

Red Sky at Night 赤い夜空**Kojima Tadayoshi 児島 忠義****Takajo-machi, Tokushima-shi 徳島市鷹匠町**

At the base of Mt. Bizan in the Iga-machi Hachiman Shrine there is an unusual, old-fashioned Shinto gate. As you pass through this gate you can see lots of round, moss-covered steps on your right-hand side leading up to the main shrine dedicated to Hachiman. To a child's eyes, the stone steps and the views from up high made it an ideal place to play. Even now, I can picture that scene and I have fond memories of playing there long ago. To the left of the main shrine there is a water shrine and a shrine dedicated to Inari. There is a bamboo thicket at the foot of the mountain. I put on my air raid helmet and put some gauze soaked in water into my mouth in that bamboo thicket. I trembled as I was cowering and clinging to the rocks at the bottom of the giant bamboo. My throat was so dry and I wanted some water but I was so overcome with fear that my hands shook when I tried to drink from my flask.

This happened sixty-five years ago at the end of the Pacific War. It was the Tokushima Air Raid, in the early dawn of July 4th, 1945. Over the course of two hours, one hundred and twenty-nine United States Air Force B-29 bombers devastated Tokushima city centre with their firebombing attacks. I was seven years old at that time. I was a

second grade student at Shinmachi Elementary School. My only knowledge of military affairs came from films, pictures and toys. But I wanted to be a good young soldier. Takajo-machi had not yet been evacuated. I thought I could stay and watch the town's vigilant fire safety drills – like the passing of buckets of water and the operation of pumps for the fire hoses. But on June 27th, just after the air raid siren had sounded, there was a wailing sound and then a loud boom as a bomb fell in the garden of the house two doors down from mine. It was dropped by a United States bomber launched from an aircraft carrier. Shrapnel from the bomb tore through the walls of our house. The house was in ruins but somehow my mother and I were not injured even though we were in the living room listening to the news on the radio. My father was not at home because he had been drafted to work in the munitions factory nearby. I was stricken with fear in that moment and couldn't tell what was happening as I panicked in the thick cloud of dust.

But the prolonged air raid and firebombing on July 4th was truly terrifying. The incendiary bombs swayed as they were scattered across the summer night sky. Throughout the air raid I was shaking with fear but I couldn't help but take a tiny peak up at the sky out of the corner of my eye. The bombs looked like red fireworks as they fell directly over our heads. The constant blasts of the huge red fireworks were buoyed

by the wind and not a single bomb landed in the bamboo forest or the grounds of the shrine. My parents escaped injury. Perhaps it was the divine power of the Hachiman Shrine. With our house and everything we owned utterly destroyed, we were forced to evacuate on foot to our relatives in Komatsushima. We set out at first light along the mountain paths with nothing but the clothes on our backs. The trauma from the horror of the prolonged air raid continued into my teenage years. The deep booming sounds of the bombs like the horrible buzzing of mosquitoes and the B-29 bombers often haunted my dreams.

Soon, on August 15th, 1945, word reached Komatsushima that the war had ended. My youthful militarism disappeared. I was relieved. We were saved. The war was a bitter experience. I adopted a new maturity and thought about how we must value life.

There should be no war. The idea of another war is wretched.

In the sixty-five years since then, Japan has been peaceful and prosperous. I am so thankful that I can spend my retirement years in Japan in peace.

I went to pray at Hachiman Shrine recently. In the grounds, the round, moss-covered steps and the main shrine above them were just as they were all those years ago. As I stared at the bamboo thicket on the left, it brought back memories of the Tokushima Air Raid. I felt a deep sense of gratitude for the peaceful era we live in.

I keep praying for peace in our world.

Note: My apologies if there are errors in this account. I was a child at the time.