What is this unknown force the professor speaks of? The atomic bomb brought humanity a level of terror neither seen nor imagined since the beginning of history, driven by this very “unknown” force. Near the hypocenter, there were traces of human bones from the day of the attack. Dr. Tsuzuki collected these samples for examination, finding them to contain a significant amount of radioactive material. He stated that, at the time of the explosion on August 6, these bones likely contained approximately two hundred times the normal level of radioactivity.

4

Three days after Hiroshima had been completely reduced to ash, we left. With those miserable ruins behind us, we walked to a village not far away. The city reeked of burned bodies. The trees, once lush with fresh green foliage, were now reduced to charred stumps. Their bare, scorched branches swayed in the wind, evoking the image of a “danse macabre.”²² Tea-colored power lines lay strewn haphazardly across the road, looking like twisted iron bars. Everywhere along the way there were naked corpses, half-burned and shriveled bodies, forms stuck up against stone walls like fossils. Other bodies looked like golden statues of the Buddha anointed with oil. One could hardly distinguish between male and female. Although some women could be recognized by their rounded lines and smaller heads. The bodies of children, meanwhile, were so pitiful that one could barely look at them directly.

We sought refuge in the homes of our fellow countrymen in a village one mountain over from Hiroshima. After leaving the nightmare of the city behind we tried to let our bodies and minds begin to heal. However, starting around August 20, strange new corpses began to appear around the village. At every home there were people afflicted with burns and wounds. Yet even those who were fortunate to have been healthy and uninjured by the bombing when they arrived began to lose their hair in clumps, bleed internally, grow pale, and die.

The doctor wrote “sepsis” on the death certificates, and every day several funeral processions would pass along the newly built road that ran through the village. All day long, the doctor and the monk worked tirelessly with the dead

22. 주검의 舞蹈 (*jugeom ui mudap*).

and dying, pouring with sweat, seemingly at a loss as time went by. It was extraordinary how they remained so busy. My wounds were comparatively light, so I lingered near the hospital entrance with a triage ticket numbered around forty, waiting for my turn.

On August 29, Dr. Sawada Toichiro of the Department of Internal Medicine at Kyushu University School of Medicine presented on the effects of radiation on the human body. He had been part of a team that traveled to the site of the bombing in Nagasaki and participated in rescue and relief efforts. His observations are as follows:

“The effects of atomic weapons on the human body can be divided into three stages. The first stage results in immediate death. In the second stage, individuals exhibit symptoms similar to dysentery, including severe diarrhea, which in some cases can lead to death. The third stage occurs without significant burns or skin injuries and is characterized by symptoms such as bleeding from the gums, pronounced anemia, hair loss, and ulcers in the throat. Some patients may also experience hemoptysis, hematemesis, hematuria, and bloody stools. Additionally, spotted hemorrhages can appear on the skin, and the white blood cell count per cubic millimeter of blood may drop to between 200 and 300.”

“When examined from a clinical perspective, the destruction of bone marrow affects the production of red blood cells and granulocytes crystalline structures (blood clotting agents). If this function is severely impaired, the first consequence is the onset of anemia. Additionally, granulocyte deficiency can lead to the development of symptoms like high fever, sore throat, and tonsillitis. In other words, symptoms similar to those of diphtheria. Among women, some experience ulceration in which, due to the plasma’s structure, bleeding does not stop. In relation to white blood cells, there is a condition known as acute leukemia. This presents a contrast, as acute leukemia includes acute lymphoblastic leukemia, which is a subtype of the disease distinct from acute myeloid leukemia.”

Like Sawada, many scholars were actively reporting on the phenomena related to the victims of the atomic bomb. At the same time, the citizens who had fled from Hiroshima to nearby rural areas were not receiving adequate care. Although treatment methods were being circulated in the newspapers, local physicians lacked basic injection medications like vitamins B and C. As a result, patients turned to eating persimmon leaves, and if not that, then even resorted to using moxibustion (a traditional heat therapy), while struggling to obtain even a small amount of liver to eat. Soon the price of liver became far higher than that of beef. Likewise, the persimmon trees at each and every house were plucked clean.

However, the Japanese government did nothing to respond to this disaster.

The authorities did not view the treatment of bomb victims as a matter of concern. They just pushed the survivors out of mind, viewing their suffering as an unavoidable consequence of the war. Of course, anyone would have felt a sense of anger and sorrow about the bombings, but living under military dictatorship and authoritarianism for so long had deprived the people of this country of the freedom of speech, and along with it, of the words to express their thoughts. The general sentiment among the Japanese people was, naturally, one of utter indifference toward the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even the citizens of the cities themselves did not seek to scientifically investigate the horrors they had endured. The nature of the atomic bomb is such that when compared to the terror of its immediate destruction, what comes after is far more frightening. By a fluke we escaped death that day, but now we could die at any moment. We are like cancer patients who wonder when their time will come. In a sense it is even worse than that: we are forced to wander through a new and unknown world of shock and fear. This is even more tragic than the initial devastation.

What would have happened if Japan had not surrendered! City after city, atomic bombs would have continually been dropped. Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, Kōbe.... In this way most lives would have been lost to the atomic bomb disease. Eventually, only a small number of invalids would have remained. Could such survivors, left to fate, really bring the nation back to life? Even if it were possible, there is absolutely no way to revive the nation without a span of several centuries. Those going on about with slogans like “all the world under one roof” and whatnot.²³ Those with absurd ambitions of world conquest. Those are the ones now faced with the crisis of their own nation being annihilated.

5

According to rumor, for the next seventy-five years no one would be able to set foot in Hiroshima again. Nor would anything grow there. But, in time, green grass did begin to sprout among the ruins. This was especially true at the West Drill Grounds, where almost all the soldiers perished, except for one or two who barely made it out. Clumps of tall grass about four to five feet high densely covered the area. Residents of Hiroshima call this plant, which is similar to mugwort, “*pikadon* grass,” and since the end of the war, they have been boiling and eating it.²⁴ People say that the ash from burned human remains makes for

23. 八紘一宇 (*Hakkō ichiu*) was a common slogan referring to the sublime authority of Japanese fascism.

24. After the bombings people in Hiroshima referred to the atomic bomb as ビカドン (*pika-don*)

the richest soil nutrients. Such a high price for fertilizer! A woman in search of her husband's body was going around from shelter to shelter. At one aid station she came across two lumps of flesh on the ground wearing military shoes. When she touched one of the bodies, a voice said, "It's me! It's me..." She ran over, only to realize it was a deranged man speaking unconsciously. When he saw her, he said, "Please just stay by my side, I've only got about thirty minutes left." As soon as he said this, he suddenly vomited a black, porridge-like substance and breathed his last. They said he was burned through, all the way from head to toe.

I went back to Hiroshima in the early spring of 1946. At the time the newspaper *Chūgoku Shimbun* (*Chūgoku* refers to the region surrounding the city) reported that there were about six thousand survivors. Somehow, people had gathered, and the streetcars that still managed to operate were now up and running again, overflowing with passengers. There were many with fresh scars among the people on the trams or walking along the streets. Around this time numerous thieves lurked in the city, and even in broad daylight, no one could feel safe. At night, the only illumination came from the candlelight that escaped through the cracks of makeshift huts built from pine slats. Nothing else resembled lamplight. For the first time, I saw snow falling on the pitch-black ruins of the once-bustling city, where hundreds of thousands had lost their lives. In that darkness, the weeds of human malice were sprouting endlessly.

Later, I came to learn that roughly half of all the Koreans and acquaintances I had in that city had died. At the Red Cross Hospital, most of the staff who had cared for me before the bombing were killed. Several come to mind. For instance, when I was in recovery, there was a beautiful young doctor who often brought spring flowers to my hospital ward. After the bombing, a young man came to the hospital to search for her body. His search went on as that year's winter fell. It might have been that her streetcar was passing through the hypocenter at the time of the attack. The young man thought that this was so. He believed that the streetcar had been tossed into the river by the blast and that the doctor's body had floated out to sea.

There was also a Korean nurse who worked in my ward. Several times after my operation, when I was still bedridden, Kure came under air raids.²⁵ Each time this nurse would carry me on her back down to the bomb shelter in the basement. She too was killed in the atomic bombing. Pressed flat like a piece of paper against that hospital entrance. Likewise, there was a medical professor in

which can be translated as the "flash-bang."

25. Directly east of Hiroshima and home to a major naval base, by 1945 Kure was subject to repeated bombings.

his early forties who used to visit me on his daily rounds after my surgery. On the morning of the bombing, he was waiting for the streetcar when he was caught in the flash. The physician barely made it to the hospital as evening approached. By then, he was so disfigured that his colleagues could not even make out who he was. Ultimately, he died there too.

Everywhere one goes they find tragic stories like this of how someone met their end. Afterwards, whenever walking through the city or riding the streetcar or bus, I would encounter people whose arms had been torn off. People with crab-like appendages, rubbery flesh clinging to the backs of their necks or faces—their skin texture entirely lost. People with eyes missing. Young women with faces stretched in all directions by keloids, so disfigured that they looked as though they were wearing goblin masks. Wherever I went in the city, I witnessed such sights. Even now, after returning to our peaceful homeland, I still cannot forget what happened on that day. Not even in my dreams. I still remember the countless countrymen who lost their lives so tragically in a foreign land. This memoir concludes with a prayer for their repose. The End.

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