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by

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2014

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**Translating Hiromi Kawakami's**

**"Tread on a Snake"**

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**Translating Hiromi Kawakami's**

**"Tread on a Snake"**

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**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**May 2014**

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this report to my parents, Ana Aguilera and Nayip Puente, for all of their love, support, and patience.

## Preface

Kawakami Hiromi won the 115<sup>th</sup> biannual Akutagawa Prize for her 1996 novella “Tread on a Snake” (*Hebi o Fumu*). As the judges’ comments in the appendix of this report will show, it was a controversial choice that had the judges discussing the future of Japanese literature. Eighteen years later Kawakami’s success in Japan has been solidified with the publication of several of her full-length novels, such as *The Brief Case* (*Sensei no Kaban* 2001), and *Manazuru* (2006) which have also been translated into several languages. I chose to translate “Tread on a Snake” partially because of its credentials, but also to bring Kawakami’s works into the circle we English readers call “modern Japanese literature.” The story combines fantastical elements with universal themes of the alienation and disassociation of the self common to Japanese literature. I only hope that my translation does the story some amount of justice, and I hope to have the chance to translate more of her short stories in the future.

Following the translation of the story itself is an essay that discusses my personal experiences translating the story. I discuss elements that may be unique to the experience of translating Kawakami’s works, but also for the most part are applicable more broadly to issues of translation that go beyond her works and even Japanese literature as well. Three issues that were central when translating Kawakami were: considering how translation choices affect the creation of a literary canon in translation; how to capture tone based on word choices; and finally, the effects of localizing and preserving foreign

terms and concepts in the language of origin in translations. Another issue of importance particularly when translating Japanese is how to deal with repetition and place names. The final section discusses challenges in preserving ambiguities and the positive or negative connotations of words where literal translation risks breaking away from the original connotations or tone of those words. This means simultaneously staying as close as possible to the original, while changing what needs to be changed in order to compensate for nuances between similar words in the two different languages.

Finally, I would never have been able to complete this report without all of the help and support I got from everyone around me. Thank you to Dr. Kirsten Cather for being a wonderfully patient mentor throughout my graduate school career, for editing my papers over and over again until they were intelligible, and for not growing frustrated with me; thank you to Dr. Robert Oppenheim who has also been with me from when I first began the mental roller-coaster that is graduate school. This report could never have been completed without the both of you. I would like to say another big thank you to Dr. Mayumi Moriuchi, who has really been there for me from the very beginning of my college career, and has just done so much for me throughout the years. I cannot thank you enough. In addition, I would like to express my gratitude to the entire faculty at the Inter-University Center for Japanese Language Studies for all of their support, and particularly to Mr. Tomotarō Akizawa for introducing me to Kawakami Hiromi's stories in the first place. Lastly, I would like to thank my parents (to whom I dedicate this report) for all of their patient support and love, and my siblings, for always knowing how to make me laugh when I needed it.

## **Abstract**

### **Translating Hiromi Kawakami's “Tread on a Snake”**

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This report includes my translation of the short story “Tread on a Snake” (*Hebi o Fumu*) by Kawakami Hiromi, which is presented here as a significant contribution to modern Japanese literature in translation. The story received the prestigious Akutagawa Prize in 1996, although support for it was not unanimous as seen in my translation of the judges’ comments offered here as well. Following the translation of the story itself is an essay that discusses my personal experiences translating the story. I discuss elements that may be unique to the experience of translating Kawakami’s works, but also many that are applicable more broadly to issues of translation that go beyond her works and even Japanese literature as well. Challenges included maintaining the author’s tone and voice, the appropriate use of notes to provide cultural background, and the deliberate use of non-translated terms in a translation.

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## TREAD ON A SNAKE

In a thicket on my way to Midori Park,<sup>1</sup> I stepped on a snake.

Cutting through Midori Park, over the hill, and past a few side streets is “Kanakana Hall,” the Buddhist rosary shop<sup>2</sup> where I work. Before I started working at Kanakana Hall I was a cooking instructor at a girls’ school. I quit in the fourth year, having never gotten used to being a teacher, and after surviving off of unemployment insurance I was hired at Kanakana Hall.

At Kanakana Hall, I mind the shop. Kosuga-san,<sup>3</sup> the owner, takes care of the sales and sees to the monks, while Kosuga-san’s wife makes the actual Buddhist rosaries. “Employed” might be too strong of a word. Actually, I just mind the shop.

I noticed the snake after I had stepped on it. I wonder if its movements were slow because it was an autumn snake. A regular snake wouldn’t have gotten itself stepped on.

The snake was soft, and because of that it felt like no matter how deeply I stepped down there was no end to it.

“Once stepped on, then that’s it, isn’t it,” the snake said eventually. After that, it melted thickly, and lost its shape. Something uncertain like smoke or like haze hung in

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the park is “Midori,” which means green, making the park “Green Park.”

<sup>2</sup> The word I have translated as “rosary” in this case refers to a Buddhist rosary. I use the words “rosary” and “prayer beads” interchangeably depending on context throughout the story.

<sup>3</sup> I have chosen to leave honorific suffixes in their original forms to preserve both the tone of the original, as well as nuances that vary from the English words “miss” or “mister.” The most commonly used is “-san,” which is similar to the English words “miss,” “mister,” “Mrs.,” and so on. It is very common, and although it is used more often with people older than the speaker, this is not necessarily always the case. It denotes respect, but can also denote emotional distance from someone, as well as signifying hierarchical position in certain respects. (Also see note 7.)

the air for a moment, and then the snake's voice repeated once more "That's it, isn't it," and a human form appeared.

"I was stepped on, so there is no helping it," it said, this time in a human's voice, and quickly walked away in the direction of my apartment. The snake, now in human form, looked like a woman around fifty.

When I arrived at Kanakana Hall, Kosuga-san was just in the middle of opening the shutters, and his wife, Nishiko-san, was grinding coffee beans in the back.

"I'm going all the way to Kōfu today, so if you'd like, would you come too, Sanada-san?" Kosuga-san said to me. I had occasionally gone with Kosuga-san in his van to sell prayer beads before, but always only to very nearby locations. Kōfu is...well, far.

As of late, Nishiko-san had been making bunches and bunches of Pure Land<sup>4</sup> rosaries. Yesterday, she packaged the two hundred sets of prayer beads which she had finally finished into a box. It seemed that Kosuga-san was going to deliver them.

"And there's also the Isawa hot springs if you're willing to walk a little ways from Ganshin-ji Temple." Kosuga-san actually said that. "You want to come with us too, Nishiko? We could close the shop."

Kosuga-san always immediately blurts things out like this. Nishiko-san smiled without answering. She was over sixty, but had hardly any grey hair and looked far younger than Kosuga-san, who was actually at least eight years younger than she was.

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<sup>4</sup> This refers to a sect of Buddhism, known as Pure Land Buddhism.

She had been wife to the owner of a long standing rosary shop in Kyoto at which Kosuga-san went to train in his younger days. Her own young husband rarely came near the shop, and instead spent all of his time messing around elsewhere, while Nishiko-san made the rosaries, and ran the shop like clockwork. From dawn until dusk and without a rest in between she managed the shop, and Kosuga-san fell in love with her. A few years later, once Kosuga-san had finished his training, he wooed and persuaded her, and the two eventually ran away together. The first time I heard this tale from their past was a few weeks after I started working at the shop. Most of the customers that come to the shop—which primarily consist of monks—know this elopement story, and even now will crack jokes, saying “How nice for a husband and wife to get along so well.” And even now, Kosuga-san recites “Namandabu Namandabu”<sup>5</sup> under his breath in response to this, while Nishiko-san smiles silently.

It was because of these circumstances that, despite the fact that Nishiko-san is said to be the most skilled rosary-maker in the entire Kantō region, Kanakana Hall continues to just scrape by in this remote area.

On the way back from the temple, as we sat drinking iced coffee at a service area off the expressway, I said nonchalantly, “I stepped on a snake.”

“Huh?” Kosuga-san replied with a startled yelp.

“That snake, what happened to it after that?” Holding an unfiltered Peace cigarette in his mouth, Kosuga-san slowly rubbed his balding forehead with the palm of his hand.

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<sup>5</sup> Namandabu is a Buddhist prayer phrase derived from Sanskrit.

“After that it walked away.”

“Where to?”

“Who knows?”

The setting sun shone on the late afternoon rest house, and the noise of cars outside the window could be heard near and far. The head monk at Ganshin-ji had a preference for antiques, and his own quarters were decorated with many old shelves, as well as wares from Shigaraki and Shino and the like. We were forced to listen to him tell us one-by-one the origin stories of the objects for a total of three hours. Even during the interval when the head monk’s wife—whose face looked vaguely like his—was kind enough to bring us soba noodles as lunch, the origin stories continued. *Please, enjoy the soba, or else it will go cold, you know.* Even though the monk’s wife said this, I didn’t know when it was alright for me to eat during the endless stories. Kosuga-san, however, somehow ate up his soba before I knew it, even as he nodded his way through the head monk’s stories with an *uh-huh*. I tried as best as I could to imitate Kosuga-san’s actions, but my portion of soba did not decrease in the least. After a small silence had finally settled while the head monk turned toward his soba, and just when I hurriedly grabbed the bowl of soba and went to slurp it up, he started once again, *oh, you know that soba bowl.* The chopsticks and the soba cup and the teacup too, also the saucer on which the teacup was placed, the table on which the saucer was placed, the cloth of the cushion facing the table on which I was sitting too—it was as though *all* of them had their own origin stories. A criminal who was beheaded in the Edo Period, a man who built a warehouse as an expression of filial piety, a real go-getter who was elected mayor,

someone who was so rich he could have been a sumo wrestling sponsor but had hit such bad times that he became unable to afford living even in a rundown shack, a woman with a wicked nature who got burned, a dog who dug gold coins up out of a field, a widow who made a career for herself by inventing a special water jug for sick patients. After we had finished listening to all of the stories, Kosuga-san calmly took the two hundred rosaries out of the back of the van and lined them up in front of the head monk. After receiving payment, Kosuga-san carefully tore out a receipt and handed it to him. The receipt had the numbers written in calligraphy with a paintbrush in kanji. All of the documents at Kanakana Hall were done by hand in skilled brush writing by Nishiko-san herself.

“By the way, Mr. Shop-keeper, I wonder if you’ve heard this talk of snakes?” asked the monk, as he folded up the receipt, but at that moment the head monk’s wife called for him. It seems he had a memorial service to do.

“You see, recently there have been a lot of snakes around. Since this area has been cleared, they don’t have a place to live, and so they’ve been coming to the temple.” As he removed his black *kasaya*<sup>6</sup> in front of Kosuga-san and me, the head monk continued.

“Snakes can change form, you see.”

He pulled a shiny blue *kasaya* over his head, put on a golden hat, and laughed with an expression like he had just eaten something sour. Bowing deeply towards

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<sup>6</sup> A *kasaya* (半袈裟) in this case refers to a strip of decorated cloth, worn around the shoulders, which is part of a Buddhist monk’s attire.

Kosuga-san, he was seen off by his wife as he left the temple. It was because the monk brought it up, that I told Kosuga-san about the snake on the way back.

“Sanada-san, I wonder what kind of snake that was?”

The horn of a dump truck sounded like a steamship foghorn. It felt as if I were at a rest house on the beach.

“It was about a medium-sized snake. Soft.”

Kosuga-san made a slightly forlorn sort of face, but without saying anything else, he rubbed his broad forehead once more with the palm of his hand, and stood up from his seat. After we got in the van, Kosuga-san turned on the radio. The stock market report ended, and around the time a Portuguese lecture started up, I dozed off, already having forgotten all about the snake.

When we arrived at Kanakana Hall, the program was halfway through an English conversation lesson.

Crossing through Midori Park at night I returned to my apartment, only to find the place completely cleaned up and a strange woman around fifty sitting in the center of the rug.

Well now, it's the snake isn't it? I thought.

“Welcome home,” The woman said as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“I'm back,” I replied, and the woman stood up and went to the small, built-in kitchen corner. When she took the lid from a pot it gave off a nice smell.

“I boiled some of the chicken meatballs you like, Hiwako-chan,”<sup>7</sup> the woman wiped the dining table with a kitchen cloth excitedly, and set out the chopsticks and dishes. She set everything up naturally, setting my tableware in the spot where I always sit, and the guest wares in another spot. She did it in a manner that was like someone who had already been living there. Chicken meatballs, boiled kidney beans, as well as bean curd and sashimi were lined up before my eyes. She brought out glasses too, and used a bottle opener to take the cap off a beer.

“Shall we have a toast once in a while?” saying this, the woman sat in the seat next to me. I did as told and toasted her back, and after gulping down some beer, my throat craved more, and I immediately emptied my glass. I thought the woman would refill my drink, but she didn’t. I wondered if she knew that I hated people pouring drinks for me.

“Oh, that’s delicious,” the woman said, refilling her own glass. Seeing that, I too emptied the contents of my glass once more, refilled it, and it wasn’t too long before it was empty again.

“There are two more bottles I’ve chilled.” the woman said as she put another chicken meatball onto her plate.

All of it gave me the creeps, but the chicken meatballs looked tasty, so I put one onto my plate as well. The woman ate steadily. When I nudged it with my chopsticks just

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<sup>7</sup> “-chan” is another commonly used honorific suffix. It is somewhat diminutive, and is typically used after children’s names. It is also relatively common to use attached to women’s names, particularly women younger than the speaker. It denotes a certain amount of affection, and the snake’s use of it towards our protagonist, Hiwako, is meant to sound not only overly sweet, but also overly-familiar (and arguably somewhat patronizing as well.) (Also see note 3.)

a little bit, some broth poured out of it, so I went ahead and ate it. It tasted as though I had made it myself. I ate some of the chicken meatballs and drank some beer, ate some kidney beans and drank even more beer. However, I just couldn't bring myself to touch the sashimi. When I thought about how it was sashimi that had been prepared by a snake I couldn't help but be creeped out. The woman poured on ample amounts soy sauce and wasabi, and ate the sashimi too, just as steadily.

“Your work ran late today, didn't it?”

“That's because I went to Kōfu.” I did not plan on answering her, but I guess I was tipsy and had loosened up from the beer.

“What are you?” I asked her next. I was able to ask her smoothly.

“Huh? Why, I'm your mom, Hiwako-chan.” The woman answered as if it were nothing, walked to the refrigerator, and brought out another bottle of beer. She tapped the bottle cap lightly with the bottle opener, and then pulled in off. She poured equal amounts of beer into both her own glass and mine, creating a lot of foam.

“Huh?”

My mother was alive and well in my hometown in Shizuoka. My father was also alive and well. I had two younger brothers, enrolled at the local university and high school. My mother had a sort of average Japanese face that looked like that what's-her-name actress who often plays the mothers' roles on TV. This woman had a deep-set face with Western features. Her eyelashes were extremely long. She had high cheekbones, and the wrinkles around her eyes and mouth made you feel the thinness of her skin.



I suddenly grew worried, and stood up to call my parents' home. I couldn't remember the number very well and tried, but failed, twice. It was like when you can't properly make a phone call inside a dream.

"Hello," on the third try my mother answered, and from the other side I heard her say "Oh, Hiwako-chan."

"Hello?"

"What happened?"

"Nothing, I was just wondering how you were."

"I'm doing fine. How about you?"

"I'm fine."

"What happened?"

I'm the type who doesn't like to talk on the phone very much so I don't usually call outside of the occasional Sunday. They were aware of this too, so even my occasional calls ended after only about two minutes.

"How are Dad and the others?"

"Nothing new. Just like usual. What happened?"

"Nothing happened."

Sometime during that hazy conversation I hung up the phone. Without so much as looking at me while I used the phone, the woman kept scarfing down food and drink.

When I returned to the table, most of the food had run out. Opening the third bottle of beer, the woman rested her chin in her hand.

“Why did you quit being a teacher, Hiwako-chan?” the woman asked me, no longer eating anything but still drinking her beer. Having just heard my mother’s voice had formed a crack in my mental defenses. She questioned me, and even as I thought about how creepy it was, I figured that since it was going to be creepy either way, then I may as well answer.

“I hated it.”

“What did you hate?”

“Teaching.”

“Really?”

“.....”

“That’s not true, is it?”

“It might not be right.”

“What was it *really*?”

The woman had even more beer, and refilled it yet again. There were goose bumps on the woman’s arms. Even with goose bumps, the skin on her arm was a faint white.

“Maybe it was because I was exhausted.”

There were not a lot of times in which students would seek something out from the teachers, but whenever I got the feeling that something was being sought from me I usually ended up giving them something that was not being sought. After doing so, I would become uncertain as to whether that was truly what I had wanted to give, and I

would grow exhausted from that. Even the feeling of wanting to give something seemed like bullshit.

“I’m going to sleep now.”

The woman said this suddenly, and without cleaning up any of the food, she wound herself around the only pillar in the apartment. Whatever sort of trick it was, the woman’s body grew thin as she clung closely to the pillar, and entwining herself to the pillar with a slithering motion, she climbed up to the ceiling. She relaxed once she ascended to the roof. Before I knew it, she had returned to being a snake. Once she came to look like a snake that had been drawn onto the roof, she closed her eyes.

After that, no matter how much I spoke to it, or prodded it with a long stick, it did not move.

Even after morning came, the snake remained immobile in its same spot. I thought it was careless, but even so I left it there without tossing it out, and headed to Kanakana Hall to work.

Once again I arrived right as Kosuga-san was opening the shutters. From far off came sounds like a gun being fired.

“It’s a stage gun, isn’t it.” said Kosuga-san when the sounds had died down. “I wonder if you know about them, Sanada-san?”

When I answered that I did not, Kosuga-san kindly explained what a stage gun was. It was a gun that only made noise, used to drive away birds that got into the crops on farms. It was about eighty centimeters in length.

“When we first opened up the shop we’d even get boars out here, and the gunshots would come even more furiously than now. *Bang bang*, from early in the morning.”

Kosuga-san, who had been raised in the city, was unfamiliar with the sound, and he laughed as he told me how initially, when he heard the sound of the gun he could not help but think that it must be Nishiko-san’s husband chasing after her and coming to gun him down.

“And that’s despite the fact that it had been more than three years since Nishiko had left her house in Kyoto by the time we opened the shop.” Kosuga-san said, and held an unfiltered Peace cigarette in his mouth for a while without lighting it.

“I thought it was the sound of training exercises,” Kosuga-san made a puzzled face when I said this.

I added, “Of the Self-Defense Forces,” and his mouth formed an “Oh” shape even as he continued to hold the Peace cigarette. It stuck to his upper lip, moving up along with it.

“Practicing for war, eh. Practice is important, you know. Very important.” Kosuga-san said this, and, not knowing how I should reply, I shook my head a little bit. “Very importaant, what’s important iiis~, a safety-deposit booox~,” Kosuga-san broke into song with a soft voice, and although the song sounded familiar I couldn’t remember

where it was that I'd heard it before. The gun went off countless times with a light *pop pop*.

The shop felt cold somehow when I entered it. Nishiko-san was nowhere to be found. Since she would occasionally take days off from the shop, I figured she must surely be off today too. Nishiko-san has gout. So she gets pains in her big toes. I dusted the merchandise and sprinkled some water in front of the shop like she always does, and since I got the feeling that no one but Nishiko-san was allowed to make coffee, I poured two cups worth of Japanese tea for us. After that I sat down at the table, and since I had nothing to do, I drank my tea.

Eventually the phone began ringing and with taking notes and looking into the inventory, before I knew it some time had passed, and by the time Kosuga-san was on his third cup of tea after returning from his work outside of the shop, the sun was starting to set. It wasn't as though thoughts of the snake had entirely left my mind while I was alone tending the shop, but whenever I would try to think about it, my ideas would break apart and scatter off somewhere. Only once, in the middle of a phone call from a customer, a monk from Yosen-ji temple, I was startled when thought I heard the word "snake" in the middle of the conversation, but it turned out that the word "shroud" had gotten fuzzy in the middle and it had sounded to me like the word "snake." However. The moment that Kosuga-san returned he brought up the snake.

"Say, Sanada-san, about that snake," he said as he wrote an order into the account book. "Please kick it out. Whenever it comes."

"What do you mean, '*whenever it comes*'?"

“I mean the snake.”

When I looked up at Kosuga-san, he too looked up, and gazed at me. He gazed at me, and it was like he already knew that there was a snake staying at my place.

“Is it no good?”

“That’s right.”

“No use, no matter what?”

Even while he spoke those words that seemed powerful, Kosuga-san began to hum “Very importaaant,” the same song he had been singing that morning. Whether he was feeling slow and sluggish, or whether he felt he was at his wit’s end, I did not understand Kosuga-san’s circumstances the least bit. Maybe he felt both. Just as a feeling of regret began to come over me—for having shelved my snake problem for the day and been carefree enough to just work—I recalled where it was that I’d heard the song that Kosuga-san was singing. It was the song that played from the float for the local festival sponsored by the credit union in front of the station. However it was that the song and lyrics had been composed, however it was that they’d performed it, the “Very importaaant~” song had been recorded onto a tape in an endless loop which played continuously while the float was on parade. Since Kanakana Hall had remained open on the day of the festival, I remembered sitting idly in the back of the shop trying to prevent the “Very importaaant~” from soaking into my brain through any means possible. However, the “Very importaaant~” had seeped deeply into my head.

“Please kick it out.”

“Is that what I should do?”

“Yes, you should if you can.”

“Can I, though?”

Without answering, Kosuga-san rubbed his forehead with the palm of his hand. He put away the paper money into a hemp pouch, and locked the cash register. He turned towards the Buddha statue inside the glass case and spoke the words, “Namandabu Namandabu,” closed the gas valve, and placed the plate of purifying salt<sup>8</sup> beside the washroom. Finally, he closed the shutters and turned out the lights.

“Well, I’m not too sure, but there’s no reason to deliberately go out of your way to take on a burden that you don’t need to be taking on.”

That was what Kosuga-san said, but I got the feeling that you didn’t really know what sorts of things to take on and what sorts of things it was alright not to until you actually tried to take them on. But I didn’t tell Kosuga-san that.

I returned to my apartment, my thoughts alternating between *it’s probably not there, it’s probably there*, so that the snake was already at the center of my thoughts when I got back.

The snake was there. It was in the form of a woman.

When she said to me, “Welcome home, Hiwako-chan,” I felt as though this was something I had been hearing for years and years.

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<sup>8</sup> This plate of salt refers to a small plate in which a small pile of salt is placed on to bring good luck for a business and ward off bad things. The plate is then placed near the entrance of the shop and left there throughout the business day.

“I’m home,” I replied.

The woman said nothing more. I went to take a bath and do the laundry. I did not want to take off my clothes in front of her, so I changed in the cramped bathroom. Still unable to dry my body properly, I put on my pajamas and came out, only to have the woman immediately open a bottle of beer with a “Come on now.”

I was going to say that I didn’t want any, but once I saw the beer I decided to drink just one glass. After I finished, I reached for the snacks, refilled my glass with more beer, and looked up to see the woman completely making herself at home.

“Say, do you remember, Hiwako-chan?” she spoke to me, the area around her eyes turning red. “Do you remember when you fell out of the tree, Hiwako-chan?”

I had no memory of having fallen out of any tree. But the woman continued.

“Little Gen-chan from next door screamed to me, ‘Hiwako-chan’s mo—m, Hiwako-chan fell—’ and I was so surprised I almost couldn’t stand up.”

The woman raised her voice slightly, her eyes glaring at the space in front of her.

“When I went to go check on you, you were sitting under the tree, and when I asked you if you were alright you told me ‘No.’ That’s so very like you, saying ‘No’ like that, isn’t it Hiwako-chan?”

No matter how I searched, I had no memories like that.

“About that—aren’t you confusing me with somebody?”

“I’m not. I’m your mom so there’s no mistaking it, Hiwako-chan.”

“My mother is in Shizuoka.” I was angry. But the woman’s expression was composed.



“Well, that may be the case, but I’m your mom too, Hiwako-chan.”

“How stupid.”

“I know a lot of things you don’t know, Hiwako-chan.” She said this, and I felt a chill.

The woman’s skin shone in a slippery way, and she started to look very much like a snake. *At this very moment, I’ve gone and taken this woman on*, I thought. I felt like I’d had the same sort of feelings a few times before now, but I couldn’t remember specifically in what sort of situation that had been. The woman was looking at me with a loving gaze.

Curling up, she said in a syrupy voice, “Hiwako-chan, you’re very important to me.” As soon as she coiled up she turned back into a snake, and slithered up to the roof. Once it reached the roof, it turned again into what seemed like a drawing, and no matter if I pushed or pulled at it, I could not remove it.

Wanting to be as far from the snake as possible, I laid out my futon in a corner of the room. I thought I would be unable to sleep, but before long I fell asleep, and I did not wake up again until the next morning.

I was drinking tea while I sorted some sales slips when from behind me, Nishiko-san said, “Your voice is so soft today, Sanada-san.” She said this despite the fact that she had only just come out to the store, and had therefore not spoken with me at all yet. She would sometimes say things like this, for example right after coming in to work first

thing in the morning. She might say, “You had a bit too much to eat yesterday, didn’t you, Sanada-san?” or “You’re going to be feeling depressed all day today,” and so forth. The things Nishiko-san said would often come true. Today my voice was soft, and I could not open my eyes widely.

“Good morning,” I said, turning toward her, and she laughed.

“My, it’s just as soft as I thought.”

Kosuga-san returned, making an awful lot of noise. The reason for the loud noise was the luggage that he was carrying. It was covered with a cloth. Placing it on top of the glass display case, he took the cloth away, and under it appeared a box. From inside the box came the sound of something moving incessantly.

“What is that?” when Nishiko-san asked this, Kosuga-san put a finger to his lips and said, “Shh. It’s *that*.”

“Oh, *that*.”

Pretending that I wasn’t listening, I peeked at them from behind as I placed some sales slips, but the two did not say anything more on the subject. There was the smell of Peace cigarettes, and I heard Kosuga-san sigh.

At noon, Nishiko-san brought some *ten-don*<sup>9</sup> for us, and the three of us sat and ate in the small room at the back of the shop. Once about every month we were treated to *ten-don* at Kanakana hall. A single shrimp topped the *ten-don*, along with an abundance of pickled eggplant.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ten-don* (天丼) is a dish that consists of steamed rice in a bowl, topped with various fried food (usually shrimp, but can also include fish and vegetables).

Kosuga-san told us about the monk who had come by that day. Apparently he was at a loss because his son whom he wanted to take over the temple for him had gone off to the United States. He was buying up second-hand clothes in the U.S. and selling them all off here in Japan. When I asked if second-hand clothes really sold here in Japan nowadays, he said that it seemed there were some very rare and valuable jeans that would even sell for several hundreds of thousands of yen<sup>10</sup> a pair.

“Is that popular with young people nowadays?” Kosuga-san asked me, but since I did not know, I said “Who knows,” prompting Kosuga-san to make a curious face.

“Now that we’re on the subject, Sanada-san, you wear clothes that are different from what young people wear nowadays, don’t you?”

I was silent, not knowing exactly what kind of people Kosuga-san was referring to when he said “young people nowadays.”

Nishiko-san said in a chiding manner, “It’s not like it used to be back in our days anymore, when you could walk around Shijō Kawaramachi in central Kyoto and bump into someone you know.”

“I suppose not,” answered Kosuga-san, crunching away at his shrimp. I was recalling the snake. Unlike when I spoke to Kosuga-san and Nishiko-san, from the very beginning there had been no wall to separate me from the snake, to make me feel distant. There was a wall whenever I spoke to the “young people nowadays” that Kosuga-san was talking about too. For example, when I was a teacher with my students and coworkers and such, and now that I thought about it even with my mother, my father, my brother—

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<sup>10</sup> A few thousand dollars.

sure, it would grow thinner or thicker, but the wall was there—and in some ways you could say that I could talk to them *because* there was a wall there.

But there was no wall between the snake and me.

The *ten-don* felt heavy in my stomach as usual, and I felt unwell and continued to speak in a soft voice into the evening.

As I walked through Midori Park, I remembered my great-grandfather. My great-grandfather was a farmer, and had five fields and a tea plantation. One day he ran away. For a while they heard no news of him, and my great-grandmother supported her five children and did all of the farm work herself. Three years later he returned in the spring, and I don't know what the two of them talked about, but in the end they buried the hatchet as if nothing had happened. The years passed without trouble, but once my great-grandmother passed away and their five children grew up and had children of their own and his health started to deteriorate, he suddenly spoke up about the time he had run off.

My great-grandfather had been off living with a bird.

The bird had taken the form of a woman, and one autumn day she had come to tempt my great-grandfather. Entranced by the beautiful woman with sweet-smelling hands, my great-grandfather abandoned his family. He lived like that, off in another place, for two years, but by the third winter the woman started to shun him.

“Her true nature as a bird came out, you see.” he apparently said.

“She started saying, ‘A good-for-nothing man like you cannot make me lay eggs.’” That is how my great-grandfather told the story.

“She said, ‘I want to make a nest, you know!’ and with a lot of flapping the bird flew away for good. So I came back home.”

When I heard that story from my mother I was about middle school age, and I thought it was a weird fable. I thought it was a fable with no moral to it. Even remembering it now, I can’t pull forth any moral from it. Is it that if you abandon your family to follow some worthless woman, the only thing waiting for you is your own ruin? But it seemed like my great-grandfather had enjoyed living with the woman far too much for that to be the case. Is it that women cannot be understood? But it seemed like the woman’s words were far too spot-on for that to be the case. Was it that the Meiji Era was centered around a strong patriarchy, where women were unable to blame even men that came home after leaving them, and so women now should open their eyes more to their own needs? But it had not sounded like my great-grandmother had lived under my great-grandfather’s oppression all that much for that to be the case.

Even if it was a true story and not a fable, I figured that it was different from the situation I was in now. Despite this, I still recalled the story, in the same sense that a person in danger of being eaten by a shark remembers the story of a person who was swallowed by a whale.

The dried leaves of Midori Park fluttered down with a whoosh. Even though it was nearly night, there were still several children out raising their voices loudly. They rode their bicycles, slicing the air around them, and circled the park’s bike trail. Several

of these bicycles came towards me from behind, the children riding past me and onward. My hair would sway every time at the sharp gusts created by the children and their bicycles as they passed me by.

I felt as though a wheezing lump settled in the back of my throat.

“Exactly *what* are you?” That was the first thing to come out of my mouth. I asked hurriedly. I couldn’t ask after being offered alcohol and food.

“Why, I’m *obviously* your mother, Hiwako-chan. How many times will you make me say it?”

The woman answered while examining a split end or something. Her hair, which she usually kept up, was loose. It was very long hair. The woman looked a little older with her hair down.

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“ ‘*Don’t understand,*’ you say.”

The woman opened her mouth wide. Thinking that she might have a forked tongue since she was a snake, I averted my gaze for a moment, but it was not forked at all. It was a regular human tongue.

“You always *do* pretend that you don’t know things, don’t you? I don’t really admire that about you.”

*Even if you say that, I don’t get what I don’t get.*

“Today, I tried going for a walk around here. It’s a nice place, isn’t it?” the woman said, changing her tone.

“It is, isn’t it.”

“There are a few too many children, though. Children nowadays are poorly disciplined.”

“Is that right?”

“There was a goat, you know. At the house of the person called Narita-san. Did you know that, Hiwako-chan?”

While such a conversation continued between us, the food and alcohol started up again. As we ate and drank, I looked at the woman several times, and she'd say “See, pretending you don't know,” I got a feeling like she was laughing at me inside my own mind. She actually did laugh as she poured more alcohol, and warmed up some soup. The woman was beautiful, and I liked her face.

Two weeks passed from when the snake had come, and it was now inventory season at Kanakana Hall. In the spring and autumn, Kanakana Hall would hold an inventory count. There were three lines of shelves that reached from the floor to the roof in the back of the store behind the sales area, and the goods in there as well as the goods from the sales area were all fully recorded into a coarse paper notebook made by Nishiko-san. Bombay black wood base prepared with agate, 10.<sup>11</sup> Real crystal Buddhist rosaries, 7. Plum wood, 20. Nishiko-san would take the memos recorded in that way, and would write them into the account book. It was an old-fashioned way of doing things.

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<sup>11</sup> Bombay black wood is sometimes known as *tagayasan*, and that is the word used here. Agate is a type of quartz.

*I wonder, can you use computers, Sanada-san?* Kosuga-san would occasionally say, but as soon as Nishiko-san would answer, *Kanakana Hall doesn't take part in transactions big enough to use a computer for managing our inventory*, he would reply, *That's true isn't it*, and the conversation would be over. However, after a while Kosuga-san would bring it up again, saying *I wonder, Sanada-san, are computers handy?* He would bring it up, but that would be it.

Just past noon, Kosuga-san brought another box back with him again.

Something was moving incessantly inside the box. Nishiko-san went to leave the box in the storehouse. It had been decided that we would finish half of the inventory count today and continue the rest tomorrow, so I went out to buy some snacks and tea cakes. Kosuga-san came along with me.

“Sanada-san, can we stop around there for a bit to have some tea? Don't worry about the shopping for today.” As I faced Kosuga-san in front of the station café, I thought about how something like this had happened before, and realized that I was thinking of the time at the speedway service area on our way back from the temple in Kōfu.

“The snake, is it still there?” Kosuga-san asked, just as I had been expecting that he would.

“Well, yes.”

The snake had settled itself in. Perhaps I was happy to return to my apartment at night and have my food already prepared for me. I had never thought that returning to an



unlit apartment was unpleasant, but as it turns out once you start living with someone you end up getting used to it.

“I had something to talk to you about today.” Kosuga-san didn’t press me any further about the snake. Instead, he went and told me this.

*The truth is, we have had a snake with us for over twenty years. It appears to be something that followed Nishiko, and it claims to be her aunt. At first, since it was creepy and a hindrance we tried to drive it out, but we were unable to. Fate would make it so that something would come up and we would be unable to drive it out. A relative would suddenly get critically ill, a couple would stop getting along, someone would get injured—whenever we would get ready to try and drive it out those sorts of things would come up continuously. We had an exorcism done too, but the person who conducted it said there wasn’t anything especially evil haunting Nishiko. And of course, even though we exorcised it, it didn’t disappear. Eventually, having it around became natural, and we stopped caring whether it was around or not. However, recently it seems like the snake’s approaching its death, and it has become unable to turn into human form. Even when it does turn into a human it’s only for a very short time. It stays as a snake, and it’s become more snake-like in its tastes. It wants to eat small birds and frogs. I bought a small bird today too, and gave it to Nishiko. I don’t know what Nishiko is thinking. Whenever I tell her she should just throw the snake away already, she just shakes her head stubbornly, and keeps on happily giving the snake live bait. I can’t understand Nishiko when she gets like this. I get scared.*

Kosuga-san rubbed his forehead three times with the palm of his hand.

“I’m scared, you know.” He said once more.

I wondered exactly how Kosuga-san felt when he said that he was scared, since when he said “scared” I could feel that he *was*. But was he scared of the snake or scared of Nishiko-san, or perhaps even Kosuga-san did not know the answer to that? Thinking about that, I ended up recalling the words that the snake had said to me: “You always *do* pretend that you don’t know things, don’t you, Hiwako-chan?”

After that, Kosuga-san ordered some pancakes at the café, and I ordered a pear Charlotte cake. We were there for about an hour, and then returned to Kanakana Hall once again.

The woman tapped me on the shoulder. When I turned, she began rubbing her icy cheek against mine. It was like hugging a small pet, or like being wrapped up snugly by some large object, and I felt satisfied. As she pressed her cheek to mine, the woman wrapped her arms around me. Her arms around me felt icy too, and it seemed as though the woman’s fingertips were turning back into a snake. Even if she had turned back into a snake, it wouldn’t have creeped me out. In fact, it actually felt more reassuring that she was a snake. If she were tangled around me in woman form rather than in snake form, I would be much less able to relax. She was exactly the same height as I was, and we wrapped our arms around each other’s bodies like some pair set.

Wrapped around me, the woman spoke, “The world of snakes is warm, Hiwako-chan.”

When I nodded, she continued, “Do you want to come to the world of snakes too, Hiwako-chan?”

Shaking my head in a way that could be interpreted just as much as a *yes* than as a *no*, I calmly peeled my body away from the snake’s hug.

I did not find the world of snakes to be all that appealing. Perhaps the snake knew what I was thinking too, because this time, without wrapping her arms around me she instead sat right in front of me and drew her knees up to herself.

“Have you ever been betrayed, Hiwako-chan?” she asked with seducing eyes.

In order to be betrayed, you first have to be rather involved with something. Had I *ever* been that involved in anything?

I recalled a number of things—some emotional and physical connections with a few men and women, some push-and-pull negotiations with someone or other at places I frequented daily for a certain period of time—but I couldn’t think of anything particular. I thought it could be that I just could not recall or had unknowingly tried to forget, but as far as I was aware, if it were something that I could forget without knowing it, then it must not be something that I could say I was very involved in.

“I feel like I haven’t.”

When I answered, the woman opened her mouth wide and laughed.

I thought she would question me more, and so I waited, but she did not ask anything after that. Without questioning, she slithered up to the roof and looked down at me.

“Hiwako-chan Hiwako-chan” she called incessantly, and then returned to the form of a snake. Even after she turned into a snake the sounds of “Hiwako-chan” did not stop.

It mixed with the sound that the snake made like the friction of rustling cloth, and both “Hiwako-chan Hiwako-chan” and “Shhhhhsssss” could be heard simultaneously as the sounds continued to ring.

It was like the strange sounds that could be heard on windswept nights.

When I arrived at Kanakana Hall, Nishiko-san was sitting there blankly.

Water had been sprinkled in front of the shop, salt was stacked higher and more abundantly than usual in its plate,<sup>12</sup> and the inside of the store was sparkling clean.

Kosuga-san was not there.

“Good morning.”

“Oh, Sanada-san,” Nishiko-san spoke out in a voice like a castaway who has finally drifted back to shore. There was something at her feet. I could sense its presence.

“I opened up the shop early today.” she said in a weary manner.

“Around what time?”

“Let’s see, around four o’clock this morning.”

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<sup>12</sup> See note six above about the salt.

I swallowed a “*huh?*” and backed away a little. The moment I stepped back I saw that there was a bamboo cage at Nishiko-san’s feet. The presence seemed to be drifting up from the cage.

“You see, I’ve become unable to sleep for some reason. Daybreak has been coming later recently, so it’s dark such an awfully long time that I get bored.”

So then did that mean Nishiko-san had opened up the shutters at four a.m., turned on all the bright lights inside the store on and been rustling about the shop? Having grown bored of moving around, had she been sitting still here, staring into the pitch darkness outside?

“Has Kosuga-san gone out already?”

“Who knows. I haven’t seen him yet today. He may still be asleep. You see, he has been sleeping a lot recently. All he does is sleep, it’s like he isn’t human.”

She said it in an terribly forsaking manner. Inside the cage, something moved.

“Ummmm...?” When I said this, Nishiko-san looked up. Her eyes shone in her face. Her eyes, which had been narrowed and scrutinizing, in turn began to bulge greatly, and they swelled as she resisted tears.

“That cage—what is that?”

Nishiko-san’s eyes grew larger and larger. They opened wide, peeled open, until finally the white of her eyes overwhelmed the dark parts, and it was as though a whole third of her eyeballs protruded out of its socket. Or so I thought, as they immediately returned to their normal state.

“Right, the cage. It’s just an ordinary cage.”

Her eyes began to grow large again. Her eyes swelled steadily, and it was as if her eyeballs were alive of their own accord.

“Isn’t it a snake?”

“Would you like to see?”

Just after she said this, Nishiko-san’s eyeballs returned to normal. The atmosphere inside the shop was different from how it usually was. What exactly had happened to Kosuga-san? Was he really sleeping soundly, like had he really become something not human?

Nishiko-san opened the lid of the cage. There was a single, enormous blue-black snake, stretched out long like it was dead.

“Ah”

As soon as I raised my voice the snake raised its head, and stared at me with shining eyes that looked like Nishiko-san’s. Nishiko-san was smiling faintly.

*It’s a snake. Apparently, there’s one at your place too, isn’t there, Sanada-san? I heard about it. How standoffish of you, you could have told me about it. So you are that type of person too, eh, Sanada-san? Somehow, that calms me down, I’ve really come to like you somehow, Sanada-san. You see, I may not seem like it, but my tastes in people are pretty extreme. You didn’t think that was the case, now did you, Sanada-san? You thought of me as just someone who put out the salt every day and makes the rosaries, and had eloped once; you thought that I was someone that had nothing to do with you, didn’t you? Not liking me or disliking me, you planned to simply pass the days like usual somehow, didn’t you? You thought that sort of every day routine was nice, didn’t you?*

*Well, I, when I come to like something, I come to love it a whole lot. I loved Kosuga a whole lot too. But Kosuga doesn't love me very much, you see. The love turns over into hate, and again over into love, and after another three times or so of turning over it turns into a little bit of hate. But inside that hate is sprinkled with spots of love, so that Kosuga feels extremely unwell. That is why all he does is sleep.*

Nishiko-san spoke in a soft voice. The snake slithered smoothly out of the edge of the cage, and entwined itself around Nishiko-san's body.

*Say. What is your snake like, Sanada-san? You see, my snake is going to die soon. I'm so sad I cannot help it. And I love it **so much**. You see, I wanted to become a snake. I wonder why I didn't go to the world of snakes that time. I was invited, you know. You will probably be invited too, Sanada-san. The snakes invite you countless times. But I refused it countless times. You see, I thought that I wasn't supposed to do something so far off course for a person. Even I did not understand what I mean by "a person's course," though. I wonder if the snake gave up. It has stopped inviting me now that we are at the end. I wonder how much time has passed since then. And to think that if it were now, I would accept immediately. The world of snakes is sure to be a splendid place. I think it's a place that's warm somehow with absolutely no parts that are separate from me and I could just sink deeply into it and sleep. Why won't you go to the world of snakes, Sanada-san, huh? The world of snakes is really warm, you see.*

Nishiko-san's voice as she said it's "really warm, you see," sounded like the voice of the woman in my apartment. Despite the fact that their voices were completely different from each other, it sounded like the same thing was speaking to me. Before too

long, it became unclear whether I was in Kanakana Hall or in my own room, yet I remained aware that in reality it was only Nishiko-san stating her own strong feelings in that tender voice. Even while I was aware that it was only Nishiko-san's own feelings, I wanted to eat up what she was saying. Would I be able to go to the world of snakes right now if I ate it up? Could I, enter the world of snakes, sleep there and pretend like I don't know?

When the words "pretend like I don't know" came to my mind I suddenly felt a chill down the whole surface of my back. Nishiko-san's eyes were no longer swollen, and had returned to their usual slender, slight form.<sup>13</sup> The snake remained coiled around Nishiko-san's body, but it was in low spirits and lacked a certain spark. Eventually Nishiko-san stopped speaking, and Kanakana Hall went back to its usual atmosphere. The snake's scales were splintered, standing on edge.

On the topic of snakes, there is something that comes to mind a bit when I think about them.

It's about being intimate with someone. The first time I go to bed with someone, I can't close my eyes. They entwine me with their hands, and I wind my arms around that person, but even when the two of us begin to strive towards that feeling of losing our

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<sup>13</sup> In the original Japanese, Hisako's observation about Nishiko's eyes returning to their normal state includes the term 一皮目 (hitokawa-me), also commonly referred to as 一重瞼 (hitoe-mabuta). These terms refer to Nishiko's single-fold eyelids, presenting an image of smaller eyes as opposed to their swollen state. I changed this part to improve fluency without drawing too much attention to the eyelids themselves.



human shapes, I can't let go of my human form. And despite the fact that our human boundaries are supposedly able to intermingle indefinitely with each other, I absolutely cannot close my eyes.

With my eyes still open, I simply watch as they move, as they confront me, as they yield to me.

Once the first time has passed and I've been with them a few times, I eventually begin to close my eyes, the previously tough, solid surface of my skin slowly beginning to run liquidly, and before I know it I unwittingly start to change form. Even though I do not try to reach that point, it happens anyway.

Once the time finally comes that I can reach that point, the other person always changes for an instant, into the form of a snake. It's not me who turns into a snake, but the others, those who are my partners, that turn into various types of snakes, be they red or blue or grey.

That's what it was always like. There were also people who I quit being intimate with before they turned into snakes, but those with whom that wasn't the case would, without exception, turn once into a snake.

I didn't know why it was that I did not turn into a snake while the others did, or if perhaps in reality I also changed into a snake when the others did. But even now I can vividly remember the chilling feeling accompanied by goose bumps that I would feel the instant they would turn into a snake. If I had turned into a snake too, then I wouldn't have gotten goose bumps like that.

When night comes, the woman takes the form of a snake. However, the snake provokes no sensation in me. Will the woman scorn me and say I am only *pretending not to know*? Will she make that *Shhhhhssssss* sound as if to say *Hisako-chan, Hurry up and go, don't pretend like you don't know and go on to the world of snakes?*

Kosuga-san had become a shadow of himself.

I looked at him from behind as he was trying to open the door of the rosewood Buddhist altar. With his hand on the door, Kosuga-san looked like something seen through a shimmer of hot air.

“Kosuga-san,” I called to him without meaning to.

“What is it?” he said, turning. The color from his eyes, nose, and mouth was drained, and he was more like a featureless noppera-bō.<sup>14</sup>

“What’s wrong?” I asked, and Kosuga-san made a curious face.

He said in retaliation, “Sanada-san, aren’t you looking awfully darker today?”

Kosuga-san stepped towards me and away from the Buddhist altar. He stroked my chin with the palm of his hand a few times. He stroked me like you would stroke an animal.

“You’ve changed a little bit, haven’t you, Sanada-san?” he stroked me more as he said this. “The air around you is tense and on edge, you know.”

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<sup>14</sup> A noppera-bō (のっぺらぼう) is a faceless ghost that appears in Japanese mythology. The area where a person’s face would be may have bumps where the nose, mouth, and eyes should be, and appear as though a layer of skin covers this area, or it may have a more flat appearance.

After that, Nishiko-san would stay at the shop until the evening, the snake still wrapped around her. Kosuga-san ended up not coming to the store. Not a single customer visited the shop, and both Nishiko-san and the snake sat still, hardly moving at all. I passed the time doing things like cleaning up after the inventory count, and practicing the way that Nishiko-san had taught me to record things in the account book using an old one. Neither Nishiko-san nor the snake emitted any real sense of presence. With the passing time, both Nishiko-san and the snake appeared more and more like ornaments.

When it came time to go home, she stood with a wobble, took out of her pocket an money envelope filled with money that she apparently had prepared. *A bonus*, she said, and handed it to me.

Bowing after she had handed it to me, I asked about closing up the shop, and Nishiko-san nodded as if she did not really care either way. Feeling her and the snake behind me, I closed up and, leaving the lights on only in the spot where Nishiko-san was, I turned out the rest of the lights, and left Kanakana Hall behind me. Both Nishiko-san and the snake had once again become ornaments in the single remaining lit-up spot. Thinking that this might be the last time I would ever see Nishiko-san, I left the shop.

Just as I had thought, Nishiko-san stopped coming to Kanakana Hall after that.

“What is Nishiko-san’s situation, Kosuga-san?”

“She’s doing considerably well, but she still can’t walk very well. The doctor said she should move around a little bit more, but she’s reluctant to.”

The day after that night when I left Nishiko-san inside the shop, Kosuga-san had told me about Nishiko-san’s injury. He told me how she fell down the stairs. She had

climbed the stairs with the snake still wrapped around her, which had caused her footing to become unstable and she tripped.

“And the snake, it was crushed.” Kosuga-san explained in a voice that showed he was not too bothered by this.

“It was crushed, so we buried it in the garden. When I asked Nishiko, she told me ‘Please bury it around there,’ so that’s what I did.”

Kosuga-san turned his neck a few times in a hopeless sort of fashion, and then, with an enthusiastic “hup,” he hoisted onto his shoulder the cardboard box with rosaries to be delivered to a nearby temple. They were the last prayer rosaries that Nishiko-san had made. They were Hoshizuki Lime Tree rosaries. Nishiko-san had made those rosaries with great care like she always did. Bending her back a little bit as she sat on her knees facing the stand she used to string the rosary beads, Nishiko-san would assemble the rosaries silently.

“Nishiko might die, huh?” Surprised at Kosuga-san’s words, I looked at him.

His color was even more and more faded, his very life energy draining out.

“There’s no way!”

“It would be so disappointing if she died, wouldn’t it,” Kosuga-san said as he rubbed his forehead with the palm of his hand. The smell of incense grew strong for a moment, and the air in Kanakana Hall stirred. It was stirring as though several invisible things were floating around inside—things that seemed like and yet unlike foxes.

Kosuga-san rubbed his forehead with the palm of his hand once more.

“It would be disappointing, so I don’t want her to die,” Kosuga-san murmured in a way that made it uncertain whether he was speaking to me or to something else.

Readjusting the cardboard box, he left the shop.

Later that day, I made some tea on my own, remembered that there was *ten-don* around noon and had some, and in the breaks between dealing with customers I updated the account book. While I was updating it, I would occasionally think of the snake.

My entire apartment was brimming with the presence of the snake. Not the woman’s, but the snake’s.

The woman was nowhere to be found, but dinner was on the table. I figured that the woman wouldn’t be coming home tonight anymore.

I opened a drawer and numerous tiny snakes slithered out from between my notebooks and pens. They slithered out and went up my arm, up past my neck, and into my ears. I jumped when they crawled inside. It didn’t hurt, but as soon as they had come into my outer ear canal, the snakes liquefied and flowed deep inside. Cold. I shook my head from side to side with great force to try and prevent the snakes that had not yet gone inside from doing so. When I did so, the snakes which had transformed to liquid in the depths of my ear increased their viscosity as they headed toward my inner ear. The sticky water filled up the area around my canals. They encircled the tiny bones in my ear.<sup>15</sup> I became unable to hear anything as my ears became full of the snakes, and only the faint

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<sup>15</sup> This refers to the auditory ossicles, or the tiny bones in the middle ear that transmit sound.

sound the snakes made as they thickly poured down resounded constantly. The liquid snakes stroked the nerves inside my inner ear, and the stimulation was transmitted to my head. The inside of my head was filled with snakes, and the images of the snakes were transmitted outwardly into every part of my body. I could feel the snakes everywhere on me—on my fingertips, my lips, my eyelids, on the palms of my hands and the soles of my feet too, on my ankles and my calves, on my soft stomach and on my stiff back, in the very roots of my hair—I felt them every place that the air touched and it gave me goose bumps. When that moment of sheer terror had ended, the presence of the snakes disappeared temporarily, and I was released. However, five minutes later the sensation of the snakes began to attack my skin again, intermittently like some onset of malaria. It was distressing.

I moved my distressed body to face the table. Even in this situation I had quite an appetite, and I ate the meal the woman had prepared. Spinach sprinkled with sesame seeds. Tossed *kombu*<sup>16</sup> and finely sliced carrots. Mackerel marinated with sweet miso. *Ebi-imo* too.<sup>17</sup> Rice and sardine whitebait with white sesame seeds. Even while I consumed the food, the soft tissue inside my mouth continued turning into snakes, then back to normal, in a hectic manner that could not get any faster.

Praying silently that I wouldn't turn into a snake, I bit into the food the snake had prepared and gulped it all down without leaving any. Chewing and swallowing and chewing and swallowing again, I licked my plate clean. I listened for the voices of all of

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<sup>16</sup> *Kombu* (昆布) refers to Laminaria seaweed, also known by the common name of “Devil’s Apron.”

<sup>17</sup> *Ebi-imo* is a type of *satoimo*, which refers to a variety of potato-like root vegetables found in Japan.

the things that cry in the night, lay down, and waiting for the snakes that would come intermittently to pass through, I aimed for the horizon furthest from the snakes. Small, long, and thin, my sense of touch sought out every opening and stretched, spreading out farther and farther. My sense of touch expanded, but the snakes were dispersed all throughout every single part of it without leaving any exceptions. It was absolutely distressing.

*It's good to be a snake, Hiwako-chan. The world of snakes is warm, you know.*

The voice poured down incessantly from the entire sky, and I was soaked to the bone in it. The second drawer was packed tightly with medium-sized snakes of beautiful colors, but when I hastily closed the drawer, the third drawer was consequently pushed open and inside it enormous snakes were coiling up. The snakes would climb over my body as I lay down and slither around the entire room, and when they grew bored of that they would climb back on top of my body and wildly fasten themselves to each other as if to form towers, or rafts, or puzzles.

*Hiwako-chaaan, Hiwako-chaaan! How long are you planning to sleep? Upon hearing my mother's voice, I was about to get up quickly, but when the thought came to me that this might be a trap set by the snakes I could no longer make myself get up. You are who you are, Hiwako-chan, so you mustn't turn into a snake, okay? My mother's voice said again, but conversely that made me lose all of my energy, feeling like if that was the case then I should just turn into a snake immediately. The snake's voice said, That's right, I've been saying right from the beginning that I'm your Mom, haven't I Hiwako-chan? Your Mom is a snake so it's only reasonable that you be a snake too,*

*Hiwako-chan*. And thus started the argument between my mother and the snake. The snake and my mother argued eternally as they both grew enormous. The snake hurled the baby snakes and the curled up snakes in the room to make my mother shrink away, and my mother herself hurled common sayings and magic words to intimidate the snake.

I became unable to tell what was going on, but even then my body did not stop transforming itself intermittently into a snake, and that sensation gradually became one free of discomfort. I thought that surely one of these times I would end up transforming into a snake entirely, and as I savored equally the pleasure and displeasure that were enough to make my tears flow, the night wore on.

“You seem a little troubled lately, Sanada-san,” Kosuga-san said as he ground some coffee beans. He had begun preparing the morning coffee ever since Nishiko-san had been resting.

The sleep deprivation caused by the snakes’ attacks every night was tremendous. I frequently found myself thinking that I might just as well surrender to the snake, but something hard, deep inside me would simply not allow me to assimilate into a snake no matter what.

“How is Nishiko-san doing?” I asked as I sipped my coffee. Kosuga-san blinked his eyes wearily.

“Well, about that, she’s recovering more quickly than I expected.” Despite the fact that his tone was a happy one, he still looked like he lacked color. He told me that



Nishiko-san had crawled out of her futon, and like an infant learning to walk, had staggered uncertainly as she held onto something. He said that she could now walk slowly around inside the house.

“Are the snakes not coming anymore?”

“For now.”

“Is Nishiko-san alright without the snake around?”

“She doesn’t seem to be that concerned about it.”

Kosuga-san was astounded. The snakes at my place increased and decreased, while shadowing me annoyingly every night. Had Nishiko-san escaped the curse of the snakes? Had she been able to decisively give up on the world of snakes?

For the first time in a while we were going to make a delivery to Ganshin-ji Temple in Kōfu again. Kosuga-san had been all yawns that morning. When I asked him if he hadn’t been getting enough sleep, he told me that he had not. “I’m worried about the journey there, so would you come along too, Sanada-san?” he said to me, so the two of us closed up the shop and got into his truck.

When we arrived at Ganshin-ji, the head monk had been waiting there eagerly for us, and he began the origin-stories again. Kosuga-san sat in a more leisurely position, which was rare for him, and simply sat there nodding absentmindedly. The two of us were so very sleepy that we began to slouch over time and again in the middle of the head monk’s stories, and we would nudge each other back up.

*And the snakes.* Before I knew it the topic of conversation had turned to snakes, but since both Kosuga-san and I were sleepy, neither of us really took much notice of it.

*There was someone who took a snake as his wife, you see. Actually, the truth is, that someone was me.*

After he said this, the head monk stared at us intently. Silence fell for a moment, and then the head monk started to speak again.

*Snake wives are great. They're dedicated. They're great at managing the home, and are also able to take care of the finances. Superb in bed too. They don't have a temper and best of all they're quiet. When they listen to you they only stare with large, perfectly clear eyes. They have their stubborn moments too, but it's not like human women who get stubborn because they get emotional. Their bodies are just built stubborn by nature is all. And it's precisely because they are stubborn that they keep their promises without fail. They cannot have children, but they lay eggs. Of course, the eggs they lay can only hatch into snakes, but if the snake doesn't mind then I have no complaints. See, I never liked children from the beginning.*

Saying this, the head monk clapped his hands loudly. After a moment, the monk's wife appeared with soba just like last time. Her hair was set in a low bun, and she wore a coverall apron over a darkish kimono.

*Please enjoy the soba,* said the head monk's wife after she finished setting it out, and instead of retiring to the kitchen she sat with us.

Addressing his wife, the head monk said, *I'm completely used to snakes now, but it seems like these two cannot quite get used to them.* The head monk's wife stared back at the monk with her eyes wide open. Sure enough, the whites of her eyes did look clear and her entire eyes were filled with water. They were eyes that drew you into them.

*Excuse me.* The head monk's wife spoke in a low, hoarse voice. Kosuga-san was gazing at her in blank amazement. *Master monk. Even among snakes there are a variety of types.* Without so much as glancing in either Kosuga-san's or my direction, she faced the head monk and spoke only to him. *Why, there's simply no way of knowing what the snakes that went to their homes are like without meeting them first.*

Just as soon as the monk's wife said this, all of the pottery and old furniture lined up around the room began to make a rattling noise. Nobody said anything. When one medium-sized cabinet with metal fittings which had been shaking particularly conspicuously stopped its shaking, the head monk's wife stood up and turned on the lights. When the lights were turned on, I saw that it had become quite dark outside. Despite the fact that it was still only early afternoon, black clouds covered the sky, making it look close to nighttime.

Still, nobody said anything. The drawers of the mid-sized cabinet moved suddenly, and a great deal of snakes slithered out from inside it. All of the snakes slithered smoothly towards the head monk's wife. One by one she caught each of the snakes and put them into her pockets. A lukewarm wind blew in the vicinity of the temple. After storing all of the snakes in her pockets, the head monk's wife first walked smoothly up to Kosuga-san, curled around him, and gave a lick to his forehead. Next, she came up to me and did the same thing.

*What do you think? What do you think of a snake like me?* The monk's wife spoke in a hoarse voice, and the head priest watched over her with a satisfied look.

*How am I supposed to answer that?* Kosuga-san answered in a flustered manner, his face flushed.

*Am I not to your liking?*

*It's not about liking you or not liking you. You see, I'm the type who can't grow accustomed to this sort of thing.* Kosuga-san answered finally, sweating profusely.

*Well, then how about you? I wonder, are your snake and I different?* The head monk's wife stared at me fixedly with those large eyes of hers. I wondered, *are they different?* I was never interested in snakes to begin with. Even now, I'm not all that interested. It's just that they keep coming around. They come around and keep inviting me to go to the world of snakes. I don't want to go to any world of snakes. No matter how much I refuse them and tell them I don't want to go, the snakes keep coming around inviting me one after another. I wonder if sooner or later my opinion will flip and I'll start to want to go to the world of snakes. I can't feel at ease the way I did when I let the snake inside the apartment. But, there's something about the woman that's the same inside of me. There was something absurdly comfortable inside the tingling feeling that I got when the woman was wrapped around me.

The head monk's wife asked me once more, *What about you?* and I slowly shook my head from side to side. The head monk and his wife looked at each other, and the monk's wife eventually stretched herself out thinly. By the end she had changed into a snake. The snake climbed onto the head monk's lap, slithered up his back, and encircled his neck three times. With the snake still wrapped around him, the head monk began to recount another origin story.

Nishiko-san, whom I had thought I would never see again, appeared once more at Kanakana Hall.

“Shall I teach you how to make prayer beads, Sanada-san? You might be cut out for it, you know,” she said awfully enthusiastically. She spoke very little and briskly, running the shop just like before, while also making rosaries steadily. As soon as Nishiko-san returned, the orders too, which had been temporarily suspended, accumulated, and with that, the color returned to Kosuga-san as well.

The sunny days continued, and the snake in my apartment returned to being a woman again. When she turned back into a woman, she was just an ordinary one. There were some aspects of her that were snake-like, but her humanness won out. Since winter was close at hand, she knit, and aired out the futons and so on. She would apparently spend her extra time taking walks.

“Nishiko-san, is the snake issue alright now?” I asked once, facing Nishiko-san as she poured some coffee. After thinking about it for a while, she answered.

“It’s not alright! There’s no way I could forget about it, now is there?”

“Is that right?”

“Why, if a snake comes by again I might really go on and go to the world of snakes, you know.”

“Do you mean that?”

“Let’s see. Well, it would probably be a different snake that would come, so I suppose I would have to decide when the time came.”

The conversation about snakes ended with that, and Nishiko-san started to teach me the basics of making prayer beads.

Ever since I had returned from Ganshin-ji Temple, a feeling like something was ringing inside my head had continued. The something was not a sound, but something like a lump. The lump would vibrate, scattering around a hazy signal. The scattered signal caused no sensations at first, but with the passing days it began to pester me. The pestering then grew stronger, and with that the lump would grow larger and firmer.

The woman in my apartment would occasionally come all the way to Kanakana Hall. She would press her face against the cleanly polished glass of the entrance to Kanakana Hall, and peek inside. Kosuga-san would be the first one to notice, but he would make an effort to appear like he hadn’t. Soon after Kosuga-san would notice, Nishiko-san would look up. Nishiko-san would look fixedly at the woman. They would stare at each other solemnly for a while. Nishiko-san’s eyes would narrow, while the woman’s eyes would grow large and wide. When I watched, the lump inside me would vibrate more and more.

“Sanada-san, she’s here, you know.” said Nishiko-san. “Why don’t you have her come in?”

Without answering, I shook my head from side to side. Clumsily twisting the string that the beads of the rosaries were to be passed onto, I made a point of not looking at the woman outside. When I made it a point not to look, the lump vibrated more and

more. Pressed up against the glass, the woman's nose, eyelids, and forehead stretched, and it was as though just those parts of her had turned into a snake. Strangely, no customers would come whenever the woman was there.

If I left her alone, the woman would leave.

When she left, a number of tiny, unidentifiable husks fell there, and while Nishiko-san carefully swept each of them up, both Kosuga-san and I scurried all around the store. The twelfth month<sup>18</sup> was swiftly approaching.

“Hiwako-chan. I can't wait anymore.” the woman said. After she said this, the woman grabbed hold of my legs and caused me to fall. Not only did she make me fall, but then she straddled me and squeezed my throat.

“If you squeeze my neck I'll die!” I yelled.

She shouted back with a strange expression on her face, “Well, it's just that I can't wait!”

My face flushed at having my neck squeezed so forcefully. Light filled the entire room, and it was trembling electrically. Kicking my legs back and forth, I looked for an opening in the woman's grip. The woman squeezed me slowly and with great force. I tried to escape, but I was no match.

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<sup>18</sup> I used the words “twelfth month” rather than just using the word “December,” because the original uses the word *shiwasu* (師走), which is an older word used for the twelfth month of the lunar calendar.

“Hiwako-chan. Hiwako-chan.” The woman squeezed even more as she insisted on calling only my name. I gave a sidelong glance at the floor on which I lay, only to see the fibers of the rug sway, and steam rising from between those fibers. The entire room was boiling with excitement.

Several things flew in from the open window, and struck the woman as she straddled me. Each time, the woman’s hair would stir upwards and strike away the metal fragments, crushed fruit, and bird remains that came to strike her. When five-colored confetti dropped in, the woman showed an opening. Without a moment’s delay, I put my fingers in between hers that were around my neck, and using leverage I removed each one of her fingers in order. Once all of her fingers were off of me, the woman sprung up and jumped on top of the table.

“Why can’t you wait?!” I asked in a loud voice, and the woman crinkled her eyebrows together painfully.

“Because! No matter how much time passes all you do is pretend like you don’t know, Hiwako-chan!” she said, and those words gave her the upper hand once more. The woman jumped on to my head as I flinched, and she rubbed the top of my head in a circular motion with the soles of her feet. Despite the fact that she was rubbing me roughly, it was enthralling. I prepared myself, thinking that at this rate I would be strangled again, but the woman did not do so, and instead she just continued to rub me more and more.

I began to get a feeling like I had been repeating this fight with the woman for hundreds of years now. The woman attacking, and me passively taking it.



I was sick of the repetition already. The vibration which had been growing larger and harder inside me for some time now was threatening to break through my borders.

With great force, I cried out to strike at the woman. My fist connected softly with the woman, entered her, and just like that was sucked inside. No matter how far I punched there was no end to it. As my fists went deeply inside, the enthralling feeling would come at me again. I started wanting to close my eyes and collapse into the woman's arms. I started wanting her to call my name, *Hiwako-chan Hiwako-chan*. I started wanting to transform into a snake and wind myself around her waist.

I opened my eyes wide, drew back my fist once more, and this time tried slapping the woman's face with the palm of my hand. But the same thing happened. No matter how many times I slapped it, the woman's face remained thin and pale, without becoming distorted from the force.

"Hiwako-chan, why won't you come to the world of snakes?" the woman complained.

I didn't know what I should do. Inside my head I said *I don't know, I don't know!* However, the truth was that I did know. I knew, but I was numb to it nonetheless. I thought that I shouldn't yield now. Though I thought that, I was in fact yielding easily. I was yielding because I wanted to. *If you wanted to yield, shouldn't you just do so? Why is there any need to go out of your way to do something that you don't wish to do?* It became unclear whether it was me or the woman who was saying this. While I thought about how unclear it had become, this fight which had gone on for hundreds of years now

suddenly seemed ridiculously foolish, and at the same time I was determined to put an end to it.

“There’s no such place as the world of snakes!” I said, in as clear a voice as I could muster.

I’ve said it at last, I thought. I made clear everything that I’d made unclear before now. I understood that I had been pretending not to know. Despite having fought for hundreds of years, it was really a terribly simple matter. I wondered why I had been unable to say something this simple until now, and I was at a loss again. I was at a loss, and the matter ceased to be a simple one once more.

“I wonder if that’s true,” the woman said, laughing. “I wonder if it’s that easy,” she squeezed my neck.

There was a crackling noise. The energy that was filling the room began to give off blue electrical discharges, and before long something started dripping from the roof. The dripping increased, and the room began to flood. The woman and I continued to fight in the water, even as it increased reaching from our ankles to our knees, and then from our knees to our waists. The fight continued even as the apartment was completely submerged in the water, until the entire apartment building was swallowed in it and started streaming along with a muddy stream that cut through Midori Park, and headed towards Kanakana Hall. But even then the woman and I were unwilling to compromise.

“You’ll understand if you just come with me, you know. How can you say anything if you don’t come along?”

“It’s not about going or not going, because there’s no such place!”

“But Hiwako-chan, I *am* your mom!”

“That doesn’t make any sense!”

“Like I said, just listen to what I told you.”

“No!”

“Not listening is the same as not understanding!”

“I don’t *want* to understand!”

“See, there you go again pretending not to know things.”

The entire apartment streamed along while we shouted at one another. Dawn had already broken, and the shutters of Kanakana Hall were opened. Kosuga-san was sweeping in front of the shop. Nishiko-san was making Buddhist rosaries quietly, facing her stand. Festival floats tightly packed with flowers and dancing girls were being pulled along merrily in front of Kanakana Hall. The credit union song streamed out loudly from the float—*Very importaaant, what’s important iiis*. Like a loop, the repetition surrounded Kanakana Hall, but even then Kosuga-san and Nishiko-san went about their business inside the shop with tranquil expressions on their faces. *You know, practice is important, Sanada-san*, said Kosuga-san, winking at me as I was swept past the shop. *It isn’t just practice, I’m saved while I practice*, I replied back, but Kosuga-san was as composed as ever, only rubbing his forehead with the palm of his hand, a filter-less Peace cigarette in his mouth.

“Be reasonable and open your eyes already, Hiwako-chan!” the woman said.

“You’re the one who needs to open your eyes!”

“There you go again!”

The woman squeezed my neck forcefully. It was unclear whether she felt pleasure or pain. The woman had a strange expression on her face as usual. *Well if that's how it's going to be*, I thought, and squeezed the woman's neck back.

Whatever was giving off the blue electrical discharges made it so that the area shone so brightly that I could not even keep my eyes open. Within that, the woman and I squeezed each other's necks violently with equal strength. With terrible speed, the room streamed on.

## TRANSLATING KAWAKAMI HIROMI'S WORKS

### WHAT TRANSLATION MEANS FOR FORMING THE LITERARY CANON

Inside and outside of the field of literature, it seems like translation is pushed every day farther and farther into the background as an academic field. This has only become more pronounced with the recent jumps in electronic translation programs and technology, as translation oftentimes becomes more a matter of speed than accuracy. As it is made to take a backseat, perceived only as a stepping stone for academic and entertainment purposes alike, how can we, as translators, respond? How to achieve a balance between speed, accuracy, and fluency in translation? How can we even define “accuracy” or “fluency” in a translated work? If “accuracy” means the ability to transmit the original meaning of the words in the original work, “fluency” demands the ability to simultaneously make something accessible to the readers and target audiences, while still maintaining the cultural context of the original wherever it is possible to do so. The following is an explanation of some of the choices I made while translating “Tread on a Snake,” as well as a recounting of some of the challenges I faced while doing so. There is no such thing as a perfect translation, and I am sure that somewhere in the course of the story I am guilty of falling into each of what linguist and translation theorist Antoine Berman has called the “twelve deforming tendencies” of translation.<sup>19</sup> Even so,

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<sup>19</sup> Berman, Antoine. "Translation and the Trials of the Foreign." *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. Lawrence Venuti. London: Routledge, 2012. N. pag. Print.

it is my hope that this can serve to help somebody with their own translations, and help them make sense of the responsibilities that come with translation.

Although I have put in a great deal of time analyzing, reading, and re-reading a number of Kawakami Hiromi's works, thus far, my research has been done exclusively using only her short stories and novellas. Though I only address the challenges of translation I encountered with "Tread on a Snake," from the thirteen or so stories from the *Kamisama* and *Hebi wo Fumu* anthologies that I analyzed, I found that her tone, voice, and first-person narrative styles remain relatively consistent throughout. She uses somewhat detached narrators, and the occasional shifts between third person and first person narration common to Japanese literature. Therefore, I believe that my comments about translating Kawakami and the principles of translation that I advocate can apply to many of her works, including her many novels as well. Although I was aware that some of her novels had been translated and printed in English for general audiences before I began translating the shorts, I deliberately avoided reading translations of any of her works so as to avoid inadvertently picking up influences from her other translators.

It is important to emphasize the effect that translations, particularly those which become the "official translation" of a work come to have on the literary canon. How are the stories that make up the English-speakers' Japanese literary canon chosen? Ultimately what gets translated is chosen by publishing companies and translators themselves, but many times the fact that those choices are actually *creating* and putting together the category of "Japanese Literature" as the English-speaking world will understand it goes unnoticed. "Canon" is a foggy category in and of itself, and taking into account that the

canons of foreign literature are even more cherry-picked by small groups of individuals shows us the responsibility that translators have toward the works they translate. Even once we acknowledge the importance of the choices of which stories are to be translated, we must see that the influence of the translator has broader ramifications. A translation, in some form or another, is required to some extent to be an interpretation of a work in and of itself. The choices a translator makes will affect how the work is received by readers of the target language, how its most memorable lines will be quoted and dissected, and how works by same author will fit (or *not* fit) together to also form the “canon” of that author’s works. Does a given author have certain writing quirks or tendencies characteristic of all or many of their works? How can those characteristics be consistently brought across in translations of those works? These are the questions that need to be asked both when choosing what to translate, and during the process of translation itself.

#### **THE BEGINNING AND CAPTURING TONE**

The first lines of a translated work are especially important to forming the literary canon. When translating “Tread on a Snake,” I ran into challenges right at the beginning that would greatly affect how the work will be read and interpreted, by anyone who chooses to use this translation. As mentioned above, in a translation, not only do the translator’s own interpretations of a work get woven in with the original, but the translation also ends up determining the “canon” for speakers of the target language.

Although this seems like an obvious observation, taking the first sentence of the story as an example shows the importance a translator's choices make on how the work will be treated in the future. The very first sentence opens abruptly with the protagonist, Hisako, stepping on the shape-changing snake. In the original Japanese, the sentence is relatively short and comes without any warning. The challenge here, however, was conserving the abrupt tone of the sentence, while fully incorporating all of its meaning.

In the original, the second half of the sentence reads 「ミドリ公園に行く途中の藪で、蛇を踏んでしまった」<sup>20</sup> making use of the *-te shimatta* ending. In this context, the construction implies a sense of regret or even a lack of anticipation on the part of the narrator. I considered adding “regrettably” or “accidentally” to the English sentence, but both choices felt like they overstated the *-te shimatta* ending. Another potential choice was to use, “I went and stepped on a snake,” in order to portray at least some of the hesitation and unexpectedness of the action. However, the English phrases were inevitably long to an extent that made the phrasing seem awkward or exaggerated. Had this sentence been in the middle of a paragraph, or at least further into the story, it may have been possible to incorporate the sense of regret in either the previous or next sentences. However, this was not the case. Not only was this the opening sentence, free of any backdrop outside of the “thicket on [the] way to Midori Park,” but the following paragraph completely shifted its focus.

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<sup>20</sup> Kawakami, Hiromi. *Hebi o Fumu*. Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 1996. Print. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.



Instead, I chose to emphasize the quick, impactful feel of the action to create a sentence with a more striking tone: “In a thicket on my way to Midori Park, I stepped on a snake.” The impact provided by the shorter version conserved the spontaneous tone which was important because the blunt, almost curt tone of the sentence is an integral part of Kawakami’s writing style in all her stories. I believe “I stepped on a snake,” without any additions, left a rawness to the event, which made for a more memorable and quotable sentence. However, the choice made was much more than just an attempt at a catchy opening. It still remained true to the tone of the original and sets the stage for the rest of the work, and assures that Kawakami’s choppy, curt prose so characteristic to her writing in Japanese will remain in clear view in the English version.

#### **LOCALIZING, PRESERVING, AND WHAT REMAINS**

Just as important as what is translated in a work is what is left un-translated. Even when leaving something in the original language does not interfere with bringing the meaning of a word or phrase across to the reader, it undoubtedly will affect the mood or tone of a piece of literature. In his essay about translating Sōseki’s works, McClellan warns against choices that will exoticize foreign terms or concepts in a work, because “the English reader half expects [it] in a Japanese novel in translation.”<sup>21</sup> As he suggests, there is a possible tendency among readers to exoticize foreign terms, concepts, and even locations that unintentionally increases an already existing gap of cultural knowledge.

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<sup>21</sup> McClellan, Edwin. "On Translating Kokoro." Comp. Lien-hsiang Lin. *A Symposium on Natsume Sōseki's Kokoro: A Selection from the Proceedings*. Singapore: Dept. of Japanese Studies, National University of Singapore, 1994. 15-25. Print.

The degree to which this occurs will vary based on the reader's education, background, and purpose for reading a translation.

For example, a student of Japanese literature with an existing knowledge of Japanese culture will not read a story the same way that someone with little background knowledge of Japan reading for entertainment will. Likewise, a student reading a story for a class with no background knowledge of it will differ from someone whose hobby is to frequent the international literature section at the bookstore might. If a translator adds in descriptions of what would be typical homes, clothing, and daily rituals in the original, this will inadvertently draw attention in a way that was not intended by the author, which will then leave bigger impressions in a foreign reader's mind simply by noting it. Take for example, the layout of a Japanese bathroom in a typical home. The toilet is in a separate room from the shower and bath, and the entire floor of the bath and shower area is tiled. If a translator adds this explanatory information, these facts can draw unnecessary attention or cause confusion if the reader is unfamiliar with this layout. Even certain grammatical practices, like italicizing foreign words contribute to exoticizing foreign concepts by placing visual emphasis on them, and therefore accentuating the "otherness" of those words in relation to the reader.

Even though McClellan makes a good point to warn against exoticizing a work through syntax that may come off as awkward to a reader of the target language, there remains the challenge of accurately transmitting unique cultural characteristics contained

in the original work.<sup>22</sup> In other words, there are times, when, to a certain extent, a translated work *should* feel a little bit foreign. For the work to lose its “foreignness” in its entirety would mean stripping any and every cultural reference from the work and completely localizing those references. Localizing, an art of its own, comes with its own challenges. However, in the case of translating, the way to keep a balance of simplicity without *oversimplifying* cultural characteristics is by translating as much as possible, including place or food names when it is appropriate. When this cannot be done without impeding the flow of the story, adding brief notes when there are cultural or linguistic aspects of a word that impede its translation or encourage its preservation in the original language is key. Such a practice does call to the attention of the reader the translator, this third person who lies somewhere between the author and the reader, in the shadows of the work they are reading. However, this might be a price worth paying. Earlier translation theorists opted not to include such notes and instead aimed for what translation theorist Lawrence Venuti called “the translator’s invisibility.”<sup>23</sup> Venuti indicates that, in an attempt to remain “invisible” to their readers, translators often opted to over-explain or over-simplify their translations. He warns that this is damaging to the original literary works, and warns against this. Unfortunately, there are times when dealing with a literary work, when long explanatory notes are just not plausible, and can become cumbersome to a reader with little to no cultural background in the place of origin of the work. However, so long as notes are not too distracting to a reader, then there really aren’t any severe

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>23</sup> Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London: Routledge, 1995. Print.

repercussions to bringing the translator to the attention of the reader, when it is for the purpose of better explaining a cultural aspect of the work.

One occasion in which this became clear to me was during a scene where *morijio* or “purifying salt” is mentioned (Kawakami 22). It is included not as something central to the story per se, but as part of a daily ritual that the shop owner Kosuga does just as he “closed the shutters and turned out the lights” of the shop before going home. He sets the small plate with salt piled on it next to the washroom, but what does this mean? Without some background knowledge of the practice of setting a plate of salt outside near the entrance of the store to promote business and ward off bad tidings, the reader will be left wondering what is going on. Even in a story like “Tread on a Snake,” which is laden with religious imagery, the plate of salt is likely to stand out even to an English-speaking reader who has some cultural background knowledge. In certain respects, the act is not emphasized more than any of the activities surrounding it in the same scene. Even so, the author chose to include it for a reason, and regardless of what that reason may be, cutting out pieces of the story is unacceptable and defeats the purpose of translating the work in the first place. In this case it does not matter whether it is a translation for general audiences for the purpose of entertainment. Some type of explanation is required, but how can this be approached with the appropriate amount of attention, without drawing too much attention to it which might risk exoticizing the ritual, and without leaving the reader at a loss as to its purpose? An attempt to explain the salt within the text would only extend the scene unnecessarily and add explanations that did not exist in the original work. Likewise, failure to mention the salt at all could invite

confusion, or make the salt stand out even more. Is this setting out of purifying salt a very religious practice? Is it common? All of these questions require the translator to step out of “invisibility” and provide an adequate explanation. In this instance and other similar ones, I tried to achieve this by adding a footnote that describes the cultural background. Keeping the note as simple as possible (this is literature, not a textbook after all) and brief as possible so as to avoid adversely drawing too much attention provides a balance of description without adding that burden to the body of the work itself. Choosing which topics to mark with cultural notes once more becomes the responsibility of the translator, and in this way we observe once again the effects that the translator has on the way a reader interprets not just the translated work in question, but also the foreign culture as well.

Leaving a word completely un-translated also has consequences. The most frequent way in which this presents itself in academic works is in the adaptation of foreign concepts and the (re)creation of terms for use in a specific concept. The most common examples are typically terms relevant to an author’s research, often abstract concepts related to those of self-identification or identity, such as the adaptation of the terms *honne* (本音) and *tatema* (建前). To some extent this reforms or recreates the word as an English term even though the word is left unchanged with the exception of Romanizing it for readability. The use and adaptation of foreign language words into English shows the flexibility of languages, and helps to provide accuracy in its own way by avoiding oversimplification. However, when not accompanied with proper explanations of the cultural and linguistic characteristics of the given terms, leaving

words un-translated only increases the potential for misunderstanding and even exoticizing those words. I recently had the pleasure of reading one of Robin LeBlanc's books, *Bicycle Citizens*,<sup>24</sup> and was almost inappropriately ecstatic with the thoroughness of her explanations of the Japanese terms she used in her book. Throughout her book she provides detailed explanations of key terms, including the meaning of specific *kanji* used in a word. By making sure to also provide explanations of how the definition of a word could vary from person to person, as well as describing the contexts under which people made use of certain words, she steps away from viewing translation as a mere stepping stone, to highlight the act of translating itself into her study. Leaving certain words in the original language, she adapts the foreign concepts for use in the English language as a *part* of the vocabulary she creates for her readers.

In the twenty first century with increasing numbers of young consumers of Japanese media, the preservation of original Japanese words in translations may become an even more acceptable strategy. Many non-Japanese speakers now playfully use terms that appear commonly in Japanese media, such as “*kawaii*” rather than “cute,” and even the tongue-in-cheek use of terms that do not exist in the English language, such as “-*sempai*,” “-*chan*,” or other suffixes (primarily in online environments). In a sense, by not translating words, one can help create a new language that incorporates foreign vocabulary. A study of how the meaning of adopted terms change and deviate from their original meanings after they have been adopted into English would be useful in further

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<sup>24</sup> LeBlanc, Robin M. *Bicycle Citizens: The Political World of the Japanese Housewife*. Berkeley, CA: U of California, 1999. Print.

determining how keeping terms in the language of origin in translated works (due to either variations between the original language and target language, or to the non-existence of a term in the target language) affects the readers' interpretations of translated works.

I decided to preserve honorific suffixes in my translation of "Tread on a Snake." For example, I retain the use of "*-san*" when the protagonist refers to the elderly couple, and likewise I preserved the use of "*-chan*" when the snake-woman refers to Hisako. Keeping, cutting, or replacing of suffixes in translation of Japanese works is an on-going debate, and a hardly new one at that. Popular opinions waver between keeping with the "authenticity" provided in preserving honorific suffixes in the original language, or translating everything "properly" in order to make a truly "complete" translation. In the case of contemporary stories like Kawakami's works, an attempt to translate some honorifics that do not have direct English equivalents can lead to difficulties. For example, using terms like "honorable master" to incorporate the "*-sama*" or "*-dono*" suffixes in a story that is supposed to take place in the present-day might sound strained and draw readers' attention away from the story, straining their suspension of disbelief in a story. Attempting to translate the suffixes just to keep the original Japanese ones out of the translation can have an effect opposite from what is expected, leaving a piece of literature to sound like a dubbed kung-fu movie from the 1970's. The danger that keeping the honorifics will increase the propensity of the reader to exoticize the contents of the story does not disappear completely, of course, but we must consider the alternatives before making judgments as to what is appropriate to keep in a translation.

In the case of “Tread on a Snake,” translating some honorifics and keeping others in their original form offers a hybrid strategy that most accurately captures the original. Having the snake call our protagonist “Hisako-chan” gives life to the syrupy tone of the snake and helps to establish the desired characterization for the snake. Using only the protagonist’s name; “Hisako” simply does not bring the tone across as completely and thoroughly as adding “-chan,” even if the reader is not used to seeing the term used. Attempting to force the honorifics out of the work would be something similar to attempting to translate the characters’ names based on their meanings when it is not relevant to the plot. In cases when the meaning of the characters’ names is significant, such as “Crow” from Murakami Haruki’s *Kafka on the Shore*, translating the characters’ names may be acceptable and even essential, but in the end everything is case-by-case, even when dealing with works by the same author.

The same principles apply when dealing with the names of places in a translated story. Kanakana Hall, which is an important location central to the story, required particular attention. Kanakana Hall is written “*Kanakana-Dō*” (カナカナ堂) (1). “*Kanakana*” is written in *katakana*, meaning that there are no *kanji* to derive specific meaning from the word. It is meant to sound lighthearted and onomatopoeic to some extent, and I therefore chose to preserve this portion as the name of the shop. In contrast to this, “*dō*” (堂) has a variety of definitions that, depending on which is used could change the way in which the story is interpreted. The definitions of “*dō*,” range from



temple and hall,<sup>25</sup> to shrine and “magnificent” when relating to buildings.<sup>26</sup> As a shop where Buddhist prayer beads are constructed and purchased, we can understand its relationship to temples. However, the store itself is not a temple, and calling it “Kanakana Temple” could have caused confusion. “Kanakana Shrine” was similarly problematic because not only is the shop not a shrine, but since shrines are typically defined as being related not to Buddhism, but to Shintō, calling the shop “Kanakana Shrine” would also have proved confusing or even misleading. Likewise, using “Kanakana Shop” would have meant discarding the more accurate meanings of “*dō*” for the sake of fluency where it is not necessary to do so. By calling the shop “Kanakana *Hall*,” I maintained use of one of the central definitions of “*dō*” (堂) without blurring the fact that it is in the end a shop and not a temple. In addition, using “hall” maintained the connotation of “magnificence” for a building, and kept the majestic sound of the original name deliberately used for this cute, quaint little shop run by the elderly couple in a “remote area” (Kawakami 09).

In the case of “Midori Park,” (Kawakami 01) a location which appears multiple times during the story, I chose to include a brief note explaining that the meaning of the word “*midori*” is “green” in order to give the name some context. However, trying to force a translation of the entire name, calling the park “Green Park” for example, would have drawn extra unwanted attention to the park’s name. To avoid the awkward, almost campy sound that may be absent from the original Japanese, it was necessary *not* to

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<sup>25</sup> Hadamitzky, Wolfgang, and Mark Spahn. *Kanji & Kana: A Handbook of the Japanese Writing System*. Rutland, VT: C.E. Tuttle, 1997. 143. Print.

<sup>26</sup> Bober, Gregory. "Dou - Tangorin." *Tangorin*. Gregory Bober, n.d. Web. 07 Apr. 2014.

translate “*midori*” in order to preserve the sense that it is a regular name for a regular park in a story filled with fantastical happenings.

## REPETITION AND SIMPLIFICATION

Place names also provided another problem in my translation of “Tread on a Snake.” As I translated certain place names, I found myself dealing with the issue of “expansion,” or the fact that “every translation tends to be longer than the original,” as defined by Antoine Berman in his list of twelve “trials of the foreign.”<sup>27</sup> This can cause phrases to get too long, especially those which are repeated throughout a story and therefore cannot be altered. When translating the names of several temples, such as Ganshin-ji Temple (Kawakami 09) and Yosen-ji Temple (Kawakami 20), I decided to use the entire name of the temples while adding the word “temple” for clarification. The word in Japanese, 寺, literally means “temple,” and can be read either “-tera,” “-dera,” or “-ji” depending on the word. Since, for example, the name “*Ganshin-ji*” is written 「願信寺」 which uses the kanji for “temple,” I had three main choices in translating the name. I could write “*Ganshin-ji*” on its own, but without the occasional reminder that it was a temple, a reader with little background on temple names could lose track of the different locations in the story. Calling it “Ganshin Temple” would provide both the English meaning and the Japanese name, but since temples are typically referred to *with* the “-dera” or “-ji” ending, removing it would be like cutting off a piece of its name. The

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<sup>27</sup> Berman, Antoine. "Translation and the Trials of the Foreign." *The Translation Studies Reader*. By Lawrence Venuti. London: Routledge, 2000. N. pag. Print.

remaining option and the one I chose was keeping the “-ji” ending and adding “temple” to the names as well. I did occasionally remove “temple” in English when the same name had just been mentioned, so the reader did not need to be reminded that it was a temple, but for the most part I used both. The result is an inadvertent amount of repetition within the names akin to saying “Ganshin-temple Temple.” This repetition could be perceived as overkill, or “over-translation,”<sup>28</sup> but ultimately it contributes significantly to the understandability of the temple names, making it easier for someone reading the translation to remain focused on the story. Furthermore, we are used to seeing such repetition in place names, such as “Enoshima Island,” “Fujiyama Mountain,” or “Rio Grande River.”

Simplification, or oversimplification, increases the propensity for mistaken associations. When referring to the prayer beads created at Kanakana Hall, to be safe from miscommunications, I was sure to include a cultural footnote in my translation that specified these were Buddhist prayer beads. After this notation, I chose to use the terms “rosary,” “Buddhist rosary,” and “prayer beads” relatively interchangeably throughout my translation. I used whatever word fit more fluidly into a given sentence, based on the mood or tone of the given scene. In particular, I used only “rosary” when the sentences containing the word were already long or complicated without adding any longer terms like “Buddhist prayer beads” into them.

The term “rosary,” typically associated with Catholic rosaries, and loaded as it is with both cultural and religious connotations, may at first seem like misappropriation, or

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

a way of localizing a term which in the original is specific to Buddhist prayer beads. However, using the term contributes to the translation in its own way. A rosary certainly comes with different cultural connotations, but in the end it is by definition a religious artifact used for the purpose of prayer, and more specifically for keeping track of the number of prayers performed by someone using that artifact. While from a different cultural context, Buddhist prayer beads too are artifacts created and used for similar religiously associated purposes. In terms of cultural context the two are completely different, but by using not one but several terms to refer to them, I believe that the beads are more easily identified and processed by the reader. A reader of the English translation who is a member of a general audience is more likely to have some background knowledge of Catholicism than they are of Buddhism. I am speaking in generalizations of course, but nonetheless, the word rosary can resound as something familiar to the reader. Then, a few sentences down they may see the words “prayer beads” or “Buddhist rosary” with which they are less familiar, and hopefully the use of all the three terms in combination throughout the story serves to curtail the exoticizing of the potentially unfamiliar prayer beads.

#### **AMBIGUITIES AND CLARIFICATION**

In the above examples, I stressed the need to use simplification in order to clarify temple names and other culturally specific terms in order to create a fluid, cohesive translation. I will now stress the importance of finding a good balance between clarification and preserving ambiguities. In contrast to adding “temple” or “rosary” as

explanatory terms embedded in the text, these cases require *avoiding* extra explanations. Japanese is known to be a language that lends itself to ambiguity through a variety of grammatical characteristics. Pluralities and singularities are sometimes left up to interpretation, subjects (and sometimes concomitantly gender) can be completely omitted from sentences, and verbs often have multiple meanings, such as *omou*, which can mean to feel, to think, to consider, to believe, or to have feelings for someone depending on the kanji used. But because in literary works this word is used frequently and is often written only in hiragana, its meaning is not as clear as it would be if it were written in kanji. Similarly, it requires little explanation to determine why discerning whether a character is smiling or laughing (or even smirking) through the verb *warau* (笑う), which can mean all of these, can make or break a given scene. The best thing for a translator to rely on in these cases is context, but it is possibly even more important simply to be aware of the ease with which nuances and connotations of phrases can change with the slightest alterations. For “Tread on a Snake,” one of the biggest challenges was determining these differences which appear small at first glance, but hold the power to completely alter a scene.

Specifically, there were points when reading and re-reading a scene was the only way to determine where exactly I should refer to the snake as an “it” to show its animal nature and when to refer to it as a “she” to show its (apparent) humanness. At the same time Kawakami deliberately avoids using gendered pronouns, and often omits the pronouns altogether. Would using “she” while the snake was in animal form unnecessarily attribute human qualities to the creature? Since Kawakami specifically had

the snake transform into a woman, not a man, would using “it” while it took on the form of a woman take away from the snake’s characterization? What about while it was in the process of transforming and slithering its way up to the ceiling? Similarly, controlling the nuances carried by the variations of the word “snake” also proved to be challenging, and essential to maintaining the spirit and disposition of the story. I found that choosing between “snake,” “the snake,” and “a snake” could alter a scene completely. Because there are no plurals marked in the original Japanese, it was unclear at times whether the protagonist’s drawers had *a* snake or several snakes slithering inside of them. It is absolutely crucial to keep all of these things in mind when translating, as the slightest variation on a phrase can have tremendous effects on a scene. Re-reading a scene multiple times can help to pick up on the smallest of clues which can make the biggest difference in how something is interpreted.

Apart from those ambiguities which are found commonly in stories, there were things which were specific to “Tread on a Snake,” and to Kawakami’s style of writing. One example was the use of the word *usui* (薄い), which appears in several places throughout the story, and can mean thin, pale, light, diluted, or weak depending on context. Kawakami’s short stories all contain fantasy elements in them, and in the case of her use of *usui*, the ambiguities between what was physically happening and what was spiritually happening to some of the characters in proved quite challenge when translating the work into English. One instance in which this word appears is when both Kosuga’s mental and physical states appear to be declining. The original sentence reads 「コスガ

さんの影が薄くなっていた」 (*Kosuga-san no kage ga usukunatteita*) (Kawakami 43), which literally translates as: The shadow of Kosuga-san had become thin/pale/weak. This can easily be interpreted as referring to Kosuga's depression as his wife Nishiko's snake appears to be strengthening its grip over her. However, the section which follows the statement refers to the mythical faceless monster, the "noppera-bō," and Kosuga also comments that Hisako is "looking awfully darker" (Kawakami 43) soon after that. The language used in this section implies that "*kage ga usukunatteita*" should be taken literally to some extent, rather than strictly figuratively. The ambiguity that the phrase takes on, oscillating between the physical and the spiritual, the real and the surreal, is an essential part of the work that needed to be preserved in the English translation. This was why I chose to translate it as "Kosuga-san had become a shadow of himself," in order to retain both meanings. Preserving those subtle ambiguities in the translation becomes essential for those readers who will only ever have access to that translation.

The scene in which the protagonist, Hisako is describing the feeling of her sexual partners turning for a moment into snakes proved to be one of the most challenging in terms of not only making general word choices to fully encompass the meanings of the Japanese text, but also in preserving ambiguities. First, the use of the words "*aite*," or partner, and the deliberate use of the plural "*hito-tachi*" (people) in a language where specific indication of plurality or singularity are not required already set the stage for a hazy scene. Kawakami uses the plural and singular forms together at times, such as 「...その人、私の相手であるその人たちが...蛇のかたちになるの

であった。」 (Kawakami 42) This literally translates as “That person (*sono hito*), it was the people (*sono hito-tachi*) that were my partner(s) (the plurality/singularity of *aite* is ambiguous)... who turned into the shape of a snake.” Although in Japanese it is grammatically acceptable to use the (usually) singular “*sono hito*” and the plural “*sono hito-tachi*” in the same sentence, problems arise in the English translation. In addition to the plural versus singular language used, both *hito-tachi* and *aite* are also gender neutral terms. This made the use of pronouns all but impossible in certain places. I did decide use the word “they” relatively flexibly, taking advantage of the fact that it is used more and more as a *singular* third-person pronoun (branching off of the technically grammatically correct use of the word as a plural pronoun) in vernacular speech because of its gender neutrality and ease of use. Other areas required the use of vaguer terms such as “the others,” “the other person,” and “my partners” in order to maintain the ambiguity of the situation as much as possible. The most important thing was to maintain a natural sound to the sentences containing the vaguer-than-usual references without losing any of the original meanings.

The verbs in this scene further complicated the process. Both the euphemistic use of the word *oyobu* (及ぶ), which can mean to compare with, to commit something, to reach, or to amount to, and the choice of the somehow simultaneously vague yet stark phrase *hada wo awaseru* (肌を合わせる) (Kawakami 41, 42), which literally means “to make skin touch” or “to make skin meet skin,” and is used here to refer to Hisako’s physical relationships required attention to context, subtle nuances, and word



connotations. I began making a list of words, as I usually do with problematic terms. It was only after I had a word document with more than a dozen ways to say “slept with” that I realized I needed to take a step back and try a different approach. When translating, we must always be aware that different words take on different connotations for different people, and so I decided to ask native speakers about the connotation of *hada wo awaseru*. Using a language-learning website, I asked native Japanese speakers in Japanese how they ranked several words, including this phrase, meaning “to be intimate with” in terms of subtlety and explicitness. I also asked which words they considered to be more romantic, which terms would be heard on television as opposed to news reports, and asked that they let me know their associations with the term “*hada wo awaseru*.” Once I had an idea of how people interpreted the words in the original Japanese context, I was able to come up with better alternatives for the English translation that would hopefully preserve the same level of evasiveness and directness that the author intended. I chose “being intimate” and “go[ing] to bed with someone” in different sentences to keep some of the evasiveness in the original, while still getting the point across.

The importance of the scene made for taking extra steps to ensure that the meaning was brought across properly in English. Overall, the entire phrasing in this very section of the story is opaque to the point that it becomes euphemistic. This means that the smallest change in word choice can change the entire connotation of the scene. Balancing clarification without removing important subtle phrasing proved to be an important part of translating Kawakami’s stories. In cases similar to this one, coming up with several ways to phrase something can help to get a new perspective on a scene.

Likewise, asking native speakers about the connotation of a word in their native language can produce a deeper understanding of which terms are more appropriate in the target language. It can help with determining what sounds more fluent to an English reader while still maintaining as many of the ambiguities and subtleties found in the original Japanese.

### **FINAL THOUGHTS**

It is no exaggeration to say that the choice of every word, every piece of punctuation is important to the outcome of a translated work, in a way similar to how it is important when the story is first created by the author. Kawakami writes some dialogue in quotations in the standard way and other dialogue without any specific markings to indicate that the characters are talking except for context. When thinking of how much time goes into writing a piece of literature should we not expect that a translator of the work should likewise take an appropriate amount of time in making sure that a translation is faithful to the original? Purpose and target audiences, as well as types of media must be taken into account when deciding the formality of language and amount of explanations necessary to communicate the meaning in the target language. Preserving the original tone of a work, incorporating an author's characteristic writing quirks, and providing an appropriate amount of cultural notes without burdening the reader with too much distracting information create a balance in translation that make for a better, clearer, and more accurate work. I hope to have the opportunity to translate more of Kawakami's

works in the future, and I can only hope that my translations may reach that point of balance.

## **Appendix**

The following is a translation of the judges' comments who evaluated Kawakami Hiromi's "Tread on a Snake" for the first round of the Akutagawa Prize in 1996. Also included is Kawakami's own brief comment made after receiving the prize. The comments highlight the judges' various interpretations and evaluations of the work and even of the direction that Japanese literature is taking in their eyes.

### **115TH AKUTAGAWA PRIZE: EVALUATION, COMMENTARY, AND A WORD FROM THE AWARD RECIPIENT**

#### **Kawakami Hiromi**

I wrote about snakes and received the award.

Snakes are creatures that appear out of a hole in the spring and return to that hole in the autumn.

I received the award in the summer, the season when snakes are most active.

The coincidence is funny somehow.

Since receiving the award, I've stopped thinking about snakes so much.

Right before receiving it, I had been thinking of nothing but snakes. *Snakes, snakes, snakes—please pull through!* I had been praying silently like that.

Now that my pleading is over, I no longer think of snakes but of completely different things.

I feel I should apologize to the snakes, but there's nothing to be done about it.

As I say my thanks to the snakes for pulling through for me, I would like to face my next, completely different topic.

## **115TH AKUTAGAWA PRIZE EVALUATION AND COMMENTARIES**

### **Hino Keizō**

*Snakes* are almost guaranteed to make an appearance as universal images in religion and myths. At the same time that they are formidable in that they are well received as archetypal symbols of eternal life and the dark forces of the earth, in many cases, legendary myths tell the story of how humans became human through a battle with a snake, which is made synonymous with a dragon.

Kawakami Hiromi's "Tread on a Snake" taps into that type of universal drama based in the foundational, deep-psyche of mankind. Or rather it is perhaps the newest modern-day Japan version of that drama.

The nonchalant, casual opening line, “I stepped on a snake,” is witty. Just like that, a rather average, young woman reluctantly and inadvertently comes into contact with the territory of the mythical. And this is because, even in our high-tech world, the dark sphere of those mythical archetypes continues to die and be reborn in the depths of our minds.

In all truth, I worried about how long the resilience of the opening sentence could be sustained as the story unfolded, but through the medium of literary expression the author’s composition skills, which have grown exceptionally stronger and more flexible since her previous works, created this dramatic world of an invisible fight that takes place in the deep consciousness of young women today in Japan. Compared to the magnificence of the opening, the ending dragged, but her prose should continue to improve in the future.

As she is drawn to the “snake’s” warm world of sleep (which tempts her with the word “mother”), the female protagonist, who “aims for the horizon furthest from the snake,” fights by clearly voicing out loud, “There’s no such place as the world of snakes!” In other words, by putting this statement into words it is almost made true, but it does not result in a simple victory. In short, this is simultaneously a story of the mythical fight between a *snake* and a *human*, as well as a record of the verbal battle between a self-satisfied “existence” and a self-aware “consciousness.” These battles are, like this author, eternal.

## **Maruya Sai'ichi**

Kawakami Hiromi-san's "Tread on a Snake" is a choice work that leaves no room for complaints. I am happy to be able to recommend a promising newcomer.

This is a tale of metamorphosis, but, whereas usually tales of metamorphosis have a feeling of danger to them, this one gives feels very mundane, bringing to mind daily routines. It takes on the annoyances and burdensome things that are unmistakably present in everyday life rather than the acute, sharp unease of the dangerous variety. That is truly innovative. Through the author's own devices, she presents to us certain situations which exist in the ways we humans live our lives, presenting them to us plainly right before our eyes.

As she writes about snakes turning into humans and humans turning into snakes as if it were nothing, it seems that perhaps the author is suggesting the relationship between living in the natural world versus living in an historical or perhaps a cultural world. She appears to think about this easily and comfortably, not by straining her mind, but extremely deeply nonetheless. Her ideas came across well, and were very interesting.

The opening, the middle, and the end were all skillfully done. The humor was top-quality, and the writing style was also quite consistent. There wasn't a single point that was out of place.

## **Miura Tetsurō**

I admired the graceful composition filled with cold emotion in Kawakami's piece this time. I get the feeling like I haven't met any newcomers with such flawless sentences in recent years. But, ever since I accidentally stepped on a viper with my bare feet in late childhood, I've held an unbearable fear and hatred of the creatures we call snakes. As a result, reading through Kawakami's work was truly not an easy endeavor. I stopped to take a shower three times in the middle of it. However, perhaps the fact that the story makes the reader feel in such a raw way as though the snakes are near them suggests the power of the author's writing style as well. Even so, my fear and disgust towards the subject matter should not be allowed to influence the evaluation of the work itself. I'm sorry for allowing it to do so. Nevertheless, is perhaps the set-up of a woman and a snake clichéd already?

## **Miyamoto Teru**

I hadn't considered the winning work, "Tread on a Snake" at all, so I was completely surprised when the majority of the committee members pushed for this piece during the preliminary voting.

Snakes turning into people and talking don't seem like literary subjects to me. Since I think we've got more than enough of that in Aesop's fables, I opposed the selection of "Tread on a Snake" until the very end. I believe that fables, after all, can only ever be fables.



## Takubo Hideo

With its premise of a snake that turns into a woman and back, Kawakami Hiromi-san's "Tread on a Snake" made me recall the ancient Dōjōji Engi<sup>29</sup>, Akinari's "Lust of the White Serpent,"<sup>30</sup> or even contemporary works, which produced a sense of reluctance in me regarding the hackneyed topic. However, as the writing skills were considerable, I was eventually made to overcome my reluctance. As a result of the author's rich development of connections and ideas, I found myself sometimes stopping in the middle of reading, and at other times reading in bursts.

The snake impersonates a woman and calls herself Hiwako's mother, and when I read the scene in which the protagonist and the snake are violently fighting the "fight which had gone on for hundreds of years," I was reminded of the clay figure from the Jōmon Period of a woman with a snake wrapped around her head. Some transcendental sensation of the crossing between life and death that Japanese have had since ancient times may unexpectedly be hidden at the bottom of this. In that sense, there are great parts such as, "I aimed for the horizon furthest from the snakes. Small, long, and thin, my sense of touch sought out every opening and stretched, spreading out farther and farther..." Ultimately, I voted for this work and for "Tiananmen."

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<sup>29</sup> This refers to the Dōjōji Engi *emaki*, or illustrated scrolls that date back to the Muromachi period (approximately 1333 – 1573) and are now preserved in Dōjō-ji temple. Takubo refers to a portion of the scroll which tell the story of a woman who turns into a great snake out of anger and resentment.

<sup>30</sup> "Jasei no In" (蛇性の姪), also known as "The Serpent's Lust" or "Lust of the White Serpent," is a story by Ueda Akinari (1734 – 1809). Although it is based on Chinese folklore, it too is a well known story that includes the concept of a white snake taking the form of a human woman.

## **Kuroi Senji**

It's difficult to explain the fun of "Tread on a Snake" using logic. Rather than exploring the meanings and metaphors of the world that is depicted, with this type of novel, there is first the challenge of whether or not one can easily immerse oneself into the work. Through the smooth pacing of the writing style, I felt that that difficult problem was overcome quite naturally. As a story, it is a type of metamorphosis tale, but rather than having humans turn into snakes, snakes turn into humans and try to tempt humans into their world. Even as she's drawn to this, the young female protagonist resists, and her attempts to deny the world of snakes were interesting. In that sense, perhaps we could say that rather than simply being a tale of metamorphosis, it is one about a battle against the temptations to metamorphose. The other characters who have dangerous relationships with the snakes too, such as the couple from the prayer bead shop, and the head priest from Kōfu, also leave an impression as regular townspeople.

## **Ishihara Shintarō**

I absolutely cannot praise the winning story, Kawakami Hiromi-shi's<sup>31</sup> "Tread on a Snake." I have absolutely no idea just what the snakes are supposed to be a metaphor for.

Although metafiction is fashionable right now, I can only say that the fact that this work

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<sup>31</sup> The suffix "-shi" is similar in meaning to "-san," although it is less common, and considered to be slightly more polite. It is gender neutral, and is used more often in the context of professional encounters than in casual ones.

could be the recipient of a prize with historical value serves to show the decline of Japanese literature today.

### **Furui Yoshikichi**

There are probably cases when it's impossible to express a certain distinct, physical sensation with words. If so, then a work should pursue the sensation with devotion. This is not a work which simply stomps all over an average person's sensibility towards snakes. The protagonist says that when she sleeps with a member of the opposite sex, she feels that it is not she, but the man, who takes on the form of a snake. As it "steps" this far, the work is filled with snakes in every crevice. However, since the prose lacks enough passion for the snakes, in the end it's all washed up, and streams away.

### **Ōba Minako**

Kawakami Hiromi-san

This is the snake. Like a snake, coiling around, rearing its head, and getting chills from the displeasure of others.

## **Ikezawa Natsuki**

Kawakami Hiromi-san's "Tread on a Snake" is a choice work which not only traces its lineage of tales of metamorphosis back to the *Konjaku Monogatari*, but also combines a sense of the contemporary, while at the same time bringing with it a feeling of the old-fashioned. The snake which the protagonist Hiwako steps on transforms into a fifty year old woman, settles down in her apartment, and insists that she is Hiwako's mother. Their lives together begin. Even though Hiwako knows that this is not her mother, she is unable to resist the delicious meal and cold beer waiting for her when she comes home from work, and, unintentionally dragging her feet, she starts to live with the snake just like that (To a child, a mother is first of all an assurance of a comfortable life). There is a side story about a different snake at the prayer bead shop where she works.

Was it Ishikawa Jun who first said that short stories are born from darkness, and end again in darkness? Making the reader accept the snake's sudden appearance was skillful, and the end in which the apartment is streaming off with terrible speed while inside it Hiwako and the snake strangle each other's necks was also splendid. The reader can only be left to watch and take a breath as they watch in blank amazement from behind as the two fade into the distance. I am in complete agreement with this work receiving the award.

## **Kōno Taeko**

Writing a story by thinking exhaustively about what makes a good story does not produce a good story. Furthermore, a good story is not brought about from having mastered story writing techniques, but rather one masters the technique of writing as a ricochet effect of having written a good story. “Tread on a Snake” indicates to us that the author Kawakami Hiromi-san has mastered the trick to writing good stories, through writing this. In this case, her mastery is synonymous with discovery or creation.

“Tread on a Snake” is considerably different from other stories of metamorphosis. From time to time I have thought about the fact that there is no way for me to leave my own physical body, or that there is absolutely no way to know another person’s feelings. But I read this with great fascination as a work that shows those sorts of absolute truths without any exceptions, through the depiction of metamorphosis as a method of turning things upside down. The writing style was also pleasantly unique to the author.

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## **Vita**

Ana Puente-Aguilera was born and raised in Austin, Texas. After graduating from James Bowie High School, in 2007, she entered Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. During the spring of 2010 she attended Kansai Gaidai University in Osaka, Japan. She received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in International Studies from Texas State in May 2011. In August of that year, she entered the Graduate School at The University of Texas at Austin. In June of 2013, she completed the language program at the Inter-University Center for Japanese Language Studies in Yokohama, Japan. In May 2014, she received her MA degree from the Department of Asian Studies at UT Austin.

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