

Two Poems by Toshiko Hirata
translated by Hiroaki Sato

Recent Photos, Photos of the Dead

Because I'm greedy by nature, I can't let you escape. That you want to get out, I noticed long ago. Also, that you drench me with enmity when I turn back to you, and that you thrust your pale arm forward. That's all the more reason I don't want to let you go. I want to keep you under my control, a loose rope tied to you. I want to feed you evil-smelling wine and ham and keep you shut up here all your life. You will serve me every night with your unbathed, dirty body. Rub my arms and legs with tears in your eyes. Caress me with your nailless fingers. I won't free you. I won't put you behind the iron door. Decay here in a leisurely manner.

Your emaciating body. Your eyes are muddy, you cough horribly, your skin is coarse. You don't talk, you don't eat, you don't act. You can't even stand erect on your own. Bones stand out on your scrawny body. Medicine has no effect on you. Do you spit it out secretly? Your condition worsens day by day. Your end may be unexpectedly close.

I want to be in touch with you. I want to be always in touch with you. With your thin, flat chest, your shoulders, your slender neck. Not to mate, but I want to be holding you. I want to feel human temperature. If you die, your body temperature will be lost. To be in touch with a dead body is pleasant at first. But one gets tired of it in no time, before the day darkens. A dead body is a boring creature. You'll be no good once you die. You may die if you revive at once. But I won't tolerate your remaining dead. Are you hoping to die? Your hope won't be fulfilled. I won't let you die. And yet you go on emaciating. You only sleep, inert.

Do you have an older twin brother? Do you have in this world an older twin brother whose limbs are far skinnier, lips thinner, and whose hair is brown—that is, one with an advanced likeness to you? If you do, call his name wordlessly. Tell him to come here within three days and do the transition work against that day. Teach him the rituals of this room. This will be your last assignment. You can't die before you finish it. I won't tolerate a wishy-washy transition.

Get to it with that in mind.

Sleep forever if you do it to perfection.

If you don't have an older twin brother, you won't be allowed to die. I'll call your name many times. I'll even go to the Nether World to call your name. Wake up and love me. Hold me tight with arms that seem ready to snap. You must stay here until your old, one-eyed mother gives birth to an aphasiac older brother.

A Woman's Life or Nakayama Atsuko

The wound on Nakayama Atsuko's right arm was made by her real mother, Shizu, 42, who slashed at her one spring evening when her honorable self was three. Trying to avoid Shizu, who still came after her, brandishing a Bizen Osafune¹, she fell off the verandah of the main house, with a thud.

The wound on Nakayama Atsuko's head is the one made when she hit a corner of the stepping stone as she fell.

The butterfly on Nakayama Atsuko's thigh was tattooed by her stepfather, Sadazô, 51, one summer evening when her honorable self was ten. Sadazô, who tended to become wild when drunk, sent her mother to a distant sake store and schemed to do something with his daughter's thigh.

The wound above Nakayama Atsuko's eye was made when, shaking off her stepfather's hands and running, she bumped into a pillar.

The burn on Nakayama Atsuko's belly was made by her brother, Sadaichi, 16, one autumn evening when her honorable self was fourteen. Sadaichi, who excelled academically, was given free reign at home. He savagely mistreated his sister, who was not blood-related, and once splashed boiling water on her belly.

The wound on Nakayama Atsuko's calf was made by a dog who bit her when she ran away, without even putting on simple clogs, and stepped on his tail.

The wound on Nakayama Atsuko's left shoulder was made by cousin of the same age, Sachihiko, one winter evening when her honorable self was eighteen. Knife in hand, he importuned her for sex and cut her, along with her clothes.

Nakayama Atsuko doesn't have one small finger because she lost it in slapping the knife away.

The mark on Nakayama Atsuko's neck was made by her husband, Masayoshi, 39, who tried to strangle her one summer evening when her honorable self was twenty-eight. The country was in a depression and the company he ran went bankrupt. In despair, he attempted double suicide.

The vertical wrinkles between Nakayama Atsuko's eyebrows were chiseled into her flesh as she writhed.

¹ Osafune is the name of a town in Bizen Province (today's Okayama). The town produced excellent swordsmiths for many generations. As a result, Bizen Osafune became synonymous with a sword of superior make.

The wound on Nakayama Atsuko's back was made one autumn evening when her honorable self, 35, fell down the staircase. Trying to get to the telephone under the staircase, she slipped, and the impact on her back left her breathless.

Nakayama Atsuko's sprained ankle resulted from her landing on the floor.

Nakayama Atsuko is missing a front tooth because her stepsister, Akiko, 32, struck her one winter evening when her honorable self was thirty-nine. She stepped in to mediate Akiko's quarrel with her husband, and Akiko, blood rushing to her head, hit her.

For a moment the world turned white for Nakayama Atsuko, but the couple's quarrel ended without any other damage.

The dent on Nakayama Atsuko's head was made by her oldest son, Hideki, 16, one spring evening when her honorable self was forty-five. A problem child, Hideki approached her from behind with a baseball bat. His first blow struck her on the side. His second managed to graze her head.

Two of Nakayama Atsuko's ribs were broken in the first blow.

Nakayama Atsuko's crooked nose was made one summer evening when her honorable self, 51, grappled with a burglar. He'd come into the newly built house without taking his shoes off, and that gave her extra strength. She valiantly put up a fight and subdued him.

The entrance of Nakayama Atsuko's house is decorated with a letter of commendation from the police.

Nakayama Atsuko's arms become numb,
Nakayama Atsuko suffers pain in her hips,
Nakayama Atsuko has a crooked spine,
Nakayama Atsuko's fingers tremble,

Nakayama Atsuko's life continues.

Toshiko Hirata (b.1955) won the Gendaishi Shinjinsho (New Modern Poets prize) in 1984, leading to the publication of her first book, *Rakkyo no Ongaeshi* (Repayment of the Shallots), which has been translated into English for *The New Poetry of Japan* anthology (Katydid, 1993). She is the author of over ten books of poetry (including *Terminal*, which won the Bansui Prize in 1997), fiction (*Piano Sandwich*), essays, and award-winning plays (*Kaiun Radio/Good-luck Radio*). Her most recent collection of poetry is *Shinanoka* (Poetry Day Seven). Hirata's work has been translated and anthologized in English, Chinese, Korean, Italian, and Russian.

A leading translator of Japanese poetry into English, **Hiroaki Sato** has won the 1982 PEN American Center Translation Prize for *From the Country of Eight Islands*:

Anthology of Japanese Poetry (Anchor Books, 1981, with Burton Watson), as well as the 1999 Japan-United States Friendship Commission Japanese Literary Translation Prize for *Breeze Through Bamboo: Kanshi of Ema Saikō* (Columbia, 1997).