Preface

Japanese names are presented in the Japanese order, that is, surname first and given name last. Other Japanese words are italicized except for those generally familiar to the English-speaking reader. The Hepburn system of Romanization has been used, but macrons have been employed to denote long vowels, with the exception of the names of well-known people or places such as Tokyo.

Translation

Water

I was now to take lessons in cleaning with water. From the very word go, my father tried to scare me by saying,

“Water is a terrifying thing so it can't be handled by the faint-hearted.”

I had been brought up in Mukōjima so I knew about floods and that they were frightening, but try as I might, I couldn't see what on earth could be frightening about a bucketful of water for cleaning, so although I tried to sound impressed, deep inside I wasn't a bit scared.

“Buckets,” he said, “are difficult, and what's more, they're inelegant things.”

I had always thought that “elegant” was something that could be said about a geisha or a dancing master and “inelegant” referred to people like our teachers at school who just bumbled around, so I thought that calling a bucket “inelegant” was a funny thing
to say.

According to my father, water and metal together made a deadly combination that would completely ruin anything made from paper, cloth or wood; lacquer, leather or even stone. He also upheld that cleaning was something that should be carried out with a pure heart and an eye to beauty. When I was told that it would not be at all easy to learn to handle such destructive substances and thereby hone my domestic skills to any sort of satisfactory level, I was utterly convinced.

“All women everywhere do the housework with the intention of making things cleaner,” said my father, “but everything just gets dirtier and dirtier. It’s very unusual to come across a home that can be said to have acquired a fine patina of age and looks all the better for it.”

Then he said, “Look at our passage, then. What do you think?”

When I said that I thought its dark, shiny floor was rather fine he retorted,

“No, it’s not. It’s not even fair to middling. That sort of shine is no good at all. Do you know why it’s black?” he asked, and when I said that I thought that it was probably because it was the sort of wood that just went black, he threw his head back and laughed.

“Now where the devil would you find wood like that?” he scoffed. “It’s the dirt off all the old floor cloths that have been rubbed over it all these years.”

“The poor child can’t even tell when a thing is fine or not,” he said pityingly.

It was just as well for me that we were only in the passageway. Usually it was at the museum that I was put in the position of being pitied for my ignorance of “fine” things. My father, particularly when he was young, was desperate for the chance to look at really fine things, but usually, according to him, people who possessed such things were arrogant and miserly, and too mean to show them to anybody. Although not all the things in the museum were exceedingly fine, he said that they were quite passable and for a very small entrance fee you could look at everything without worrying about somebody’s feelings. So it was a very convenient and useful place for him, but a dreadfully tedious one for me.

“What shall we do with her?” he smiled wryly.

I, too, was at my wits’ end with boredom. There weren’t any “passages” on show in the museum, it seemed, so at least I didn’t have to worry about that.

I learnt that the best type of floor cloth was not the thick, quilted type but a simple square of cotton material which, when folded in eight, should be no bigger than the palm
of the hand.

"Quilted floor cloths," he said, "get dirty too easily and it's a complete waste of time and energy doing all that elaborate stitching on a piece of cloth that was only fit for the bin to start with. You just get left with the stitches in the end so don't bother. Find something more useful and interesting to do with your time."

The water was ready in the bucket, filled almost to the brim. Exasperated, he tipped some away so that there was only a little more than half a bucket left saying.

"Why, oh why, is there so much water for you to make free with?"

Then he put a small mat down on the floor and placed the bucket of water on it.

"Right. Off we go then," he said, "It's going to be hard work!"

He had a big smile on his face so I wasn't worried. I was smiling too. I was used to my lessons by now.

I had to wring out the floor cloth. I knew how to do it really well because I had been told off by both my grandmother and my father before about not doing it properly so I had got quite good at it. However, the spirit that is already a-buzz with the anticipation of praise is a woolly, flighty thing. I dipped the cloth into the water, wrung it out once, twice and then it was as if I was sucked into a silent world of which I understood nothing but where time just rushed on of its own accord. When this sort of thing happened I felt that if I showed that I was alarmed and asked a silly question like "What's going on?" somebody would grab me and stop me so I acted as if nothing was wrong.

As soon as I had finished wringing out the floor cloth and was standing up somebody shouted,

"I saw that!"

Just where a short, fat finger was pointing there was a pattern of water spots that spread over a surprisingly wide area.

"Even though I just told you what a frightening thing water is, you don't know what fear is. People who don't know about fear need to be slapped. The water is giving you a sign that it's no more than you deserve for not listening properly to what I was saying. Don't just stand there, snap to it and wipe up that water. It'll leave marks."

The face that was wreathed in smiles only moments ago was stiff-jawed and angular. Well, at least I was finally able to concentrate. When I think about it now I feel ashamed. I have the will to learn, but I don't seem to be able to get myself into a frame of mind that would enable me to pick up things quickly. In other words, I have to have time to
prepare myself before I can even start to learn something. I need a period of induction.

In both teaching and learning situations it makes no difference whether the participants are parent and child or complete strangers, the important thing is the closeness of the bond and making the best of the opportunities that present themselves. Even though I was told, “perfect timing; perfect opportunity” so many times that I finally lost count, usually I would still be dawdling away, until by the time I had noticed something was up and I had come to my senses it was already too late and my father would be standing there. Even from behind you could tell that all was not well and sometimes he would be waiting, moving from one foot to the other, marking time. Whenever I arrived he would always be there, already fed up and waiting impatiently and of course I would be in for it. It was almost as if my mind was encased in something thick and oily which could only be penetrated to the very roots and therefore deep enough for me to learn, if I was subjected to some sort of painful lesson.

My father was more than willing to teach me. This was my first experience of being educated by my unstinting, exceedingly thorough father. My stupid behaviour, however, continued right up to the end and as a result I have lost count of the number of invaluable opportunities I missed to learn from my father. This is just one example.

When I got nervous and couldn't go on, my father would show me how by doing it himself.

“When you are dealing with something like water,” he said, “that has a tendency to spread itself out, you have to keep your wits about you. What’s more, buckets are narrow at the bottom and widen out at the top so when you are wetting the floor cloth you have to imagine that your fingers are folding the water into it. That’s why the bucket should only be just over half full.”

When you are not using very much water it soon gets dirty so you have to keep changing it. Not taking the trouble to do this, cutting corners and trying to get out of doing things was called being “stingy” at our house. In the Rohan family the word “stingy” was the ultimate insult. If anybody called you stingy it was the most contemptuous thing they could say, the greatest put-down, the final blow, and it meant that there was nothing more that you could do other than lie down and die.

When my brother and I heard that word we knew that it meant that we had lost all hope of plea bargains, further appeals were out of the question and that we would have to kneel for quite some time, with our foreheads stuck to the tatami in penitence for our
sins.

If, then, it was being “stingy” to be too lazy to change the dirty water in the bucket, then the black, glossy floor of our passage that had been washed with that same water was the perfect example of “stinginess”. No wonder he didn’t like it. According to him, a well-polished passage floor ought to be the colour of burnished chestnuts.

I, of course, not having had the opportunity to go into other people’s houses much, have never, even to this day seen a fine example of a passage floor such as he talked about.

Father’s way of wiping the floor was neat and streamlined. Later when I was old enough to go to the theatre, I thought I recognized his movements in those of the actors on the stage and I felt as if I had stumbled onto something for which I had been searching for years.

His white fingers were somewhat short and stumpy, skillful and sensitive and without even brushing the edges of the tatami he ran on all fours with the floor cloth down the narrow passage between the rooms and stopped a hairsbreadth in front of the wooden pillars. The blood flowing crimson beneath his nails showed how much strength he put into it. Up and down the passage he went systematically, working to a good rhythm. His knees spaced well apart and his heels nicely up behind supported him and left his upper body free to work so that even though he was a little portly around the middle he was light on his feet.

“Do you see how it’s done? Have a go yourself then,” he said, standing up and panting a little. It was the first, and indeed the last time that I saw my father washing the floor.

It had never occurred to me before that there was a correct and proper way to carry oneself, and looking at him I learnt that it was so. He was a man of action, and he liked to get on and do things as soon as he could.

I grasped the floor cloth and in a flash I was imitating him going up and down the passage but I was soon told, “Why on earth do you have to jerk about all stiff like that? Can’t you do it more smoothly?” which left me open-mouthed with astonishment and despair. I think I was a bit of a disappointment to him especially since he had gone to the trouble of doing it himself to show me how.

His teaching methods were evidently based on a three-stage system:
“the student tries to do it” • “the teacher does it” • “the student tries again”
If you can see something done, you can do it yourself simply by imitating. Even a three-year-old plays house by imitating people doing the cleaning. Of course it’s not the real
thing, it just looks like it. That’s the point at which it has to be driven into you and each little thing has to be pointed out and examined closely.

Getting sick and tired of this sort of thing or being bored to death, that’s what was called “stingy” and you got cast aside. The only way to be sure of not losing him was to put up with it. Being angry, crying, answering back, or turning on him, all these sins could, at a pinch, be forgiven, but collapsing in a limp heap was strictly forbidden and resulted in being completely abandoned. I hated it and was frightened when he turned his back on me. Such is the lot of a motherless child.

There was one more unexpected point that I became aware of as a result of learning to use the floor cloth, and it was something that I felt very deeply. This concerned movements that we make without being aware of them. For example, when you have wrung out the floor cloth, what do you do with your hands next? After wringing it out you naturally progress to wiping the place you set out to clean, but in between the wiping and the wringing, what do you do with your hands? I myself was completely unaware of what I was doing.

“You’re dealing with something as awesome as water and you think it’s all right that there is a time when you are not aware of what you are doing! You didn’t notice! What an utterly staggering thought!” he said, and this was the final blow.

Of course, now that I think about it, the way that I went about things was nothing short of outrageous. As soon as I had finished wringing the cloth out I shook the water off my hands, spread out the floor cloth with them while they were still wet and walked off. The drops of water splashed over a surprisingly large area and left spots. What is even more astonishing is that not only did I not think that the spots looked awful, or that they were something to be ashamed of, but that I hadn’t even noticed them.

When I was seventeen or eighteen I really like reading detective stories and I asked my father if he didn’t think that my unconscious movements after wringing out the floor cloth might not make a good twist to a story. He laughed and said, “Aha! A clue, a clue to somebody’s sloppiness!”

I watched people carefully and I noticed that my friends, the maids and even my stepmother unconsciously shook the water off their hands when they were wet. My father said, “If you could only grasp how to do it properly, you would be streets ahead of all of them” and I can smile now at how, as a young girl, such flattery made me feel just a little bit taller. On the other hand, he soon made me feel like a nuisance and cut
me down to size again by reminding me that,

“If you can’t handle water, then you won’t be able to any of the fine things in life. Not
cooking, not teaching, not painting, not flower arranging and not the tea ceremony
either. If you think your old Dad’s just being a pain in the neck, why don’t you go and
take some lessons in the tea ceremony. When you do, you can try flinging the tea cloth
about and flicking the water off your fingers all over the place and see if they’ll let you
do it. What I’m telling you is only common sense. In fact, it’s more than common sense,
it’s something that everybody takes for granted.

Back in the late nineteen-twenties, we had a maid called Okichi who was probably
nearly thirty at the time. She had been orphaned before she had even had the chance to
finish elementary school and since then had had a hard life going from mill to mill
working as a filature girl. The hardships had made her into a jolly woman who flinched
from nothing. When she had been doing the floors they would be in a dreadful state with
marks from where she had dripped water all over the place. One day my father said to
her,

“You’ve got to stop this messing around in the passage first thing in the morning!”

“Pardon?” she said.

“Pardon my foot! What’s wrong with you? Look at the sloppy way you’ve dripped
water all over the place. You may be a good-looking woman but you’re disgusting about
the house.”

“Oh, Sir!” she said, ” You do say such awful things!” and although she laughed her
head off she wasn’t quite so careless after that.

This episode left me with a sort of “unfinished business” feeling in my head but later
I could see the funny side of my father try to preach to Okichi. He never tried to teach
the maids as he did me. He did a lot of complaining, but in the end he left them to it. With
me too, he would only teach me once. After that I had to get on with it as best I could
but it was still difficult to shake him off completely and occasionally he would get a dig
in.

For instance, there was the time I was washing the floor. My excuse was that I was
in a hurry, and I was slopping the cloth around any old fashion without thinking about
the grain of the wood or anything when he came up behind me and said, “Just a minute
young lady, you’re not supposed to be practiseing fancy hieroglyphics!” I had no idea
what hieroglyphics were so I went and looked them up in the encyclopaedia. By that time
everybody was allowed to look at the encyclopaedias, even the maids. There was a picture and when I saw it the penny dropped and even I had to admit that he was one up on me that time.

I rather liked his way of correcting me so I thought I would try it out second hand on my brother and my friends. Feeling rather proud of myself, I went around saying, “What? Don’t you even know what hieroglyphics are?” and was thoroughly despised for my cheek.

I became skilled enough with the floor cloth for my father to decide that, for the time being, we would go on to something else but I had already been forced to abandon my attempts to wash out the brush we used for the entrance hall. That very morning, when I was reluctantly getting out the water and the brush and thinking that I was going to be in for a telling off again, he disposed of the matter in what I thought was a very cavalier manner. “You can’t possibly do it right so don’t bother,” he said.

At this time, we still had a lot of visitors and so the entrance hall got dirty every day. Officially, I had been told not to, but I used to get up and do it quietly every morning before my father woke. Whether he knew about it but wasn’t bothered or whether he had just completely forgotten about it I didn’t know, but not being able to broach the subject because of his attitude was the most awkward thing about it. You had to be able to adapt yourself to his constant admonitions. It was intolerable.

One morning, when I was sixteen and was in charge of all the cleaning he stood in the still–damp entrance hall and said, “I see you’ve cleaned it then.” It startled me for a moment but then I felt as if a great burden had been lifted from me. Two years is a long time, but fifteen and sixteen, when you’re at your very best, is a great age to be. Every waking moment was crammed full of delightful things to do so it wasn’t as if it was always hanging over me like a black cloud, but the entrance hall question was always there at the back of my mind. Compared to his constant carping, being ignored was very hard to bear.

From about this time until the air raids started we had a number of women come one after another to help with the cleaning. Every time one of them washed down the concrete floor he would tut–tut and say, “Can’t even wring out a floorcloth properly and she’s got the cheek to think she can wash that! A monkey could do better than that!” He was very fond of the word “monkey”. I loved monkeys. They looked so intelligent and when I watched the comical way they moved I felt they were like my friends and that
I was one too, Aya monkey!

My father was interested in water in a variety of ways. He loved it. If anybody were ever to ask me what his favourite thing was I always intended to say, without reservation, “water”. When he talked about his calculations of the currents that flowed on the surface, in the middle and at the bottom of large rivers it was completely beyond my comprehension and I just thought that he certainly did study some strange things. Sometimes though, he would speak emotionally and poetically about water in a way that even somebody as insensitive as I would be moved and swept along with the flow.

Some of the tales he told about water were really good. There was something about them, a fragrance that reminded me of my mother. It was probably because they were set in Ōkawabata, at about the time when she was still alive. When I asked him to jot them down so that they would form a series he would “H’m” in assent but when it came time to actually do it he said, “Oh, we’ll leave it for today.” and that would be that. When I tried to push him into doing it the next day he neatly avoided it saying, “Good grief! You’re worse than a debt collector! Stop bossing me around!” Since even I didn’t like being called a debt collector only one of these stories remains. All that was left was the story called “Phantom Tales” and my acceptance of the inevitable yet again.

About ten years previous to this, when I was about eighteen, I think it was in the middle of November, my interest in his stories about water deepened markedly. Something happened that put my very life at risk.

In my school English book there was an extract from Poe’s “A Descent into the Maelstrom”. However many words I looked up in the dictionary, I couldn’t make head or tail of it. I thought and thought, but I couldn’t get anywhere with it. I think my father must have been drinking because he said, “What’s up then?” Grasping at a straw I explained about the story and he said, “Oh! That one. Let’s have a look!” and put his glasses on. We children had never had much respect for our father’s English accent. It wasn’t British, and it wasn’t American either. It was really weird, something not of this world. He translated it for me, but literally, word for word so that I had no idea what it meant. If I hadn’t been looking at the book while I was listening, I would have thought it was classical Chinese.

“Whether you understand it or not, that’s what the book says,” he said when I looked stumped, “the trouble with you is that you don’t know what a maelstrom is!” he went on, putting the book down and taking off his glasses. Poe too, was sucked down into my
father's maelstrom. By then I couldn't have cared less about the translation, I didn't want him to finish what he was saying, it sounded so interesting. I asked him some questions to so he would go on and I reeled him in closer to hear more. Of course, the alcohol helped him to warm to his subject.

"Whirlpools are not just the ones you can see at Naruto in Awa. The River Ōkawa that you see every day, how many do you think there are? The ones that you can see on the surface are nothing to get excited about, but there are those in the depths of the river that are very powerful. Try letting a reed go down into one of them and watch what happens to it and how it comes out." Then he broke off and looked at me intently. I felt sick to my stomach with dread. Finally he talked about how you could get yourself out of one of these whirlpools even if you couldn't swim. I could swim like a brick, so I hung onto his every word. Now, if I could tell you that this was the end of the story, and we all lived happily ever after then that would be perfect, however, the very next day I fell right into the River Sumida!

It was a drizzly, cloudy morning, and as I was about to board the steam ferry at the Azuma Bridge landing with all my school bags and an umbrella and things, my foot slipped as I stepped onto the boat and I fell into the gap between the floating landing stage and the stern of the ferry. It was all over with one splash. When I opened my eyes I could see a light that seemed to come through frosted glass and millions of bubbles that swirled as they rose around me. "Whirlpool!" I thought. I tucked my legs up under me and waited for the undertow to hit. I wasn't afraid and when I kicked out with my feet and gradually rose up to the surface the first thing I heard was a sound like gravel being tipped out. Even now it doesn't make any sense to me but my father said, "That's the sound water makes." The next thing I saw was a tall bridge some way away and on it people running backwards and forwards shouting, "She's fallen in, she's fallen in!" and "She's come up, she's come up!" I was so embarrassed that I panicked.

Water poured into my mouth and not wanting to be overcome by it I kept swallowing. Still more poured in. People jumped in after me, and some threw life belts. They didn't reach me, but floated along with me some distance away. On the other side of the bridge another ferry going to Eidai was moored. Another whirlpool. I was getting frightened and the water started to come up over my face.

As I was desperately trying to keep my nose above water I saw something shiny come towards me. It was a boat pole. At one end of the pole was a sharp, triangular, metal
gadget. The elderly boatman who was wielding it was giving me a friendly smile and the young mate was manning the stern oar. I no longer had my umbrella but I was still holding on to my schoolbooks and the first thing they did was to get me to let go of them and then they got me to catch hold of the side of the boat. Even though I put every ounce of strength I had into pushing on my arms like we did in gymnastics, I couldn't get myself out of the water and into the boat which was rocking badly. The boatman said, “Slowly now, gently does it” but even so I stared to fret and panic. The pleats of my *hakama* were incredibly heavy and clinging.

By using all my might I was amazed to find myself flat on my back in the bottom of the boat and I felt water dripping onto my forehead again. The boatman had caught hold of my hand and his sunburnt face was right by mine near the side of the boat. I was so scared I can remember the sound of my teeth chattering, but not much else. I think I had been spun round and round by the undertow and I remember a terrific pain as if my hip was being crushed when I was dragged over the side of the boat and then the top part of my body was free of the water. Then I felt somebody give me a great shove, the pad at the top of my *hakama* was torn off and I found myself lying in the bottom of the boat unable to get up. A great cheer went up from the people on the bridge above us.

As this was the route I took to school everyday, they knew who I was and somebody phoned for a rickshaw to come and pick me up. And the embarrassment! As you can imagine I was completely soaked from head to toe and I was given one of the ferrymen's gold-buttoned greatcoats to put on. Strangely enough my *geta* had stayed on my feet throughout my ordeal and now looked rather comical attached to two fat legs sticking out from under the bottom of the greatcoat.

A good fire had been built and the onlookers had been shooed away but I couldn't stop shaking. At last I was tucked in under the hood of the rickshaw and I relaxed a little. Then for the first time I felt how cold the water was as it trickled down the back of my neck from my wet hair.

When I saw my father standing outside the front door looking at me I just stood there wanting to cry and said, “I'm sorry about all the trouble I've caused” but he roared with laughter. “I bet you swallowed some water” he said. “No I didn't” I lied. “Don't be stupid,” he said, “You must have. Stick your finger down your throat and get it up.” So, as I couldn't do anything else, I crouched down where I was. He patted me on the back while I heaved.
About an hour later my little brother got home and said, “You got swept away, didn’t you? You’re famous. Aya is Ophelia! Aya is Ophelia!” My father said, “If the landing stage had got stuck under the ferry we’d be in a spot of bother now. Still, you’re safe thanks to Mr. Poe!”

After the accident my fear of water was so bad that even the leaves swirling round in the gutters made me feel shaky, obviously the heart that had longed to hear father’s tales of the riverside was still bearing the scars of its recent ordeal. The swelling evening tides of the springtime, the deep stagnant pools before the autumn storms, to most people they are just something to look at, but not for me. I had felt the spirit of the water on my skin as it moved me along.

Even common stories like “The Beautiful Otter Woman” and “The Fish Boy” were interesting, to say nothing of “Murder on a Frozen Moonlit Night” which was terrifying. However, by the 150th day after my father’s death, all of his stories had completely disappeared from my memory. They must have gone with him when he left. The only one that I was able to tell Mr. Shimomura was the one called “Phantom Tales”. But the stories that I had forgotten were the real phantoms.

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Research Note

A Translation

Susan M. Williams

This paper is the third of an on-going study of the early works of Kōda Aya (1904–1990) and is a translation of the essay “Mizu” (Water) which forms part of the long memoir “Atomiyosowaka” (Fingers Crossed). These have been chosen from the collection of essays entitled “Konna Koto” (This Sort of Thing) principally because it was felt that they most clearly reveal the relationship between Aya and her father Kōda Rohan.