

My poem is called "The day the train stopped."

We were on our way to Hiroshima
from Kyoto
on the train.

It was August in 2010,
Six months before Fukushima.

My group from the American University
nuclear studies course
had just been at the Kyoto Museum for world peace.

In the lower level of the museum
there were photos of US atomic soldiers
with cancers so severe,
their bodies no longer recognizable as human,
like the mutated children of Chernobyl
but only older,
with legs and arms swollen to the size of giants.

We should have a peace museum in America
I thought then,
these pictures are also our stories

The museum
would tell the stories
of what the utopian dreams
of radiation had brought.

I know the early dreams./ I share dreams just like them too.
Early scientists like Frederick Soddy and Madame Curie,
dreamed of their discovery
being used to heal
and to produce true access to medicine, energy and wealth
for the world's poor.

As Soddy would say,
to finally end the chasm between
those who labored as slaves, like miners,
and those who were privileged?
He meant as well as I do.

The train almost imperceptibly slows, comes to a stop/

I gaze out the window and think about how this belief was not only rhetoric,
it was essential to

the US Atomic Energy Commission,
their wishes deployed by the United Nation's technical experts.

Radiation health safety is the lynch-pin, the science, that would christen it safe.

Chemist Willard Libby said, of course artificial radiation can be made safe-- it just needs to be below natural background.

The tangible curie
is lost in translation
to rads, rems, sieverts, and millirems,
doses now based on models and assumptions.

This sensible trope,
unexamined beyond the realm
of pro nuclear experts,
relentlessly repeated
"below background,
below background,
below background is safe enough."

That is what they told the US atomic soldiers
and it wasn't true then
nor is it true now.

Yet it is relentlessly repeated
“below background,
below background,
below background is safe enough”

What do the numbers in millirems mean to a Navajo elder
watching her grandchild die,
wasting away from Navajo Neuropathy?

How did this happen?/ The UN: A body created for peace,
would use nuclear technology
to heal what ails us,
ending war with an equality
that only slick technological fixes
like research reactors, Geiger counters and radioactive tracers
could bring to backward nations.

Our **bodies**/--- future **bodies**/--- were sacrificed by **bodies** like UN
and nation state **bodies**
in their hopes for peace.

And hopes for contracts and sales.

The train is still just sitting on the tracks.

Soon we will move,

someone new with a suitcase will board,

walk thru our car,

but I notice no one does.

I think about/

how over time,

national security

came to obscure bodily sovereignty.

Most know nuclear war is inhuman, but nothing can quite be done to stop it.

The technology spreads

and with it the ideas of my body and contamination

as a small price to pay for my country,

for the free world.

As imperceptibly

as the radiation,

human rights

become relegated to the state.

I gazed out
the window of the train,
It was all so achingly beautiful in Japan.
But slowly I realized
we were still stopped-- but not to let anyone off or on.

Why has the train stopped?

No one knew.
We were no where it seemed,
not near a town or village or city or a station.
Just between places/

The time passed.

Is the train broken down?

There were no answers.

I folded peace cranes while I waited.

With each folded crease,
I thought about the Hibakusha,

the atomic survivor testimonies

I had heard,

folding cranes

for each person who spoke,

each person or lost soul

they mentioned.

I am in the story

with my origami folding.

I think of the horror

after the bombs fell.

The survivors I listened to

had spoken of

their unimaginable memories:

the people in the silence

just whispers

begging for water,

holding their arms away from their bodies

walking as zombies

as their skin fell off in tatters

like Tibetan prayer flags flown too long.

I know how this happened.

I saw the documents.

But why does it go on?

I folded,

we are still suspended

on the train tracks.

The others on the train

were more impatient.

Complaining.

Finally, the director of the Kyoto Museum for World Peace

Atsushi Fujioka softly explained to us

the reason for the delay.

A suicide.

Someone had jumped in front of a train

and taken their own life.

I folded, folded, and folded for this person

I did not know

but whose death screamed:

wake up to the nightmare/

that so many

are sleeping through.

It was some time before I could speak.

Atsushi I said, this means:

we need to see the links between suicide

and grief over a world that leads with nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons send the message:

what is one life,

when 'superpowers' threaten the whole of existence?

How do we heal these souls and end this tragedy?

I keep folding peace cranes.

For not only

All the survivors I met in Japan

But for

the uranium miners,
the atomic soldiers
and workers,
the scientists...
the children, the families ---
all souls,
taken thus far,
as generations of time spreads out,
are folded in my heart.