

Where Are the People?

On Not Being Caught Off-Guard, Serenely or Otherwise

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Poet Ishigaki Rin (1920-2004) arrived at work on August 5, 1952 and was told to write a poem to accompany the photo of an A-bomb victim that would be prominently displayed on the following day, the anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing. Because of the U.S. Occupation ban on verbal or visual representations of the victims of the atomic bombings, this was the first time for the poet herself as well as the union official who requested the poem to see such a photograph, and both were in a state of shock.

Although this poem was occasioned by first exposure to the horrifying spectacle of the impact of an atomic bomb on human flesh, it dwells on the long moment—months, years, decades—*before* a nuclear catastrophe. I never read it without feeling the shiver of our implication as both culpable and victimized in the nuclear age. And *after* Fukushima, I realize it's possible to continue to be caught off-guard in our blindness about the plight of people caught in the slower devastation of a nuclear power plant disaster, in our willed ignorance that our present is a moment of a catastrophe-in-the-making. Can we respond to these "Greetings" without the benefit of another disaster?

Greetings

by Ishigaki Rin

Upon seeing a photograph of an atomic bomb victim

Ah
this burnt, oozing face of
August 6, 1945
belonged to someone in Hiroshima at that moment
one of the 250,000 burnt, oozing things

no longer of this world.

Even so,
my friend

let us look once again
into the faces we have turned toward each other—
faces without a trace of the flames of war,
faces of today radiant with health
morning-fresh faces.

When I search there for the expression tomorrow could bring
a shudder passes through me.

The earth holds several hundred nuclear weapons.
How, when you walk the abyss between life and death,
can you be so serenely
beautiful?

Hush. And listen.
Can you hear something coming?
What needs to be seen is before your eyes
What needs to be chosen
is in the palm of your hand
8:15 a.m. comes around every day.

That morning of August 6, 1945
all those 250,000 people who died instantly
were
like you, like me
serenely beautiful caught
off guard.

(Translated by N. Field)