



SERGE LAMOTHE

A polygraph who defies description, Serge Lamothe has quickly become one of the voices of his generation. Since 1998, he has published novels, short stories, poetry and plays. He is also a screenplay consultant and an opera dramaturge.

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Oshima

by Serge Lamothe

Excerpt translated by
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Synopsis

“Until now, the journey has not called me to draw on my courage nor determination, but I no longer know whether I’ve dreamt my life or if I’ve been dreamt up by it.”

Oshima is a futuristic road novel with a touch of existential thriller. Thirty-five-year-old Akamaru, a Eurasian born to a French mother and Japanese father, leaves Paris at his father’s request to join him on his native island of Oshima. But it’s been twenty years since he first came to France, in 2023, and so much has changed on this side of the world, which has been plunged in chaos since the TGC (Total Grid Collapse). After a series of surprising encounters, he comes to understand the significance of the journey that has led him to the other side of the Earth, to eventually find himself.

Rights held: World

Excerpt

For my twelfth birthday, my father insisted on taking me to Hiroshima. We took the ferry back all the way to Tokyo, then hopped on the Shinkansen and travelled the last eight hundred kilometers in less than four hours. I knew why Tetsu-san had his heart set on making me visit that city; the first in the world to be the victim of an atomic bomb attack: because his mother, Akiko, was a *hibakusha* – a bomb survivor. Tetsu was born seventeen

years later, even though his mother had been told she would never be able to bear children. She saw her son as some sort of miracle, a gift from the gods. And my father always refused to accept the truth, namely that Akiko had adopted him.

I never got to know my paternal grandmother who died of leukemia, the bomb’s legacy, a few years before I was born; but on that afternoon, my father had insisted

on retelling the account his mother had made of that terrible day of August 6th 1945.

Seventy-five years after Little Boy's explosion – the first A-bomb to be used against a civilian population – Hiroshima was a wonderful and prosperous city, with its modern buildings and effervescent bustle. If we hadn't been visiting the Peace Memorial Park, nothing would have led us to believe that all hell had broken loose on this very spot and reduced everything to cinders all those years ago.

On August 6th, Akiko had gone to school earlier than usual to help her teacher, Mrs. Takahara, prepare the morning's calligraphy class. She wore a white dress and a long-sleeve blouse of the same colour, her Sunday clothes, that for some unfathomable reason she had chosen to wear that day.

She was busy hanging pieces of washi paper intended for later use during the calligraphy lesson when, at precisely eight thirteen am, intrigued by the faraway drone of a B-29 bomber, she had gone to the window and peered up at the sky. When she saw the plane change course and regain altitude, she thought it must be a simple recon flight. Her classmates – Akiko was twelve years old and most of them were younger than her – had started to gather in the small schoolyard and were busy playing or arguing as was their wont. A few of them lifted their heads to look at the plane without a shred of fear. Hiroshima had been spared from the bombings since the onset of the war, and its citizens thought this must once more be no more than a spy plane. They were a common sight.

At a quarter past eight, when the flash of the explosion illuminated everything as if a billion suns had ignited at once, Akiko did not hear a sound but she still threw herself on the concrete floor and covered her face with both hands as she had been taught to do during bomb drills. If she had remained by the window at that very moment, she would have seen her classmate get vaporised in a millisecond: all the water, all the carbon, and every last molecule of their small bodies ejected into thin air in the form of vapor, and this even before they could have understood that something was happening, before their brain was even able to transmit to their nervous system the encoded message of their obliteration.

In a one-kilometre radius, tens of thousands of victims vanished this way. Later, many survivors would consider themselves lucky. No air blast had followed the flash so Mrs. Takahara had gotten up to peer out the window, thinking a conventional bomb must have detonated in the area. No one will ever know what nightmarish

vision greeted her, but one thing is certain: her pupils had vanished. We can imagine that on the spot where they had been gathering a few seconds earlier, little piles of clothes littered the ground, a wisp of ethereal black vapor rising from each of them.

Then came the blast of the explosion, pulverising everything in its path. The wooden houses blew up into tiny shards, fragments the size of a blade of grass that caught fire instantly. Every window of the primary school where Akiko and Mrs. Takahara were still located shattered as well, and Mrs. Takahara was violently blown to the other side of the room, thousands of tiny pieces of glass shrapnel deeply embedded in her flesh.

Akiko, who had been wise enough to stay flattened on the concrete floor, would later recount how she had inexplicably been lifted over a metre above the ground where she seemed to levitate for a few seconds before falling back on the floor. The sheets of washi paper, even though so fragile, were twirling in the air of the classroom. Strangely, they were barely damaged. Akiko stood up with some difficulty as she felt like all her bones had been crushed. She noticed that her hands were black, covered in a charred and shiny crust: her skin, or what was left of it. She found no other trace of burns on her body and later realized that this was owing to her white outfit. Her white dress, blouse and socks had saved her life by reflecting the greater part of the gamma rays to which the flash had exposed her.

A quick glance at Mrs. Takahara's mangled body made it clear that she was beyond help. Wobbly on her legs, she went out into the courtyard and understood instantly that she could not stay there. She looked in the direction of the Nakajima neighbourhood where she lived: it looked pitch-black – as if night had fallen. Fires raged everywhere and a cloud of black smoke, with flashes of lightning running through it, billowed up to the stratosphere. In the opposite direction, oddly, the sun shone brightly. About this surreal vision, Akiko would later say, "I know it might sound crazy, but I had never seen anything so beautiful."

She wondered for a moment if the disaster was only affecting the city of Hiroshima or if all of Japan had been hit and destroyed by this single act of retaliation. Maybe the whole planet was falling into chaos. Was this what her Christian friend Ania meant when she spoke of the End of Days? For Ania and tens of thousands of people, the end of days had indeed come, no matter their beliefs.

She already knew, deep inside, that neither her parents nor her brothers and younger sister could have survived *that*.

The young girl mustered her courage and chose to walk towards the light, abandoning all hope of seeing her family ever again. As she made her way through the ruins, she grasped the magnitude of the devastation. Walking ghosts kept appearing from every direction. They were either black as coal – a good portion of their skin and flesh charred to a crisp – or they didn't have any left at all: it dangled from the end of their limbs or down their back like the shreds of some oversized garment. Soon, the former would be dubbed the *alligators* and the latter, the *ungloved*. All these survivors walked around aimlessly in utter shock, or lined up in a daze, like so many ants. She turned back only once to gaze at the fire tornadoes twisting up to the sky, casting orange, green, and purplish flashes. She came across some people who defied description, charred from head to toe with vacant eye sockets; women cradling bundles of raw flesh who moments earlier had been cherubic infants. She saw things that she would never mention. Things she would later confide she would have given anything to forget, even for an instant.

At some point, Akiko realised that she was being followed: a queue of *alligators* and *ungloved* had formed behind her. She was suffering from violent waves of nausea and she had never felt so thirsty in her life but she quickened her pace anyway to distance herself from these walking ghosts who, from the looks of them, would surely die before nightfall.

She was more than three kilometers away from ground zero and still heading towards the sun-bathed hills when she saw a frail silhouette tottering in her direction. It was her cousin Natsumi who was two years older than her. They fell to their knees, face to face, and did not speak a word. For those who had witnessed the explosion and had survived, during the endless minutes that followed the detonation of the bomb, human words lost all meaning. Language stopped to exist because nothing could be expressed in the face of the horror that had befallen the world.

Akiko and her cousin were still motionless and silent when a black rain started to fall. An oily water with an unbearable stench, and drops as large as grapes, poured down on the burning rubble. The two young girls were severely dehydrated. Natsumi threw herself on one of the forming puddles to lap at the toxic rain that had fallen from the atomic cloud. She couldn't have known it was a horrible mix of radioactive dust, ashes, and inorganic debris, as well as the remains of thousands of their compatriots who had been liquefied and vaporised into the atmosphere. The survivors who drank from it died a few hours or days later. This is what happened to Natsumi.