

HIROSHIMA NO MORE

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

Life betrays us. We must die. Nothing can save us. Not love, not good works, not ageless monuments, not wealth, power or prayer. Our curse is to perceive our end, and to numb the terror we empty our lives as readily as our bowels. It is the most enduring question: *Why must I die?*

Each death is an end to the world. Elaborate constructions of life afterward persist in every culture, yet for all of the rigorous hells and nirvanas a more solid faith gives our scanty lives meaning: that the bloodlines will continue, that humanity will survive the smaller mortalities of its members. Our children; their children. A future time.

The faith has lately been shattered. The human race has brilliantly invented its own suicide. For the entirety of its future humanity, its civilizations and quite possibly all other life on its home planet are threatened with a holocaust conceived by itself. We have seen our world from space, so small and frail, a mote in God's eye; the same technical mastery that sent rockets to the stars is capable also of sending them on a shorter, final journey of obliteration. Even now, in the post-Cold War era, the ostensible end of the nuclear arms race and dismantling of the huge arsenals, it is an act of faith that at any instant deadly missiles have not been launched from somewhere: on a normal day we might all look up and see spiky umbrella-like contrails of nuclear missiles reentering the atmosphere, and all that was normal a few moments before will vanish forever.

History has a fissure more pertinent than the birth of Christ or the sowing of grain. The Sign of the Cross is transposed with a much more powerful icon. The Mushroom Cloud.

Humanity has lived 60 years with the enormous power and consequences of nuclear energy. Yet since the beginning of the nuclear age very few of us have been able to confront the horror that nuclear weapons represent, and because we have preferred to ignore or deny the consequences of nuclear holocaust, we generally allow a free hand to those who ensure its probability. We cling to promises of our leaders that they serve the best interests of humanity and we pray they are right about their decisions because we are confused and perplexed about what they are doing with the terrible power we have acceded to them. We have made ourselves like trusting children, horrified and hardened by parental abuse, but we feel there is no alternative. We permit our governments to keep secret from us the vital information necessary to preserve ourselves and our descendants. If we are to know we might have to act, and prefer instead to leave the unthinkable to its perpetrators.

It is difficult to hold for very long onto the consequences of nuclear war. The scale of a world destroyed is too large and inaccurate. It is not easy to believe we can so quickly sweep away what has taken centuries to construct.

People nostalgic for the Cold War might remember the daily crises and confrontations that kept everybody a bundle of nerves behind their Happy Day smiles (which resembled terror more than sublimity). Scores of doomsday books written by such popular writers as Nevil Schute, Pat Frank and Philip Wylie fed a morbidly voracious dread. M.L. Graham of Arch Cape (Oregon) tersely captured the basic scenario of these end of civilization as we know it novels in three paragraphs, which he wrote for the NCTE (Feb 1980) and titled "Ground Zero":

More brilliant than a thousand noontime suns the flash and racing inferno poured down from the sky, and in an instant a countryside turned to ash. Little girls with delicate skin were cremated in pink dresses. Old men on park benches vanished. Gone also were the benches and the shade trees flared into burning forests. Shadows were burnt into the ground the instant bone and blood burned away. Seeds that had contained such promise were scorched to lifeless pits by a cosmic zephyr traveling at the speed of death. Love and hope, in its way, were disintegrated.

The giants of war had flung their spears. With unyielding and pitiless menace they had squeezed a formula for horror out of the Earth, then shaped laws around bombs that turned the simple atom into the destroyer of worlds. The bombs quickly became the intent of laws, and the laws became hopelessly snarled with the laws and bombs of enemies. The drift to the final war was inevitable because nothing was done to prevent it.

A shower of radiation particles fell gently like an invisible snow upon the charred land, covering the smoking rubbish piles that had been alive moments before. There was silence. A crazy kind of silence.

The real event that actually happened is no less grim. Kai Erickson, editor of the Yale Review, writes, "These, we learn, are the facts of the matter:

"A single B-29, lazy in the morning sky, passes over the center of town at an elevation of 25,000 feet, without attracting much attention. A few seconds later the whole area is lit up with a bluish white glare, which is quickly transformed into a huge fireball and a thick column of smoke beginning its climb into the sky. Heat rays from the initial flash blister roof tiles for a distance of several hundred yards, char telephone poles more than a mile away and burn exposed human flesh as far away as 2 1/2 miles. The heat rays are followed in an instant by a seemingly soundless blast wave that smashes everything standing for a considerable distance and fills the air with bits of debris. A period of relative calm follows as the day darkens under clouds of dust raised by the blast. And then a conflagration, a virtual whirlwind of fire, bursts into motion and rages out of control for the rest of the morning and afternoon. In the meantime minute particles of carbon and as well as fission fragments and other debris are sucked up into the colder air overhead, where they condense and return in the form of an oily black rain, slick and full of radioactive fallout.... In a matter of hours, 9 square miles of Hiroshima and 5 square miles of Nagasaki — the latter somewhat protected between folds of hills — are reduced to dust and ashes."

As many as 140,000 people in Hiroshima (bombed August 6, 1945) and 70,000 in Nagasaki (bombed three days later, August 9) died on the day of the attack or in the weeks immediately following, and the death toll rose by another 130,000 in the next 5 years. Hundreds of thousands more were severely injured, many to never recover; decades later people continued to die from wounds or illnesses traced to the effects of the two bombs.

The world's most accomplished experts on the consequences of nuclear weapons are the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "There is irony in the fact that it has taken the world so long to learn what it now knows about the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, for it is hard to imagine many events in modern times that have attracted more attention or been the focus of more apprehension," Erickson wrote of what he called "one of the greatest horrors humanity has yet imposed upon itself." (The initial Japanese response was that use of the atomic bombs was "sufficient to brand the [U.S.] for ages to come as the destroyer of mankind and public enemy number one of social justice.")

Most people would rather not be reminded that they live in the age of plutonium, and that wherever they live they are an hour away from a missile that has their address despite current dismantling of arsenals: enough remain to obliterate the planet multiple times (and newer ones are under construction). To do something means to acknowledge what they prefer to not know as if ignorance is a form of protection, and defense of personal helplessness is formidable. Yet if we go about with heads down and hands in pockets and plead that nothing can be done, then we have written our doom. Our troubles did not originate with the gods we invent nor from the cosmos we hardly understand: the nuclear devil is our own. It is not a bad joke played on us by a malevolent deity nor is it a divine instrument of hurrah for the faithful. For all its awesome power and despite the suspicion that it is wildly out of control, nuclear technology is a product of human beings and a problem of human scope that can only be resolved by human beings.

Everybody since 1945 have lived their entire lives under the shadow of nuclear war. The abnormal is normal. We are

shockproof; standing on the brink of nuclear atomization is our national/natural posture.

The obsessive secrecy of the nuclear powers has not prevented the international proliferation of nuclear technology. Instead, the effect has been to remove the public from the issue and make it a process of the very few who, in the short term at least, profit immeasurably from nuclear armaments. Patriotism and claims of national defense and security have obscured the fact that immense fortunes have been made from a war economy fueled and made self-perpetuating with public money. There has been since their inception a disease about nuclear weapons — not radiation, but the belief that a nuclear war can be fought and won despite substantial evidence that mutual annihilation will be its only result. Now, with the Cold War over, the Soviet Union banished to history's dungheap, the nuclear arms race over and the great arsenals deconstructing, fear of using a few nukes seems not so absorbing. After half a century on the brink of possible oblivion, a city atomized here or there instead of the whole planet seems a much smaller threat.

The two nuclear bombs that ended World War 2, might have put an end to war for good. Instead a nuclear arms race between two conflicting and aggressive ideologies, the United States and the Soviet Union, allies and victors in the war against Nazism, divided the world. Each developed huge stockpiles of nuclear weapons that were capable of obliterating the planet several times over. The result was a balance of terror defended by arguments that only nuclear parity could prevent a third world war. The U.S. and the USSR spent hundreds of billions of dollars developing their nuclear arsenals, each government posing the threat of the other to continually escalate the race.

The two superpowers raced through generations of nuclear weapons, blackmailing each other into increasing their arsenals and making treaties that allowed for more and deadlier weapons. (One critic exasperatedly wrote after the superpowers' incessant dickering over nuclear arms control for almost 40 years that "not a single weapon has been removed by mutual agreement.") Every small war anywhere in the world was a

threat of nuclear confrontation between the nuclear giants yet simultaneously these wars skirted oblivion by acting as pressure vents against the big bang.

Pat Frank wrote in his apocalyptic novel, *Alas Babylon*, that once the U.S. and USSR "possessed maximum capability" in thermonuclear weapons and efficient means of delivering them, "every maxim of war was archaic. War was no longer an instrument of national policy, only an instrument for international suicide. There was no sane alternative to peace."

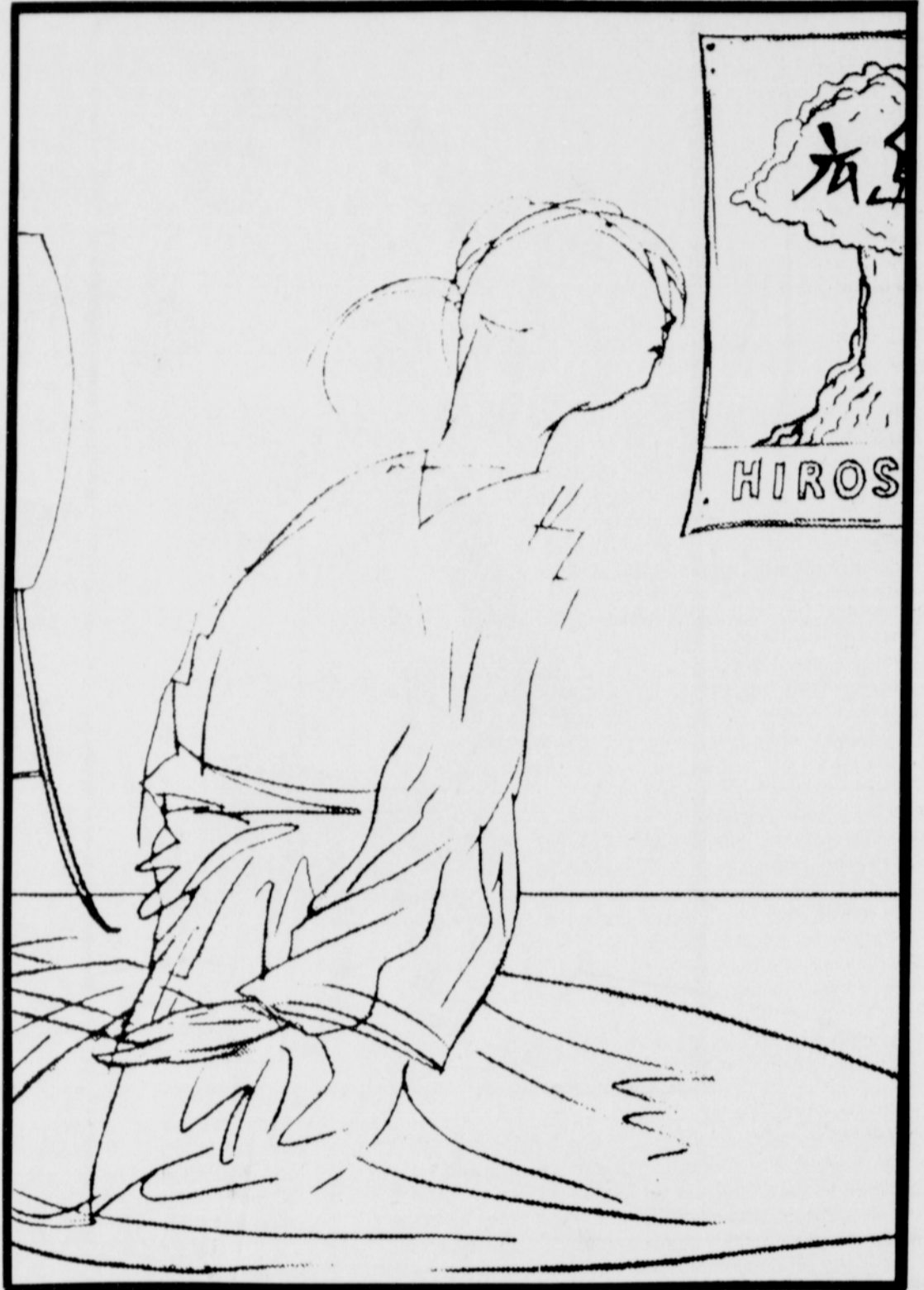
The debate about entering World War 2 cut through all levels of American life, an extensive soul-searching discussion, argument and recrimination such as the nation has seldom experienced (which was ended by Pearl Harbor). Yet no such debate occurred around the use of atomic energy. Instead it was from the very beginning surrounded in secrecy. "Only a handful, of course, knew what they were creating," Dwight MacDonald said after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "It hardly needs to be stressed that there is something askew with a society in which vast numbers of citizens can be organized to create a horror like *The Bomb* without ever knowing they are doing it."

The so-called national security state started with Hiroshima. Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell (authors of *Hiroshima in America: 50 Years of Denial*) write in *The Nation* — a small group of relatively isolated leaders making drastic decisions and then concealing the nature and consequences of their decisions from the public. "The American coverup has been apocalyptic in at least two ways," they write: "in the grotesque human dimension of what has been suppressed and in the relationship of that coverup to our continuous embrace of still more destructive nuclear devices." Hiroshima, Lifton and Mitchell say, was "the mother of all coverups, creating distortions, manipulative procedures and patterns of concealment that have affected all of American life. Secrecy has been linked with national security — and vice versa — ever since."

Nuclear alienation was the result: starting with Hiroshima, officials advised Americans to leave all problems about the bomb to political, scientific and military "experts" — the nuclear priesthood. Americans were requested to opt out of the most critical issues of the age. Surrendering their right to know more about nuclear policies contributed to the gradual alienation from the political process. Despite mass collusion in official secrecy, and resentment at what has been concealed and falsified, Lifton and Mitchell ask, "To what extent do we feel ourselves a people who have been unforgivably deceived in the most fundamental of human areas — having to do with how, when and by whose hand, or lethal technology, are we to die?"

Within 40 years the U.S. and USSR built up arsenals which together contained more than 60,000 nuclear warheads. Soviet warheads alone numbered some 45,000 at their peak in 1986. "The USSR has enough multi-megaton nuclear warheads to bomb the USA every hour, every day for a year (or 175 bombs in each state) and use less than half of its supply," Shay Williams and Jim Weathers of Cannon Beach wrote in a statement that accompanied their 1983 design *Save The Human Being*. "The USA could bomb the USSR with half our supply for almost two years." ("Why have we allowed our governments to build over 50,000 warheads?" they asked)

Once the United States began to rely on nuclear weapons to counter the perceived Soviet threat, the issues that kept the arms race going with the USSR were, as Carl Kaysen wrote, the "profound ideological antipathy and demonization of the other side, the lag between the decision to build new weapons and their deployment, worst-case analyses, Soviet secrecy



ROBERT JORDAN (AFTER YOSHITOSHI, c.1890)

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