

Tsutomu Yamaguchi: The Twice-bombed

On 6 January 2010, Mr Tsutomu Yamaguchi died, aged 93. He was the last survivor of the two nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in August 1945. Satendra Nandan read his story in a magazine in New Delhi on 30 January 2010 after witnessing a parade of weapons on the Indian Republic Day, 26 January; Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated in New Delhi on 30 January 1948.

The garden is green, beautiful,
 In the leaves of trees there's peace
 The birds twitter, the caterpillars crawl,
 There are butterflies
 On the quiet breast of their earth:
 Remain close to your home soil.

The old man sits, crying uncontrollably:
 Tears have wet his tattered cheeks, shirt:
 His face is leaning towards infinity.
 He's past ninety, past life, past dreams.
 Yet nothing is really past.

Mr Tsutomu Yamaguchi, in his hoed garden,
 Died on 6 January 2010.
 I am reading about Gandhi.
 The papers in New Delhi, having seen
 The parade of weapons,
 Are full of tributes to another life's span.
 What is really the measure of any man?

The morning in August, in January,
 Had its usual brightness
 The sky was blue and the birds flew
 In a pattern which only they knew:
 It was another ordinary day.
 Yamaguchi was walking to catch a train
 From Hiroshima to Nagasaki;
 He had finished his assignment
 Now was time to say goodbye to his few friends
 In the engineering office of Mitsubishi
 And buy a gift or two for his wife
 And his only son.
 Three months in Hiroshima
 Was long enough
 It's time, he thought, to return home.

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Across the green potato fields
He walked:
Sometimes Life can be just crossing a green field.
In the clear blue sky, a plane hovered,
Circled the city,
Two white parachutes mushroomed
Yamaguchi saw them fall
Before he fell, faced burned,
Flesh a molten monstrosity.

He remembered the flash: white magnesium light;
I have become Death, declared the red sun.
Krishna-Christ, Buddha-Gandhi are One.

He lay in the burnt potato fields, bleeding,
Feeling the soft earth beneath his melting skin;
It's reported he was two miles from
The epicenter of the first atom bomb
Dropped on the heart beats of a city
And a very young man.

He was burnt, eardrums ruptured,
But he still made his way to that railway station
To catch the train to Nagasaki.

He crossed the river
On the raft of human remains
Floating, burnt, broken: dead.
Like corpses in the Ganges.

Years later, he told the school children:
On the bridge of inhumanity
On the raft of human debris,
He had reached the other side.

The old man wept uncontrollably
The children simply stared at his crying face.

He reached Nagasaki, just in time,
To report to his office.
For a nation at war with the world and itself
Weapons are necessary like evil.

His manager at Mitsubishi
Was, as usual, incredulous, skeptical:
How can a single bomb destroy a city?
Impossible is Nothing.

Suddenly the same white magnesium blaze
Was seen through the office window,
The bars melted, the boss died.
Young Tsutomu was thrown again
To the ground, made of steel.
O, Yama! Death-in-Life.

Close to death he clung to life
To the reinforced bars,
His house was vaporized
His wife, his little son survived.

His son was to die of cancer, aged 59.
At the funeral, the father wept twice:
How the white light had darkened his son's life.

But often Mr Yamaguchi would cry
Long into the midnight
When there's nothing but the approaching silence of death
And the birds are asleep in their nests
And dried leaves flutter on an empty path
Towards a garden, into a green patch of potato fields.

It is said, the old man
Painted many faces of the Buddha
And wrote *tanka*, 31-syllable poems:
Within these small acts of creation
He summarized two nuclear bombs
Believing in the nameless art of worship
And human affections.
Peace, he often murmured, is God
And the blue sky, the green earth
Will not perish.

He became the only *nijyuu hibikusha*:
The twice-victim of the first two atom bombs.

And, now he, too, is gone
Somewhere another mahatma must be born?

Satendra Nandan