

# What I Would Ask My Husband's Dead Father Study Guide

## What I Would Ask My Husband's Dead Father by Sharon Hashimoto

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## Introduction

Sharon Hashimoto's poem "What I Would Ask My Husband's Dead Father" was published in Hashimoto's first full-length poetry collection, *The Crane Wife* (Story Line Press, 2003). The poem was inspired by the poet's annoyance that her husband's family had left his father's ashes in a closet, where they remained more than a year after his death. (Cremation is a common Japanese funeral practice.) This led her to speculate on her own mortality and ultimately to question the rituals involved with life and death. The poem is typical of Hashimoto's work in that it deals with an incident involving her family and yet reaches out and touches a more universal issue.

## Author Biography

Sharon Hashimoto was born on October 23, 1953, in Seattle, Washington. She has lived all her life in the Pacific Northwest. She holds two bachelor degrees, one in modern European history and the other in editorial journalism, both from the University of Washington. In 1990, Hashimoto also received a master of fine arts degree in creative writing from the University of Washington.

Hashimoto was encouraged to pursue an interest in poetry by many other writers such as Nelson Bentley, Lonny Kaneko, Alan Chong Lau, and James Masao Mitsui. Enjoying the challenges of wordplay and imagery, she seeks to capture small but important moments in everyday life.

In 1989, while still in graduate school, where she was studying with Colleen McElroy, David Wagoner, and Shawn Wong, Hashimoto's poetry was awarded a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Hashimoto also studied fiction writing. Her poems have appeared in such publications as *Poetry*, *The American Scholar*, the *Seattle Review*, *Shenandoah*, and *Asian Pacific American Journal*. Hashimoto has been awarded grants from the King County Arts Commission, and Artist Trust.

In 1992, Brooding Heron Press published a limited edition chapbook of Hashimoto's poems entitled *Reparations*. In 2003, her first full-length poetry collection, *The Crane Wife*, was published by Story Line Press. It included the poem "What I Would Ask My Husband's Dead Father." *The Crane Wife* was co-winner of the 16th annual Nicholas Roerich Poetry Prize for a first full-length collection of poetry.

Since 1990, Hashimoto has been an instructor of Literature and Writing at Highline Community College in Des Moines, Washington.



# Plot Summary

## Lines 1—7

"What I Would Ask My Husband's Dead Father" begins with the speaker addressing her husband's dead father directly. The man has been dead for over a year, but the family has not yet found a final resting place for his ashes. The ashes have been "sifted and smoothed" into a small white box, and the lid has been tightly shut. The makeshift urn is kept in a closet, which becomes the man's resting place until the family decides what to do with his remains. The speaker suggests some possibilities. The ashes might be scattered in the woods "among pines and firs," or perhaps they could be scattered over the water in Puget Sound in the Pacific northwest, where they would be borne along by the tide.

## Lines 8—16

The speaker then says that perhaps this is one of those things that cannot be decided. She reflects that what is now missing from the remains—the body animated by the spirit—is "more than 98 percent water." She imagines the spirit steaming away from the body. Then, she produces a more concrete image of what is missing. She remembers a common sight of her husband's father when he was alive, his head nodding slowly as he fell asleep on the living room couch. She offers another reason for the failure to take care of the ashes. Perhaps it is because they simply cannot imagine their father romanticized by having his ashes scattered over the mountains. He lives for them in a much more mundane context such as in photographs at Christmas time, in which he can be seen holding up another flannel shirt. The shirt is presumably a gift from another family member and one that he is used to receiving at Christmas.

## Lines 17—24

The speaker then moves on to a general comment about aging, how "spines compact," meaning that people lose height as they age. She brings her own parents into the poem. They too are "shrinking" as they age. Like her husband's father, they have given no indication of what they want done with their bodies after death. After asking a direct question of the dead man about whether there should be a headstone placed next to that of his mother, the speaker returns to contemplating her own father. He is not a religious man, so there should be no religious ceremonies or rituals, whether Catholic or Buddhist, at his death. He does not want a wake to be held. He just tells his daughter that it is up to her what she does after his death. When he is dead, he will not know anything about it; whatever happens will not make any difference to him.



## Lines 25—32

The speaker then muses about her own beliefs. She is not sure of what she believes. She reports that when she was eight years old, someone told her that the spirits of the dead are all around the living. It must be crowded, she says. She wonders about her grandfather, who was killed in a landslide. If his spirit is present, perhaps he is calling to her, in which case, what would he say to her when she does not respond? The speaker implies that he would rebuke her. That thought leads her to think of a dead dog lying beside the road, which seems to stare up at her with one clear eye. She thinks that maybe there is some connection between those thoughts of the grandfather and the dead dog, but she does not make explicit what that connection might be.



# Themes

## Rituals of Death

The occasion of the death of her husband's father and the delay in taking care of his ashes prompts the speaker to reflect on the rituals that accompany death and on the notion of an afterlife. The poem also touches on the difficulty of understanding the change that comes about in death. It is easy to remember a person from photographs or from a familiar memory, but it is not so easy to imagine what they have become or how they might live on. There is agnosticism about the speaker's attitude; she admits that she does not know what to believe, and the occurrence of the word "perhaps" twice in the second verse adds to the open-ended possibilities. There is no theological or religious dogmatism in the poem, but there is a willingness to be open even if that means living with uncertainties.

The poem suggests an uncertainty about the appropriate rituals that should accompany a death and the disposal of the body. Other than having the body cremated, the family cannot decide what to do; there is no accepted tradition for them to follow. The speaker's remark, "We've waited for over / a year" suggests some annoyance with the long delay and the indecision. Keeping the ashes in a closet is obviously no long-term solution, but where should the ashes be scattered—in woods, on water, or on mountains? Or somewhere else that they have not thought of yet? The family must invent some kind of appropriate ritual, but the speaker feels that they do not have the imagination to do so. It is not as if they can rely on a tradition that they could follow whether they understood it or not. In the world of the poem, the burial ritual seems to be a matter of individual choice, but the dead man expressed no preferences.

## Life after Death

The loss of traditional religious ritual and belief is forcefully expressed in the blunt words of the speaker's father, which she quotes: "It's up to you. When I'm dead, I'm dead. I won't know / the difference." This is one of two opposing perspectives on death presented in the poem. For the speaker's father, death is the end of everything. There is no afterlife of any kind. This is the point of view of an atheist, as the speaker points out. Neither Catholic Christianity nor Buddhism has anything valuable to offer in such a view.

The last verse suggests another possibility to which the speaker seems to be drawn. The idea is that the dead are present all around the living, even though the living cannot see or hear them, or even sense their presence. This idea is presented not as part of an identifiable religious tradition, but just as something the speaker heard someone say when she was eight years old. She does not identify who said this, and it does not appear that the remark was even addressed directly to her. Yet, it obviously made a big impression on her since she remembers it still and treats the idea it expresses with respect.



The speaker also allows her imagination to embellish the basic idea that the dead continue to exist all around the living. She entertains the possibility that not only do the dead live on as spirits, but they may also be trying to communicate with the living. The separation between the dead and the living is therefore not as absolute as might otherwise be supposed. The final image of the dead dog with the clear eye is a mysterious one, but perhaps the implication is that the dead can communicate through signs. Perhaps the call of the grandfather that the speaker fails to hear and the eye of the dead dog are connected. The clear eye that stares up, not just at the sky, but also specifically at the speaker, is perhaps an accusing one, a reproach from the ancestor at the granddaughter's failure to acknowledge him. This of course is presented not as a dogmatic belief but as an imaginative possibility. For the speaker, it appears to be a more attractive notion than her father's belief that life ends at death.





## Style

The poem's language reinforces the different perspectives on death that are presented. In the first stanza, the dead man has been "sifted and smoothed" into the corners of the box that contains his ashes. The verb "smoothed" suggests the gradual erosion of pebbles and stones as water runs over them over a long period of time. It suggests that a human being is gradually being reabsorbed into the natural environment. The same impression is conveyed by the image, "a body settles." The context is how people lose height as they get older, but the image of settling suggests a building that may settle into the ground over time, sinking gradually by its own weight. It suggests a preparation for death—the body is getting closer to the earth into which it must eventually be reabsorbed. The word "settle" may also carry a secondary meaning of acceptance, in the sense that a person may settle for a certain thing or attitude, in this case, the inevitable approach of death.

The images in stanza 2 suggest the difficulty of imagining the reality of death as descriptions of dissolution and mortal remains alternate with homey images of the real person who was known and loved. First, the depersonalized idea of a human body is conjured up in the phrase that it is "more than 98 percent water." This is followed by another impersonal image of dying—as spirit steaming from a body. There is the familiar personal image of the man himself in a typical posture, which is followed by another impersonal image of ashes scattered on a mountain. This is followed by a second personal image of the man as he is remembered through photographs.

The alternation of impersonal and personal images suggest that the speaker is still trying to come to terms with the incomprehensible transition of a loved one who moves from life into death. The two perspectives tend to overlap, in the sense that life is found in death and death in life. The personal image of the man nodding off to sleep and slumping on the couch, for example, also suggests the coming of death. The "fine scarf" the speaker imagines formed by the ashes on the mountain humanizes the impersonal state of death, presenting the human remains as a kind of high-quality fashion accessory. (The primary meaning of the word "fine" in this context—made up of minute particles—is not the only meaning, since fine also means elegant, attractive or beautiful.) Since a "fine scarf" would also make a fine Christmas gift, the image anticipates that of the flannel shirt two lines later—the shirt that was a Christmas gift. In that image of the living there is also a hint of death. Not only is it not a direct image in the mind of the speaker, unlike the previous image of the dead man, since it has to be stimulated by a photograph and in that sense is more distant, but the holding up of the empty shirt in an innocent Christmas snapshot becomes an ironic reminder of death, since after the man dies the shirt remains but the body that was within it is no more.

In the last stanza of the poem, the image of the crowded city reinforces the theme of the blurring of an absolute separation between life and death, since the dead are being described in terms drawn from the living.

## Historical Context

Chinese and Japanese immigrants have been coming to the Pacific Northwest since the nineteenth century, attracted by the high demand for labor. Many Japanese arrived in the region after the United States annexed Hawaii in 1898. However, although Japanese Americans, as well as Chinese Americans, have a long history in the northwest and in other regions of the United States, many decades were to pass before mainstream America took any notice of the literature produced by these immigrant groups. Before 1970, few works of fiction and poetry by Japanese Americans had been published. But this did not mean that nothing had been written. In fact, Japanese Americans had a thriving literary culture in the 1930s, publishing their work in their own literary magazines. They continued to produce literary journals when imprisoned in internment camps during World War II, although everything they wrote was subject to censure by the American authorities.

After World War II, a few pioneering writers managed to get their work published. Toshio Mori wrote *Yokohama, California* (1949), consisting of stories of the Japanese American communities in Oakland and San Leandro, California, although when published those communities no longer existed. The first novel by a Japanese American was *No-No Boy* (1957) by John Okada. It is about a Japanese American who refused to join the armed forces in World War II and consequently was imprisoned for two years. After the war he returns to the Japanese American community in Seattle, where he is rejected for his disloyalty, although his mother praises him for his loyalty to Japan. The novel has since become a classic. Another distinguished writer during this immediate post-war period was Hisaye Yamamoto, who was born in 1921 and was interned during World War II. Between 1948 and 1961 she published seven short stories which are still considered among the finest works by a Japanese American.

A breakthrough in the cultural visibility of Asian American literature came in 1974, with the publication of *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, edited by Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong. It was the first major anthology of Asian American literature, and included work by those of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino descent. The anthology established a canon of Asian American writers although it was later criticized by some for too narrowly defining Asian American identity. The second major anthology, compiled by the same editors, was *The Big Aiiieeeee!* (1991), which included the work of first-generation Asian immigrants to the United States.

During the 1980s, Asian American literature began to enter the literary mainstream. A landmark in this respect was Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), which became a bestseller and was made into a successful movie. Among Japanese American writers, one prominent figure is the poet Janice Mirikitani. Born in 1942, Mirikitani was imprisoned as a child in an internment camp in Arkansas. A third-generation immigrant, she has been an extremely influential figure for Asian American writers. She has published three volumes of poetry, *Awake in the River* (1978), *Shedding Silence* (1987)

and *We, the Dangerous: New and Selected Poems* (1995). Her poetry attacks racism, sexism, poverty, war, and injustice.

An issue for Japanese American writers has been how to come to terms with the experience of mass internment during World War II. Many have chosen to ignore it in their writings. (Hashimoto uses the topic of internment but in a rather personal way; she is curious about how it affected her parents but appears to have no wish to directly confront the injustice of it.) Cynthia Kadohata, whose novel *The Floating World* (1989) is about a Japanese American family and is partly set in the 1940s, was criticized by other Japanese American writers for not even mentioning the internment camps.

Other issues that Japanese American writers, like other Asian Americans, have had to deal with, are cultural stereotyping in America. Until recently, Asians were often portrayed in a negative fashion in the American media. This has meant that Americans of Asian descent have been forced to develop a strong self-identity and confront negative stereotypes.

## Critical Overview

Hashimoto has only published one other book prior to *The Crane Wife*, which was her poetry chapbook called *Reparation*. Although she has published little, Hashimoto's books have been highly regarded and acclaimed and have showed her to be an emerging poet with great talent. As writer Shawn Wong says about Hashimoto (quoted on *The Crane Wife* book jacket), "[Her] voice claims that space with the pressure of each line in our ears." *The Crane Wife* was the co-winner of the sixteenth annual Nicholas Roerich Poetry Prize, launched by Story Line Press, in 2002.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2



# Critical Essay #1

*Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century poetry. In this essay, Aubrey discusses the themes in Hashimoto's poetry collection The Crane Wife.*

Although "What I Would Ask My Husband's Dead Father" only hints at it, Hashimoto is a poet of dual heritage. *The Crane Wife* reveals her deep connection to Japanese culture, but it also shows that she is also firmly rooted in American culture, particularly the Pacific Northwest area where she has spent all her life.

A number of poems in *The Crane Wife* take their inspiration from Japanese folktales that Hashimoto uses to subtly probe issues of family relationships and the experience of loss. "The Mirror of Matsuyama," for example, draws on a folktale in which a dying mother gives her daughter a mirror, telling her that whenever she is lonely she must look in the mirror, and she will find that her mother is always with her. In the poem, the surprised daughter disbelieves her mother's statement at first, but then, when she puts it to the test and looks in the mirror, "Amazed, / you looked back, your fingers stretched / to meet mine." The poem suggests the indissoluble link between close family members that survives death (a point of view that is also hinted at in "What I Would Ask My Husband's Dead Father"). Yet, the sense of loss and longing cannot be fully assuaged, as the last two lines imply: "Each time we meet, we press / closer together, as if you could make me whole."

Another Japanese folktale inspired the poem "The Mountain Where Old People Are Abandoned." The tale is about a village that has no use for old people; anyone over sixty is banished and left in the mountains to die. The poem is told in the voice of a mother, who is being carried up the mountain by her own son. The son (in contrast to the speaker in "The Mirror of Matsuyama") refuses to look at his mother's face. This fact does not stop her forgiving him since he is only doing what the rules of the village require.

The title poem, "The Crane Wife," also alludes to a Japanese folktale, one in which a sailmaker who lives by the sea finds a wounded crane lying on his porch. He nurses it back to health, and it flies away only to return in the disguise of a beautiful young woman. They fall in love and marry. When economic times get hard, the crane wife makes him a magic sail to sell in the village. She sets two conditions, the first being that he does not look at her while she is making it and the second being that she will never make another one. The sailmaker disobeys both instructions, and the two are parted forever. In the poem, Hashimoto assumes her reader is familiar with the tale. As the crane wife makes the sail, she thinks back over the circumstances of her transformation and realizes that she is not content: "Disguised as a woman, I forget / what I want as a crane." Longing to get back in touch with her essential nature, she resolves that "tonight, / when his body moves against mine, I'll wake / to listen for the wind in his breathing." The last line seems to be an allusion to the folktale, in which the sailmaker loves cranes because he thinks they are like sails and seem to hold the wind in their



wings. The poem, which some might read as a feminist allegory, suggests that self-sacrifice and love are not enough to bring personal fulfillment if they lead to a distortion of the authentic self.

In addition to exploring this realm of myth and folktale, which is well suited to her wistful thoughts about the connections and the separations between people, Hashimoto also writes of a key event in Japanese American history. This began in 1942, during World War II, when more than 100,000 Japanese Americans were sent to internment camps. The American government stated that this was for their own protection but, in fact, the government believed that Japanese Americans were a threat to national security at a time when the United States was at war with Japan. From the evidence of the poems, Hashimoto's grandparents and parents were sent to Heart Mountain Relocation Center located between Powell and Cody in Wyoming. More than ten thousand Japanese Americans were interned at Heart Mountain. Since the poet was born in 1953, she has no direct knowledge of the camps, but the poems show that she is curious about what the experience was like. Like many people who have been through difficult times, her family is reluctant to talk about it. In "Because You Showed Me a Piece of Barbed Wire," the poet visits the area in Wyoming where the camp was. Someone shows her a piece of barbed wire that came from the camp, and she feels that she has a piece of her mother's past in her hand. She wonders whether her mother, who at that moment is on a trip to Tokyo, would tell her some details of what happened if presented with that stark reminder. Conveying a hint of the enclosed world of the camp, the poem concludes, "I turn the knotted path of wire smelling of ghost dust, / touching the barbs that held everything in."

In "The Backseat War," the poet tells of a trip by car taken when she was young with her brother and grandmother. The grandmother points to a place where a Buddhist church existed before the war. Her family and other Japanese Americans about to be interned brought their special belongings there for safekeeping. When they returned after the war, their valuables had been broken or burned. She mentions the word "camp," which for the young girl means Girl Scout cookouts, but for the old woman it recalls unpleasant memories, and not for the first time: "Once Grandma / had spoken of four people crowded into one small room / before she turned because something was in her eye." In "Reparations: My Mother and Heart Mountain" the poet reveals that her family was held for four years at Heart Mountain. She tries to imagine her mother at age thirteen in the camp and asks her what she remembers. All the force of the remembrance is in the last line of the poem, in the sudden switch from the natural to the sinister:

She tells me: Your grandmother made us think  
it was an adventure to hang blankets at night  
and make our own rooms, to fall asleep listening  
to the wind and each other's coughing  
as floodlights filled the slits in the walls.



If many of these poems draw on Hashimoto's dual cultural background as a Japanese American, it should also be pointed out that others convey a quintessentially American childhood. In "Wonder Bread," for example, the poet as a young girl returns from a Brownie meeting and sits sidesaddle on her brother's bicycle, clutching her sack of Wonder Bread as "Tank-like Buicks, Fords and Chevrolets / Crowd the main road." In "Rock-O-Plane," she takes a scary ride with her mischievous brother on the Rock-O-Plane at the Puyallup Fair in Puyallup, Washington.

As these poems suggest, Hashimoto is primarily a poet of the family. It is family relationships that often stimulate her deepest thoughts and her most poignant expressions of empathy. The death of her grandfather in a landslide is one example. It is this incident that leads to her speculation about the continuance of life after death in "What I Would Ask My Husband's Dead Father." It is also the subject of "Temblors." In that poem, the poet tries to penetrate what might have been her grandfather's feelings during those fatal moments in Pahoa, Hawaii in 1923. And in "Saihei Hashimoto Apologizes to His Wife for Dying," there is another description, from his point of view, of the accident. This is a touching poem that concludes with the man's attempt to comfort his wife. After mentioning the grass that grows over his grave, he says, "Don't let the scent of plumeria / feed your sorrow."

Many other poems in *The Crane Wife* are built around the poet's interaction with family members. She learns from her aunt how to weave a lai; she worries about how her five-year-old niece will be affected by the sudden discovery of a dead duck; as a girl, she tussles with her rambunctious, teasing brother; and, most frequently, she observes the quiet lives of mother, father, and grandparents. In the poems that focus on her closest relatives, Hashimoto sometimes makes empathic leaps into the essence of their experience of life, but more often she asks poignant, unanswerable questions about how they must have felt in certain situations. In "Four Weeks Unemployed: I Fail the Water Department's Lift and Carry Exam," for example, the poet tries to get a secure but uninteresting job on the advice of her parents. She asks herself when her parents forgot about their dreams and settled for something less than what they really wanted:

Late nights, did they fall asleep listening  
to each drop of rain breaking against the roof,  
remember how the sky let go of its dreams?

There is always affection and compassion in these poems about family, but sometimes they contain disturbing thoughts that arise from unexpected, puzzling emotions. In "Watching the House," for example, the poet is alone in her parents' house after they have left for a trip to Tokyo. She realizes that she does not really belong there anymore and feels like a stranger:

Something about the way  
the rocking chair leans





back and forth  
chills me, when I know  
I should be warm  
in the presence  
of my father's glasses  
on top of the television  
or my mother's yarn spilling  
from a paper sack.

It is the poet's responsibility to enter the recesses of the heart and not flinch at what she may discover there. As Hashimoto explores the significance of everyday moments and probes the delicate web of family relationships, she encourages the reader to think and feel more deeply, more truly, beyond the surfaces of things.

**Source:** Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "What I Would Ask My Husband's Dead Father," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.



## Critical Essay #2

*Holm is a short story and novel author, and a freelance writer. In this essay, Holm looks at how Hashimoto's poem addresses indecision and discomfort about aging and death.*

Sharon Hashimoto's "What I Would Ask My Husband's Dead Father" is a poem that explores a number of ideas in a very short space. Perhaps most obviously, the theme of indecision is addressed. But the poem also has much to say about society's perception of elders and of the dead. This poem contrasts the romantic and the idealistic with gritty reality. And finally, and maybe most important, "What I Would Ask My Husband's Dead Father" asks the question: do the dead continue to know about and care about what goes on here on earth? Even though the title of the poem is a statement, the poem really is a large question that deals with issues and decisions that are not easily resolvable. The poem explores aspects of death and challenges the reader to face aspects of death and aging that are uncomfortable territory in today's western world.

The poem suggests that society's impulse is to minimize the unpleasantness of death. The first few lines refer to a "small white box" with ashes that are "sifted and smoothed to each corner." The more order that one can bring to dealing with death, perhaps the more easily and fearlessly it can be faced. The lid of the box is "snugged down and tight" in an attempt to gentrify, and possibly even confine, death—because death is something that no one understands and that everyone will face. The small white box with a tight lid defines and puts structure around something (death and the deceased's ashes) that is really a complete mystery.

Order and sameness are also suggested in an auditory way in the first several lines of the poem, using alliteration. Hashimoto shows repeated sameness by using words in this part of the poem (and throughout the poem) that begin with the letter "s"—sifted, smoothed, snugged, scattered, spirit, steamed, sight, slumped, sleep, spine, settles, shrinking, stilled, stinking, and stare. The repeated sound of "s" could be interpreted to mimic the inevitability of death, or perhaps a constant reminder that these human realities will occur, and it is a predictable reality that all living beings progress toward. And all these s-words reach across a wide range of emotions or experiences. For example, "snugged" could imply comfort or neatness. "Stinking" on the other hand, would suggest an entirely different experience—one of revulsion or distaste. The s-words march through the poem with the orderly regularity and predictability of death, and mimic the ups and downs of the human experience—life.

As if confining the ashes of the deceased was not enough of an effort to put order around death, the box has been consigned to a closet until the family decides what to do with the ashes. Perhaps the decision is postponed because it is easier to leave the small, neat box with cover tightly tamped down in a place where no one will be reminded of death—the ultimate shared human experience. In a closet, in the dark, with cover tightly containing it, death can never escape. The poem says just as much about those who are alive as it does about the person who has died. The living relatives have waited for over a year to dispose of the ashes, and the reader gets the sense that no



one is in a hurry to make a decision. The relatives have flirted with two contrasting scenarios for disposal of the ashes—to place them among the still and rooted pines and firs, or to scatter them in the moving tides in Puget Sound. Both options suggest freedom for the deceased's ashes and perhaps the deceased's spirit—particularly the vision of "following the tides in Puget Sound." If the spirit does live on after death, surely such freedom in nature would be more desirable than being tamped down in a closed box in a closet. But the living relatives would rather minimize death (both the death of the husband's father as well as their own inevitable deaths) than fully accept it and fully feel it as a part of their experience of life.

The poem also takes a hard look at aging, and societal reactions to this phenomenon that is a shared part of the human experience. People do not usually get to decide when they die or how they die; people may not get to decide certain aspects of aging. "Spines compact as we age," says Hashimoto, "a body settles." The word "settles" could also suggest that people have to settle for the fact that aging and death are inevitable. The inevitability of death and aging in life are an interesting contrast to the theme of indecision running through the poem.

The hard truth about aging also serves as a stark contrast to any attempts to romanticize death, or the life of the deceased. A neatly tamped and hidden box of ashes still does not let the survivors in this family forget the dead father's "head slowly nodding as you slumped in sleep on the living room couch." A "fine scarf of ashes dusting mountain crags" is a lovely image, but it is superseded by Christmas photos of the deceased "holding up the shoulders of another flannel shirt." The mention of shoulders also refers the reader back to the hard, anatomical signs of aging in this poem—shoulders are close to the spine and shoulders can slump. Hashimoto chooses her words carefully and they work on several levels—telling the story of the poem in real time, and creating allusions and hints for the reader that make a deeper impact about the themes of old age and death.

Indecision is a theme throughout this poem on several levels. Most obviously, the family cannot decide—or puts off deciding—how to handle the deceased's ashes and put closure around his death. But there is also indecision on the narrator's part about whether death is really the final end for a soul or a spirit. Someone tells the narrator that "the spirits of the dead are all around us." Yet the narrator's own father claims not to care about wakes or memorials after his death, and leaves it in the hands of the living relatives. He says, "It's up to you. When I'm dead, I'm dead. I won't know the difference." It is interesting that this is the only piece of dialogue in the poem, which seems to give it added emphasis. This is the crucial issue. What do the dead want, and how do their living relatives deal with the closure of the deceased's life?

With that one line of dialogue, the narrator's father has turned the decision of the closure of his life over to the narrator. But it is a decision that no one is comfortable with and that no one wants to make, as illustrated with the indecision regarding the ashes in the tightly tamped box. In a larger sense, the narrator cannot make a decision about whether the dead live on as spirits. "I'm not sure what I believe," the narrator says. This is the crux of the issue. If the people in this poem knew that existence truly ended with



the death of the body, it may not make a difference (as the narrator's father firmly summed up) what is done to memorialize the person after death. But the narrator and the narrator's relatives, who cannot reach closure regarding the ashes, are not convinced that the dead do not know the difference. At the same time, procrastinating on a decision regarding the ashes may be a way to avoid getting closer to the uncomfortable subject of death.

If spirits of the dead really do not exist, wonders the narrator, then why does the "stilled and stinking dog" stare "up at me with its one clear eye?" Without overly describing, Hashimoto has conjured an arresting image that completely captures the mysteries of life, death, and the passage between them. What person has not looked at the body of a dead person or animal, and marveled or tried to comprehend that life truly has left the body? The eyes have been referred to as gateways to the soul. Perhaps this is why Hashimoto chooses to emphasize the open and clear eye of a dead dog. Obviously the dog is quite dead, to the point of decay, yet there is something about the open eye that suggests to the narrator that some spirit or soul or part of the dog may still exist. It is as if the dog would seem more completely, finally dead if his eye were closed. Yet Hashimoto's narrator makes no attempt to shut the eye of the dog, as is done in some traditions with the bodies of dead humans. In fact, the narrator wonders whether the dog, with its open and clear eye, is trying to tell the narrator something about that fact that she may not have responded to the call of her deceased grandfather. Hashimoto's narrator, the reader infers, wonders if the spirits of all living beings who have died (dogs, people, others) communicate their desires to each other. The narrator still wonders if the dead follow and care about the living. The poem never resolves the question, and that would be impossible. Just as it is impossible to know what happens after life, it is impossible for the narrator and others in this poem to reach resolution about how they handle a family member's death. Appropriately, the poem ends with a question, rather than a conclusion. For in this poem, people can never be sure what follows death, at least while they are living.

**Source:** Catherine Holm, Critical Essay on "What I Would Ask My Husband's Dead Father," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.



## Topics for Further Study

Research the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II. What were the conditions like in the camps? Why did the American government consider internment necessary? How long did it take for an official apology to be made?

Why have humans always felt the need for burial rites? Why is cremation rather than burial becoming more popular in the United States? What do different religious faiths say about cremation?

Is religious belief increasing or declining in the United States? What are the reasons for the trend? What percentage of the population declares themselves to be atheists? How many believe in an afterlife?

Write a poem that focuses on an ordinary moment, or incident, involving you and a member of your family. Try and draw out the significance of the moment. Did it produce an important insight about yourself and your feelings? Or about someone else and his or her feelings? Did it reveal something to you that had been hidden before?

## What Do I Read Next?

Hashimoto is also a short story writer. Her story "The Mushroom Man" (published in *The Raven Chronicles*, 1997) is about a Japanese American girl's memories of her late father, who used to go out to the woods near Seattle to collect mushrooms. The story can be found online at <http://www.ravenchronicles.org/raven/rvback/issues/0497/apr97/hashim.html> (accessed March 1, 2005).

In *Camp Notes and Other Writings* (1998), Mitsuye Yamada reflects on the internment camps for Japanese Americans during World War II. Yamada was born in Kyushu, Japan, and raised in Seattle (the same area that Hashimoto comes from). Her family was sent to a detention camp in Idaho.

James Masao Mitsui's *From a Three-Cornered World: New and Selected Poems* (1997), from the Scott and Laurie Oki Series in Asian American Studies, contains topics ranging from childhood to career, and friendships and love. Mitsui is a prominent Japanese American poet who, like Hashimoto, lives in Washington state. Also like Hashimoto, he writes of family and the significance of everyday moments.

On first publication in 1993, *Encyclopedia of Japanese American History: An A-to-Z Reference from 1868 to the Present*, edited by Brian Niiya, with a foreword by Daniel K. Inouye, in conjunction with the Japanese American National Museum (updated edition, 2000), was named by the New York Public Library as one of the outstanding reference books of the year. The updated edition of 2000 also includes an overview by Asian American studies scholar Gary Okihiro, a detailed chronology of major events in Japanese American history, and an extensive bibliography of the best sources for further research. There are nearly 100 photographs in this work.

*The Floating World* (1989), Cynthia Kadohata's first novel, is about a Japanese American family of misfits wandering around from the Pacific Northwest to Arkansas during the 1940s and 1950s in search of work. Their only companionship is with each other. The story is narrated by a twelve-year-old girl named Olivia.

The poet David Mura is a third generation Japanese American. His *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansai* (1991) is his account of a year he spent in Tokyo in 1984 on a United States/Japan Creative Artist Exchange Fellowship. He also recalls his early years growing up in a mostly Jewish area of Chicago.

## Further Study

Galang, M. Evelina, ed., *Screaming Monkeys: Critiques of Asian American Images*, Coffee House Press, 2003.

This is a substantial anthology that explores images of Asians and Asian Americans in America, both positive and negative.

Hongo, Garrett, "Introduction: Culture Wars in Asian America," in *Under Western Eyes: Personal Essays from Asian America*, edited by Garrett Hongo, Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1995, pp. 1—33.

Hongo discusses the disputes that have surfaced concerning the public role of the Asian American writer on matters concerning politics, community, social justice, and the representations of Asians in mass culture.

Matsumoto, Tarisa, "Family and Folktales: An Interview with Poet Sharon Hashimoto," *International Examiner*, February 3, 2004.

In this interview, Hashimoto talks about the autobiographical nature of many of her poems, her role as family historian, and the use she makes of Japanese folktales.

Uchida, Yoshiko, and Richard C. Jones, *Dancing Kettle and Other Japanese Folk Tales*, Harcourt, 1949.

Uchida was a Japanese American from California who wrote extensively about the Japanese American experience. This is a collection of fourteen Japanese folktales retold in simple language. They give insight into the kind of material Hashimoto reinvents in some of her poems.

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Hashimoto, Sharon, *The Crane Wife*, Story Line Press, 2003.

Wong, Shawn, ed., *Asian American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology*, Harper Collins, 1996.