

VJ Day 2025

for Caroline and Michael

And there was a great light,
and their clothes became dazzling white
and the appearance of their faces changed.

And there was a cloud overshadowing them
and they were terrified as they entered it.
And they kept silent.

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Behold the man!
A shadow etched into a wall
still.

Stand to face his hypocentre.
See the seared civilian flesh
on his right hand

and hear the hundreds of thousands of shadows
prophesying
an unpeopled future.

Some have tried to lift their voices
but what voices can be lifted
when they have been silenced?

Little boy and little girl
fat man and thin woman—
we the billions exist in spooked oblivion.

Once a year or perhaps one day a decade
our shadows tell us it is time
to pay attention to the remnant on his left hand

crying out crying
for the rule of law and justice and peace! peace! peace!
But they too have been silenced.

There has been no peace no peace
no peace for the shadows
who cannot submit to such a hollow victory.

Their broken hearts cannot be bound up.
They were emptied out way back.
Nor will the blinded recover their sight

when the forces of evil must be unleashed
to combat the forces of evil.
And there will be no release for captives released

to stumble their way back
to an indeterminate existence
remarking in their silence

that war makes no heroes—
heroes know only the shame shadowing them
for pity's sake!

Where the bells of Urakami tolled
a thousand penitents making their confession
will be cindered again and again and again until—

Be still.

Listen.

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On 6th August 1945, the Allies dropped a “Little Boy” nuclear bomb on Hiroshima. Three days later on 9th August, they dropped a “Fat Man” bomb on Nagasaki. Estimates of the dead by the end of 1945 vary from 150,000 to 246,000. Many shadows of people were left etched in walls or on steps when their bodies were vaporised. The hypocentre of the Nagasaki bomb (directly beneath its detonation) was close to Urakami Roman Catholic Cathedral, where more than a 1,000 people were attending Mass in preparation for the Feast of the Assumption on 15th August, and were incinerated. The fallen remains of the belfry are now part of a designated Registered Monument. The Japanese Emperor's announcement of surrender was broadcast on 15th August 1945, now observed as Victory over Japan (VJ) Day or Victory in the Pacific (VP) Day. Many British prisoners of war across SE Asia had to wait weeks after VJ Day to be found and released, and only months after Victory in Europe (VE) Day did they return to a Britain that had largely moved on.

Each year the church observes 6th August as the Feast of the Transfiguration. The poem draws on Luke 9.28-36, the Gospel reading set for 2025—the disciples see Jesus appear in glory, with Moses and Elijah representing the law and the prophets standing to his left and right. See also John 19.5 (in John's Gospel, Jesus appears in glory on the cross), Luke 4.18-19 quoting Isaiah 61.1-4, and Psalm 46.10.