A Nuclear Refrain

Kye Askins, Phil Johnstone, Kelvin Mason

Published by Punctum Books

Askins, Kye, et al.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/84186

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2918087
Roger looked more closely at the girl, and saw how thin and frail she was, almost a ghost.

“Who are you?” he asked, his voice trembling, utterly confused.

“You know who I am,” the girl replied in a quiet voice. Her English was heavily accented, and she sounded as spectral as she looked.

“My name is Sadako Sasaki.”

Roger’s skin prickled. He vaguely recognised the name but it eluded his mental grasp and he just couldn’t place it. Nevertheless, it resonated, stirred something in him. His fear wasn’t helping his memory work either, so he shook his head again, as if that could reconnect the synapses in his brain.
Some part of him was aware of the dissonance between how he normally felt, confident and secure whenever he “held the floor” and spoke with authority — with a swagger! — in Parliament and in social circles, and how he felt now: uncertain and vulnerable, unable to find anything at all to say.

“You do know, and you should know. I’ll help you to remember.” Sadako looked gravely at Roger. “I’m taking you somewhere to show you, to make you realise, much more than my name.”

She walked up to him and took his right hand in hers. His whole body tensed. This close he could almost see right through her. Her decimated frame barely seemed opaque. It shimmered, as fuzzy as all of his own senses were feeling in that moment. Roger found that he couldn’t withdraw his hand, couldn’t even struggle. He rose meekly from his desk and the girl led him towards the door of his office and opened it. He hardly had time to worry what his colleagues would think of him, openly holding hands with a young girl in the Palace of Westminster, before he was
thrown into further shock. The door opened not on to the corridor that he had walked so smugly along a short while ago, but into what appeared to be a small kitchen and living area. Most of the space was taken up by a large, low wooden table, and there were four people in the room.

There was a family atmosphere, background chatter and the sounds of small movements as bodies did a variety of things that seemed, to Roger, simultaneously mundane and utterly strange. An older woman was on her feet, boiling a kettle on a stove and putting cups on the table to make drinks. Yet, the cups, the kettle, the stove all looked out of place and out of time. Sitting at the table, a middle-aged man was intently folding pieces of paper and putting them into a basket. Roger couldn’t quite make out what the intricate shapes were. Next to the man sat a young woman who was sewing a kimono. On the other side of the table, a teenage boy was scribbling on a piece of paper with a pencil, a book open on the table beside him. He was quite clearly doing his school
homework and the familiarity of that took Roger right back to his own school days. Of course, the script that the boy wrote was very different to the English alphabet. Strangely, not one of the people in this cosy domestic scene was smiling.

Sadako still held Roger’s hand firmly, ensuring he couldn’t turn away even if he had been so minded.

“When will mother be home?” the young woman asked the man, very conspicuously not looking up from her sewing.

“Soon. She is trying to find out information about your aunt, uncle, and cousins, after…” The man paused awkwardly, but did not look up from his own task.

“She is at the government office, trying to find out what’s happening in Hiroshima at the moment, and where her sister is.”

Astounded, Roger found that, although he spoke no Japanese, he understood every word. He looked beseechingly to Sadako, but she only indicated with a nod that he should attend to the scene unfolding before him.
The older woman passed around the tea and sat down on a mat at the low table, opposite the man. When she spoke her voice was quiet and careworn.

“Your mother is worried for Fujiko and her family. You know how close they live to where the Americans dropped their bomb.”

“They say the bomb cloud will harm us all.” This time the young woman did look to the man next to her.

“I do not understand this weapon,” the man said, unconsciously rocking back and fore. “It is incomprehensible, a filthy monstrosity.”

“Do you think we should still have the wedding, father?” The girl asked. “Maybe Daisaku and me shouldn’t get married next month? Maybe we should wait. We don’t know about my aunt, and we don’t know about the other harms that this bomb might do.”

“No, no, we’ll be fine,” her father reassured her, visibly gathering himself. “Nagasaki is too far from Hiroshima for this
atomic fall-out they’re talking of to reach us here, we are safe. And we must continue our lives, to show the enemy they haven’t won. Your mother will find Fujiko, Shigeo, and their children; we’ll bring them here to live with us perhaps. Everything will be okay.”

He looked up to meet the girl’s eyes and attempted a reassuring smile.

“And anyway, I’m nearly at seven-hundred cranes,’ he held out one of the paper birds he had folded and smiled. “You can’t not get married!”

“America, the Russians, the Allies, they have won, son. They had already won; they didn’t need to drop this bomb.” The older woman shook her head as she spoke. “There was no need for them to… I don’t understand it. Such a frightful thing. So many lives; so much destruction. The world will not be the same again with this atomic bomb.”

Roger glanced at Sadako, he needed to speak, to explain something. He felt a physical compulsion to tell himself, as much as her or the family at the table:
“But the bombs saved lives, millions of lives, especially Japanese lives! Everyone said so, all the politicians at the time. And later studies!” He realised that the family weren’t hearing him, were unaware of even his presence, but he rushed on anyway, earnestly directing himself to Sadako.

“Yes, the bombs killed a quarter of a million or so, in the aftermath, and yes, more down the line. But… But Russia and America were about to invade, and that would’ve caused ten million Japanese deaths. Not to mention maybe a million on the Allied sides. Don’t you see?” He felt his authority returning, numbers were solid ground for him. Statistics were so much safer than people’s stories.

Yet, as he looked back into the room, everyone had stopped what they had been doing to reach out in some way to the older woman as she began to cry.

“What is this world, if we can kill each other so readily? If we can kill so many so without thinking of everyone? Without car-
“What are you doing for each one?” She hugged her grandson closely, pushing away his homework.

“Well, if this bomb has ended the war, then we can hope now for the future. We have to look forwards and do what we can,” the father sounded adamant.

“Yes, yes, that’s the spirit!” Roger piped encouragingly.

“Remember,” the father continued, holding up one of his origami creations, “our tradition says that anyone who folds a thousand cranes will get their wish? Well, I wish for peace.”

“It’s also tradition,” his daughter reminded him shyly, “that the bride’s father gives a thousand paper cranes as a wedding gift to wish the couple a thousand years of happiness and prosperity.”

“That is also my wish,” the father said fondly, looking to his daughter. “We must be positive…”

“We must be positive and believe the next thousand years will be better, without war, for our children and our children’s children.”
“I wish that aunty Fujiko, uncle Shigeo, and our cousins are alright,” the boy said tentatively, half as a question to his father.

“It’s only two days since the bomb, everything is…. ” The man faltered. “Well, it’ll just take some time to find out and…. It’s just appalling what has happened, unimaginable. I’m not going to pretend to you, son, that everything is alright, but we must hope that our family are safe.”

The man continued, his voice hardening:

“This force turned on us by America…. The radio news says really they are showing the Russians their power.”

“Then they should bomb the Russians!” the boy interjected.

“They should not bomb anyone!” His grandmother replied firmly. “Haven’t we had enough bombing, dying, and suffering now?”

“We’re in war, of course bombing happens. War is death and pain and killing,” the man said. “If I had been in the army I would have killed for my country, you know that.” He looked angrily at his mother, then softened.
“I’m sorry, I miss Yuji too, but my brother died for us, for our cause.”

His mother’s shoulders and head sank into her chest, as though she had been folded like a piece of his paper.

“What cause?” she asked in barely a whisper. “We call ourselves civilised, a great civilised nation. So do the British and Americans and Germans…. Is war and killing the way to be civilised? Is making a bomb that kills thousands, wipes out a whole city, civilised? Just because the Americans made it first, don’t think other countries aren’t trying to have this atomic bomb too. What happens then, when we all drop atomic bombs on each other?”

The boy looked petrified, and Roger felt frightened for him. That feeling served to dissipate the fear that he felt for himself in this surreal setting. His trepidation turned to something else, another emotion, or mix of emotions he couldn’t explain. Growing up, he’d viscerally known the Cold War terror just as everyone around him felt it. Yet, he
knew that the threatened nuclear apocalypse hadn’t happened. He wanted to reach out and tell the boy it would be alright….

But wait! Where were they? Hadn’t the father said Nagasaki?

Roger’s fear for the boy, though bewildering, became more acutely terrifying than before. He felt a chill through his whole being. Sadako, he observed with a pang, was regarding the people at the table with silent tears streaming down her cheeks.

Picking up her sewing, the young woman seemed to force herself to smile as she looked to her grandmother and spoke:

“Mother will find aunty and our family, and they’ll come to the wedding as planned, and my and Daisaku’s children will play with our cousins. Sadako is only a baby herself, oba-chan.”

Roger’s jaw dropped: Sadako!

“Yes, magomusume,” the older woman continued forlornly. “And we will honour those killed in Hiroshima: so many people who have brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers,
and children; and we will be happy that our family survived.”

As she finished speaking the kitchen and its family retreated from Roger: the image zoomed out, became distant, then hazy and finally faded away.

Sadako still gazed at the space where her family had been. When she spoke, her voice was clear and much calmer than Roger expected:

“You know me, you’ve heard my story. I didn’t die in the Hiroshima bombing. I was at home, two years old, when the explosion happened, just over a mile from what you would nowadays call ground-zero. I was blown out of the window, my mother, Fujiko, ran out to find me, so relieved and amazed that I survived, with no apparent injuries. My brothers, sister and father all survived too, a miracle when so many people died such awful deaths. My oba-chan, my grandmother, ran back to the house for something, and we never saw her again.”

Dumbfounded, Roger nodded his head. Yes, now he remembered this girl’s story.
And there was something else too, something to do with origami cranes?

“We never saw my aunt, uncle, or cousins again,” Sadako continued, turning to face him. “They died a day after this scene we just witnessed. They weren’t so lucky when the second bomb hit Nagasaki. Aika and Daisaku never got married or had children for me to play with.”

Sadako paused, locked her gaze on Roger, her eyes sorrowful and still wet with tears.

“Your daughter Amanda is engaged, isn’t she?”

Roger felt the pit of his stomach pitch and he felt nauseous. The thought of anything happening to Amanda brought instantaneous, physical pain.

“While we ran from our house,” Sadako continued, “my mother and I were caught in the black rain. Nine years later, swellings appeared on my neck and behind my ears. After that, I got purple spots all over my legs, caused by bleeding under the skin. I was diagnosed with acute malignant lymph gland leukaemia. My mother always called it ‘atom...
bomb disease.’ When I went into hospital in 1955, the doctors gave me less than a year to live. My white blood cell count was six times higher than the levels of an average child.”

Roger wanted to speak, but he had no idea of what to say.

“*It was in the hospital,*” Sadako resumed, “*that I first heard about the tradition of the cranes, the Japanese legend that promises that anyone who folds one thousand origami cranes will be granted a wish. Until this moment I had no idea that this was also what my uncle was doing in Nagasaki before the bomb that took them away fell. Myself, I started folding cranes, and wished to live. I wished for peace. I wished no one harm.*”

“When she was still quite young,” Roger recalled wistfully, “*just seven or eight years old, Amanda used to fold paper hearts for us, her mother and I.*”

“I wish Amanda only health and every happiness.”

Roger’s sigh trembled through his body. His feeling of relief for Amanda was mixed with terrible sadness for Sadako and her
relatives. Buck up, man, he thought, you can’t care for the whole world — for suffering across all time and space!

“I died on the morning of October 25th, 1955 when I was twelve years old,’ Sadako told him.


But he had the shakes. Good grief, he told himself, pull yourself together, man, none of this is happening, it’s not real.

“Look,” he managed, “I’m sure this is all very…but I have my own life, I have Marjorie and Amanda and…and a job to do. And I don’t believe in ghosts! I insist that you take me back to my office right away.”

Roger wasn’t sure what to expect from this madness, but being assertive was his habit and he felt reassured as his familiar embodied demeanour returned.

Still holding his hand, Sadako turned around and led him back through the door, closing it after them with no sound.

All seemed as it was before the darkness descended. The remains of his ham sand-
wich lay on the floor. Bizarrely, Roger found himself checking the desk to see if anything was missing. He looked out through the windows, observing that the sun was still high in the sky. He blinked. It was as if no time at all had passed. Just a dream. Back to blessed reality. Alone.

A voice emerged then, in a tone that Roger could not place.

“This was all real, Roger. This happened. You’re trying to hide this history, and from this history. Not just you, but your colleagues and many in your country, and in your world. I’m here to unhide the abominable. There is more for you to see, to open your eyes and your mind. I’ll leave you now to think about the past, but there are more spectres to come.”

Open-mouthed, Roger turned to watch the diaphanous Sadako walk back out through the door without opening it.

“Expect another on the stroke of midnight, in the comfort of your own home.”