The Lost Language of Cranes

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Art by Suzanne Northcott

The Lost Language of Cranes II”Suzanne Northcott

The Lost Language of Cranes

I
For if Hiroshima in the morning, after the bomb has fallen,
Is like a dream, one must ask whose dream it is.

Peter Schwenger, *Letter Bomb: Nuclear Holocaust and the Exploding Word*

Reading with my daughter
the story of *Sadako and the Thousand Cranes*.
Rachel loves to tell the story
of the little Japanese girl who is almost two when the
bomb explodes a mile from her home in Hiroshima.

They run, fleeing to the banks of the River Ota
drenched by the black rain,
falling, falling.

When she is twelve years old,
Sadako runs like the wind in school relay races
best runner in the sixth grade, until she falters
her body gnawed away by leukemia,
*Atomic Bomb Disease*.

In the hospital, her friends remind her
of the *Tsuru*, the crane
Japanese symbol of long life, of hope.

*If you fold a thousand cranes.*
*they will protect you from illness,*
*grant you a wish.*

Sadako tells the cranes
*I will write peace on your wings*
*and you will fly all over the world*

Sadako begins folding,
folding fragments of newspapers,
discarded wrappers from her medicines,
making tiny paper cranes,
folding, folding
Sadako’s mother writes:

*If she has to suffer like this,*

*she should have died that morning*

*on August 6th.*

She watches her daughter, her
   painstaking folding.
She buys a bolt of silk fabric
   printed with cherry blossoms,
   makes a kimono to enfold her child.

Sadako’s small fingers folding,
   folding day after day.
She makes 644 cranes before she dies.
Her classmates complete her thousand cranes,
   place them in her coffin,
   as if her heart would continue to beat in the paper wings.

Her mother wraps her daughter
   in the softness of silk,
   in the cherry blossom kimono,
   lays flowers in the coffin with the birds, so that her child
can bring them with her to the next world.

Sadako’s mother asks the birds:

*Why didn’t you sing? Why didn’t you fly?*
II

A cemetery seen from the air is a child’s city.
Carolyn Forché, “The Garden Shukkei-en”

I watch my daughter and her friends
folding tiny origami cranes for their class project,
winged symbols of peace, spread rainbow-hued
across the kitchen table.

The paper birds criss-cross the earth
   correspondences for peace projects,
   their hopeful wings trying to speak
the horrors of war amidst the cheery optimism
   of chalkboards and classrooms.
The children will send the paper cranes
in garlands of a hundred birds each
to the mayor of Hiroshima,
to be placed with millions of paper cranes
at the foot of the Children’s Monument where the stone figure of Sadako
holds a large golden crane above her head,
arms outstretched to the sky.

I watch my children play and wonder
if the power of birds will stand strong against
exploding words and mushroom clouds
against the screams that reverberate
in the silence of Hiroshima’s Peace Park.

“Origami Crane” Suzanne Northcott
After I noticed the flash, white clouds spread over the blue sky.
It was as if blue morning glories had suddenly bloomed…
Testimony of Isao Kita

By the banks of the river Ota,
where Sadako used to play in the Garden Shukkei-en,
stands a stone angel holding an origami crane.

Hibakusha, survivors who are still alive
wander the garden, across the pond
on the Kokoukyo Bridge, through tea ceremonies
and the blossomings of plums and cherries and irises.

In the garden, the silence,
the insistence of memory, the flash of light,
the burning heat, the shattering of glass,
everywhere the cries of children calling for
their mothers.

Bodies stripped naked by the
blast, skin peeling, hanging from fingertips
like cloth, mothers holding dying children
in their arms, trying in vain to pluck away
the swarming maggots.

Bones in rice bowls,
babies crawling over dead mothers, rooting for
nipples, seeking milk, their reflections shimmering
like ghosts.

Against a clear blue sky, flames of fire
and then black sticky rain
falling, falling on trees, on flowers, on rooftops,
on people, the world turning so black
it could not be washed off.
IV

..Somewhere slow
poetry is being tender with its alphabet.

Don McKay, “A Morning Song”

Outside my house the morning sun spills,
gilded ripples across the bay.
The cranes stilt across the mudflats.

I wonder what they know, what we have lost,
these birds that mate for life.

Sometimes in the shallow waters of these wetlands,
the cranes dance,
sending waves flying, a language of ancient memories,
a language that teaches us that after grief, it is possible
to love again,
a music we have forgotten, such sheer joy.

When the cranes lift in ascent, cathedrals of wind
rise in their wingbones,
estuaries of morning light lifting across continents,
a white front of radiance,
their cries like clouds of desire.

After, in the presence of still waters,
you can rest in the white light, in the grace of wings.

The Lost Language of Cranes II
(The Lost Language of Cranes I) 12”x 48”, mixed media on wood.

Epigraph by Peter Schwenger from Letter Bomb. Nuclear Holocaust and

Section II
Art by Suzanne Northcott
“The Lost Language of Cranes I,” (detail) 12”x 48,” mixed media on wood.

Section III
Art by Suzanne Northcott
“The Lost Language of Cranes I,” (detail) 12”x 48,” mixed media on wood.
Art by Suzanne Northcott
“The Lost Language of Cranes III,” 12” x 48,” mixed media on wood.


**Hibakusha:** The first atomic bomb used in wartime was dropped in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, killing between 130,000 and 150,000 people by the end of that year. The term *hibakusha* refers to survivors of the Atomic Bomb. Those who survived the bombing are aging rapidly now after struggling for many years. Segments of this poem are informed by the testimonies collected and videotaped by the Hiroshima Peace and Culture Foundation to commemorate the International year of Peace in 1986.


When Sadako died on October 25, 1955, her classmates folded the missing paper cranes to make a thousand and placed them in the coffin with Sadako’s body. Since then the paper crane has become an international symbol of nuclear disarmament.

Sadako’s friends and classmates collected Sadako’s letters and writings and published them under the title *Kokeshi*, after the name of a doll they had given Sadako in the hospital. Inspired by this collection and the remarkable effect Sadako’s story had on others, Eleanor Coerr wrote the powerful book, *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*, published by G.P. Putnam in 1993.

Sadako’s classmates began a national campaign to build a monument in her memory. It was built to honor all children who suffered from the devastating consequences and effects of the atomic bomb. The Statue of Sadako is also known as The Children’s Monument. Built in 1958 with donations from school children, the monument stands in the center of Hiroshima’s Peace Park surrounded by thousands of paper cranes from people all over the world. At its base is a plaque with the following inscription:

*This is our cry
This is our prayer
Peace in the world*

**About the Author**

**Rishma Dunlop** is a professor of Literary Studies in the Faculty of...
Education at York University, Toronto. She is the founder of a research collective of women artists/researchers called The Red Shoes Collective. Current research projects include The Language of Her Bones, an exploration of the engagement with literature and the arts for human rights and humanist education. Her ongoing collaborations with visual artists include exhibitions of literary texts and art, collaborative publications and performances. Rishma Dunlop is a poet and fiction writer whose work has won awards and has appeared in numerous books and journals. Her books of poetry include Boundary Bay, (1999, Staccato/Turnstone Press), The Body of My Garden (2002, Mansfield Press) and Reading Like a Girl (2004, Black Moss Press). She is editor, with Priscila Uppal of Red Silk: An Anthology of Canadian South Asian Women Poets (2004, Mansfield Press). Rishma Dunlop is an active member of PEN Canada (advocacy group for writers’ human rights, Writers in Exile and Writers in Prison) and she organizes a speaker series at York University called Writers and Artists Without Borders.

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About the Artist

Suzanne Northcott lives in the historic village of Fort Langley, B.C. Mainly self-taught, her work ranges from contemporary figurative to abstraction. Her work revolves around an exploration of the nature of boundaries and what lies between: between self and other, the material and the subconscious world, or the space between disparate places. She works mainly in acrylic on wood or canvas, sometimes in combination with drawing media and phototransfer. A senior member of the Federation of Canadian Artists, Northcott is in demand around British Columbia and across Canada, teaching creative process and life drawing. She has guest lectured at Capilano College, University College of the Fraser Valley and York University. Her work is widely collected and her awards include the prestigious Aim for Arts International Show and this year's Spillsbury bronze medal. Her collaboration with Dunlop is a continuation of her fascination with words and image and follows an earlier project "The Sex Lives of Vegetables," with poet Lorna Crozier.

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