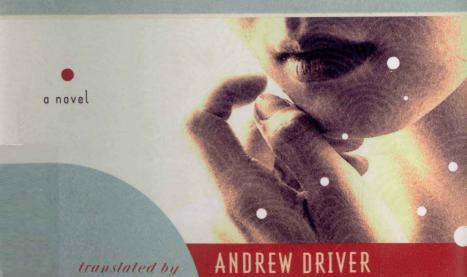
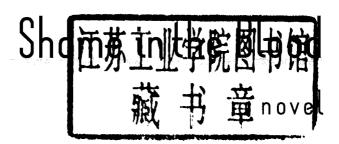


# SHAME IN THE BLOOD





by Tetsuo Miura
Translated by Andrew Driver



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## A Portrait of Shino

I ONCE TOOK SHINO to Fukagawa in the old part of Tokyo. It was not long after we'd first met.

Fukagawa was where Shino was born and had lived until the age of twelve. I myself had only arrived in Tokyo from the remote north of Tohoku the previous spring, and it was strange to think that I should now be taking this "Fukagawan" back to the place of her birth. But Shino had been evacuated to Tochigi the summer before the war ended and had never since returned to Fukagawa, which had been razed to the ground and would now be quite unrecognizable to her. Whereas I, a kid from the countryside, was in the habit of walking through Fukagawa two or three times a month, sometimes even on consecutive Sundays. To me, Fukagawa was the most familiar neighborhood in the whole of Tokyo, excluding my route to and from the university each day.

We took a tram that passed through Fukagawa on its way from Kinshibori to Tokyo Station, and got off in front of Fukagawa Toyo Park, at the corner where the tramlines met the Susaki Canal and made an abrupt ninety-degree turn. As the tram moved off, Shino stretched her back, inhaling the air, and surveyed the streets around us. It was a hot sunny day in July. With their rows of squat, makeshift houses baking in the blazing sun, the streets smoldered with white dust and shimmering heat.

"Oh dear. It's completely different," Shino said forlornly. "I feel like a stranger here. The only thing I remember is the school."

She pointed across the road toward a three-storey building whose charred concrete hulk was exposed to the sun. That building had been Shino's school for five years.

"Don't worry," I said. "It'll come back to you as we go along. After all, you were born and raised here, weren't you?"

Shino laughed. "That's right. Well, everything else may have changed, but at least the roads should be the same." She returned her gaze to the gutted school building. "It's just that . . . well, I'd heard the whole place had been burned to the ground, but I couldn't imagine that the school would burn, too. I just couldn't believe that a concrete building would go up in flames like that. But as soon as I saw it, I realized it was true, because of the windows. When a concrete building burns, the windows all turn black, don't they."

I watched her as she looked across at the blackened windows, pressed together like honeycomb cells whose edges had been burned away. When she blinked her thin almond eyes as if she'd made some unexpected discovery, it was my turn to laugh.

"Well, if you get distracted like this each time, we'll be here all day!"

Shino shrugged her shoulders. "All right, will you lead the way? Which is closer, I wonder."

"I'd say Kiba."

"I would have thought Susaki."

Susaki, as I recalled, lay on the other side of the canal. In that case we could walk there from Kiba. And so it was that Shino and I crossed the shimmering tramlines, passed through the long, narrow shadow cast over the road by Shino's old school, and headed toward the reservoirs at Kiba.

Shino wanted to visit the place where I'd last seen my brother. And while we were there, she would show me where she had been born and raised.

Kiba is a district of timber and canals. Whenever I went there, the wind was strong, and the water in the reservoirs was constantly ruffled by the waves rippling beneath the floating rafts. The wind at Kiba carried the fragrance of wood and the smell of drainwater. It was thick with sawdust that stung the eyes of the uninitiated like smoke from a bonfire; the only ones who walked through Kiba with tears in their eyes were people from other parts of the country.

The first time I walked through Kiba, I had also cried, much to the amusement of my brother, who had taken me there. Yes, my heart was bursting with joy that we should be walking side by side. But if there were tears in my eyes, the wind was surely to blame.

And the spring before, returning to Tokyo for the first time in two years, I had again walked through Kiba. My brother had already left our lives by then, and my heart must have been

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burning with a kind of rage. But even then it was the wind, I was sure, that persistently clouded my vision. Perhaps my eyes would never get used to Kiba. Or perhaps, in all of Kiba, the sawdust was particularly thick on the route I always took. In any case, I'd long since abandoned hope of ever getting used to it.

On this day, however, Kiba was different, its atmosphere strangely remote. The piles of wood, the reservoirs, everything was bathed in an oddly dazzling light that seemed to deflect my gaze, and even the sound of saws slicing through wood seemed utterly alien to my ears. I had come to know a few faces on my now-customary walks—the old woman in the cigarette shop, the delivery boy at the noodle restaurant, the guards outside the row of lumber mills, the truck drivers. For some time after I had lost my brother, I would go around asking about him, his old pocket notebook in hand, hoping to discover something of his fate. Those good people all mistook me for a detective at first, only to break into the broadest of smiles later. But on this day, for some reason, they simply stared at us with odd looks in their eyes. When I looked back at them, they would abruptly turn away or issue strange groaning sounds. And my eyes were dry from beginning to end. Perhaps even the wind was avoiding me today.

It was as if Kiba didn't know me when I felt happiness in my heart.

Shino and I stood together beside a reservoir on the outskirts of Kiba. The wind blew straight into our faces, and sunlight crashing on the water quivered and glinted endlessly on its surface. Two or three rafts floated in the distance. Behind them, a

mass of timber refuse stretched out drearily into the distance, and, beyond that, I could hear the sound of unfamiliar machinery, like the droning of horseflies.

"This is as far as we go. Well, that's Kiba for you. There's nothing here at all," I said, spitting out over the water.

"What a nice breeze. It's as if I've come home to Fukagawa at last"

Under a blazing sun, I had led Shino this way and that around these streets, which felt foreign even to me. Yet she happily turned her little face toward the breeze, while loose strands of hair clung to the perspiration on her forehead and cheeks.

"Let's go home. You must be bored," I said. I regretted taking her there.

She shook her head as if to disagree. "No, no, we've just gotten here. Let's stay a little while longer."

She squatted down with her arms around her chest. "Is this it?" she asked simply.

"Yes," I replied.

That was where I'd last seen my brother. He had studied applied chemistry at technical college and had gone to make torpedoes at the Naval Department's Explosives Research Institute. But after the war, for some reason known only to him, he had joined the lumber company that owned this reservoir. When he handed me his business card I noticed that he was already a "managing director." He worked with that company for five years, and had been there for four years when I graduated from senior high school back home and came to Tokyo. I started university with his financial support. I was the youngest

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of six children, and our father was already getting on in years. Even so, my brother didn't seem to find me too burdensome. Whenever I needed money, I would just go to his company and ask him for some. He would nonchalantly hand me the cash each time, then treat me to some hearty meal, like a yanagawanabe stew. A year later, in early spring, I went to see my brother again. We hadn't met in a while. In the deserted office, an old man was warming himself at a brazier. He said that the managing director was not at his desk, but might be out on the reservoir. I passed through the silence of the factory and went up to the edge of the reservoir. The wind still held a wintry chill and created furrows on the surface of the water. The water was translucent all the way to the bottom. My brother, alone, was stepping restively from raft to raft, holding a fireman's hook pole without making particular use of it. The sight of him in his white shirt, without his jacket on, was almost dazzling. It gave me a kind of start. Instinctively, I called his name. He stopped still in a faltering pose, then slowly moved across to the raft nearest the shore. I ran along the concrete edge of the reservoir toward the point nearest the raft, but the distance that separated us across the water must still have been forty feet or more. "What is it?" he shouted, perching precariously on the edge of the raft. I shouted back that it was just the usual request for money. Right away he nodded and said I was to take the bank passbook and the name seal from the office drawer. I should use as much as I needed. He had other business to attend to that day, so we should meet another time. For a little while, we just stared at each other in silence. With the setting sun behind him, my brother seemed taller than usual. His sunken eyes formed large, dark shadows that made his head look like a skull. As I went to leave, I thanked him for the money. He suddenly broke into a smile. "Don't use too much," he said, raising the fireman's hook pole high in the air.

And that was the last time I saw him.

Three years had passed. That reservoir, now under a different owner, was right there in front of us.

"Was that the last you heard of your brother?" Shino asked.

"Yes."

"What happened to him after that?"

"He died."

The words slipped out easily enough. I'd grown used to saying them ever since I was a child, after all. My sister? *She died*. My brother? *He died*. They seemed such convenient words to me. *He died*. That was all. There was nothing more to say. I didn't need to explain anything.

"Well, let's go," I said, making to leave. "It's just a reservoir, after all. We won't change anything by looking at it." But still Shino squatted there, praying quietly to the water's surface. My eye was struck by the slender white nape of her neck visible at the collar of her kimono. The sound of my footsteps echoed loudly off the water's surface, like the beating of a wooden board.

From there we went to Susaki.

Susaki was the only area in the older part of Tokyo that I had never visited; my brother had never taken me there. Once I visited him while he was living with the family of his company's president. They had been burned out of their own home and

were temporarily housed in a classroom of Shino's old school. We went up to the roof together and looked out over the streets of Susaki from afar.

It was an odd-looking place. Narrow alleys were crammed on either side with garish little houses, their roofs and windows adorned with red and white undergarments that had been hung out to dry and now fluttered together in the wind. To the eyes of a country lad like me, it was a sight that aroused curiosity.

"I wouldn't mind going there," I said.

"Don't be stupid," my brother said, blushing quickly.

Susaki was a prostitutes' quarter.

As we reached the tramlines, a distant memory seemed to return to Shino. There at the side of the street, she suddenly recognized the signboard of an old shop selling *shiruko* sweet bean soup.

"Ah, I remember. Now I know where we are!"

Clapping her hands in front of her chest, she hurried on ahead of me and turned into a side road. The road sloped gently before meeting the canal, which it crossed by means of a broad stone bridge. Susaki lay on the other side of the bridge.

At the foot of the bridge on this side was a street stall. What it sold, I couldn't tell. In the shadow of a reed screen that surrounded it, a middle-aged woman with a sickly complexion, who was wearing a one-piece dress with a wide open neck, languished against the back of a bench, watching the street through half-closed eyes.

"This is Susaki Bridge," said Shino.

The stone parapet of the bridge was still marked with black

stripes where it had been licked by flames. Shino patted it affectionately with the palm of her hand. Then she looked up curiously at an arch that crossed the sky on the far side of the bridge. It bore an inscription in letters edged with light bulbs, which were presumably lit at night. "Su-sa-ki Pa-ra-dise," Shino read in a hushed voice.

"Paradise' sounds cheap to me," she said, her cheeks flushed. Then she started off again without a word.

Shino walked briskly over the bridge. The pounding in my chest quickened of its own accord.

It was not that I'd never visited a red-light district before. Far from it—on many occasions I'd strayed into such places with friends, under the influence of drink, to gratify some cheap passing desire. But now I was about to walk these streets in broad daylight, sharing a white parasol on a sunny day with the woman who commanded my affections. This was something I could never have imagined.

After crossing the bridge, we turned into the first side alley on the left, and the red-light district was suddenly there in front of us. Its streets seemed to have withered in the sun, their color faded like that of a sick man. And the only sound to be heard in this alley, which was silent but still steeped in the seedy atmosphere of night, was the ringing of our own footsteps.

At the corner of another alley, a spot where houses of ill repute were packed together tightly, Shino suddenly stopped and turned to face me. "This is it," she said, pointing toward a shabbylooking building on the corner. "This is where I was born."

It was a firm, clear voice. Her face was tinged with self-

consciousness, but there was not the slightest hint of shame in her voice.

"My mother used to operate a shooting range here. I'm the daughter of a shooting range owner from the red-light district."

Shino looked me straight in the eye and smiled, her face brimming with a kind of inner strength. That strength seemed to gather together the beads of perspiration that glistened on her brow, then sprang from her face and leapt across to my heart with a rhythm like ripples on water.

"It's all right," I said. "There's nothing wrong with that."

In my haste, I didn't even mind the way my voice sounded shrill and nervous.

Now Shino's parasol began to quiver. As she gripped the handle tightly with both hands, her fingers shone radiantly white against the deep red of her obi. She glared at me with a look of reproach.

"Look at it closely. So you won't forget," she said firmly.

I looked. I saw pink walls peeling here and there, tiled pillars rising abruptly from a cracked concrete floor, cheap Westernstyle balconies perched up above, and neon lights hanging over the alleyway like old cobwebs. When darkness came, this garish "house of women" would show dubiously colored lamps in its windows. But under the noonday sun, it seemed little more than a deserted building that was merely holding its breath. Here, of all places, I thought it pointless to seek the ghost of Shino's birth-place.

Something that sounded like raindrops fell on Shino's parasol and bounced back off again. Looking up, I saw a group of

puffy-eyed women, their shoulders and breasts exposed, sitting along the upstairs windows of the houses that crowded around us. The women had been looking down at us in silence, resting their chins on their hands on top of the futon mattresses that were hanging halfway out the windows to be aired. Then one of the women had spat out the gum she'd been chewing, aiming it at Shino's parasol. When it hit the target, they had all snickered together.

Shino cast her eyes down and started off without a word. We walked for a while toward the heart of the area. Suddenly Shino turned to face me.

"Did that shock you?" she asked.

"Well . . ."

"I'm sorry." She apologized as if it were her fault. "I don't wish to speak ill of them, but courtesans weren't like that in the old days. When it comes to professional pride, they were in a different class then. They all seem to think it's a joke these days—it makes me nervous just to look at them. I suppose it's because times have changed, but I really can't stand these amateurish girls. I'm sure my father would be disappointed."

"What's your father like?"

"My father?" She tilted her head to one side and laughed. "He's a lazy good-for-nothing. Well, he's in poor health now, so I shouldn't be too hard on him. He was the eldest son of a dyer in Tochigi, and he should have taken over the business. But when he was young, he had little time for study, and eventually he was disinherited for it. He ran wild, threw away his education, and did nothing but drink, saying 'I'm no good, I'm a failure.' But even

then, on the day of the Benten Shrine festival, he would dress up in fine clothes like haori half-coats made of silk. People used to call him 'Professor Atariya' in the red-light district. Atariya was the name of my mother's shooting gallery. Apparently he used to look after the less fortunate courtesans and give them advice. I remember one of them who was friendly to me, Onaka of the Tonero House. She had consumption and couldn't work anymore, but her contract still had a while to run, so she used to go to my father for advice quite often. In the end, though, there was nothing anyone could do for her, and on the Fudo Temple festival day, she killed herself by putting poison in tokoroten jelly and eating it. Now, the Tonero people were the most heartless lot in the whole district. They were scared, and none of them wanted to clear up the mess, so my father took care of everything from beginning to end. One evening, he loaded Onaka's coffin onto a cart through the back door. He pulled while I pushed as far as Nakanocho. Some shop clerks there happened to be using long dippers to cool the road with water from a huge rainwater tank. One by one they came and joined our cart, and helped us push it all the way to the gate of Daimon Temple. I was always doing things like that, even when I was a child."

We were now walking through Nakanocho toward that same temple gate, which I could see in the distance. We were on a broad road with a pavement, an ordinary shopping street lined with bright shops. We looked at each other and both laughed with relief at the same time.

"Haven't we walked a long way!" I said.