

The Beginnings

Prologue

I had the pleasure of meeting Hiroko Takanashi for the first time over a late night cup of tea at the home of her son-in-law. It was in the early summer of 2002. She was a quiet, unassuming and very elegant Japanese woman of seventy two years of age. Our conversation had drifted for some reason to her experiences of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima in 1945. This was a subject she did not encourage herself, but also one she did not shy away from. She spoke with grace about incredible experiences. She showed no sign or sense of anger, or of a desire for retaliation. She spoke calmly and yet clearly of matters that went beyond my capacity to even imagine experiencing.

I asked Hiroko at the time if she had ever written down her experiences. She said she had written down only a few paragraphs in Japanese for official records. I felt at the time that her experience was too important to leave un-recorded. I asked for permission to take her experiences and her poetry of those experiences and to put them into English so that a larger number of people might be able to understand the atomic experience and Hiroko's message, that this never happen again. Almost six years have passed since that first meeting.

What you are about to read are the stories I heard that first night and what I have learned since about Hiroko. Her stories are wrapped in her poetry, the haiku of a very talented Japanese poet. I hope that the reading is an enjoyable learning experience, as the writing was for me.

Father Eric Freed

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1. The Haiku

List of Hiroko's Haiku and initial translation

The First Haiku

資料館 心耳のなげき 百合匂ふ

shiryoukan shinji no nageki yuri niou

The atomic museum, the cries in the heart's ears, the scent of the lily

The Second Haiku

死の川の 遠き被爆忌 千羽鶴

shi no kawa no tooki hibakuki senba zuru

Of the river of death, the distant atomic memory, a thousand cranes

The Third Haiku

慰霊碑の 乙女の銘に 月うるむ

irei hi no otome no mei ni tsuki urumu

On memorial stones, the names of young girls, the tears of the moon

The Forth Haiku

まなうらに あの日の修羅や 平和祭

manaura ni ano hi no shura ya heiwasai

On the backs of my eyelids, the scenes of that day, the ceremony of peace

The Fifth Haiku

原爆忌 魂つれさる 夜明雲

genbakuki tamashii tsuresaru yoakegumo

The atomic memory, makes off with souls, dawn clouds

The Sixth Haiku

空蟬に 憑く被爆霊 宵の月

utsusemi ni tsuku hibakurei yoi no tsuki

The empty shell of the cicada, possessed by the souls of atomic victims,
early evening moon

The Seventh Haiku

被爆橋 ぐる流灯 ふかぶかと

hibakubashi kuguru ryuutou fukabukato

The atomic bridge, under which flow the candled paper ships, deeply
solemnly

The Eighth Haiku

二十万の 霊の揺れみる 流灯や

nijuuman no tama no yureiru ryuutou ya

Two hundred thousand souls, bobbing up and down, ah candled ships

The Ninth Haiku

流灯の 補陀落はいま 被爆川

ryuutou no fudaraku wa ima hibaku gawa

Of the candled ships, the trip to fudaraku (paradise), now a bombed river

The Tenth Haiku

寝苦しき 回想めぐる 原爆忌

negurushiki kaisou meguru genbakuki

Tossing and turning, reflections back and forth, the atomic memory

The Eleventh Haiku

薔薇いけて 被爆地をたつ 夏の朝

bara ikete hibakuchi o tatsu natsu no asa

Setting roses in place, I turn my back to the atomic site, a summer morning

These are the haiku written by Hiroko. The translations I have offered are mediocre at best. The real way to understand these haiku will be to look at each one, and to see pictures of what is being mentioned. This will help to understand better the meaning of each Japanese word in the phrase and to begin to approach the imagination of the Japanese mind and heart with each word. This is where my input will become important. I must be honest and forthcoming from the beginning. I will do my best to explain each poem, but the reader must know that what they are reading is my understanding of the poem. My understandings of these haiku are limited by my own background. I know Japanese well and love the language and the culture. Yet, I bring the same biases and limitations to interpretation that anyone else does. What I will be offering here is exactly that, 'my understandings' of these powerful poems. I cannot and do not claim to offer 'The Understanding' of these poems. I will frequently talk about my own experiences and how Hiroko's poetry has tapped into that. I have spoken with Hiroko and she has given me permission to share my understandings of her poetry. Now, I would like to introduce the poet and the heroine of these haiku, and then introduce myself before we take up each one of them. I add also a brief description of how a haiku is put together, of the structure and the logic behind haiku and a guide for those who would like to try and pronounce them. This will be of importance to those interested in the language and culture of Japan.