

Poems of the Atomic Bomb

(*Genbaku shishū*)

Written by TŌGE Sankichi

Translated by Karen Thornber

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Introduction

The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945 marked the beginning of the atomic age. Nearly seven decades later, policy specialists and activists continue to debate the future of nuclear weapons in the face of increased sophistication, worrisome proliferation, and ominous threats of use. The March 11, 2011 Tōhoku earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent meltdowns at Japan's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, the second worst such emergency in history after Chernobyl (1986), reminded people the world over of the nuclear threat even in peacetime.

Japanese creative writers began publishing on the atomic bomb almost immediately, and they continue to do so well into the twenty-first century. Two concerns lie at the heart of their thousands of short stories, novels, poems, plays, and essays: the extreme and persistent suffering of *hibakusha* (survivors; lit. explosion-affected persons) and abolishing nuclear weapons. Much atomic bomb literature describes the excruciating physical and psychological wounds from which hundreds of thousands suffered and died and with which even larger numbers continued to live, in many cases for decades after the bombings. By telling very personal stories, whether fact or fiction, this genre challenges scientific and historical accounts that focus primarily on the physical destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and it offsets medical records that reduce individuals to lists of bodily functions, if not mere statistics. But at the same time that they translate into words an extraordinarily painful landscape, atomic bomb writings also explicitly and repeatedly impress on the reader that words are woefully inadequate, that the traumas experienced by *hibakusha* cannot be conveyed by conventional means.

In addition to depicting the pain of the *hibakusha*, Japanese literature of the atomic bomb also addresses the future of human civilization, calling for a nuclear-free world. It expresses particular concern with the continued testing and spread of nuclear weapons and speaks of the dangers of Hiroshima and Nagasaki being repeated many times over. These writings posit that one of the greatest deterrents to nuclear proliferation is the knowledge that people could readily transform entire nations, if not the globe, into a vast nuclear wasteland, that the unimaginable suffering of *hibakusha* would pale next to the agonies people now are capable of inflicting on one another.

Tōge Sankichi's (1917-1953) *Genbaku shishū* (Poems of the Atomic Bomb, 1952) is an excellent gateway into Japanese creative writings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A survivor of Hiroshima and author since childhood, Tōge is the only atomic-bomb writer

to have become a popular hero, and Japanese publishers continue to print new editions of his anthology.¹ *Poems of the Atomic Bomb*, one of Japan's earliest poetry collections on the bombings, describes Hiroshima's destruction in painful detail and harshly condemns both the decision to use the atomic bomb and postwar nuclear proliferation. This collection is filled with images of burning and dismembered corpses lying in piles beside roads or floating in rivers, and it brims with descriptions of horribly disfigured bodies staggering along streets and stark images of the terrors of radiation sickness. But at the same time it refuses to depict the atomic bombings as occurring in a vacuum; Tōge's verse calls for an end to the vicious cycle of violence that has characterized so much of human history. *Poems of the Atomic Bomb* also attempts to restore a sense of dignity to people who experienced the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by encouraging them to participate actively in the anti-nuclear movement.

Tōge's anthology comprises twenty-four poems – written in free verse and ranging from eight lines to eight pages – one prose passage, and an afterword. With the exception of the opening verse, the first third of *Poems of the Atomic Bomb* discusses the immediate aftermath of the bombings of Hiroshima. Following the seventh poem is a prose essay that summarizes events of the week following the bombing. Although here and elsewhere in the collection Tōge includes many graphic descriptions of the horrors that befell the residents of Hiroshima, his verse underlines the humanity of the people who gradually begin to emerge from the rubble. The second two-thirds of *Poems of the Atomic Bomb* shifts focus to the months and years after the attacks. These poems alternate between describing traumatized *hibakusha* and discussing what can be done to counteract the apathy that allows nuclear testing to continue. Tōge's verse often somewhat idealistically calls for fighting war with love, urges Hiroshima's children to use hugs to disarm adults who instigate military conflict, and pleads with everyone to join hands and work together to prevent further proliferation of nuclear weapons. But his writings are very clear about the responsibilities facing all peoples in a nuclear world.

Not satisfied with *Poems of the Atomic Bomb*, Tōge dreamed of writing an epic poem titled simply *Hiroshima*. Yet weakened by both recurring radiation sickness and respiratory problems that had plagued him for many years, he died on the operating table in March 1953. Celebrated during his life, he was quickly elevated to hero status in death.

The physical structures of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have long since been rebuilt, the remnants of the bombings transplanted into often excessively hygienic museum exhibits. And the aging survivor population, whose unabated cries of agony and protest have thus far prevented society from trivializing the horrors of what happened to these cities, will disappear in the next few decades. Were it not for the thousands of texts they and other concerned parties continue to leave us, we might quickly be lulled into a false sense of security once the human face of this trauma – essential to a deeper understanding of the consequences of nuclear war – is lost forever.

¹ Robert Jay Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*, 441-43. Reprintings include Tōge Sankichi, *Genbaku shishū* (Tokyo: Aoki Shoten, 2004), and Tōge Sankichi, *Shishū: ningen o kaese* (Tokyo: Shin Nihon Shuppansha, 2000), 9-126.

Note on the translation:

This translation of Tōge's collection aims to give the English-language reader a better understanding of both *hibakusha* suffering and the many challenges of rendering this suffering into words. *Poems of the Atomic Bomb* uses exceptionally fragmented language to verbalize the incomprehensible horrors of the atomic aftermath. My unsparing translation attempts to retain the difficult style and irregularity of Tōge's verse: what reads awkwardly in my English translation also reads awkwardly in its Japanese source.