

翻 訳

Kōda Aya: “*Atomiyo sowaka: Nata*”
 「あとみよそわか・鉈」
 “Hatchet”
 A Translation

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Preface

In this translation 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 throughout 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

Hatchet

The first time I held a hatchet in my hands was to chop wood for kindling to heat the bath water. I struck the wood and the blade got wedged in so I gave it two or three more taps to split the wood.

“What a useless child! You can’t even chop wood. Don’t be so feeble!” Father said, and proceeded to show me how.

“You should be able to summon up more strength than that. Whatever job you are doing, sparing your efforts is a very stingy and ugly thing to do. When you throw all the strength of the body into doing something, then and only then, is it beautiful. A woman must be beautiful even when she is just chopping wood. She should be like a breath of fresh air.”

At the time, when he went on like this I used to think he was such an annoying old man. He really

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got on my nerves.

“Stand the piece of wood that you’re going to split on the block, stand at right angles to it and bend your knees,” he explained. “It’s wrong to aim, raise the hatchet and chop. You should raise your arms first, then take aim and chop. The wood should be split into two with one stroke. If it doesn’t work it’s because you’ve got your stance wrong.”

“Except for the experts, the hatchets most people use are normally quite blunt, that’s why you have to do it with a single stroke. It’s no good thinking that you’re going to have two goes at it. Put your whole body into it, and press down on your diaphragm. Keep your wrists relaxed and flexible, and don’t bend at the hip. Look carefully at the grain of the wood and watch out for any knots.”

I didn’t have the faintest idea of what I was supposed to do. Father did it two or three times to show me how. A weird shiver of repugnance ran up and down my spine. It was cold in the shadow in front of the shed. The white hands that lifted the thick-backed hatchet aloft, the sash which circled his rotund middle like the hoop of a barrel, the light blue edging of his plain, lined, pongee kimono and above all, his eyes: passion surged out of them. Years of drinking had made his eyelids sag, but now the wrinkles at the corners slanted sharply upwards. He brought the hatchet down with one swift stroke and the wood split in two.

In the first place, I was already scared of waving sharp-edged tools about and it upset me to think of things undergoing sudden changes in shape.

His eyes never wavered and as he chip-chopped his way through the kindling, his neck and shoulders appeared to be shrouded in a mist which precluded me from speaking to him. For an immature, over-sensitive girl it was a chore which required a great deal of self control.

The wood we used as kindling we bought as waste from the local lumber yard but the blocks looked good enough to be used as building materials. It should have been easy to chop up but I was timid and couldn’t steel myself to bring down the hatchet in one bold stroke.

Father didn’t like the way I stood holding up the hatchet.

“One little kick and you’d be flat on your behind!” he said.

As I stood there unable to make up my mind to bring down the hatchet I was subjected to an onslaught of grunts and groans from my father hovering behind me. I shrank down. His voice sounded like stones. All of a sudden, a real stone came flying at me from behind. I stood up and glared at him face to face but when our eyes met I lost the battle and looked down at the ground.

“Have another go!” he said, and if anything his choice of words was gentle. To be honest, though, I was too tense to notice whether there was even the smallest speck of affection in what he was saying. Some people might think that his unrelenting intensity and his refusal to let up was a form of cruelty

but for some reason my legs found the strength to plant themselves firmly on the ground. Of course this may have been the result of a sort of rebellion born of desperation, at any rate it wasn't true courage. I managed to pull myself together and I thought, "What's and arm or a leg or two? Who cares if they get chopped off?"

I suffered from what was apparently a terrible fear of boulders. I can remember exactly when it started. It was at my mother's funeral. In the temple there was a corridor that ran between the main hall and another large room, and a huge drum hung from the ceiling of this corridor. The beginning of the ceremonies was marked by the beating of this drum. Initially the drum was given two strong heavy beats and these were followed by a series of lighter taps, gradually increasing in speed as they became lighter and lighter. Finally there was a single strong stroke similar to the first two. I was only seven and as the first stroke sounded I felt overcome by a terrible weight, and terror struck to the very roots of my being. Then, just as I was feeling relieved that the beats of the drum were becoming softer and faster the final great stroke fell and I could stand it no longer.

I stood up shakily and made for the door only to be stopped by somebody near me who held me fast and sat me firmly on their knee so that I was unable to move. The beating of the drum and being held so tightly that I couldn't move somehow got all mixed up together and in the darkness behind my tightly shut eyes, a huge boulder came out of nowhere rolling towards me. I could bear it no longer and struggled free. The drumming stopped. I had upset everybody but I felt calmer.

Since then I was frequently plagued by nightmares of being chased by drums and boulders and I would wake up crying. Soon after that just the word 'heavy' was enough to frighten me and when Father started telling us the story of Kamakura Gongorō and his fabulous strength, although it was the middle of the day, I panicked and ran out into the sunshine to get away from it.

Having been branded as stingy for running away, you'd think I'd have wanted to prove I wasn't by resisting the forces of the boulder but instead I felt I wanted to hang on to it desperately. Once I endured it for so long that I got cramp in my legs. Father was shocked and massaged them until they got better, but that was agony too.

The business with the drum that was at the bottom of all this was so terrifying that I was quite unable to talk about it at all. However often Father asked me, I was never able to explain. Afterwards, whenever we went to the temple, even before we had left the house I was prepared for the worst. When the time came to go in, I stuck my fingers in my ears, kept my eyes on the ceiling where there were carvings of peonies and doves to look at and forced my mind to dwell on pleasant things.

A wild and fierce side of my personality that even I was aware of was beginning to show. Concentrating on the image of the hatchet as hard as I could, I let it fall.

Although I had had no experience of such a thing, the wood's resistance to the edge of the hatchet made it feel as if I was chopping into a living thing. These eerie and unpleasant associations that welled up inside me made my bottom rise up too. Father didn't stop grunting out his encouragement. I didn't let go of the hatchet.

The next thing I knew, my father had disappeared and so had my fear of sharp-edged tools and boulders. In the final analysis, it wasn't the actual skill that Father taught me, it was how to concentrate the force of the whole body.

Sometimes the wood that we got hold of was pine logs and sometimes it was dead pruned wood from garden trees. Pine always had a great many knots in it and sometimes the grain was twisted. When the pattern of the grain was straight, sometimes, deep in the wood there would be a kernel like the centre of a boil. At other times there would be a different type of thing entirely where you could see where a branch had started to grow out diagonally and it looked like the lead in a pencil.

When I got a six-inch log that was twisted right through, the grain was so stubbornly cohesive that it was impossible to know where to begin. I really sweated over that piece of wood. In the end I was forced to chip away at it little by little until it was all in small pieces. Father accused me of making tooth-picks

Another time, when I was again 'making tooth-picks' and my father was nearby watching what I was doing, I happened to look up and I saw that he was scowling. Then when the log was all chopped up into splinters he said,

"Finished at last, have you?"

I was day-dreaming and not really listening to him but I had the feeling that I had achieved something.

Cypress wood was easy to chop but plum was very difficult. It fought back so hard that I got pins and needles in my hands but in the end, it too went into the stoke-hole.

Finally I got the knack and it got so that I could tell even in the fraction of a second before the blade touched the wood whether it would split or not so I suggested to father that using an axe would be even better.

"How preposterous!" he spluttered. "What a ridiculous child!" "A hatchet is quite good enough for jobs like chopping wood for the bathwater" and he went on to give me a lecture on the hierarchy of the blade.

Under the veranda outside father's study, packed in one on top of the other, there were a large number of wooden engraving blocks that had been used for printing the illustrations for his books. There was one from 'The Scythe' showing the boy raising his scythe to the man, and another of the

pretty girl in 'The Toy Bamboo Leaf Boat'. I could also make out one with the raised letters of the title of 'Hamamatsu Chrysanthemum'.

I don't know if there was something bothering him but as told me to chop them up and burn them it seemed to stick in his throat. I thought it was a waste but I chopped them up one after the other without saying anything. They were made of cherry wood. They burnt very well. And that is the story of how I made ashes from plum, pine and cherry.

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Translation

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A Translation

Williams S. M.

This paper is the next in an on-going study of the early works of Kōda Aya (1904-1990) and is a translation of the essay “Nata” (Hatchet) which forms part of the long memoir “Atomiyo sowaka”. This and other previously translated essays 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.