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POETS ON THE BOMB

The ship belonged to the bombardier
who opened his little bay,
He saw the target the lovely target,
and suddenly "Bombs away."
— *Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart,*
"The Bombadier Song" (1942)

That bomb had more power than twenty
thousand tons of TNT. It had more than two
thousand times the blast power of the British
Grand Slam, which is the largest bomb ever
yet used in the history of warfare.
— *Harry S. Truman (1945)*

God suddenly averted His eyes at 8:15.
— *Fujikawa Genshi (haiku, Hiroshima)*



Wait Till Next Year is the title the historian Doris Kearns Goodwin gives her recent memoir of growing up in New York in the 1950s and rooting for the Brooklyn Dodgers. It takes on a decidedly non-baseball meaning when we read what she has to say about the impact the existence of the atomic bomb had on the lives of the children of her generation, especially after the Soviet Union had exploded its own nuclear device.

Now that America no longer had a monopoly over nuclear weapons, the devastating power which had brought the Japanese to their knees might be turned against us. The threat of an atomic attack not only changed the course of the Cold War; it produced reactions that filtered down from the offices of

government into the lives of an entire generation of young people. To us, the Cold War was not an abstraction. It was the air-raid drills in school, the call for bomb shelters, and exposure to the deliberately unsettling horror of civil-defense films. Our generation was the first to live with the knowledge that, in a single instant, everyone and everything we knew—our family, our friends, our block, our world—could be brought to an end. If a bomb exploded in Manhattan, which was considered a likely target, its fireball would vaporize everything from Central Park to Washington Square, and produce deadly fallout over a twenty-to-thirty-mile radius. On the basis of some obscure calculation, we were informed that the bomb's impact would reach Rockville Centre [her home] in twelve minutes. (157-58)

The impending threat of such sweeping destruction called for plans and drills of preparation:

The air-raid drills conducted by our school were treated with the utmost seriousness. When the shriek of sirens interrupted our studies, we practiced two different drills. On the assumption that the bomb was close by, we were to fall to the floor, face down beneath our desks, elbows over our heads, eyes shut. Although I could never figure out how my flimsy desk, with its worn inkwell and its years of name-scratching, could protect me from the atomic bomb, I did what I was told, and kept absolutely still while we awaited the shriek of the falling missile. In the second drill, designed for situations in which there was time to take cover, teachers led us into the hallway and down into the basement, where they directed us to lean against the wall and fold our arms over our heads. (158)

It was their own government, of course, that taught American children of the 1950s to react as victims in the face of the possi-

ble use of the atomic bomb by America's enemies. Since it was all part of the Cold War, they were not instructed in how the rest of the world might survive the destructive explosion of such bombs initiated by America itself. Pretty much glossed over in such schoolroom training was the fact that the United States had been the first nation to explode atomic bombs or that Hiroshima and Nagasaki children had not had the benefit of such instruction.

August 1945, immediately after the first atomic bombs were dropped on those two Japanese cities and the unconditional surrender of Japan that followed shortly thereafter, was a time for celebrating victory, not for the raising of moral and practical questions about the destructive power unleashed by the splitting of the atom. Yet it was not long afterwards, in 1946, that John Hersey, who had been a correspondent filing feature pieces on the war in the Pacific theater, reported on "Hiroshima," a magazine piece that took up an entire issue of the *New Yorker*. Seeing immediately beyond the narrow moral focus demanded by the victory-at-all-costs mentality that had fueled the war, Hersey's piece had an immediate impact on readers. Influential as it was, however, Hersey's *Hiroshima* probably did not achieve its fullest moral impact, not even when published as a widely disseminated book in the same year, because at that very moment the (as yet barely named) Cold War had already taken its hold on public opinion in America as well as on the nation's foreign policy. The Cold War was fired up by George Kennan's then top secret report on the USSR, which became the blueprint for diplomacy toward the USSR and, in a more public way, by Winston Churchill's "Iron Curtain Speech" in Fulton, Missouri, on March 5, 1946. "From Stettin on the Baltic to Trieste on the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across Europe," announced Churchill, making widely known some of the darker implications of the Soviet Union's decision to cut herself and her satellite countries in Central and Eastern Europe off from the rest of Europe. Moral concerns over the very decision to build the bomb, let alone its use in warfare, did not, of course, disappear. But those concerns were largely overridden by incoherent arguments that the bomb was necessary to successful diplomacy, that the threat to use it worked for peace, and that its use would

destroy whole populations while enhancing the chances for the survival of Americans.

My concern here differs somewhat from that suggested in Doris Kearns Goodwin's account of her worries about the bomb as she was growing up. Poets, like novelists and other writers, took up the theme of the bomb, referring to the effects resulting from its existence and the long-range implications of its uses. My subject is the way poets reacted to the bomb, with a focus on representative poems in English, running from the 1940s to the 1960s. The poets selected, standing for many others, are a mixture of the famous and not so famous: Robert Frost, Daniel Hoffman, Richard Wilbur, Paul Roche, and Olga Cabral.

In *Steeple Bush* (1947), his eighth and penultimate book of lyric poems, Robert Frost, who was born in 1874, refers to the atomic bomb directly in two late poems. "U. S. 1946 King's X," first published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1946, needles America's exclusive policy on the bomb. Writing before the Soviet Union demonstrated that she too knew the "secret" of atomic energy, he continues to think within the spirit of competition and free play among nations that he always advocated:

Having invented a new Holocaust,
And been the first with it to win a war,
How they make haste to cry with fingers crossed,
King's X— no fairs to use it any more! (362)

Interestingly enough, the poet distances himself from those making international policy on the bomb. Objectifying the policy-makers of the nation, he refers not to "how *we* make haste," but to "how *they* make haste." Frost, who to the end of his life believed in the salubrious effects of international competition in all areas— science, sports, the arts— sets aside, for the sake of his own notions of proper and effective diplomacy, the bomb's threat to planetary life itself, not to mention the immediate loss of human life and the long-range effects of radiation poisoning.

As the tone of "U. S. 1946 King's X" suggests, Frost's impulse in the years immediately following WWII was to treat the matter of the bomb satirically. After all, the bomb might have its uses, even as bureaucrats and scientists were rushing to define

and promote the peaceful uses of the atom. It might be the answer to the mounting though rapturous anxieties brought on by new knowledge, especially in science. The bomb might be the means, even, of personal and national relief, through the act of what he called, "Bursting Rapture," the title of another late poem in *Steeple Bush*:

I went to the physician to complain,
The time had been when anyone could turn
To farming for a simple way to earn;
But now 'twas there as elsewhere, any gain
Was made by getting science on the brain;
There was so much more every day to learn,
The discipline of farming was so stern,
It seemed as if I couldn't stand the strain.
But the physician's answer was "There, there,
What you complain of all the nations share.
Their effort is a mounting ecstasy
That when it gets too exquisite to bear
Will find relief in one burst. You shall see.
That's what a certain bomb was sent to be. (362)

In the penultimate poem of *Steeple Bush*, "The Broken Drought," Frost looks prophetically at the human condition that includes not just bombs but natural disasters (defined so by mankind) as drought. Although this poem was written prior to 1944, its placement in *Steeple Bush* suggests the nature of its relationship to the two atomic bomb poems that accompany it in the final pages of the volume.

The prophet of disaster ceased to shout.
Something was going right outside the hall.
A rain though stingy had begun to fall
That rather hurt his theory of the drought
And all the great convention was about.
A cheer went up that shook the mottoed wall.
He did as Shakespeare says, you may recall,
Good orators *will* do when they are out.
Yet in his heart he was unshaken sure
The drought was one no spit of rain could cure.

It was the drought of deserts. Earth would soon
Be uninhabitable as the moon.
What for that matter had it ever been?
Who advised man to come and live therein? (363)

Frost belongs to an older generation that was already middle-aged when it was horrified by the way modern warfare was conducted in 1914-1918. By the time Frost was in his sixties and seventies there seemed to be nothing new under the sun for him. He could not, of course, really take the existence of the atomic bomb in stride, but there was a sense in which his familiar Wordsworthian way of accommodating the discoveries of science and explaining the swerves of history would do. Taking the long view of history and myth, he simply would not fall in with the sweeping notion that "the use of nuclear energy as a weapon" had given poets a shared "sense of peril," causing them to "speak in despair about the triumph of 'the bomb' over life" (Rukeyser 55).

It is to such prophets of disaster, as adduced by Frost in "The Broken Drought," that Richard Wilbur, born in 1921, nearly a half-century after his closest New England precursor, addresses his own words. In "Advice to a Prophet," Wilbur takes a Frost-like tack, pretending to instruct *his* prophet on how, when he comes, to put his message across. Only in terms of the realized things of Wilbur's (and our) imagined world will humankind gain any apprehension of his potential fate in the atomic age. It is a matter of qualities and colors, not numbers.

When you come, as you soon must, to the streets of our city,
Mad-eyed from stating the obvious,
Not proclaiming our fall but begging us
In God's name to have self-pity,

Spare us all word of the weapons, their force and range,
The long numbers that rocket the mind;
Our slow, unreckoning hearts will be left behind,
Unable to fear what is too strange.

Nor shall you scare us with talk of the death of the race.
How should we dream of this place without us?—

The sun mere fire, the leaves untroubled about us,
A stone look on the stone's face?

Speak of the world's own change. Though we cannot conceive
Of an undreamt thing, we know to our cost
How the dreamt cloud crumbles, the vines are blackened by frost,
How the view alters. We could believe,

If you told us so, that the white-tailed deer will slip
Into perfect shade, grown perfectly shy,
The lark avoid the reaches of our eye,
The jack-pine lose its knuckled grip

On the cold ledge, and every torrent burn
As Xanthus once, its gliding trout
Stunned in a twinkling. What should we be without
The dolphin's arc, the dove's return,

These things in which we have seen ourselves and spoken?
Ask us, prophet, how we shall call
Our natures forth when that live tongue is all
Dispelled, that glass obscured or broken

In which we have said the rose of our love and the clean
Horse of our courage, in which beheld
The singing locust of the soul unshelled,
And all we mean or wish to mean.

Ask us, ask us whether with the worldless rose
Our hearts shall fail us; come demanding
Whether there shall be lofty or long standing
When the bronze annals of the oak-tree close. (12-13)

The poet advises the prophet, whose visit is inevitable and whose message is certain, that he must speak out in our language, that he must not try to scare us with talk of weapons, of "long numbers that rocket the mind," but rather with naming the things of this world that have appealed to the human imagination, of the altering and loss of the "dreamt" world we know as reality. Many years ago, a colleague (who was also a poet) complained that one

could not talk about the atomic bomb in this fashion adopted by Wilbur. Yet, with the passing of the decades, it seems to me, we have come only closer to Wilbur's way of talking about our fears of nuclear holocaust. Quantification of loss and potential loss has long since lost its early hold on human minds.

The third poet I would invoke in this consideration of poetic responses to the advent of the bomb is Daniel G. Hoffman, who was born in 1923. The first poem under consideration, published in 1950, has a title that runs directly into the body of the poem:

The Seals in Penobscot Bay

hadn't heard of the atom bomb,
so I shouted a warning to them.

Our destroyer (on trial run) slid by
the rocks where they gamboled and played;

they must have misunderstood,
or perhaps not one of them heard

me over the engines and tides.
As I watched them over our wake

I saw their sleek skins in the sun
ripple, light-flecked, on the rock,

plunge, bubbling, into the brine,
and couple & laugh in the troughs

between the waves' whitecaps and froth.
Then the males clambered clumsily up

and lustily crowed like sea-cocks,
sure that their prowess held thrall

all the sharks, other seals, and seagulls.
And daintily flipped the females,

sea-wenches with musical tails;
each looked at the Atlantic as

though it were her looking-glass.
If my warning had ever been heard

it was sound none would now ever heed.
And I, while I watched those far seals,

tasted honey that buzzed in my ears
and saw, out to windward, the sails

of an obsolete ship with banked oars
that swept like two combs through the spray

And I wished for a vacuum of wax
to ward away all those strange sounds,

yet I envied the sweet agony
of him who was tied to the mast,

when the boom, when the boom, when the boom
of guns punched dark holes in the sky (453-54)

Hoffman's poem is about love, the kind of natural love the existence of which, embodied in the seals, is under the impending threat of destruction by the atomic bomb. It is against no twenty-one gun salute fired off into the sky by this destroyer (on trial run) that the seals gambol away in their naturally sexual play. The seals do not hear the poet's warning (nor would they heed it, one can safely presume, if they did hear it). The poem is big with a question: what does it matter to Nature that the bomb exists? Is it only the poet's human self-love that makes him envy "the sweet agony / of him who was tied to the mast" (either the Greek or the boy who stood on the burning deck will do), a rather self-serving longing that exposes itself as such before the easeful sexuality of the seals? Or does that longing expose the lusty human cock-crowing signified by guns that punch "dark holes in the sky" and the possession of atom bombs that is aped in Nature by seals who are "sea-cocks" sure "that their prowess

held thrall / all the sharks, other seals, and seagulls” and “seawenches” who look at the Atlantic as if the ocean were their looking-glass?

The poet immediately follows up his poem about the unhearing, uninformed seals with “At Provincetown,” a seascape-inscape poem about seagulls.

Over the wharves at Provincetown
we watched the hooded gulls maneuver.

As one last gull, in late arrival,
flung his wings before our face

crying “Wait!,” . . . “Wait!,” in a race
to ride their aerial carousel,

we saw his dark-dipt head, eye-bead,
each individual grace recede

as all swooped up, then spun, and fell
unmoving in motion. Here was pure flight,

free from all bird-appetite.
Then the highest soarer saw

the *Mary Magdalena* yaw,
laden low with mackerel.

* * *

Beauty is the moment moving
toward unpremeditate perfection.

Over the wharves at Provincetown
the gulls within our arteries soaring

almost complete the great mobile
that all but froze gullsblood to steel.

Other wings across the harbor
flash like swords and dive for garbage. (454-55)

Here is something of this world, both moral and aesthetic, that must not be destroyed. Note that it is not the contemplation of the imagined things that most matters but the destruction of “the great mobile” itself. Placing “At Provincetown” immediately after “The Seals in Penobscot Bay,” the poet does not have to make explicit in the second poem what the existence of the bomb puts in harm’s way.

It is with sober resignation, however, that another poet in the mid-1950s sees the inevitable employment of the bomb. Paul Roche, who was born in 1927, voices his lamentations within the ordered lines of a villanelle published in *The Listener*, the BBC’s weekly print publication, for June 23, 1955. Knowing that warriors will always be warriors and that they, like the poor, will always be with us, the poet of “Villanelle for a Modern Warrior” settles, ironically, for what seems to be a minor concession— that modern warriors not “sing” their songs of warfare.

Young soldier, airman, sailor— king,
The earth is trembling at your potency.
Celebrate but do not sing.

The world’s eyes plead while worshipping.
Your body’s strong in fighting livery,
Young soldier, airman, sailor— king.

A Titan everywhere you swing
The earth a trinket at your wrist. You’re free.
Celebrate but do not sing.

Kisses on your blossoming!
Rapine in atomic latency!
Young soldier, airman, sailor— king.

Watch a mushroom moonfire fling
A town in fountained ashes to the sea.
Celebrate but do not sing.

Spread thick your lustihood, your wantoning,
To match that power to blast. Your lonely
Laughter afterwards will ring

As homeward echoes vanishing.
Young soldier, airman, sailor— king,
Celebrate but do not sing. (1114)

To conclude this brief sampling, I shall turn to two poems by Olga Cabral, who is now in her late eighties. The first poem, "In the Shadow of the Mushroom," is taken from *The Evaporated Man*, her second collection of poetry, published in 1968 and described as "a new book of anti-war and other poems" (Cabral cover). It is not at all incidental that the book's appearance coincided with the peaking of war in Vietnam.

In the shadow of the mushroom
the pinball machines
declare wars, set armies
of missiles in motion
and trading's brisk
in new swastika pins
made of gold fillings
from the teeth of cadavers.

In the shadow of the mushroom
heads filled with hydrogen
the gray balloons ponder maps
and sewer rats sell shares
in underground survival
to trousered rodents
who know where the next boom
in real estate will come.

In the shadow of the mushroom
monks from the Rand lamasery
shoot craps with neutrons
keep prayer-wheels running
and cities prepare
for the time of disaster
warehouses stuffed with shrouds
none will have time to need.

In the shadow of the mushroom
seconds tick the countdown
on the galactic clock
and the era's monument
is the evaporated man
who left his shadow sitting
on some steps in Hiroshima
for the Age of Overkill. (14)

The poem seems to say that living with the threat of the bomb hanging over mankind itself engenders war. To call them pinball-machine wars seems appropriate in a world that refers to the explosion of nuclear bombs as "setting off devices." The poem counters, too, those promotions of "Duck and Cover" aimed at 1950s schoolchildren as described by Doris Kearns Goodwin. For the larger truth, as Olga Cabral prophesizes, is that "cities" will "prepare / for the time of disaster / warehouses stuffed with shrouds / none will have time to need."

One last poem, again by Olga Cabral, addresses rather evenly the best-case scenario surrounding the building and employment of family bomb shelters. In the United States, mounting hysteria over the bomb seemed to peak when Governor Nelson Rockefeller embarked on a feverishly inclusive program for the construction and stocking of such shelters throughout the state of New York. Survival of an attack of atom bombs by a bomb-sheltered family of four (at the time's ideal zero reproduction rate) insures life lived, as the poet characterizes it, "Through a Concrete Window":

On the day they locked the world out the wax orange bush
provided by the decorator for a morale builder
continued its sterile gibber of blameless blossoms,
for it, like the occupants, was disaster-proof.

In sub-suburbia the four lived on
though warned by the stuffed canary of arrested development,
for they had nowhere to go but the Exercycle—
trips through old travel folders muscularly provided.

The radio worked throughout, prayers by Conelrad
and celestial choirs broadcast from the iron mountain
whose inaccessible bank-vaults housed for (if any) posterity
the epic chronicles of AmCan and AmTelTel.

Outside it rained. Human ashes fell
above their bunker for fourteen days and nights.
They tried to quiet Junior. It was their last bottle of Coke.
Nobody knew if this mortal debris was brown or black or white.
(18)

Thirty, forty, fifty years later, these somewhat neglected
poems by Frost, Wilbur, Hoffman, Paul Roche, and Olga Cabral
though constituting but a handful of the thousands undoubtedly
that have been written down through the decades, may strike
some readers as little more than faded snapshots from a now
distant past. It may even be, perhaps, best that way. Yet there is
still something to be said for heeding the warnings of prophets
whose prophecies have not come true, at least not yet. Just wait.
Wait till next year. ☹

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