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Kurahashi Yumiko

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Translators' Introduction

Kurahashi Yumiko (1935–2005) was, for more than four decades, one of Japan's most innovative and original writers. Acclaimed for her political satire, experimental novels, and fantastic short stories, Kurahashi was also the author of two collections of fairy tales. Born in Tosayamada, Kōchi prefecture, in Shikoku, Kurahashi had initially intended to pursue a career in dentistry; however, in 1957 she entered Meiji University, Tokyo, where she studied French literature. Kurahashi first gained critical attention in 1960 when her short story "Parutai" (from the German Partei [party]) won the Meiji University President's Prize. "Partutai," which was also nominated for the prestigious Akutagawa Prize, was only the second story that Kurahashi had written, and it is clearly influenced by French existentialism; she herself described it as being an "imitation of Sartre."¹ Although the story's satirical portrayal of the Communist Party attracted a great deal of attention, not all of it was favorable; indeed, it was as controversial as it was successful, but the controversy surrounding this and other early short stories was merely a prelude to the negative criticism of Kurahashi's work that would persist even as she established herself as one of the leading intellectual writers of her generation. The best known of Kurahashi's early antirealist novels include *Kurai tabi* (Blue Journey, 1961) and *Sei shōjo* (Divine Maiden, 1965). In 1966 Kurahashi was invited to spend twelve months in the United States as a Fulbright scholar in the creative writing program at the University of Iowa. On returning to Japan she had further successes with *Sumiyakisuto Q no bōken* (The Adventures of Sumiyakist Q, 1969), *Bājinia* (Virginia, 1970) and *Yume no ukihashi* (The Floating Bridge of

"Ningyo no namida" and "Issun Bōshi no koi" by Yumiko Kurahashi © 1984. Sayaka Kumagai. English translations published with permission in *Marvels & Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2008), pp. 171–182. Copyright © 2008 by Wayne State University Press, Detroit, MI 48201.

Dreams, 1971), the latter of which reworks the final chapter of *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*). In 1972 Kurahashi moved to Portugal with her husband and their two children; they stayed for two years but returned to Japan in 1974 because of the political unrest. Kurahashi published a collection of grotesque tales in 1985,² and in the following year published what is arguably the best known of her later experimental novels: *Amanonkoku ōkanki* (*Record of a Journey to Amanon Country*). Her last completed work, *Hoshi no ōjisama*, was a translation of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le petit prince*, which was published posthumously in 2005.

Kurahashi's first engagement with the fairy-tale genre came in 1984 with the publication of *Otona no tame no zankoku dōwa* (*Cruel Fairy Tales for Adults*), a collection of twenty-six short stories in which fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen, the Grimm brothers, and Charles Perrault are rewritten and juxtaposed with revisions of Japanese tales appropriated from the eighteenth-century collection *Otogi zōshi* and the twelfth-century *Konjaku monogatari*. *Cruel Fairy Tales for Adults* also draws on sources as diverse as Franz Kafka, Tanizaki Junichirō, Hayashi Tatsuo, and Oscar Wilde, as well as Greek myths and British folktales. Citing G. K. Chesterton in the afterword, Kurahashi describes fairy tales as perfectly logical and rational; she also maintains that they are cruel because they are governed by standards of retributive justice and didactic morals, and, in the case of her own tales, for adults because their erotic nature might be considered too "poisonous" (*dokusei*) for children.

"A Mermaid's Tears" (*"Ningyo no namida"*), the first of the stories presented here, is based on Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid." Kurahashi's retelling of the tale closely follows the source text, but there are crucial differences, especially in the description of the youngest and most beautiful of the mermaids; a description that perhaps owes something to René Magritte's "L'invention collective" (*"The Collective Invention"*).³ Kurahashi's surreal and, from the outset, sexually active mermaid is a far cry from the necessarily pure and virginal little mermaid of Andersen's tale, but the two mermaids do have a number of things in common, including a desire to rid themselves of their piscine characteristics in order to join the handsome prince in the world above the sea. They are also both willing to make sacrifices to get what they want, and in both versions the sea-witch is more than willing to oblige. The mermaid at the beginning of Kurahashi's tale may well owe something to Magritte's painting, but what of the androgynous being created by the sea-witch at the end? Kurahashi could be alluding to Plato's *Symposium*, in which the Platonic Aristophanes suggests that there were originally three human genders: male, female, and a combination of the other two. However, combining genders and questioning sexual binarism is a recurring theme in Kurahashi's work, and it is therefore not surprising that the distinction between male and female, and self and other should continue to be blurred in "A Mermaid's Tears."⁴

"*Issun Bōshi no koi*," translated here as "*The Love Affair of Issun Bōshi*," is based on one of the best-known and best-loved children's stories in Japan. "*Issun Bōshi*" was

collected in the above-mentioned Otogi zōshi anthology (c. 1700); however, it actually has its origins in the Muromachi period (c. 1336–1573). It is related both to enchanted bridegroom stories and Tom Thumb tale types like Perrault's "Little Thumbling" ("Le petit Poucet"). In common with Tom Thumb, Issun Bōshi's name refers to his size: a sun is a unit of length, one sun (issun) being equal to 3.03 centimeters, while bōshi is a term used to refer to young boys.⁵

Kurahashi's retelling of "Issun Bōshi," in common with her version of "The Little Mermaid," closely follows the plot of the traditional tale: the childless couple, the miraculous birth of a son, and the journey to the ancient capital, Kyoto, where Issun Bōshi is taken into service as a companion for a beautiful princess. Kurahashi also retains the climactic scene in which the tiny hero is called upon to defend the princess from an attack by ogres. In the traditional tale, Issun Bōshi stands his ground and fights; even after being eaten by one of the ogres, he brandishes his sword and stabs its belly, causing it to cough him up, and thus effecting his escape. Kurahashi's Issun Bōshi is, as readers will see, more fallible than his medieval predecessor, yet he too manages to escape. Utterly terrified of the diminutive but resourceful hero, the ogres run for their lives, but in their rush to get away they drop the "mallet of good fortune." A common motif in Japanese fairy tales, the mallet of good fortune (uchide no kozuchi) is an Aladdin's lamp or horn of plenty that can make dreams come true. The discovery of the magic mallet facilitates the happy end in which Issun Bōshi is transformed into a handsome young samurai, but this is not quite the end for Kurahashi, who goes on to contemplate what happens to this increasingly erotic relationship after the happy end.

The morals that conclude these cruel fairy tales for adults were added at the behest of Kurahashi's publisher. In the afterword, she insists that if there were a moral for the book as a whole, it would be jigōjitoku: you reap what you sow.

A Mermaid's Tears

A long time ago, at the bottom of the deepest ocean, lived a sea-king who had six beautiful daughters. Of all the king's daughters the youngest was by far the most beautiful. Her eyes were as clear and blue as the deepest sea, and she was covered from her head to her chest with the most lustrous and exquisitely well-formed scales. She was quite unlike her older sisters, for not only could you see her navel, which is unusual for mermaids, but it was thought that no human girl could possibly match her long and shapely legs. The youngest of the mermaid princesses was shy and thoughtful, and often seemed to be preoccupied, but fish never close their eyes, so even when she was completely lost in thought her eyes had a golden glow and always remained wide open.

The mermaid princesses liked nothing better than to listen to their grandmother's stories about the world above the sea. "As soon as you are eighteen," she would say, "you will have my permission to rise to the surface, and then you

will be able to watch ships and humans.” The most remarkable of all the tales that they heard about the world above the sea told of the sweet-smelling flowers that bloom there, and of the “fish” with delightful voices that swim in the wind. And it was almost unimaginable to think that a mermaid might sit on a rock soaking up the silvery light from a “night sun” that is invisible from the bottom of the ocean.

When at last the eldest of the king’s daughters reached the age of eighteen, she was given permission to rise to the surface of the ocean; however, as misfortune is sure to befall anyone who catches sight of a mermaid, she was warned in the presence of her sisters not to be seen by humans.

When the eldest princess returned, her sisters were entranced by her stories. It was the youngest, however, who listened most eagerly to how she had sat on a beach with her wet scales shining in the moonlight as she gazed at the twinkling lights of a town; and to how during the daytime she had hidden behind a rock listening excitedly to music and the peal of bells coming from a nearby church; and how, on approaching a wood, she had seen the sweet-smelling flowers and watched the singing “fish” darting through the air. Listening to these stories, the little mermaid was beside herself with excitement, but it would be another five years before she would be allowed to visit the world above the sea.

The following year, the second of the sisters reached the age of eighteen and was given permission to rise to the surface. She was followed by the third, the fourth, and the fifth until, in just one more year it would be the turn of the youngest. But the youngest of the princesses couldn’t wait a moment longer, and without waiting for permission she decided to rise up through the sea toward the surface.

She lifted her head above the waves just as the sun was setting and golden clouds glimmered in a rose-tinted sky; and right there before her very eyes lay a three-masted ship becalmed on the water. As darkness fell, lanterns of various colors were lit and the little mermaid could hear gay and festive music coming from on board. She swam close enough to the ship to be able to see a great number of elegantly dressed people through the cabin windows. The most remarkable of them all was an extraordinarily handsome young prince with eyes as clear and blue as the deepest sea and wavy, golden hair, the like of which had never been seen before at the bottom of the ocean. That day happened to be the prince’s birthday and the celebrations had just begun. The little mermaid could not take her eyes off the handsome prince. How wonderful it would be if only I could be human, she thought, a beautiful human girl living among these finely dressed people and dancing with a prince. Forgetting that she was a mermaid, the princess pressed her head against the cabin window.

At that very moment she caught the prince's eye. He shouted, the music stopped, and his guests turned as one and stared in her direction. The ship heaved to one side, and as the lights went out, there were screams from on board. A dreadful storm had descended upon the ship, and the little mermaid realized that by ignoring her grandmother's warning, she had caused this terrible misfortune, and now there was nothing that she could do about it. The ship was tossed about by the raging ocean until, in the midst of terrible thunder and lightning, it was smashed to pieces and swallowed beneath the waves. The mermaid, thinking of nothing but trying to save the prince, swam with his lifeless body, desperately trying to keep his head above the water.

The storm had subsided before dawn, and the little mermaid had managed to swim with the prince to the safety of a sandy beach where she would be able to take care of him. Suddenly, she noticed a tower of flesh rising rigid and acicular above his belly. Instinct told her to put the supplementary thing into the part of her body that felt a lack. It was a perfect fit, and getting hotter and hotter inside she forgot that she was a mermaid and even believed for a moment that she was becoming human. In the warm glow of the morning sun the prince's face seemed to have regained a little color, and the mermaid would have liked nothing better than to have remained with him forever, but she leapt up horrified at the thought that on recovering his senses he would see the ugly upper part of her body. And so it was that with tears in her eyes the little mermaid returned to the bottom of the ocean.

Although she told her sisters about the adventure, the youngest of the princesses could say nothing about what she had done with the prince. And she could no more reveal her feelings about wanting to leave her sisters and her parents than she could about her wish to abandon the sea world altogether and become human. In fact, the youngest of the mermaid princesses, who had always been quiet and thoughtful, became more withdrawn than ever.

One day, she determined to visit the sea-witch who lived below the whirlpools in the darkest, fathomless depths of the ocean, where bleached human bones and the wreckage of ships lay scattered about.

"I know what you want," said the sea-witch as soon as she saw the little mermaid. "You've had your way with a human and now, instead of that fish's head, you want the long hair, slender arms, and ample bosom of a human girl, don't you?"

"That's right," cried the mermaid, "I'll do anything, anything at all, if only you'll grant my wish."

The witch nodded and, with a strange smile, demanded the mermaid's immortal soul. The little mermaid agreed at once. It didn't matter to her if she died, only that she should be with the prince. "Listen carefully," said the witch, "this will make you mortal just like humans, but if the prince were to love you more than

his own life, you will regain your immortal soul. If, on the other hand, he should abandon you for another woman, you will once more become a mermaid, die, and turn into foam on the surface of the ocean.” At that, the witch gave the little mermaid a magic potion that she had brewed in her cauldron. As she drank the potion, the mermaid’s scales began to lose their luster and fall off, and in no time at all the upper part of her body was transformed into that of a young girl.

The little mermaid swam straight to the beach and waited. When evening came, the prince finally left the palace and, with a somber and pensive expression, walked toward the beach in the setting sun. He often walked along that same beach thinking vaguely about the girl who had saved his life on that stormy night, hoping that one day he would meet her again. Imagine his astonishment, then, to find a young girl standing there naked but for the golden glow of the setting sun. “It was you,” he cried, embracing her. “It was you who saved my life.” Once more they did what they had done on the morning after the storm, and at last the fog clouding the prince’s memory began to clear.

Now there could be no doubt whatsoever that this was the girl who had saved his life. As soon as the prince got the little mermaid back to the palace he dressed her in the finest clothes and installed her in his bedroom. Ironically, she felt ill at ease; after all, she was quite unused to dancing and wearing beautiful gowns, and polite conversation with the crowds who thronged to the palace made her feel awkward. And so it seemed quite natural that she should spend more time lying naked in the arms of the prince than she did wearing the gorgeous dresses that she had until so recently longed to wear. The prince’s lifestyle was starting to raise eyebrows. Not only was his behavior unacceptable to the king and queen, but it was also of great concern to their senior retainers. Consequently, the court went ahead with plans to find a suitable bride for the prince, and in time it was decided that the beautiful princess from the land across the sea should be his wife. The prince owed his life to the girl who had been introduced at court as “the fisherman’s daughter,” but the idea of actually marrying her had never entered his head; equally, he had no intention of removing her from the palace even when the time came to take a wife.

As soon as he laid his eyes on the beautiful princess from the land across the sea, the prince was besotted. Before long there would be a grand wedding, and the little mermaid realized that her time as a human would soon be over. On the evening of the wedding, the little mermaid returned to the sea, and as she swam in the moonlight, scales began to appear on her back and chest, and then, just as the witch had foretold, her head returned to its former piscine shape. At that very moment, the ship carrying the bride and groom sailed into view, and the little mermaid once more heard gay and festive music coming from on board. She peeped through the cabin window, and again misfortune befell the ship, which broke up in a dreadful storm and sank without trace. This time, however,

the little mermaid embraced the prince and swam to the deepest part of the ocean. She lost consciousness as she was pulled downward by the roaring whirlpools, and when she regained her senses she found herself in the sea-witch's lair. The witch looked at her incredulously and asked if she had another wish. "Please join us together," said the little mermaid, "then we'll be able to live as one until the day we die. I'll give you the remaining halves of our bodies."

The witch considered this quite a bargain. After all, the lower half of the prince's body, the manly part, was as magnificent as it was desirable. And so she fused the upper half of the prince with the lower—human—half of the mermaid.

The people were delighted with the prince's miraculous return. In time, he succeeded the old king and ruled the country honorably, but he never married and nobody really knew why, nor whether he was truly happy. The lower half of the prince's body, the mermaid's half, still had its own soul, and the two souls continued to communicate. However, while the prince could satisfy the little mermaid's demands by comforting the most feminine part of her body, there was nothing that she could do for him in return. Whenever that part was comforted by the prince, it shed tears, which, in sadness or delight, immediately hardened into pearls, and it is pearls, they say, that continually flood the prince's bed.

Moral: *The nether parts are not for loving.*

The Love Affair of Issun Bōshi

Once upon a time, in a certain place, lived an old man and his wife. They were a devoted and, in many ways, happy couple, but they had never been blessed with any children. They longed for a child of their own and often cried, "We want a child, we want a child." Then, one day, on a visit to a shrine, the old man implored the gods to give them a child. "Even if it's no bigger than a finger," he said, "please give us a child."

It wasn't long before the old man's prayers were answered and a child no bigger than his finger was born. His wife, however, was not best pleased with a child scarcely bigger than her little pinkie. "It's your fault," she scolded, "fancy making such a stupid wish. It's bad enough that your little whatsit is smaller than your finger—and now this!" Despite her complaints, the old woman decided reluctantly to raise the boy, and she named him "Issun Bōshi." Time passed, but the boy didn't get any bigger. The old woman continued to complain, and the old man simply put up with it until one fine day he agreed to drive the boy out of the house. This came as something of a relief to Issun Bōshi; after all, the old woman thought nothing of farting in front of him, and every time the old man sneezed the boy was showered with snot. All he wanted was some love and affection, and, desperate to get out of there, he immediately dressed in the samurai style and armed himself with a sewing needle for a sword. The old couple gave him a rice bowl and a pair

of chopsticks, and, using the bowl as a boat and one of the chopsticks to paddle it with, he set off down stream toward the emperor's capital. After overcoming many hardships along the way, he arrived, at last, in the capital, Kyoto.

Issun Bōshi was chased by cats and dogs and almost trodden on by children, but he made his way along the capital's busiest thoroughfare until he found himself at the gate of a great mansion, a splendid house that by all appearances belonged to a noble family. He paused at the gate and shouted, "Hello. Is there anybody there?" When a servant came to see what all the fuss was about, he found a man, no bigger than his little finger, standing on a straw sandal. Issun Bōshi announced himself as any other mature young man would do, and asked earnestly if he might be allowed to serve as a retainer and remain at the mansion. The servant pinched Issun Bōshi between his thumb and forefinger and carried him thus to his master, who placed him on the palm of his hand and examined him through a magnifying glass. The young man, who wore his sword in a thread that bound his waist and whose hair was tied up in a samurai top-knot, knelt and bowed. Despite his size, he even had a perfectly formed little mustache, which the noble lord found so amusing that he laughed out loud.

"They tell me that your name is Issun Bōshi," he said. "You're so very small that I thought you were a boy, but I can see for myself what a fine young man you really are."

"Indeed, my lord, and I would ask most graciously that you take me into your service as a retainer."

"But what can you do?"

"With respect, my lord, I can do anything."

"In that case, you must dance for us."

Issun Bōshi started to dance on the palm of his hand; it was the strangest of dances, but everybody clapped and cheered, so he took a straw flute from his kimono and played quite brilliantly while he continued to dance. The lord was much amused by Issun Bōshi and decided to give him to his daughter as a plaything.

His daughter, the princess, was famous throughout the capital for her beauty, but for some reason she had an aversion to men, and although she was of marriageable age, she remained deaf to the proposals of her suitors; in fact, whenever she was visited by a young nobleman, she rejected their overtures with poems that were as scathing and mocking as they were caustic. The princess's greatest pleasure was reading, and occasionally, when she found herself with nothing to read, she would take up her brush and compose something for herself. She decided to call Issun Bōshi "Little One Inch," and no doubt considering him to be a rare and exotic creature, she made him a little house from exquisite paper; she set the house on her desk, and then lined a shell with soft threads of silk, which she placed in it for a bed. At mealtimes she never tired of

sitting Issun Bōshi on the palm of her hand and watching the way he held each grain of rice with both hands as she fed him with her chopsticks the way she would feed a small bird.

The princess was in the habit of talking to herself, and there were some things that she would normally only ever put into words when she was alone; however, she talked to Issun Bōshi. His answers were so interesting that it wasn't long before she was nonchalantly telling him things that she wouldn't even dream of telling her parents. She was, for example, a flawless beauty, and rightly proud of it, but she worried that the vital part of her body might be shamefully blemished in some way, and she often disparaged men; she considered men to be the most extraordinarily dull creatures, quite stupid, and totally lacking in spirit. At the same time, she came out with the most outrageous ideas about wanting to be ravished by some half-human ogre, who would tear her limb from limb. Whenever she had these wild fantasies while Issun Bōshi was turning the pages of the book that she was reading, she would lift him on the palm of her hand to eye level and ask, "Well, Little One Inch, what do you think of that?" And sometimes she would murmur, "What would you do if you were me?" As she moved closer to him, the pupils of her eyes looked like full moons, and, feeling as if he might be devoured by them, a shudder of pleasure ran through his body. Issun Bōshi was in love. Naturally he couldn't breathe a word about it to anyone, and in front of the princess he kept up appearances by continuing to play the fool.

By and by, Issun Bōshi was given permission to share the princess's bed, but this favor turned out to be something of a mixed blessing, for she was a restless sleeper, and whenever he absent-mindedly snuggled into her armpit to get some sleep, he was almost crushed to death by her tossing and turning. He saved himself by staying close to her ear and telling her stories until she slept; even when he was given permission to crawl between her breasts, he would always go back to his own shell-bed.

One night, Issun Bōshi crawled up the hill of her breast and toyed with the small tower at its summit. The princess was delighted with this and informed him that henceforth he would be required to do the same thing every night. He was also given permission to explore her body and toy with it as he pleased. As he satisfied his curiosity, a sigh of pleasure sometimes escaped the princess's lips, and her body would tremble as if it had been hit by an earthquake, but instead of resisting she moaned, "Please, don't stop." On the following evening her orders were more explicit than ever.

Now, Issun Bōshi was having difficulty getting the princess off to sleep; after all, he was no bigger than your little finger, and it was no easy matter crawling about on that gigantic body and toying with it as he had been told. He was, however, secretly in love, and so he worked hard night after night to satisfy her demands. The princess showed her appreciation by feeding him delicacies with

her tongue, and this soon became his greatest pleasure, especially as she would put food that she had chewed on the tip of her tongue and, as he clung on to that dining table of tender flesh, let him eat.

One day, the princess tucked Issun Bōshi into her obi and, accompanied by her attendants and retainers, set off for Kiyomizu Temple to pray to “Kannon,” the goddess of mercy. Making their way home along a mountain path, the party came across two ogres. The princess’s retainers were paralyzed with fear as the monstrous ogress—one red, and the other blue—descended upon them with their mouths gaping open. The princess fainted on the spot, and without even thinking about it Issun Bōshi burrowed beneath her kimono and hid in the most precious part of her body—a place that was, by now, quite familiar to him. Outside, he could hear a terrible commotion. The ogres were snarling and gnashing their fangs, and they seemed to be carrying the princess off to their lair. I’ll go berserk in the ogre’s belly if I’m eaten along with the princess, he thought, but there must be something that I can do before then. Well, it’s an ill wind, they say, and just as he was thinking the worst, red flesh, which seemed to be part of an ogre’s body, suddenly thrust its way into his hiding place. Issun Bōshi stabbed at it frantically with his sewing-needle sword; the ogre shrieked with pain and the thing disappeared. It was followed immediately by another, which, using all his strength, he impaled. “There are thorns in it!” yelled the ogres. “It’s a monster,” they screamed as they ran for their lives. The princess still lay unconscious on the ground, but when Issun Bōshi whispered, “You’re quite safe now,” she finally regained her senses and, as if in a dream, stood up.

Lying beside them on the ground was a small mallet that the ogres seem to have dropped. “The mallet of good fortune,” said Issun Bōshi. “It can grant all your wishes. Please make me taller with it.” The princess tapped him lightly on the head with the mallet, chanting, “Grow tall. Grow tall.” Issun Bōshi instantly grew taller—taller by a head than the princess, and every inch a man.

When the couple returned to the mansion and recounted the story of their adventure, the noble lord, who had been grief-stricken since he had heard of the attack from the retainers who had escaped, was so delighted with his daughter’s safe return that he decided right there and then to make Issun Bōshi his son-in-law. This time, even the man-hating princess had no objections.

They were duly married, and it was widely believed that they would live happily ever after; however, it wasn’t long before the princess looked utterly dejected, and Issun Bōshi started to look sad and depressed. When he was no longer able to bear it, the lord asked his daughter what it was that was causing her such distress. The princess replied that she no longer wanted to live with Issun Bōshi.

“But why?”

“Because he—because that gentleman is Issun Bōshi.”

“Why, he’s a fine figure of a man, isn’t he? Tall and handsome—”

“But he’s still Little One Inch. The vital part hasn’t changed at all, and it’s quite out of proportion with the rest of his body.”

One day, not long after this conversation, husband and wife were having a furious argument, and Issun Bōshi, who was being mocked for his size, picked up the mallet of good fortune and whacked the princess on the head, shouting, “We’ll soon see who’s a little one inch.” Not to be outdone, the princess grabbed it back and let him have it. While they were exchanging blows and hurling insults at each other, they started to shrink. In an instant they were smaller than a little finger, smaller than an insect, smaller even than a speck of dust, until eventually they were too small to see with the naked eye. All that remained was the mallet of good fortune, and nobody really knows whether, from that day on, they lived happily somewhere together, or not.

Moral: *Small is not beautiful.*

Translated by Marc Sebastian-Jones and Tateya Koichi

Notes

1. Kurahashi is quoted by Tanaka Yukiko and Elizabeth Hanson in the introduction to their translation of “Parutai.”
2. *Kurahashi Yumiko no kaiki shōhen* (Kurahashi Yumiko’s Grottesque Tales). Three of these tales are included in *The Woman with the Flying Head and Other Stories*.
3. Kurahashi has based several stories on paintings. See, for example, “Furaw abusu-torakushon” (“Flower Abstraction”), which draws its inspiration from Georgia O’Keefe’s painting of the same name, and “Erabareta basho” (“A Special Place”), which is based on Paul Klee’s “Auserwählte Stätte” (“Chosen Place”). Both stories are collected in *The Woman with the Flying Head and Other Stories*.
4. For a discussion of “A Mermaid’s Tears” and these gender issues, see Kleeman.
5. In modern Japanese, *bōshi* (or *hōshi*) means “Buddhist priest.” The sense “boy” or “lad,” found in “Issun Bōshi,” is now archaic; it can be traced back to a time when it was customary for young boys to shave their heads or wear closely cropped hair, in a similar style to that worn by monks or priests. The practice of shaving or cropping the hair of young boys continued well into the Showa period (1926–1989), but largely fell out of fashion after the war.

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