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# Swaying, Swinging

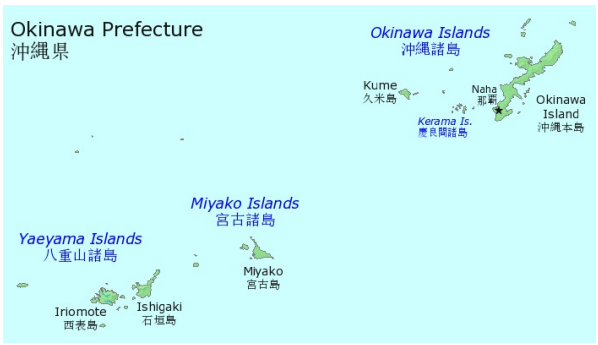

## Sakiyama Tami

## Translated by Kyoko Selden and Alisa Freedman


**Sakiyama Tami (Date unknown). Takuma Smirky, "Reading Okinawa," 2015.**

Sakiyama Tami (1954-), real name Taira Kuniko, was born on Iriomote Island, the largest of the Yaeyama island group in Okinawa Prefecture, where she lived until age fourteen when her family moved to Koza (present-day Okinawa City). Sakiyama graduated from the Department of Law, Economics, and Literature at the University of the Ryukyus. She began publishing in Okinawan periodicals in 1979 and in mainland Japanese literary magazines, a conventional means of launching a literary career, starting in 1988.

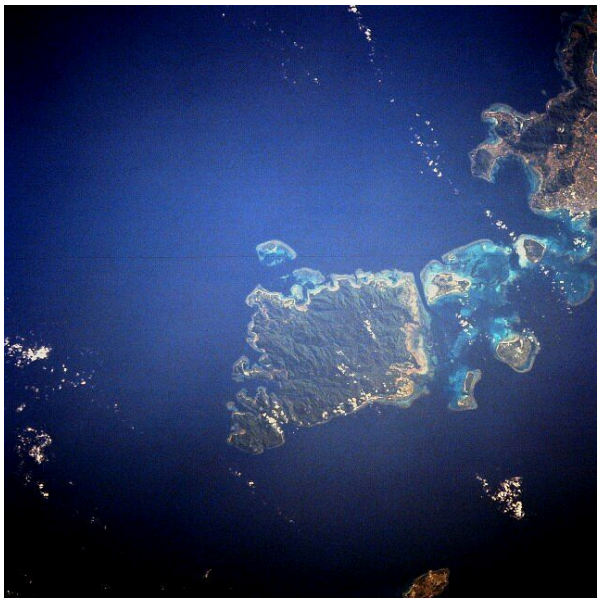
On Iriomote, settlers spoke different Ryukyuan languages, depending upon their origins, while children spoke Japanese at school. Sakiyama's family spoke the dialect of Miyako Island, over 150 miles to the northeast from Iriomote. After moving to the main Okinawan island, she was exposed to standard Japanese mixed with elements of Okinawan. The linguistic tension she experienced led her to write using Ryukyuan expressions as a conscious strategy. In an essay included in the 2004 collection *The Place Where Words Are Born* (Kotoba no umareru basho, Sunagoya Shobō), Sakiyama explains that, in her literature, she envisions genuine *shimakotoba* (island speech), which is now impossible to directly encounter because it remains only in fragments or locked in printed texts and recordings. In her work, the *shimakotoba* of Miyako Island and elsewhere claims its place in culture, in defiance of the domination of the master language, standard Japanese.




**Map of Okinawa Prefecture. Wikicommons.**

Her stories often depict the lives of islanders in connection with the sea that surrounds them, the sound of the wind, the spirit of the water, and voices from the past. The novella *Swaying, Swinging* (Yuratiku yuritiku), first published in 2003 (Kōbunsha), concerns an imaginary, legend-ridden lone island called Hotara, whose only residents are now over eighty years of age. A character explains that the name is associated with the Japanese word *hottarakashi*, meaning "left alone." That is, the island has been abandoned by the world, but not by the islanders, who never leave and continue to pass on its legends. Besides the inhabitants' community, there is a secluded dwelling on the beach for outside settlers, who are portrayed as drifters or deranged eccentrics. The area is mostly shunned, and the drifters are ostracized by the islanders. The novella, a series of connected stories recounted by the characters during a visit to the home of one of the oldest inhabitants, thus problematizes the conventional view of the idealized, nostalgic, southern islands as a utopian matriarchal and sea-bound land of bright sun.

This selection is excerpted from a translation of the full novella that appears in *Islands of Protest: Literature from Okinawa* (University of Hawaii Press, 2016), edited by Davinder Bhowmik and Steve Rabson. Kyoko Selden also translated Sakiyama's "Tale of Wind and Water" (Fūsuitan, 1997), included in *More Stories by Japanese Women Writers: An Anthology* (M.E. Sharpe, 2011), from which much of this introduction was taken.



**Iriomote Island from Space, 2005. Wikicommons.**

When someone dies, the body is not cremated or buried. After the wake, it is wrapped all over with *ikadakazura*, "raft vines" or bougainvillea, and floated out to sea just before the sunrise. This is the funeral ceremony on Hotara Island.

Exposed to the morning sun that soon begins to dye the surface of the sea, the corpse is rocked on the waves; in some cases it ends in sinking deep underwater to the bottom of a submarine trench lying on the border between Hotara and the neighboring island. Suppose it belongs to a woman, a child, or an invalid lacking sufficient weight to sink completely. It first floats to the offing but is drawn into the tide that forms a gentle eddy just a little beyond the trench and flows backward toward the northern shore of Hotara, so that once again it travels to the island. Prey to fishes and what not, the flabby, swollen body reaches the shore in sad shape, with eyes gouged or limbs lost on one side. Left like that on the shore, while drying up and weathering, it becomes covered with sand all the way to the marrow. So it has been told.

For this reason, there is no burial place on

Hotara. If one must come up with a place, they might say it is the area of the sea including the northern shore, where corpses sink and accumulate. Hotara folk refer to that northern beach, where some of the dead reach and weather, as Niraipama, or yonder shore.

On the other hand, the soul that has left the corpse dissolves in water on the forty-ninth day.[1] It neither rises to heaven nor attains nirvana; nor does it become a deity after the thirty-third anniversary. Hotara folk merely float underwater forever as *hitodama*, human souls—or so it is said.

Thanks to the ritual repeated each time someone dies, it has come to be that, in the sea around Hotara, human souls jostle one another for space. According to the results of calculations formulated by a certain special method, the briny water in the sea several kilometers all around the island will soon be saturated with the remnants of human souls. If this were so, where in the world would the souls of the Hotara dead go in the future? Some islanders who have outlived the dead have recently begun to loudly voice the anxiety hovering faintly over the island community. Possibly because of the spread of this anxiety, the island population is steadily declining. Rapidly at that.

Fed up with tedious island days ever monotonously repeated with the rhythm of the surf that ebbs and flows, people might be expected to scramble to be the first to leave Hotara. But that is not the case. To begin with, Hotara folk all firmly believe that they would not be able to live away from the place of their birth. So no one leaves the island voluntarily unless there is a particularly compelling situation. They appear almost obstinate about that, I hear. However, it is totally impossible to tell whether that nearly religious attachment to the island is good or bad for the future of Hotara, even as it has by now become the islanders' temperament.

Because none of the Hotara folks wish to leave, it might seem odd that the island population is declining, but the situation is quite simple. It seems that these people only die; they do not produce new living bodies. In fact, if one examines the island office's birth registers over the past decades, there is not a single baby's name entered. There seems to be a situation in which male-female relationships here have ceased to perform the function of creating descendants. A man and a woman who happen to form a bond might visit each other's homes and might, on occasion, live and eat under one roof as a couple with mutual affection. This age-old custom still exists; yet it has become an implicit virtue not to have children.

How did this trend come to prevail on the island, causing women to stop giving birth? Did it prevail precisely because women ceased to have children, or is the severity of the anxiety about losing space for the dead souls leading people unconsciously in this direction? Even now, what is at the root of this cause and effect relationship is unclear.

When the situation developed, however, Hotara folk did not take it very seriously. In general, not thinking of any matter too profoundly has been their predisposition from time immemorial. Thoroughly accustomed to accepting any given situation in its entirety as something that is bound to happen, they somehow believe that whatever befalls the island is completely "natural," the result of a course of events that was meant to be.

Eventually, the Hotara population was reduced to old folk over eighty years of age. The oldest man on the island, age one hundred and thirty-three this year, has begun to lament, murmuring to himself so quietly that others do not hear, that the years he has lived outnumber the inhabitants on the island. Some of the sundry traditional rituals have been discontinued because of the increase in people who cannot get around on their own. One

exception is the enigmatic mid-summer festival only involving women, which celebrates Ushumē-ganashi, the founder deity of the island. Called Hotara-upunaka, until recent decades, it was apparently performed in pomp and solemnity as testimony to Hotara being Hotara. In a way, their profound passion for this ritual, related to the founding of the island, is said to have helped Hotara folk sustain themselves on the island until now.

Although nobody knows when the secret ritual of Hotara-upunaka was discontinued, in recent years, a rumor has circulated that something strange is occurring on the beach of the island. The incident always occurs unbeknownst to anyone, it is said, at low tide between sunset and midnight in the summer.

This is a *panasu*, a story representing one of the Seven Wonders of Hotara that derived from the teatime chats of an old man named Jirā, who happened to personally witness the incident. But it has been said that Jirā himself, already one hundred and seventeen years old, recently became a spirit, a fiery ball that exits the human body and floats on the seawater. It is indeed a regrettable story.

**Tudumari-no-hama (Tsukigahama Beach). Wikicommons.**

Well, the strange occurrence that Jirā claimed to have witnessed is said to have been more a natural phenomenon than an incident, nothing special unless one paid particular attention. It was just a visible oval bubble bobbing on the water at the shoreline. Yet it did not seem to be a bubble that simply emerges because of the wind's playfulness or something along those lines, only to vanish in no time. Rather, it seemed to be the phenomenon of one of the human spirits, which had reached the saturation point in the sea near Hotara, being flicked from the water by some accident.

As Jirā watched intently, the bubble burbled audibly. Dumbfounded, he saw it swell and glide across the water, he said, burbling toward the beach as if it had a will of its own. A bubble that crosses the water and crawls up, burbling, toward the sand left by the surf—this was itself a terribly odd story; but according to the witness Jirā, that bubble began something that might be called a bubble dance, if not a Bub-bon dance.[2]

The glistening, transparent, oval body that had swollen to a diameter of around 150

centimeters stretched and shrank horizontally and vertically, kicking the sand in a bobbing rhythm. This single bubble flew along the evening dusk sand as freely as if it owned the beach. This was such an odd story that Sanrā and Tarā, the two chums sipping tea on the veranda of Jirā's house in the afternoon as the sun began to fade, almost spat their drinks at each other. Tarā nearly spat out his false teeth. This was such an unexpected development for a tea-drinking story that Sanrā and Tarā thought they had better find fault with it for the time being, despite their reserve with Jirā, who was the eldest of the three. So they started to speak to Jirā at the same time.

—Hey, Jirā.

But Jirā, who had the habit of repeatedly nodding to himself while talking, did not seem at all bothered by his listeners' response.

Meeting his serious look, both Tarā and Sanrā were at a loss as to what to do with their gaping mouths. They swallowed and tightly closed their mouths in one quick motion and used the edges of sleeves and such to wipe their cheeks that were sprayed with tea. After a little while, Tarā bent forward and looked into the eyes of Jirā, whose lips moved, searching for the next words to say—

—*Mizu nu udui, nji isē, mijirasan yā*, "water dance," that's strange, Jirā.

—*Anshi, nū nata ga*, so what happened then,

—*Ssonu, miji nu udui, nji isē ya*, to that so-called water dance?

Instead of pouring water to dampen the story, Tarā seemed to have unintentionally poured oil over it.

So, the story about one of the Seven Wonders of Hotara rolled on, with no hint of where it would end, with the old man Jirā's tediously repetitive narrative undulation that seemed to accompany the long, setting summer sun.

… That day, Jirā sat alone under the screw pine leaves on the Irizaki Beach, or sunset point, the destination of evening walks that were now part of his daily schedule. The sun had long set, but, having lost the chance to stand up, he remained seated, vacantly looking at the sea. No matter how late his return might be, he no longer had anyone with whom he felt ill at ease. His parents were gone, his older brother and younger sister had died, and he had outlived his wife Nabii, to whom he was long married. Like all the others, he had no children. As was the case with most old people of Hotara, he had lived by himself for decades. After sitting there past dusk until it truly felt like night, he finally thought of leaving the beach. With one hand on his lower back and the other on the sand, he firmly planted one foot. It was then that he spotted a little crystal ball, glistening with particular brilliance upon the dark sea. He had a sensation of a thin piece of pale silk descending across the darkness. On the other side of this faint, translucent screen hanging before his eyes was clearly visible the bubble of water that had crawled toward him on the sand, burbling.

—*Ai, nū ya ga, urē*, hey, what can that be?

Even as he wondered, the ball of water began to twist around, as though it were trying to flick itself into the air. Adding a twist with each turn, it kicked the sand about; with a sway of its hips back and forth, left and right, it sprung upward.

—*Aie nā, urē, miji nu udui ya ara ni*, ah yes, this must be the water dance.

The merrily laughing bubble dance was so lovable that, before he knew it, Jirā tried to get up, extending his arms toward it. The reason that he did not get up right away was because dragging his legs on his cane, with his lean body bent like a hook, was, at age one hundred and seventeen, the best he could do to move from place to place. His legs had become quite weak. Still, he finally stood, his bent upper body supported on his cane, one hand on his lower back. Sticking out his chin, he eyed the surface of the sand.

Then, the bubble stretched sideways. It spun around. It shrunk, then swelled, and almost burst. Amid these changes, it sprang agilely in a bobbing rhythm and undulated with delight. It made Jirā feel itchy around the chest and scratchy around the limbs. He realized that he was imitating, if clumsily, the twisting, sprightly motions of the bubble dance. His bent back, unsteady legs, and wooden arms began snaking with dreamy agility. It was indeed curious. Moreover, music came from somewhere unknown. Although quite hard of hearing by now, he strained his ears and caught the sound that seemed to approach him from far out at sea. It seemed to him that, tossed by the wind, the very undulation of the

waves that crossed the sea turned into a melody. Becoming louder, the throbbing rhythm shook his body from the feet up. It was as if it unwound and moistened his dry body that was ready to crumble to dust. On listening more carefully, rather than the sound of waves, it was a lilting echo of strings that trembled in the wind: *tete tenten, tete tete te-e-n, ton, toto, totototo, ton, ten tete ten, ten, tete tete toto toto … toto toto ten ten … to-o-n, tu-u-n, te-e-n, ten, toto ton ton te te, te te toto toto … tete ten tenten … to-o-n, tu-u-n* … It was the sound of a three-stringed instrument. Nearly disappearing, then swelling again, it pressed from afar, embracing him.

The distant, surging whirlpool would shake any listener's heart and body. Jirā felt hot from the flow of the sound, light yet tenderly warm. Overwhelmed by unreasonable nostalgia, sudden tears escaped and fell. Just when one teardrop flew on the wind, the water bubble sprang up in amorphous motions. It stretched upward, bent, divided into branches, parts slipping and sliding outward. It was not unlike, say, an automatically created water sculpture. Its motions then slackened to stillness. A colorless, transparent water image stood a distance in front of him. Jirā opened his shriveled eyes as widely as possible—Oh no, it's a human, and a woman at that. As he looked up, mouth agape, the bulges flaunted before his nose were the indecently exposed breasts of water. They shook and rippled. The water figure was entirely smooth and transparent; yet a profound expression hovered around the egg white that seemed to be its face and lured him in an exceedingly charming manner. A sudden, deep human smell from the swaying water stiffened him. It was the female fragrance that had long disappeared from this island. He did his best to support his body on his cane. The water sculpture sidled up toward his cheeks—Jirā was transfixed with bewilderment. Suddenly, it pressed to him its lapping breasts.

—*Agi ja pyō*, what on earth is this, he shouted, even more immobile than before.

When his stiff body relaxed, little by little, in response to the tenderness of her breasts, a certain odd sentiment slowly spread within his body. It perhaps resembled the cool sensation poured from the skin of transparent water, the icy air felt in the first bodily contact with this world, or the tension experienced when being thrown into the endless sky. It was, as the story went, like the pain that permeated into one's entrails when torn apart by an object of desire.

**Urauchi River, Iriomote. Wikicommons.**

As if to reproduce the indescribably strange feeling he had then experienced, he narrowed his shriveled eyes even more to look afar, spellbound with the gaze of a young female dreamer. Regaining himself, he blinked a few times and suddenly opened his eyes with determination. He stared, fixedly, into the air before him. Then, relaxing his eyes, he held his shoulders with both hands. He even groaned, ooh, as if withstanding cold shivers. Releasing his bony hands from his shoulders, he brought them to his face. Then, he roughly stroked his deeply wrinkled, wave-sculpted cheeks.

Looking askance at Jirā, who staged an interlude in the conversation by way of this silent show, Tarā ran his fingers over his grey

hair that was thick for a man his age. He thought to himself, sighing:

—*Akki sami sami, dēji na shibai shī ya saya*, I'm shocked. You put on quite an act, Jirā, didn't you?

Anyway, Tarā thought, someone should say something at this point or there could be trouble in the future. He leaned toward Jirā, who was still looking vacant, his hands on his cheeks, and began

—*Eh, jirā, urē nmi nu panasu ya sayā*, hey, Jirā, that's dream talk.

—*Funtō nu koto ya aran sa ni*, it's not something real.

The first-born son of an aristocratic family, Tarā was a rare type on Hotara, with his peculiarly gallant nature and dislike for ambiguities. At age eighty-eight, he was still a high-spirited youth by Hotara standards. With all due respect for Jirā's seniority, he was beginning to feel nonplussed about having to listen further to this story of feigned innocence. Yet, despite the fact that he began energetically, his objection was repelled by Jirā's stony gaze that had started showing something that one might call determination as his narrative gradually developed.

—*Umi nji na*, it's no dream, Tarā.

—*Kurē, umi nu panasu ya aran dō*, this is no dream talk,

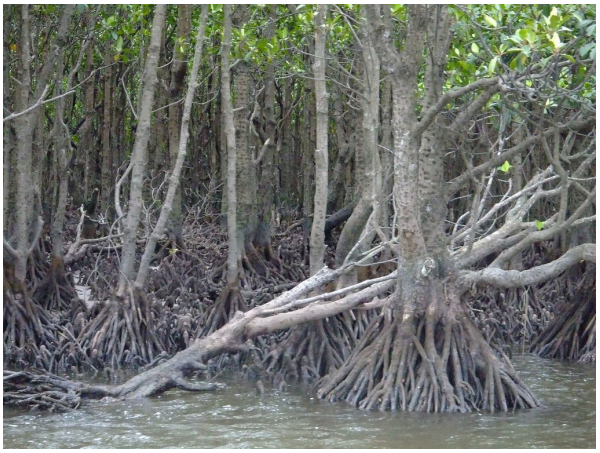
—*Funtō nu koto dō yaru*, it's a real fact.

—*Wan nē, yukkushi-ii ya*, san, I don't tell lies.

Childishly pouting his shrunken lips, the toothless Jirā loudly said: San, I don't. Tarā was speechless. Jirā's carefree yet staunchly serious nature, famous throughout Hotara, did not change no matter how old he became; rather, as he aged, it had become all the more inflexible. Thus, when he declared that he did not lie, Tarā could not refute the claim.

—*Funtō nu panasu yan*, is that a true story?

Shrugging his shoulders, Tarā stopped meddling. As his spirits dampened, to smooth things over, he reached over to the teapot and poured more tea into the cup he had just refilled so that it nearly overflowed.



**Mangroves on the Nakama River, Iriomote. Wikicommons.**

For some time, Sanrā had been casting his eyes on the edge of the verandah. It was not that he was determined to stay out of the exchange between Jirā and Tarā. He was intently listening to Jirā's mutter because something in it rang a bell. Sanrā was related to Tarā on his father's side and was a distant relative of Jirā in a somewhat complicated way. Having just turned eighty and younger than anyone else on Hotara Island, Sanrā was, so to speak, a newborn member of the elderly. With all his senses, like a baby's, responding susceptibly to the outside world, he was equipped with the ability to catch the delicate truth of the matter that lodged in the lingering overtone of Jirā's voice. Something did indeed ring a bell for Sanrā about the identity of the thing that had crawled out of the water and appeared before Jirā.

He felt the impulse to ascertain as soon as possible whether or not his hunch had hit the mark. He tried to make his feelings lean toward the tree of imagination that expanded the moment it entered his thoughts and began extending branches and leaves in all directions; but he broke through this foliage by force. Calming his excitement, he decided to stay silent and patiently wait to see where Jirā's story was going. This was because he had second thoughts: whatever the reality of the matter, the main character of this story had to be, for now, Jirā, who had the rare experience of enjoying shared moments with the water spirit.

Both Tarā and Sanrā had to gradually notice Jirā's way of talking that day, languid yet suggestive of unusual determination. Jirā perceived with his entire body the shadow of death creeping up on him. This, the two realized, drove him to storytelling while he himself remained unaware of it. Making up his mind not to interrupt until Jirā closed his mouth completely, Tarā no longer averted his eyes from Jirā's mouth as he muttered, mumbled, and sputtered. Sanrā turned his face away from the edge of the porch, and, sitting straight, looked at Jirā's deeply wrinkled long, chira, face.

To face the storyteller in this manner was to show the greatest respect to one born on Hotara Island as a Hotara resident, who had spent his life and was about to complete it. Both Tarā and Sanrā knew well that this was a scene of life that would eventually befall them as well.

*Translated from Sakiyama Tami,* Yuratiku yuritiku *(Swaying, Swinging) (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2003).*

## SPECIAL FEATURE

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Kayano Shigeru and Kyoko Selden, The Goddess of the Wind and Okikurmi

**Sakiyama Tami** (1954-), real name Taira Kuniko, was born on Iriomote Island, the largest of the Yaeyama island group in Okinawa Prefecture, where she lived until age fourteen when her family moved to Koza (present-day Okinawa City). Sakiyama graduated from the Department of Law, Economics, and Literature at the University of the Ryukyus. She began publishing in Okinawan periodicals in 1979 and in mainland Japanese literary magazines, a conventional means of launching a literary career, starting in 1988. She has written more than five novellas and novels, which have been nominated for literary awards.

**Kyoko Selden** (1936-2013) taught Japanese language and literature as a senior lecturer at Cornell University until her retirement in 2008. Author, translator, artist and calligrapher, she was the translation coordinator of the Asia-Pacific Journal. Her major works as translator centered on Japanese women writers, the atomic bomb, the Ainu and the Okinawans. Her major translations included Japanese Women Writers: Twentieth Century Short Fiction, More Stories By Japanese Women Writers, An Anthology, Kayano Shigeru's Our Land Was a Forest, Honda Katsuichi's Harukor: Ainu Woman's Tale, The Atomic Bomb: Voices From Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Shin'ichi Suzuki's Nurtured by Love, and Cho Kyo's The Search for the Beautiful Woman, A Cultural History of Japanese and Chinese Beauty.

**Alisa Freedman** is an Associate Professor of Japanese Literature and Film at the University of Oregon. Her books include *Tokyo in Transit: Japanese Culture on the Rails and Road* (Stanford University Press, 2010), an annotated translation of Kawabata Yasunari's *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* (University of California Press, 2005), and co-edited volumes on *Modern Girls on the Go: Gender, Mobility, and Labor in Japan* (Stanford University Press, 2013), and *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture* (forthcoming from Routledge). She has published articles and edited special journal issues on Japanese modernism, Tokyo studies, youth culture, gender, television, humor as social critique, teaching pedagogies, and intersections of literature and digital media, along with translations of Japanese literature. She is Editor-in-Chief of the *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*.

# Notes

[1] According to Japanese custom, ancestors are remembered through rituals held on the seventh, forty-ninth, and one-hundredth days after their deaths. Additional ceremonies are held on the first, third, seventh, thirteenth, seventeenth, twenty-third, twenty-seventh, thirty-third, fiftieth, and one-hundredth year anniversary of their deaths.
[2] "Bub-bon dance" captures the punning of "*awa odori*," here the dance of the bubbles (*awa* meaning "bubble"), and "Awa odori," a kind of "*bon*" dance to celebrate and remember ancestors in the summer *obon* season in Tokushima Prefecture, the former Awa Province.