In the Province of the Gods

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I begin to link butoh’s fascination with the grotesque to Western movements such as Surrealism and Absurdistm. Despite these connections, butoh remains to me a distinctly Japanese form. And as it matured, its avant-garde, antitradition pedigree begins to reveal its links to other traditional Japanese art forms such as noh.

And despite butoh founder Hijikata’s protest to the contrary, the landscape of butoh cannot in my mind be separated from Japan’s experience of the aftermath of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Perhaps Donald Richie says it best: “Here is a postwar wasteland whose . . . inhabitants held aloft pathetic emblems of a vanished civilization. . . . Hijikata’s picture was not the end of the world but, specifically, the end of Japan.”

What else can explain Waguri Yukio’s performance, during which he digs into a mound of dirt at the front of the stage, discovering what seems to be a corpse? Holding the corpse in his arms, he slowly but ecstatically dances to John Lennon’s “Love Is Real,” all the time looking not at the corpse he holds but up at the sky.
The black curtain at the back of the stage opens to reveal a small shrine-like box decorated with Christmas lights. As the music gets louder and louder, the dancer approaches the makeshift shrine, and it is as if he has unearthed his own body: he is communing with his sacrificed self, consumed with all the joy and all the decay that his body experienced while alive.

I want to talk with disabled *hibakusha*, literally bomb-affected people. The *hibakusha* might help me better understand how the Japanese view the disabled. Are the lives of the *hibakusha* similar to other disabled Japanese?

In August I e-mail Rahna Reiko Rizzuto, a writer who last year spent her fellowship in Hiroshima. She suggests I contact the World Friendship Center. The center sets up a mid-September interview with Numata-san, a well-known *hibakusha* who lost her right leg on August 6, 1945. I decide to be in Hiroshima when my parents will be visiting Japan for my father’s seventieth birthday. I want to experience firsthand my parents’ reaction to Hiroshima’s Peace Memorial Museum, to see how they react to the “other” part of the war. As Jews, they habitually view the war through the prism of the Holocaust.

But I almost don’t make it to Hiroshima. My original plans do not work out the way I had hoped. It is a very hot and humid summer, even by Tokyo standards. Never before have I been in a place where after the rain, the humidity increases. The summer heat, combined with my extremely active life in and out of Tokyo, has taken its toll. I have lost over twenty pounds since arriving in Japan.

Three days before my parents’ arrival, I am at the Hakone Open Air Museum to see an installation inspired by the Japanese teahouse. I tour the outdoor museum in the sweltering heat, sweating even more profusely than usual. I think this is due to the strong midday sun. Back at my hotel, I eat dinner and go to sleep.
When I wake the next morning, I can barely lift my head from the pillow. I get myself to the bathroom and start vomiting. Heat stroke, I figure. Somehow, I’m able to pack up and make my way to the station. I endure the hour-and-a-half train ride back to Tokyo. I take a taxi back to my apartment.

I find the Fahrenheit thermometer I have brought with me and take my temperature: 103°. I immediately call Eiko-san, my landlady, whose husband is a doctor affiliated with a hospital not too far away. She calls the hospital and arranges for me to be seen in the morning. But how will I make it until then?

I call Masa. He comes over and, although he is drunk by midnight, cooks a homemade chicken soup. He feeds me tiny spoonfuls as he sits on the side of the bed.

In the morning Eiko-san and Masa take me to the hospital. My fever has spiked over 104°. I pass out before I am taken to what will be my room. My blood is drawn to determine what is going on. My throat is so sore I can’t swallow.

_The patient, the sickness may last long, but is sure to get well._

“How long will I be here?” I ask the young female Japanese doctor as Masa interprets. “My parents will be here from the United States on Friday.”

“You will be here for a while, probably a week, depending on how long it takes for us to know what is the cause,” the doctor tells me. “Your fever remains high and you are severely dehydrated. It seems you have a serious infection in your throat.”

It is already Wednesday afternoon, which is Tuesday night in New York. I know my parents will be leaving their upstate house in the morning to get to the airport in New York City. I won’t be able to meet them when they get here. I give Masa their phone number so he can call to tell them I am okay but sick with a throat infection in the hospital. I will have to arrange for someone to meet them at their hotel when they arrive in Tokyo on Friday night.

The doctor asks my medical history. “Medications?”
'Paxil, an antidepressant.'

"Why?"

"Depression and anxiety."

"With a psychiatrist?"

"For twenty years." I notice the doctor raise a questioning eyebrow when Masa translates this to her. I do not think she has ever heard of, or even contemplated, someone seeing a psychiatrist for a year, let alone for as long as I’d been in therapy.

On Thursday MM comes to the hospital. He brings me flowers. "Bought from my daughter the florist. I never bought flowers from her before." MM smiles his wide smile.

Eiko-san visits when MM is still in my room. She bows deeply to him and looks at me. “How do you know such a famous man to my generation? You have such a wonderful time in Japan,” she says before bowing to MM once again. “Everyone is good to you.”

“I will meet your parents at their hotel on Friday night,” MM tells me. “I will bring them to see you here.”

By Friday my fever has abated but the infection remains. That night my parents arrive in Tokyo. MM meets them at their hotel and escorts them to the hospital. Masa, Allan, and Mika are with me when they arrive.

My father’s main concern during most of my childhood and young adult life was my well-being. He sees my friends surrounding me in my hospital bed. He relaxes and holds my hand.

"Not what I had planned for your arrival,” I say. “I’m glad you’ll have the chance to see Japan.”

Two days later it is my father’s birthday. Although I am still on IV, my fever is almost normal and the infection is finally starting to get better. I had arranged a special dinner at a small restaurant in Ginza. I do not want to miss the dinner.

“My father’s seventieth birthday is today,” I inform the doctor. “We have a special dinner in Ginza.”

“You can go,” the doctor proclaims. “We will detach your IV. I order you to go.”
That night I am still weak and very dizzy. But the doctor patches up my arm; I will once again have the IV connected when I return to the hospital later that night. Masa pushes me in a wheelchair to the hospital exit.

MM meets us in Ginza. At the small Ginza restaurant, designed to look like a traditional rustic Japanese country home, we are served the preordered eight-course “Yuki” dinner. I sit with my back braced against a wall and enjoy watching my mother eat what is to her “strange food.”

“What’s this?” she keeps asking Masa, who patiently explains what each course is. He makes sure that my mother, who does not want to eat raw fish, is not served sushi or sashimi.

A waitress carries a cake with lit candles to our table. Somehow, someone had told the restaurant to have a cake for my father’s seventieth birthday. My father is surprised, and as he blows out his birthday candles, he begins to cry.

Late at night, I am once again alone in my hospital bed. I am exhausted. But I’m glad I had the chance to see my parents experience some of the hospitality and care I have received during my time in Japan. They saw how I have managed, in a matter of months, to build a life for myself halfway around the world.

And I have managed, with the help of my friends, a medical crisis, in a place so different from what I’m used to back home. Could it be my disability experience that has allowed me to navigate a culture where I don’t know what most people are saying or most of the signs are telling me? Has being disabled, where change is the norm, taught me to find my way through difference? After all, being disabled since birth, I’ve grown up and become accustomed to living in a culture different from my own.

Two days later my parents are on their way to Kyoto. Masa accompanies me from the hospital in a taxi to my apartment.

For two weeks I barely have the strength to go out. I have to discontinue the antibiotic that, when changed from IV to pill form, causes a rash all over my body. It is already the end of September, and, although
I have extended my stay for a month, I know my time in Japan will soon be coming to an end. Less than a week after Mika’s concert of the garden songs in November, I will be leaving Japan.

For the concert I have finished six of what I think will be a sequence of eight or nine poems. The composer only has time to write the music for two. Just as well, since Mika, still bothered by her jaw, can focus more closely on the two songs she will sing. The evening will be a combination of the songs, my reading of the poems, and my giving a talk about how I came to write the poems in Japan.

Most of all I want to interview Numata-san in Hiroshima. My stay in Japan will not seem complete without meeting at least one disabled hibakusha.

So far, my research about disability in Japan has been scattered, incomplete; no big picture has yet emerged. For every successful Fukushima-sensei, there seems to be a frustrated person denied a job because of their disability. I have uncovered hints of a rich disability history in the culture of the blind biwa hōshi but have yet to locate the supposedly disabled Ebisu in the complicated pantheon of Japanese gods.

In Japan for close to six months, I am still treated as any other gaijin, not as the disabled person I am treated as back in my own country. I am still more comfortable informing those I meet in Japan about disability in the U.S. than talking about what I have found here in Japan.

The World Friendship Center is able to reschedule my interview with Numata-san, although with a different translator. Despite still feeling far from 100 percent, I decide to go ahead with my trip to Hiroshima.

For some reason, I have imagined Hiroshima to be like Ferrara, the Ferrara I first knew from De Sica’s movie version of The Garden of the Finzi-Continis. I imagined bicyclists peddling along wide, ghostly boulevards; survivors still affected by wartime events out of their control;
and the air still filled with scars of radiation even though the bomb had been dropped over fifty-seven years ago.

I arrive in Hiroshima the afternoon before I am scheduled to interview Numata-san. By the time I check into my hotel, it is too late to go to the Peace Memorial Museum. I take the streetcar to the north side of Peace Park. I walk across the reconstructed T-shaped Aioi Bridge, the target for the bomb. The bomb actually exploded only three hundred meters southeast of its target, quite accurate since this was done without radar, using only the naked eye, approximately 580 meters above the Shima Hospital in a busy downtown Hiroshima district then known as Saiku-machi.

On the banks of the Motayasu River, I reach the ruined building known as the A-Bomb Dome, 160 meters northwest of where the bomb exploded. The red brick building originally opened in 1915 as the Hiroshima Prefectural Commercial Exhibition Hall. During the war, as Japan’s economy declined, the hall was commandeered for government and rationing offices. The building’s architectural skeleton and dome somehow survived the blast that killed all its occupants on the morning of August 6, 1945.

In the twilight, I find the Children’s Peace Monument, also known as the Tower of the Paper Cranes, a memorial inspired by Sasaki Sadako. Sadako was two at the time of the bombing. She developed leukemia when she was twelve. While in the hospital, Sadako thought that if she could fold a thousand paper cranes, according to Japanese legend, her wish would be granted: she would survive. Sadako had reached 644 paper cranes when she died on October 25, 1955.

Sadako’s fellow students finished folding the cranes. They were instrumental in building this monument to their dead classmate and the thousands of children who died from the bombing. Streams of multicolored paper cranes, looking like phosphorescent psychedelic wigs from the 1960s, are left at Sadako’s memorial, as well as at the other places of remembrance throughout Peace Park. The bell in the center of the monument is in the shape of a gold paper crane.
I ring the bell. The echo through the empty park scares some birds that quickly fly away.

I make my way to the Cenotaph, the central monument to those killed by the A-bomb. The Cenotaph is in a shape evoking primitive shelters of the Kofun Period (300 to 600 AD); its parabolic arch is reminiscent of haniwa, the pottery found in prehistoric Japanese tombs, representing what the deceased might find useful in the afterlife.

Walking in the hauntingly quiet park, I try to imagine this island in the middle of two rivers as Hiroshima’s once-bustling Saiku-machi district.

The next day I interview Numata-san at the International Conference Center, just west of the Peace Memorial Museum. Mariko serves as translator. I hope not only to hear Numata-san’s hibakusha story but also to learn how her disability influenced her life after the war.

“I was a military girl,” Numata-san begins. “I believed Japan would win the war and I would do anything for Japan to win the war.” She shows me a map of the city, familiar from my walk in the park yesterday afternoon. On the map the hypocenter is circled. Also circled is the school, converted to wartime use, where Numata-san was working at 8:15 a.m. on August 6, 1945, when the A-bomb exploded. The night before, sirens warned that B-29 bombers might be approaching, but by morning the all-clear signal had sounded; it was once again safe to go out into the streets.

“We always wondered why no B-29-san hit Hiroshima,” she tells me. “We kept waiting for that to happen.”

When the building collapsed, a beam fell on top of her. “I must have passed out, I don’t remember. The next thing I knew I heard my mother’s voice. She had come looking for me and found someone to help her move the building beam off of her daughter. That’s how I lost my leg. For many years I taught in school. After I retired, a few years
ago, I finally realized I was disabled and found a group for older disabled women. Only with them did I find I could once again complain.”

Even though I specifically wanted to talk to a disabled *hibakusha*, this is the only time Numata-san mentions being disabled. It is as if the experience of the A-bomb, of being a *hibakusha*, subsumes all her identity, leaving little room for being, more commonly, disabled.

Numata-san’s story of what happened on August 6, 1945, and the following days does not differ from the other stories I have read in preparation for my trip to Hiroshima. But about a year after the bomb was dropped, something happened to Numata-san.

“I had given up hope,” Numata-san confesses. “Then one day I was by the river and I saw this tree—I will take you to see it after lunch; I would like to take you to lunch after we’ve finished here—and I noticed this tree had died in the bomb blast. It was still black and charred, but I noticed small branches beginning to grow. Somehow the tree had found a way to come back to life. And I thought, if this tree can do it, so can I. I came to visit the tree many times. When they built Peace Park, they moved the tree so it was easier for everyone to see.”

I accompany Numata-san and Mariko to the small café off the lobby of the museum. Numata-san points out the window. “That is the tree. We will visit it after lunch.”

During lunch many people stop to say hello to Numata-san and Mariko. Mariko talks to a woman who has approached our table. The woman turns to me and says, “You are Kenny-san. How amazing! I’m Keiko. I was supposed to be your interpreter but you were sick in September. We had been in touch by e-mail. I am so glad you have been able to come to Hiroshima.”

Keiko-san joins us for the remainder of our lunch. When she accompanies us outside to see the tree, I notice that she limps. Like me, one of her legs is shorter than the other.

“Have you seen the museum?” she asks.

“Not yet. I was going to go this afternoon.”

“Let me be your guide.”
After lunch we take photos under Numata-san’s thin-branched tree. Without Numata-san’s story, the tree would just be an ordinary tree. Is this the actual tree that Numata-san had seen on the riverbank, the tree that inspired her to survive? I think about the myth my parents have told for decades about my childhood—how although I was never supposed to walk, I learned to walk in two casts—and I feel closer to Numata-san than I did while listening to her story. I understand the need for the tree planted by the museum to be Numata-san’s tree.

I give Numata-san and Mariko omiyage, traditional thank-you gifts. We bow and bow and continue bowing until we finally part.

I follow Keiko-san into the museum. She narrates the history of Hiroshima, which led to its being a target for the bomb. By 1895, during the Sino-Japanese War, the Imperial Headquarters, Japan’s supreme military command, was moved to Hiroshima. Hiroshima became the embarkation point for army troops going overseas. More and more military facilities were built. I was a military girl.

The by-now-familiar story is retold: The clear, cloudless Monday morning. The mobilization to make fire lanes in the city. The mobilized middle school students working at factories; the evacuation of third graders to the countryside. The previous night’s air-raid warning at 12:25 a.m.; the all clear at 2:10 a.m.; another alert at 7:09 a.m., lifted at 7:31 a.m. The “irony” of Hiroshima not being the target of a previous air raid, now “explained” by the United States wanting to know the effects of an atomic bomb on an undisturbed city. The cost of the bomb, one of the reasons for dropping it: all that money had to be put to some use. The explosion of the bomb at 8:15 a.m. The mushroom cloud.

The second part of the museum is filled with the effects of the bomb: The burned lunchbox once belonging to a mobilized student who worked six hundred meters from the hypocenter. A human shadow burned into the stone stairs of a bank. A white wall stained with black rain, which contained large amounts of radioactive soot and dust, contaminating areas far from the hypocenter. The charred skeleton of a child’s tricycle. The cracked face of a pocket watch stopped at 8:15 a.m.
In the section devoted to birth defects due to radiation, I become self-conscious, like I did at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, when I reached the section on the Nazi extermination of the disabled. I cannot process the numerous facts on how radiation affects the body’s cells. I think about how much radiation I have been exposed to via X-rays. I wonder about Keiko-san’s limp.

“I must make an appointment,” Keiko-san says as we leave the final exhibit.

“Thank you so much for this afternoon. I am so glad we had the chance to meet. Such a coincidence.”

“Peace activists all know each other in Hiroshima,” she tells me as I bow my good-bye.

In the museum store, I ask if Numata-san’s book is available in English, and I’m not sure the woman behind the counter knows what I’m saying. I do not find Numata-san’s book; I buy other books instead, as well as postcards.

It is almost twilight when I once again find myself in Peace Park. I make my way to the streetcar that will take me back to my hotel. I once again stop in front of the A-Bomb Dome. After my day in Hiroshima, I now think of the ruins as a monument as much to reconstruction as to destruction.

Back at the hotel, I am physically and emotionally drained. I sort through the day’s images. Neither the objective numbing numbers (1,000,000° Celsius, 35 percent energy released as heat rays, 50 percent as blast, 15 percent as radiation [5 percent as initial radiation, 10 percent as residual radiation]; of 350,000 in Hiroshima, 140,000 dead) nor new words (hypocenter, cenotaph, keloid) nor old dates (July 16, 1945; August 6, 1945; August 15, 1945) can successfully tell the story of what happened in Japan.

Numata-san’s story transforms from that of aggressor to victim, from victim to survivor. Her story is filled with both guilt and innocence, with as much shame as pride. But Numata-san’s telling of her story seems fixed, closed. Even the story of her tree, which actually might not be her
tree, seems scripted. Even if I had asked more questions, I know that I could not interrupt, or disturb, her story.

How can I find a way to tie together these seemingly incomplete narratives, as moving as they are, not only in Hiroshima but also throughout my stay in Japan? What am I missing? What ties them together remains unseen.