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Hashi-yan's Last Dispatch from Iraq

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by Adam Lebowitz

"To go or not to go is the question. Our man Prime Minister Koizumi, just celebrating his 60th, states that decisions should be 'based on the situation, whether it is 'safe' or 'unsafe'. I, being over 60 myself, am at the same crossroads in a way. The difference is that our friend [Koizumi] will proceed if it is safe and will not if there is danger, whilst I take the opposite position. Koizumi in his wavy lionesque 'do', and me bald as an elephant, our thinking as opposite as our hairstyles." -- Hashida Shinsuke (1942-2004), from his diary, Screaming 'Idiot' in the Middle of Iraq.

Hashida's long frame with his floppy sun hat and picket-fence smiling visage is surrounded by waist-high youngsters outside Fallujah. His lanky arms gesticulate widely, instructing the camera where to shoot, appearing more the tour guide on summer excursion than adventurer and journalist. He seems in his element.

The opening quote is revealing of his personality: Irreverent towards leadership, determined, brave, realistic, humorous, curious, down to earth. His combat journalism came from worlds of trouble -- Hanoi in the wake of the B-52s. Cambodia (briefly a prisoner of the Khmer Rouge), Burma, then Bosnia, Palestine, and Afghanistan -- and yet he remained at least outwardly remarkably disembittered. Last came Baghdad. Arriving in the city before the United States forces, filing reports before the majors sent their own correspondents. He survived this, but not the "post-war" aftermath. Returning from the Japan Self-Defense Force base in Samawah, his car was attacked south of Baghdad; he perished, along with his nephew Ogawa Kotaro, who aspired to follow his uncle's profession, and their Iraqi translator on May 28.

Hashida was scheduled to speak at the university in central Japan where I teach on June 7 to raise money for a 10-year-old Fallujah boy's surgery. Glass had flown into his eye during the fighting. The humanist who wrote of ground-level perspectives of conflict was now devoting himself to more direct humanitarian causes. This transition is a major theme of his book, Iraq no chushin de, baka to sakebu (Screaming 'Idiot!' in the Middle of Iraq), written while covering the invasion in March-April 2003, from the first salvo of "shock and awe" to the fall of the statue of Saddam Hussein. It is a thrilling combat narrative, but in addition he comments insightfully and pointedly about Japan's relations with the US and the Japanese military's more active role in foreign affairs.

At the book's outset, Hashi-yan (his self-chosen nickname, "yan" being a Western-Japanese version of the pet-name "chan") existed on the fringes of Bangkok's Japanese expatriate community running his one-man news production office News Box Asia. It was a shoestring operation that sold reports to major Japanese and Western syndicates. Unable to procure a visa, he decided to try his luck with a photocopied forgery. For Hashi-yan, luck is the roll of his mental dice, modeled on a pair purchased in a thread-bare Hanoi store whose owner saved his bicycle following an air raid.

Luck along with guile and an obsession to see things as they happen guided his adventures with his friend, photographer Suzuki Yukio. Entering Iraq through the northern Kurdish territories overland via a small Syrian town only to learn the bombing had begun ("Goddam little president"!), his taxi finally reached the Euphrates River where he considered the absurdity of his circumstances, watching the early US bombing campaign on a restaurant TV.

The taxi driver called Saddam Hussein

"We four fools were full and in a state of bliss, or as close to it as one can come without a woman to flirt with. I asked the driver, 'So, what's your name?' 'Saddam'. 'And your last name'? 'Hussein'. We all laughed uproariously."

Soon after their arrival they experienced their first air-raid on the night of March 22 from the al-Mansour Hotel:

"The explosions felt like a whack on the head went down to the stomach. The hotel shook violently and the sound of glass breaking came from the lower floors. The next "Wee-BOOM" shook the veranda with its shock wave. A hot wind hit our faces and flew around the room, slamming the door shut. To the right of the hotel columns of fire, first one, then two and three, rose together emitting black and white smoke. We filmed feverishly as another wave of heat swept over us. 'Bo-bo-bo-BOOM!', and the wind swirling in our room pushed us from behind. With the mirror breaking in the toilet, we rushed to open the door so the wind could escape."

Having survived the bombing of Hanoi, Hashi-yan was especially well placed to compare past and present bomb technologies. Carpet bombing strategies had rolling patterns that could be predicted; it was impossible on the other hand to know where "smart bombs" were going to fall. The incendiary elements also produced much less smoke, but the hardened casings, including the depleted uranium, were frighteningly penetrating. The telephone exchange buildings were destroyed from the top down with a single guided hit. Given these events, he could only conclude that United Nations inspections were a cover for a more detailed surveillance of potential targets.

Unlike the first war. there was no Iraqi air resistance. Iraq's Chinese-made weaponry was so old and debased as to resemble museum pieces; members of Saddam's "elite" Republican Guard were reduced to burning oil to obstruct the view of incoming aircraft. Long-range missiles could be fired but they were not guidable -- "as [deputy premier Tariq] Aziz told the Pope". Hashi-yan expected to see corpses but perhaps was caught a little off-guard during a March 24 press tour to photograph children in bloody swaddling: "The birth pains of the 'New Iraq'? The foundation blocks of peace? Are they dying for nought (inujini: literally, a dog's death), or was this the birth of a new war?" For him it raised the specter of a second Palestinian-like conflict prompted by revenge and marked by guerrilla "terrorist" attacks against the United States.

The end of March brought incessant bombings and as the citizens of Baghdad were forced to cope with this disruption to their lives, Hashi-yan himself was faced with the prospect of not even being able to file his dispatches. Japan's major news outlets had packed-off to Amman, Jordan, before the outbreak of hostilities leaving him to negotiate the use of a satellite dish with a Turkish news team. For Hashi-yan this was absurd since journalism, particularly from the front-line, is an expeditionary endeavor: "Journalists like soldiers go to work on the battlefield. It is our on-site training. And yet they ran away in the face of the enemy, leaving them nothing to talk about."

Japan's legalism [and its pacifist constitution that prohibits dispatch of combat troops] has

its children "never knowing war", but war's coverage and analysis requires knowledge of war; a news desk manager with no such knowledge cannot make decisions about appropriate coverage, especially when the most dangerous time is the erratic period of lawlessness following battle. Hashi-yan learned this in 1993 in Cambodia when he was captured by disorganized Khmer Rouge guerillas. Ironically in Iraq, the Japanese majors, TBS and Kyodo, seeking to avoid responsibility for the deaths of staff during the war, dispatched crews in the far riskier period that followed the fall of the statue.

Hiding his film in the toilet

Hashi-yan had his camera confiscated by Ba'ath Party officials -- after hiding his film in the toilet -- for photographing from his hotel balcony. The Iraq Information Ministry Press Center registered foreign journalists, arranged their guides and took them on tours. When it became clear that Japan was going to participate in the "coalition", one morning Hashi-yan was accosted by an angry official demanding an explanation. He responded laconically:

"Because the Japanese government is a US underling; they really can't do anything about it."
"But why, why is that?"
"Because we are tied up in an agreement, that's why."
"And why is that?"
"Because Japan lost to the US [in World War II]."

"In general, everyone sees the Ampo security arrangement as a military alliance. Sure, on the surface the US protects Japan with bases in Yokota and Okinawa. But you don't see any Japanese bases in Los Angeles or Hawaii. Less an 'alliance', more a 'subordination', or most likely an 'occupation'. That the international community considers it an alliance is the height of idiocy (baka). I could see the new Iraq in the same light, as a colony or occupation."

As Baghdad's fall loomed, official extortion began in earnest. News crews, including al Jazeera, were ordered to pay US$100 a day back fees and expelled. Hashi-yan paid his $1,000, but even then the journalist was rankled at having to leave as a penalty for working without a guide. Back in Damascus, they decided to re-apply for visas by joining the queue of young volunteer jihadists, the fight having become an Islamist cause:

"A man in a white suit with a great beard came out. 'Today we are only offering visas for mujahideen.'
"And Japanese can't become mujahideen?'
"'Actually there isn't any rule about nationality.'

"At this point I pressed a $100 dollar bill on him, rolled in my hand. Timing is everything. Yukio-chan saw what was going on and he too assumed a serious expression. We look at each other. Now is not the time to show anxiety. In a leisurely manner I hand out some cigarettes to the people around. The dice are rolling in my head and now comes the moment of truth. "I am over 60. My only son is married, and my lovely wife has left me."

"I caught the eye of the man, and he was laughing rather than sympathizing. 'Do you think I have anything left? Nothing at all. I only want to give my life for Allah.'"

"The white-suited man spoke something in Arabic to the other men around him in the room. Everyone broke into laughter. He gave the skinny chap sitting at the desk an order, and he presented a visa form. 'Fill this out and come tomorrow.'

"Tomorrow's Friday, the Islamic holiday. We want to leave now because bombs are falling in Baghdad at this very moment. The white-suited man gave a small smile. The bribe now seemed

rather crude."

Writing, "I want to go to Baghdad, because I must fight against American soldiers," he procured this special visa free. He returns to a city pounded non-stop at night by C-130 transport planes. The airport is pummeled the night of April 4-5 and "the southern sky is dyed red". After his return he reports on April 7:

"A group of soldiers in front of the hotel told us a row of houses had been hit along the Tigris. Hiding my camera in my bag, we grabbed a cab. Black smoke rose from a mountain of rubble. There was the distinctive smell of burning bodies. It is a smell that can't be transmitted on video. It was much stronger than a crematorium.

"A young mother holding a badly burned baby rushed up and raised her voice heatedly towards our camera. The baby in her arms had its small mouth open and was breathing as if asleep. Its peach-like skin was reddened. The other side of the rubble was a giant crater, and at the bottom an upturned car. Must have been a pinpoint attack. It is impossible for adults to escape this kind of attack, much less children or infants. They can only roll over quietly and stop the bombs with their bodies. Five or six rough coffins lay in front of the rubble, most likely small for the children and larger for the adults.

"I can only wonder what responsibility the US would feel for this in a war started only to privatize American-style an oil industry nationalized by Saddam Hussein. I also wonder if the people in Japan would take notice of the hypocrisy this kind of post-war democracy entails."

At this point Hashi-yan's tone became more weary and his view more bleak. Widespread looting ensued on April 8 as total authority broke down and rag-tag foreign mujahideen were no match for the technologically advanced invaders. As he muses on the possibility of robot soldiers within the next decade: "Human mentality hardly changes or progresses throughout history. We are animals who don't learn from history but our science and technology surely does progress. The dice rolled in my head and came up snake-eyes."

Hashi-yan's longest day comes on April 9, the day the Saddam statue is pulled down. As looters' trucks whiz through the streets, Hashi-yan and Suzuki decided to take their chances and go across the Tigris without their interpreter. Their goal: to be the first journalists to photograph US forces. Armed only with a bed sheet scrawled with "TV JAPAN", they finally succeed in flagging down a ride:

"Another miracle. My mental dice rolled up as a battered red Corolla with a tubby driver came our way. There was a pile of bread in the seat next to him. He couldn't speak English but communicated the word 'hospital' as his destination. He willingly took us in and didn't seem aware of any danger.

"And so we three foolish (baka) old men hit the highway, the only car on the road. Several seconds after entering the bridge we could see a tank coming from the opposite direction. Couldn't tell if it was Iraqi or US but it was getting closer. The bridge was about 300 meters long and the soldiers were looking at us through their goggles. They were American, we made out. Without a doubt. We told our driver so, and he seemed to understand.

"I pointed my camera at them and called out, 'We made contact'. Meanwhile, the tank began to move into our lane. We continued to proceed until the tank took a position partially on our side. They were not going to let us pass. Being in the middle of the bridge a U-turn for us was impossible."

The red Corolla vs the US tank

"Suddenly, the tank pointed the barrel of its cannon directly at us. 'I don't like the looks of this,' I said. There had been suicide bombings in Basra and they were looking at us the same way.

"'Back, back!' we shouted but the car's reverse gear was broken. It was a 1970s model. The driver's face began to change color. He turned the handle in desperation to try to make a U-turn. I stuck a white flag out the window and began waving it for all it was worth. The car can't make the turn because the bridge is too narrow. We go back and forth, and the barrel is still pointed straight at us. I'm still waving the flag like a maniac and the gears make a screaming sound while white smoke comes out of the bonnet. The radiator is putting out steam, out towards that cannon barrel which remains unmoving. Finally we make the turn and make our escape.

"I don't know what the driver is thinking, but we fly down the opposite lane as the car makes a terrible rattling sound. I can see the tank is also making its way down this lane as we roll onto the shoulder on the right side of the road. Then, fire is flying from the barrel of the tank's machine gun.

"I don't believe this is happening. Da-da-a-n. Da-da-a-n. The machine gun is firing level with us and I can see cartridges flying from it. It is pointing down the other lane, fortunately, and the air is ripped apart by bullets flying down the left lane. The red Corolla stays clear.

"Ta-a-n, ta-ta-a-n, ta-a-n, ta-ta-a-n. The sound echoes through the dry air. Yukio-chan is shouting, 'Whoa!' and I yell back, 'OK, it's OK!'. I don't know who heard me but it was scary."

For Hashi-yan and Suzuki, the moment the Saddam statue's fall provokes astonishment, satisfying their driving desire to catch good coverage, but marked by ambivalence:

"The third vehicle from the front in the military convoy is a crane that puts a rope around the neck of the Saddam statue in the square. A soldier puts the Stars and Stripes over the face. It's the beginning of the 'Long Live the Imperium' ceremony. Suddenly, my disgust fades away at this moment in history.

"The lines of a famous TV cartoon character echo through my head: You bet that's the way it is. Who needs the money or fame? We witnessed a moment in history. That's the pride of journalism, and it's certainly enough for my friend and I to get the 300-yen special at Kuroda's lunch counter.

"The crane pulls at the rope around the statue's neck and pulls it down. Crash. The world saw its image, but we saw it live."

Hey, it's only life, it's only work

"And then that was the end. We walked back to our hotel since we didn't have a car. Our legs felt heavy but our hearts light. That's our life and that's our work and we put our all into it, but now it was, 'Hey, it's only life, it's only work.'"

Meanwhile, a heavily armed yet skeletal foreign force of culturally unprepared youngsters has walked into an active, heavily populated city:

"We came to within half a kilo of our place. Some US soldiers gathered in the rotary in front of the hotel. The sun was still in the sky. Soldiers, it turns out, also kill time. But we were still too excited simply to go into the hotel and fall asleep. The spirit was burning though the body was almost done. Yukio-chan went up to one.

"'Give me a beer.'
"The soldier looked at him and answered seriously, 'We are forbidden to carry alcohol.'
"'Where did you come from?'
"'Okinawa'.

"'You don't say? And how's life there?'
"'I like the fried noodles'.
"'Really? The fried noodles, you say'.
"'What do you like?'
"'I like the snake liquor. You know, you look like Kevin Costner'.
"A black soldier listening from behind broke out laughing.
"'If he's Kevin Costner, then I'm Denzel Washington.'

"As we were having our laugh an American tank came up and stopped on one of the major roads pointing its barrel west. Due west 500 meters away was our hotel. It gave me a bad feeling. My mental dice rolled and I thought that it would be a good idea to get into the hotel as quickly as possible. I went up and asked a short soldier with a red face standing on the road. 'That's my hotel. If I went inside now would that be ok?'

"'It's ok.' Was it really ok? His small blue eyes looked uneasy. He was armed to the teeth but just a regular American boy of medium build, flown straight to this desert battlefield right out of some hick high school in Arizona or Kentucky. He seemed deeply unsure of what was going to happen next.

"'Is it really, really ok?'
"'I think so.'

"I couldn't press him any more, and so I began to slowly make my way in. I still had a really bad feeling for some reason and my feet stopped 200 meters before the entrance.

"'Yukio-chan, we shouldn't go in yet.' And at that moment somewhere to our left there was a huge explosion. Red flames shot into the air and shards of metal were flying into walls. 'It's not over.' We bent over and walked away from the hotel. 'It's still going on now?' 'But it can't be.'

"It's always like that. But the next moment after a close shave you realize you are alive and refuse death's existence once again. It must be our instinct that makes us humans so arrogant. Several seconds passed and we were back with the soldiers. The soldiers had also flattened themselves against a wall."

Saved once because he was Japanese

The explosion was no more than 50 meters away in a heavily laden truck seen a few moments earlier. In the resulting crossfire Hashi-yan was able to escape to a private home as a man called out "Hey, Japanese!", fortunately saved by nationality.

On his last day in Baghdad Hashi-yan noticed that the only building not hit was the Oil Ministry: "Well, it turns out the reason was the oil." His voice has become analytical and not merely descriptive because this is a comment not on the senjo – the conditions as the front – but the senso, the war itself:

"The cause of -so is the realm of politics unseen from the battlefront, the –jo. The cause of war is the conflict between countries, such as a clash of political interests on the international stage, a competition between economies and resources. In other words, just as two different elements hydrogen and oxygen join to make water, senjô and senso are parcel to the same situation but in essence completely different. The debate over war and peace in Japan has come to confuse these two diverse elements.

"Every August oaths against war are sworn at the Hiroshima and Nagasaki ceremonies. In reality these are oaths against senjo and not senso, quite foolish since anyone would be against being somewhere American soldiers and Islamic militants are fighting it out. It would be much more serious business to counter senso but this is very contentious politically. The political statements concerning Japan starting war in the past and not being able to stop are not being made.

"Now 60 years have passed and as the dictatorship of the Liberal Democratic Party continues so does Japan's political immaturity. In a repeat of a former period we endorse war and wave our little Hinomaru flags as we send the soldiers off, "we" being the politicians, media, and the populace whose silence endorses the idea of WMD as a cause for war. Sooner or later we are going to have to move beyond this stage of confusing senjo and senso."

Hashi-yan and Yukio-chan left through the Jordan border and their adventure ended dramatically and absurdly as they crossed the sands with duty-free beer and chocolate screaming, "The world's gone mad!" ("Sekai-no Baka-yaro!") to the red, receding sun. The book closes with "The Last Words of a Combat Photographer" from Baghdad on New Year's Day, 2004, concluding with an ironic exhortation to Japan's Self-Defense Force soldiers:

"I am not here to condemn this war or the government's charade of righteousness. One cannot turn back the hands of time and the bald pate does not sprout forth anew. You, the SDF, are not the organization of peace but of war. So let us commit ourselves once and for all: to participate in 'humanitarian' and 'reconstruction' work we will 'at anytime, at any moment, to any person' engage in murderous acts. Aren't you the ones taking responsibility for this idiotic (baka) government and its foolish Foreign Ministry? Aren't you the ones leaving 'righteousness' in the wake of your own deaths?

"With his aching back killing him, General 'Boner' Hashida awaits your arrival with all his heart."

Not long after returning to Japan with her husband's ashes and his hat with bullet-tears through the upper crown, Hashida Sawako appeared on an evening news program. Against footage taken by the journalist and his cousin during their final days in Iraq -- eating in a cafe, clowning with their guide and driver -- she confided that Hashida always took care not to intrude on the lives of people around him. Reading his book, it is clear that he enjoyed being with people and people found it easy to be with him. Mrs Hashida also went to Iraq to find 10-year-old Mohammed Haisam Saleha and bring him to Shizuoka, Japan, and thanks to the citizen's group Numazu Rotaract Club, money was raised by the local community to fund eye surgery at a local hospital. Haisam arrived at our campus late last month in Hashi-yan's stead.

Hashida, his wife noted, enjoyed his work immensely. Even in a battle zone he found reason to flash that smile when associating with people who refused conflict as a parameter of self-definition and always seemed ready to emphasize the positive aspects of an area once the bullets stopped flying, such as singing karaoke in a desert roadhouse somewhere in Western Iraq. He could only reach such conclusions, I believe, through his independence, and it is hard to envision an embedded CNN or Fox News reporter -- the PR corps of the US Army in his view -- engaging in the same activities. Perhaps Japan was still considered a neutral country; if so, then that time has passed. Ogawa Kotaro often heard such sentiments interviewing the residents of Fallujah (reported in the Japanese weekly Friday). One former prisoner of Abu Ghraib went so far as to say that he should watch out for his life now that Japan was clearly on the side of the US.

I only came to know of Hashida's work two months ago as he appeared on Japanese TV news offering magnanimous praise to two young returning journalists recently taken hostage. The two free lancers faced intense criticism for "troubling" the Foreign Ministry with their release. Honest reporting of conditions was for him the non plus ultra of

wartime journalism and everyone in the Japanese media respected his standards. He was not a pacifist per se and had respect for the soldier, but was critical of political leaders; the administration of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi was especially fickle in following the US into a war in which Japan's international standing was not an issue. He also viewed as senseless the debate about sending the Self-Defense Forces to an "unsafe" area because it was a combat organization created specifically for dangerous missions; if the area was "safe", then it is better to dispatch an army of unemployed salarymen or "young, bleach-blond punk construction workers" looking for adventure.

He would have probably thought it especially fitting that the act of saving a young boy's sight was the final act of an essentially non-military individual who had experienced a lifetime of the violence of war. The surgery has been successful and Haisam's sight restored. Kyodo News ran stories almost daily on his progress including his visit to the Hashida family grave in Yamaguchi Prefecture on 6 July, his embarkation the next day to return home, and the final farewell in Amman between him and Hashida Sawako on 10 July. The money raised during his trip to Japan – almost three times the amount required for surgery – will go towards the construction of a children's hospital in Fallujah.

Adam Lebowitz is a teacher and translator who has lived in Japan for thirteen years. He has written about the Japanese media's coverage of the "war on terror" for Counterpunch, and will publish a collection of his Japanese poetry at the end of this year. His e-mail is noriko-adam@tokai.or.jp. *An earlier version of this article appeared in Asia Times. Posted at Japan Focus August 15, 2004.*