

Deakin University

Alyson Miller and Cassandra Atherton

‘Monster in the sky’: Hibakusha Poetry and the Nuclear Sublime

Abstract:

This paper analyses hibakusha (atomic bomb survivor) poetry as examples of the nuclear sublime, which Rob Wilson argues is ‘one of the unimaginable, trans-material grounds of a global condition that, paradoxically, can and must be re-imagined, represented, and invoked to prevent this trauma of negativity from happening in post-Cold War history’ (1989: 1). We argue that of all atomic bomb literature, poetry best captures the devastation of atomic warfare and a message of hope for the future because of its emphasis on the economy of expression and, as Robert Jay Lifton argues, its ‘symbolic transformation’ (1991: 21). The ineffability of experience, explored in the Burkean Romantic Sublime, will be discussed as persisting into the politics of the twentieth century and impacting on definitions of the nuclear sublime. While hibakusha continue to be discriminated against – compounded recently by the ongoing catastrophe at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power complex – the nuclear sublime compels them to record their experiences in testimony, literature or poetry or to risk a ‘forgetting’ that may lead to the annihilation of the human race. This paper argues that poetry – specifically tanka and haiku – best captures the nuclear sublime.

Biographical Note:

Cassandra Atherton is an award-winning writer, academic and critic. She was a Harvard Visiting Scholar in English in 2015/2016 and a Visiting Fellow at Sophia University, Tokyo in 2014. She is currently an affiliate of the Monash Japanese Studies Centre. Cassandra is currently working on a prose poetry graphic novel on the atomic bomb with Alyson Miller and artist Phil Day, funded by a VicArts grant. She was awarded an Australian Council Grant to write on the Hiroshima Maidens.

Alyson Miller is an award-winning writer, critic and scholar, with expertise in scandalous literature, and the representation of freaks in literary and popular texts. She currently teaches literary studies and professional and creative writing at Deakin University. A 2015-17 Victorian Arts Council grant is funding her most current project, a graphic novel/prose poem collection examining a post-atomic *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (with Cassandra Atherton and artist Phil Day).

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1. Introduction

The nuclear sublime is a critical term, first used by Frances Ferguson in 1984. In her article in *Diacritics*, she begins by identifying a clause in a State Farm insurance policy, which states it will not cover loss ‘involving a nuclear incident’ (1984: 4). Ferguson uses this example to argue that while other disasters can be insured against, ‘nuclear peril’ cannot (4) due to its utter annihilation of the world and all life forms. Drawing on Jonathan Schell’s detailed description of this destruction, she argues that Schell ‘portrays himself as having determined to try and “think the unthinkable”’ (5), while the insurance policy statement demonstrates the way that State Farm refuses to even attempt to do this. Despite their differing approaches, Ferguson makes the point that both of them are ultimately unsuccessful in discussing nuclear destruction, because of its ultimate sublimity:

the nuclear as unthinkable [is] the most recent version of the notion of the sublime, that alternative and counterpoise to the beautiful that was revived when Longinus’ *Peri Hupsous* (On Great Writing) was rediscovered in the seventeenth century and became especially influential in the eighteenth (5).

This paper examines hibakusha (atomic bomb survivor) poetry as a response to the nuclear sublime. It posits that hibakusha poetry – specifically tanka and haiku – best acknowledge the experience of the atomic bomb as ineffable. This is because of all atomic bomb literature, poetry turns on an economy of expression where fewer words are used to express ideas. In this way, we posit that haiku and tanka, specifically, with their focus on fewer words, lines and syllables than free verse poetry, are the vehicles that most successfully capture atomic experience and its sublimity. That is, we argue that these traditional Japanese poetic forms are uniquely able to express the anguish of the impossibility of describing the trauma of nuclear annihilation, via subtle use of allusion, fragmentation and minimalism.

Hibakusha are positioned to be silent, rather than provide political commentary on atomic warfare. This is due to the discrimination they continue to face both at home and abroad, even seventy years after the dropping of the atomic bomb. Robert Jay Lifton has defined their discrimination in terms of the ‘death taint’ (1991: 170), which ‘caus[es] others to turn away and the hibakusha themselves to withdraw’ (170). There is a threefold prejudice: the hibakusha became symbolic of mortality, a reminder of Japan’s loss in war and, to extend these ideas, a symbol of the atomic sublime. The prejudice against hibakusha continues even into the second and third generation because people fear they may have inherited sickness and sterility, and the belief that they may give still give birth to deformed children because of the radiation poisoning. This encourages hibakusha and their progeny to remain silent. Hibakusha poets write into this silence. This is because as survivors they argue they have ‘a sense of duty toward humanity to bear witness in the face of the patent threat to life posed by nuclear weapons’ (Braw 1997: 171).

2. Nuclear sublime and its Romantic heritage.

The impact of hibakusha poetry can be best understood by using the frame of the sublime to reference its impact in a post-atomic world. The sublime as a measure of aesthetics is best associated with reference to the Romantic period (c. 1785 – 1832). Indeed, scholars of the nuclear sublime, such as Ferguson, most often begin their studies with definitions of the sublime by citing the nineteenth century European Romantics to

emphasise both the rupture of landscape and mankind's terror at its potential extirpation. Juxtaposing the emphases of the Romantic period with twentieth century tragedies, Henry JM Day (2013) argues:

the obliteration of Hiroshima by the first atomic bomb undermined faith in the redemptive potential of the divine, the natural world or one's own humanity at the same time terrifyingly reinstated the sublime as a function of traumatic world historical events (8).

Contemporary scholars on the nuclear sublime, such as Rob Wilson (1991), argue that 'Hiroshima seemingly *locks the mind in awe*' (original emphasis), emphasizing the way it 'can serve as a trope allowing the technologically dwarfed subject to evoke the wonder/terror of the atomic bomb...' (251). There can be no doubt that writers and Romantic poets such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Wordsworth and John Keats were influenced by the idea of being overpowered by the natural world and of the mysterious as a gateway to an experience of the infinite. Caspar David Friedrich's portrait, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), is recognized as a prime illustration of the sublime; a moment of mastery over the elements, tempered by the ensuing feelings of the insignificance of the individual, in this grand vista. Importantly, Romantic writers and poets were also overwhelmed by the traumatic impact of industrialisation on the European landscape. As Ian D. Rotheram emphasises:

Wordsworth, Byron, Coleridge and Ruskin extolled the virtues of 'wild' and 'natural' landscapes. The idea of countryside as a green and pure, unadulterated landscape, in comparison to the harsh, polluted, industrialised urban areas, took hold among the urban 'industrialised' communities. 'Wild', rural landscapes acquired wistful, romantic patinas... (23).

The atomic bomb's obliteration of the landscape in its razing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a supreme violation of these cities' innocence. Significantly, while industrialisation paved the way for progress and the atomic bomb made humanity aware of the possibility of its extinction, it is significant that both these challenges to nature and landscape were manmade. Extending this argument, Gene Ray (2005) uses the traumatic violence of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima to argue that it leaves 'a permanent, ghastly latency, compounded by the anguish of shame' (5).

The concept of the sublime is first attributed to Longinus in the first century A.D. In *On Sublimity* he writes, 'the sublime is a certain eminence or perfection of language and the greatest writers both in verse and prose, have by this alone obtained their prize of glory, and filled all time with their renown' (Ashfield & de Bolla 1996:22). In Longinus' view, the sublime concerns the force of language, so powerful that it transports the audience to a realm beyond conventional thought. The experience of awe unites beauty and the sublime. This discussion of the sublime was challenged in 1759 by philosopher Edmund Burke in his treatise, 'A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful'. Famously, Burke stated:

whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say whatever is conversant about terrible objects or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime (34).

In this way, he argues, the sublime can never be beautiful; indeed for Burke the sublime and beautiful are antithetical.

While Longinus and Burke differ on the point of the origin of the sublime, they agree that the sublime transports the individual from the rational into a state of incomprehensible feeling. Burke identifies the sublime as a reaction to an object of

terror. Indeed, the sublime originates from the feeling of horror, which is defined as ‘the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling’ (34). Most importantly, Burke argues there is ‘nothing sublime which is not some modification of power’ (81). This is because in Burke’s view:

pain is always inflicted by a power in some way superior, because we never submit to pain willingly...strength, violence, pain and terror, are ideas that rush in upon the mind together (63).

The nuclear sublime stems from this Burkean emphasis on horror and the resulting terror that transports the audience to a place beyond description. The horror that stems from viewing the images published in newspapers or referenced in hibakusha artwork after the dropping of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki defies comprehension. Perhaps for this reason, the nuclear sublime is most often compared to Immanuel Kant’s *The Critique of Judgement* (1724 – 1804) (McGhee: 2016). While Kant is not a Romantic philosopher, his ideas influenced Romantic thinkers and his theories of the sublime continue to be popular today, referenced most often in accounts of the nuclear sublime, beginning with Ferguson. Kant argues that the sublime results from the failure of the mind to imagine or grasp ineffability, leading ultimately to the triumph of the transcendence of reason. Indeed, Joseph Masco argues:

In the Kantian formulation, the sublime is evoked by a natural object or process whose massive form produces a combination of awe and fear. Kant offers two species of the sublime that inform nuclear weapons science: the dynamic sublime, which is provoked by the terror of seeing a tornado or erupting volcano from a safe distance, and the mathematical sublime, which begins with the inability to comprehend the scale and vastness of a mountain or river (2013: 56).

Importantly, ‘the sublime does not end in comprehension but rather in an intellectual compensation’ (56). In this way, the experience of nuclear annihilation can never be totally understood, even as hibakusha poets aim to imagine it for an audience. In a more combative argument, C.J. Dekker argues that the ‘nuclear-sublime attitude fetishizes sight and witness (imagined or actual), as if (distant, aggressor-side) personal experience of the bomb is the only means of comprehending it’ (2014: 24). However, this paper argues that rather than fetishizing the experience of the atomic bomb, hibakusha poetry provides a mode for lobbying against nuclear warfare and furthers anti-nuclear culture. As Michael J. Green and Katsuhisa Furukawa argue, ‘Japan’s “anti-nuclear” culture [is] rooted in the experiences of Hiroshima and Nagasaki’ (347).

Significantly, Day (2013), extending Luke Gibbons’ (2003) argument concerning what he identifies as Burke’s ‘abiding concerns with colonial aggression’, emphasizes that there is activism at the heart of the ‘colonial sublime’. He postulates:

Where in the experience of the natural sublime the subject feels some of nature’s terrible might accrue to himself, in the ‘colonial sublime’ the subject, analogously, finds in the very power of his oppressor the inspiration to jolt himself into action (70).

Furthermore, as Ban Wang (1997) posits in his discussion of twentieth century China, ‘the aesthetic offers emancipatory alternatives to an oppressive political structure’ but the state can use it ‘to anchor power and laws all the more securely in the sensibilities of its subjects’ (8). In this way, the sublime can be read as ‘doubled-edged’, displaying the potential to liberate or to oppress’ (11- 12). Therefore, whether the nuclear sublime is closer to the Burkean or Kantian model is – to a degree – irrelevant. Ferguson argues, ‘the nuclear sublime operates much like other versions of the sublime, in that it imagines freedom to be threatened by a power that is consistently mislocated’ (2). It is

this emphasis on the threat to humanity that is the most important consideration in the reading of the nuclear sublime in hibakusha poetry. Hibakusha poet and activist, Kurihara Sadako, states this convincingly in her essay, 'Tsuranuku shimin no hangenbaku' [The continuity of the citizen anti-nuclear movement]:

The awesome destructive power of nuclear weapons surpasses the human power of imagination. It is said that today there exist nuclear weapons sufficient to destroy every person on earth thirty-six times over, and that fact is impossible for the senses to register. Unless you flesh out ideas with experience, experience with ideas, both will decay, become mere skeletons, and make ongoing development impossible (1994: 19).

3. Hibakusha poetry, silence and forgetting.

American writer and long-term resident of Japan, Donald Richie, invoked the nuclear sublime in his description of the response to the dawning of the nuclear age:

...the Japanese failure to come to terms with Hiroshima is one which is shared by everybody in the world today. No one has come to terms with the bomb — least of all, perhaps, the people upon whom it was originally inflicted. When the thing itself has become the very epitome of chaos unleashed, it would be expecting too much that an ordered and directed reply could be instantly presented (2009: 37).

In this way, Richie emphasises both the silence and chaos that ensued after the dropping of the bomb, dwelling on the impossibility of 'instantly presented' responses. Hibakusha cinema scholar, Mick Broderick concurs:

Indeed, 'silence' is often a considered *hibakusha* response to the literally indescribable events they have experienced and, in part, a remembrance of the eerie stillness that befell both cities after the atomic *pikadon* (flash-boom) (2009: 12).

Hibakusha poets did respond instantly to the atomic bomb, however, their responses were censored under American Occupation censorship. All publishing houses in Japan between October 1945 and November 1949 had to lodge two copies of every proposed publication to the Civil Censorship Detachment (CCD) for review. If any part of a publication was deemed to contravene the Code, it was marked and publishing instructions were sent to the publisher with the returned manuscript. However, many writers found ways to publish subversively with independent presses offering small but significant distribution. Importantly, hibakusha poets initially chose to write in haiku and tanka. As John Whittier Treat points out,

many of the first generation of atomic-bomb poets composed in the most traditional of meters with the most conservative choice of words...Such poets turn to the authority of a familiar repertory of symbols (including in the less accomplished examples, clichés) in seeking a concrete idiom for the atrocity and its aftermath (1995: 160).

While some poets later turned to free verse poetry to explore the rupture of atomic warfare, the contracted forms of haiku and tanka provide the fewest words to describe the experience of the atomic bomb. Tanka in particular is regarded as a central mode of 'emotional expression' for the Japanese (Ueda 1996: xxxvi), while the focus of haiku on seasonality, time and location (as discussed below) makes the use of traditional forms particularly appropriate. In this way, they gesture to the ineffability of the nuclear experience. Edward A. Dougherty argues that hibakusha poets understood they were working with the unthinkable and in an area difficult to express:

Writing about the scale of the event creates anxiety about the writer's ability to convey the experience because of the complexities of both the experience and its emotional impact (2011: np).

Dougherty quotes Hiroshima poet Tokuno Koichi, who stated he had 'doubts over whether...the reality of that day...can ever be communicated by literature to third persons...No matter how much one writes, one is left with the feeling there is more to say' (np), and Tōge Sankichi, who wrote in 1951 that 'The bigger the event, the less we are able to recognize that, no matter how many people wail their laments, we will never come to terms with our truest feelings' (np).

However, hibakusha poets are driven to write in order to provide witness testimony, to speak for those who lost their lives and to lobby for a nuclear-free future. In short, they wrote to prevent forgetting. Despite the effects of the nuclear sublime and its ineffability, they found words to convey the horror of the experience for future generations. Indeed, Hibakusha poet and public intellectual Kurihara Sadako wrote:

People who have witnessed such tragedy must tell of it. That is the responsibility, the duty that survivors owe to those who died...the atomic landscape...does not allow me to rest' (1994: 17).

Hibakusha silence and forgetting also relates to their discrimination on a number of fronts. Robert Jacobs has the most compelling discussion of this multi-tiered discrimination:

People who may have been exposed to radiation often experience discrimination in their new homes and may become social pariahs. We first saw this dynamic with the hibakusha in Hiroshima and Nagasaki who found it very difficult to find marriage partners, since prospective spouses feared they would have malformed children, and found it difficult to find jobs since employers assumed that they would be chronically sick. Hibakusha children, moreover, often become the targets of bullying. It became very common to attempt to hide the fact that one's family had been among those exposed to radiation (2014: np).

Providing witness testimony by writing poetry placed hibakusha poets at the centre of this discrimination, and affected not only their lives but also the lives of their families. For many hibakusha, it was simply easier to forget and the ineffability they had experienced was easier left unarticulated.

4. Hibakusha haiku and tanka.

The notion of writing to prevent forgetting is paramount to the haiku and tanka produced by hibakusha poets, highlighting an impetus to 'overcome the powerful urge of silence' (Dougherty 2011: 1) and memorialise the atomic experience. Anxieties about the inability to express the ineffable plagued atomic poets, not only because of the complexities of the emotional trauma involved, but also because of the limitations of words in compensating for the horrors witnessed (3). Through tanka and haiku, however, forms concerned with brevity and precision, hibakusha are able to transport such experiences into instances of devastation and despair. While arguably any creative expression involves a form of reduction and framing that breaks down and thus grants access to trauma, the attention to traditional modes such as haiku and tanka has a specific cultural resonance, suggesting a connection with Japanese (literary) history and culture, as well as its rupture. As discussed below, these poetic modes are associated with location, time, and seasonality, attributes utilised by hibakusha to describe

devastating violence. Such a use of haiku and tanka—conventionally understood as poetry concerned with nature, love, and in its later experimentations, individual emotions—offers both a continuation of and break with literary modes that reflects the fracturing of Japan and Japanese culture after nuclear destruction. The choice of haiku and tanka is therefore a link to a national sense of self as well as a way of expressing the ineffable in precise, familiar, yet challenging terms. As Ueda Makoto observes of tanka:

[T]he form is rich in its cultural legacy: it has absorbed the essentials of Japanese civilization for the past 1300 years and has established itself as the archetypal mode of emotional expression for those who speak Japanese. Because it is the archetypal mode, it touches and moves the Japanese heart at the deepest level...[and] will continue to be written as long as Japanese culture continues to survive (1996: xxxvi).

Moreover, described by Kenneth Yasuda as ‘tiny, clear-cut, suggestive’ (1973: xx), haiku and tanka focus on a ‘moment of absolute intensity’ that is able to ‘render...a speaking, vibrant image’. The description here seems eerily apt, given the lingering mushroom cloud that pervades – even defines – the cultural remembering of the atom bomb, yet its articulation in traditional Japanese poetry is also fitting: an evocation of a concentrated moment that is both complete, and a fragment of a greater whole. Understanding the haiku and tanka of hibakusha as split in this way enables the violence of the atomic trauma to be expressed. Indeed, utilising a form that is comprised of both single units and connecting sequences offers a way around the enormity of that being witnessed, and a breaking down of the spectacle into manageable perspectives. As a result, the horror is actually intensified as the suffering related becomes both more immediate, and more personal. In the haiku of Shibata Moriyo, for example:

looking for her mother

the girl still has strength

to turn over corpses (Shibata qtd in *White Flash, Black Rain* 1995: 23).

The intensity of the moment, underlined by the sparse, economical lines, evokes not only the familial horror of loss—a girl searching for her mother—but also a reversal of power, in which one of society’s most vulnerable—a child—must ‘turn over corpses’ to find the right remains, and find the capacity to survive in a post-nuclear world. The image is a graphic reminder of the estimated 150,000 killed in Hiroshima, and 80,000 in Nagasaki, resulting in widespread devastation; that the ironic codename for the uranium-based bomb dropped on Hiroshima was ‘Little Boy’ makes all the more poignant references to the suffering and deaths suffered by children. Yet through its attention to a singular instance of loss, and the searing image of a child sorting through charred bodies, Shibata is able to express both the enormity and the intimacy of the atomic experience.

William J. Higginson notes that Japanese poetic forms such as haiku and tanka are also defined by a ‘strong sense of place’, able to produce a clear identification not only with a specific location, but also a particular time (1996: 20). The haiku and tanka produced by hibakusha are significant in that they re-imagine the forms’ preoccupation with seasonality and nature, as discussed below, but also that they can only be understood in the context of the aftermath of the nuclear attack on Japan; a way of attempting to write about the nuclear sublime. The result is a series of images that are as alarming as they are pragmatic, especially in terms of those poems attending to the processes of ‘cleaning-up’, such as Igasaki Shizuko’s haiku, which reveals the realities of a post-disaster scenario:

eyes closed

I pick up pieces of

the sunburned bodies (Igasaki qtd in *White Flash, Black Rain* 1995: 1).

In the nightmare of a dystopian landscape, Igasaki's poetry is not only 'suggestive' (Yasuda: xx), but also momentous and cataclysmic. In its brevity, it is able to convey the terror of death on a gross scale through the smallness of 'pieces', and a vivid, sensory experience that is both familiar (that of sunburn) and grotesque. As noted, through the attuned sense of focus required by haiku as a poetic form, hibakusha achieve both immediacy and scale, and are able to navigate the impossibility of the sublime through an attention to both the ordinary and the extreme. Such a balance is observable in Shibano Sumiko's haiku, whose poem parodies the form's traditional focus on the seasonal and the natural world (Higginson 1996: 9):

a pickled plum

its importance of existence

at the centre of the explosion

The reference to plums is primarily a reference to the Japanese flag but is also evocative of William Carlos Williams' imagist poem, 'This is just to say'. Moreover, it is a striking reminder of the domestic ghosts discovered in the aftermath of the bomb, such as charred lunchboxes still containing untouched foods like onigiri, Japanese rice balls stuffed with pieces of pickled plum. The reference is, further, a potent reminder of the abruptness of the explosions, arriving dramatically, and unexpectedly, and thus disrupting the most ordinary of rituals. As Dougherty notes, 'instead of huge aerial raids where planes passed over in waves...the atomic bombs in many ways came—literally—out of the blue...The explosion's suddenness and simultaneity were dumbfounding. It seemed everywhere in the city at the same time, but each individual experienced it as a direct hit' (2011: n.p.). Shoda Shinoe's tanka captures the uncanny contrast of the ordinary and the extraordinary in a post-bomb scene of death and annihilation:

Reality

is this and only this –

the one bone

I place in the bent and burned

small school lunch tin (Shoda qtd in *White Flash, Black Rain* 1995:18).

As noted, Shibano Sumiko's parodic treatment of the haiku is significant, particularly in terms of understanding hibakusha poetry as othered. Higginson argues in *The Haiku Seasons: Poetry of the Natural World*, that 'nature, the cycle of the seasons, and love have formed the core of Japan's poetic perception and expression for centuries' (1996: 7), alongside a more contemporary interest in ideas about human nature. The image of the atom bomb as something both extraordinary and as part of the natural world helps define the sublimity of its appearance in the skies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, yet also speaks to the idea of an intrusion, and the interruption of the natural order that heralds the start of a nuclear age. Indeed, much hibakusha haiku portrays the destruction of bodies in symbiosis with the surrounding environment. Such a connection, however, does not suggest the naturalness of the occurrence, but instead serves to highlight, through a series of hyperbolic juxtapositions, a sense of the 'unreal' enabled by

technology and human invention. In Ito Hiroe's haiku:

as if they were rafts

under the flaming sky

bodies flow (Ito quoted in *White Flash, Black Rain* 1995: 1).

The subtle use of inversion conveys a world that is out of order, as reflected in the structure of the haiku. The poem reads more fluently, for example, when read backwards: 'bodies flow / under the flaming sky / as if they were rafts'. The image of bodies that 'flow' suggests their dissolving or evaporation, yet the reference to 'rafts' makes powerfully clear the hard and charred remains of blackened corpses. The conflicts within the poem are demonstrative of the clashes occurring more broadly—most obviously in terms of that between nations, but more provocatively in relation to the oppositions between humans/nature, and the powers of technology. These themes are also reflected in Utsumi Kanko's haiku, in which burning bones are presaged by the reflection of fireworks in the river:

fireworks reflections

at the bottom of the river

bones must be burning (Utsumi quoted in *White Flash, Black Rain* 1995:1).

Importantly, in seeking to write against the silence, the evocation of the sublime in hibakusha poetry needs to be as overwhelming as it is intimate, as demonstrated by the tanka of Shoda Shinoe. Shoda's poetry takes on Burke's understanding of the sublime in rejecting notions of beauty in order to excite ideas of pain and danger, but more importantly to evoke horror in the construction of horrible objects (Burke 1759:131). Furthermore, as Henry JM Day identifies, 'The sublime...comes to signify not communion with the infinite but a sense of radical alienation, of a trauma so overwhelming that it defies comprehension' (8). While moments of grim tenderness appear, such as an image of 'the bodies of a mother and child' pulled from a water tank, 'their hands / inseparably clasped' (*White Flash, Black Rain* 1995: 2), Shoda's tanka focus more frequently on the horrifying, and do so through moments of bleak abjection:

Since

so many small skulls

are gathered here,

these large bones

must be the teacher's (Shoda quoted in *White Flash, Black Rain* 1995: 19).

Defined by Kristeva as that which 'disturbs identity, system, order...the in-between, the ambiguous' (1982: 4), abjection is a key representational strategy through which hibakusha are able to deny silence in order to bear witness, but also emphasise the power of the atomic threat as the greatest to humanity. Abjection in Kristeva's terms enables a shifting of perspectives, a subversion of established poetic and cultural norms to reveal the politics—and the revulsion—of the inside. The 'small skulls' clustered to suggest a classroom, the largest of which 'must be the teacher's', portray the destruction of innocence, symbolic of humanity per se in as much as the specific loss of a school of students and their teacher. The deductive tone suggests emotional distance, necessary for hibakusha poets so as to be able to represent the unrepresentable, but also to emphasise the human in a catastrophe evolved of processes of dehumanisation. Indeed, hibakusha Kurihara Sadako notes the importance of 'returning to the human scale'

because the ‘atomic bombings resulted from a dehumanising logic: mankind...completely became a machine’ (qtd in Dougherty, n.p.).

Attention to the corpse, the ‘utmost of abjection’ (Kristeva 1982: 4) and sublime object, is part of this process of ‘returning to the human’, enabling hibakusha to explicitly reveal the horror of the damage done to the body:

Lady! Lady!

A totally burned body

called out to me.

Red and

split like a pomegranate (Shoda Shinoe, quoted in *White Flash, Black Rain* 1995: 59).

Similarly, in another tanka, Shoda describes how it is ‘not coal / heaped high / on that passing truck’, but ‘corpses / high and black’. The imagery is suggestive of the Holocaust, and functions as a reminder of the violent repetition of the human behaviours that lead to such enormous devastation. While Shoda also complies with haiku’s traditional focus on the nature and seasonal change, this is complicated through a re-visioning that clearly aligns monstrosity with the human:

The black rain falls.

Surely some monster

in the sky has turned over

giant vats

of poison (Shoda qtd in *White Flash, Black Rain* 1995: 18).

5. Conclusion

As they invert and thus subvert haiku and tanka as poetic forms, hibakusha resist the silence. Using language that is graphic and transportive, hibakusha have found a way to express the ineffable, adapting traditional modes in order to give voice to contemporary horrors. Through concise and vivid images that are as economical as they are unnerving, poets such as Shoda capture the silence and the terror imbued within the atomic sublime—the awe associated with its power, and the devastating results of its release:

Pika don!

After

the silence

I opened my eyes.

The scene had turned to carnage

and deadly moans (Shoda quoted in *White Flash, Black Rain* 1995: 59).

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