“The Transformation of Ōba Minako’s World of *Monogatari*”

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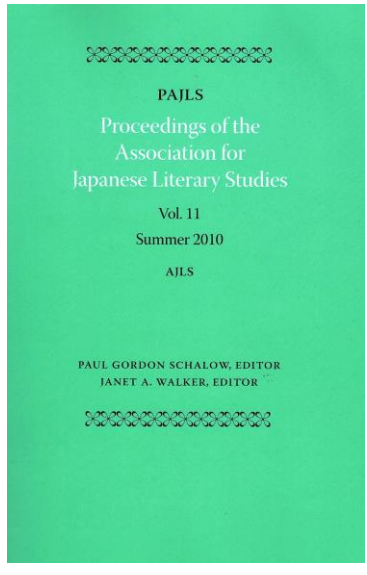

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The Transformation of Ōba Minako's World of *Monogatari*

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Let me first express my deepest thanks and congratulations to Professors Paul Schalow and Janet Walker for all their wonderful work in making this conference possible. I have been deeply impressed by the activities of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies since it started and have great respect for all of you who have contributed to the development of the association and to the promotion of Japanese cultural and literary studies.

Let me also say how happy I am to be here at the AJLS annual meeting. I feel very much honoured to be given an opportunity to talk on Ōba Minako.

To talk on Ōba Minako at Rutgers means something special to me. Some years ago Professors Paul Schalow and Janet Walker organized a conference with Ōba Minako as one of the major speakers, out of which the well-known and now classic book of literary criticism on Japanese literature, *The Woman's Hand*, evolved. I was a participant at the conference (I delivered a paper on Hayashi Fumiko) and spent three days with Ōba Minako and her husband Toshio here on the campus of Rutgers University. To come back to Rutgers to talk on Ōba Minako gives me a feeling not only as if meeting Minako again, but also a feeling of coming back to the good old days of my life, meeting old friends of those days. I could not help feeling nostalgic, particularly since the theme of Ōba's talk at that conference was "Long ago, there was a woman" (*mukashi onna ga ita*).

I learned of Ōba Minako's passing away when I was in Dalian, China. We hadn't seen each other in the more than two years since we had shared the shock of the sudden death of the editor of our books; Minako and I published several books together, one of which is a book of poems, entitled *Burning Amber* (*Moeru kōhaku*). The book of poems exchanged between us started while we were together at Rutgers.

In her declining years, especially in the past few, I had a feeling that I could somehow see into her life and what she was thinking through her *tanka* poems and other shorter pieces, and through her husband Toshio's diaries recording

meticulously the daily life of Minako as he nursed her, taking care of her daily life matters since she fell ill—but I felt a certain reluctance to intrude.

Dalian, China, is of course a very different place from Sitka, Alaska, where Ōba lived for a long time, some eleven years, before becoming an author. But as I stood there, on a tree-lined boulevard of that peaceful former colonial Japanese town, lined with Western-style buildings of the same type I often saw in my own neighbourhood as a child, looking at the park nearby where the Acacia Festival was in full swing, bright and bustling with Korean, Japanese, and Russian ethnic music and dancing and crowds of tourists, I was caught up in the sensation that I had strayed into a world quite apart from busy, modern Dalian. I felt that I was watching some fantastical scene from a film—and it all brought Ōba's Alaska to mind.

It was a feeling that I was just one of many characters interspersed across a screen, a sensation that there ought be somewhere else for me to go, which always seems to follow these festivals. It was a feeling I knew well, from the years I lived in the United States, in a city on the edge of the desert. In *Sanbiki no kani* (Three Crabs), when the protagonist fled her house, it was at an amusement park that she met the man in the pink shirt.

When I visited Toshio at Urayasu just before I came here, I recalled the feeling I had at Dalian where I learned of her death. The rooms of Toshio were filled with her pictures, paintings, and sumi writings, with objects she loved. Minako's presence filled the space and, for a moment, I took Toshio for Minako, greeting me arising from her large picture. Toshio, who works everyday surrounded by those images of Minako, editing the collected volumes of her writing and paintings, together with his diaries, said that he is at one with Minako there.

Indeed, the Urayasu home where Ōba spent her last years was not far from Disneyland. It was on land reclaimed from the sea, with rows of hotels and high-rise apartment blocks, a neighbourhood into which a hint of the nearby fantasy world would always find its way. Few of its residents had been there for long; the people in this new quarter were from all sorts of places, with all sorts of backgrounds, living just across the water from that strange, other-worldly festival. Standing in the Japanese quarter in Dalian, I felt I understood why she chose Urayasu for her last residence in life and that Urayasu seems a very natural end stop of her journey from Alaska. Or probably it might be more appropriate to think that even Urayasu might have been only a temporary haven in her journey. Ōba had the air of a drifter moving temporarily from place to place, an outsider floating like duckweed wherever she went.

Ōba Minako left us an exceptionally large canon of work that includes poems, essays, dramas, movie scripts and paintings, letters, novels and stories. I went to the exhibition of her paintings this fall and was quite struck by the fact that her paintings tell the same stories told in her narrative works, and that Ōba has formed her world of *monogatari* with all of her works in different art forms. I recalled what Ōba had said—that all of her works are linked by a single protagonist, and that each of her works retells and transforms a story, and together they compile a single tale.

Her creative reputation begins with *Sanbiki no kani.* The impact of *Sanbiki no kani* on the Japanese literary world is well documented, but in hindsight I feel some surprise at the evaluations of the Akutagawa Prize jury and the opinions of the critics at the time. Although by 1968 the protests of the All-Campus Joint Struggle were approaching, authors still had little experience of America, and novels with American characters were rare, as was even the discussion of the subject—Japan had yet to cast off the legacy of the war. America remained more a symbol than a reality.

Even by the American standards of the day, Alaska was a backwater. I lived in the United States in the 1960s, and from the East Coast, Alaska was seen as a kind of American colony, another country somewhere beyond Canada at the northern edge of the world. Yet, *Sanbiki no kani* does not especially stress this view or put it in the foreground; it is not, in that sense a story *about* Alaska. First and foremost it is a drama of an encounter with a stranger (in the form of husband and family) at a particular moment in time. The setting is a natural landscape heavy with the burden of the protagonist's solitude: it is a venue for the parties and conversations that reveal the frailty of family and community ties, the attenuating relationship of husband and wife—the frenetic quality, if you will, of the amusement park. The novel, in this sense, anticipates the then hidden reality of Japanese society—a reality which, though not yet visible on the surface, was beginning to emerge as Japan itself emerged from the aftermath of the war.

The works born of Ōba's days in Alaska (mostly up to the beginning of the 1970s) seek to create a fictive world through which Alaska and its particular lifestyle come to symbolize the universal modern human condition. On the subject of the wife with no socially recognised role, or social identity, Ōba says little. Although it is evident that the heroine of *Sanbiki no kani* is a housewife with a large ego and sense of self, the desire to be herself remains unfulfilled and hidden in the internal cave of herself. That she feels her desire cannot be fulfilled in her family relations with her husband and daughter is clearly expressed throughout the novel.

Ōba uses her life "in exile," as she refers to her time in Alaska, and the process of introspection that led up to her becoming a writer, as a collective rather than personal experience, as elements that form the world of the novel.

The "universality" discovered in *Sanbiki no kani* by the readers and literati of Japan in the midst of the universal condition of solitude and alienation in modern relationships—in family relationships, and in marital relationships, the aloneness of the individual existence as a basic condition of life. Although we find this theme throughout Ōba's early works, conceptualised and illustrated from all angles, her subsequent works developed it to levels not seen in *Sanbiki no kani.*

That first novel arrived on the scene with an impact of a kind never seen before in Japan, but with the benefit of a view across all of Ōba's work, we can observe now that *Sanbiki no kani* was but one entry into the narrative world she envisioned.

Another entry was her return home. Touched upon briefly at the beginning of *Sanbiki no kani,* her memories of home constitute the basic framework for the

stories that shape her later work. The stories thereafter have at their core a longing for home ground—for all that has been left behind—a feeling all too familiar to any expatriate "in exile," or refugee. For Ōba, writing is a form of self-examination, an imaginative return to the place from which we came, and a journey in search of the self. This journey leads the writer back to her families and relatives and further back to the beginning, to the man/woman relationship, and to femaleness itself.

One more entry into the world of Ōba's work is through folklore and legends. Her novels include many allusions to and passages taken from Japanese and world folklore, such as tales from Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm, classical literature, and historical accounts. Beyond these references and quotations, her stories themselves are told like folklore.

Higusa (Fireweed, 1969), for example, based on a native Alaskan legend, uses the style of fable to shield its credibility from question. It tells the story of the conflict between Thunderbird, the patriarch of the Crow tribe, and his successor and favourite nephew, Thrush. The central character, Fireweed, is a woman of the Eagle tribe, who as the story opens is carried home for her funeral. Tribal structure in the tale is based on the matrilineal family system; women belong to the household into which they are born, children are raised in that family, and the sons and nephews of the patriarch bear the responsibility for caring for the children. The strongest male is chosen as the patriarch, at which point the women are also handed over to him.

The story of *Higusa* develops through the struggle between two men when the young, strong nephew whom the patriarch expects to succeed him falls in love with Fireweed and tries to leave the house. By conceding the girl to the young man, Thunderbird tries to keep his nephew in the family, but struggles with his own jealousy and desire. In this way, the story crosses the confines of folklore into the realm of modern psychology.

The wild Fireweed, full of energy and desire, is the Crow matriarch; she seeks a young strong man to give her a child, all the while manipulating the other men of the tribe to ensure its safety. Thunderbird was tormented by his desire for the girl and his jealousy of his nephew, and finally, in an effort to prevent the two from leaving the household, he kills the girl.

The legend of Thunderbird's ancestors is woven into this work of folklore, as a fable within a fable; the narrative surface is one of legend, but beneath it is a tale of sexual desire, and of the power relationships within the family. Men and women have always attracted, betrayed, and manipulated each other—driven by the urge to mate and reproduce, and survive—a pattern unchanged since the days of our most ancient ancestors. It is clear that Higusa, a wild, sexual, and uncontrollable woman with strong desires and sense of herself, is the prototype of Ōba's mountain witch figure, the archetypal woman of Ōba's works, to be developed to her full stature and significance throughout her later writings.

Yamauba no bishō (The Smile of the Mountain Witch, 1976) succeeds in creating a space where folklore and legends connect with modern times, building upon

Ōba's work in Alaska and yet striking out in a new direction. "Let us speak," the novel beings, "of the mountain witch"—a fearsome creature of legend who lives alone in the mountains, lures men who lose their way into her hut, and after nightfall eats them while they sleep. Ōba's mountain witch can also read minds; all men fear her, but she knows all their thoughts, and pursues them wherever they run.

Witches in fables always seem to be old women, but even a witch must have had a youth, and so the author writes:

> There must once have been a time when she was a child with skin like fresh *mochi* (rice cakes) and a bittersweet scent, a time when she was a maiden who would seduce men with skin that shone like glossed silk. She must once have gouged the flesh of men's shoulders with nails which shone like seashells, suffocated lovers between her supple breasts.

From that point the story tells not of the mountain witch but of a village woman. Able to read people's minds since she was a child, the girl is shunned even by her mother. Once of age, she marries and cleverly manipulates her husband, shaping him into the provider she wants him to be. The woman always appears to be the subservient wife and good mother, but inside she is a witch, dreaming of the mountains. Even as she supports her husband, keeps the household, satisfies him sexually and bears his children, she never abandons her secret desires. Her story presents us with a metaphor for the modern housewife, oppressed and confined to her role in the home and family.

The heroine, then, lives on two levels. On one, she is wife and mother, who swallows—that is, internalises—the desires of others, lives on the leftovers, and dies before them. On the other, she is the witch, living a secret life, out of her element. The last smile of this woman, who was a mountain witch again on her death, seems to the family as pure as a child's and somewhat mysterious. She has read the minds of her husband and children, who found taking care of their wife and mother a burden, so she chose her own death. That smile was one of joy, of returning to the mountains where she belonged. It was the smile of a woman with the imaginative power to see into the characters of others from a position above her family. On this deeper level live the women of the village and the witches of the mountains alike. As the protagonist says:

> To be a witch who lives in the mountains and devours men, or to live in the village with the soul of a witch . . . I once wondered which would bring happiness, but now I see that they are the same. Live up there, and they call you a witch; live down here, and they call you a fox-changeling: that's all. They say down here that you're an ordinary woman, healthy in body and mind, but inside it's all the same.

The protagonist here mirrors, in a sense, the Yuri of *Sanbiki no kani*, and reflects at the same time the spirit of the woman in *Higusa*, who dies the victim of a man's

desires. She confronts an archetypal conflict: between personal freedom—the mountains—on the one hand, and accommodation—the village—to the needs of others, on the other. Her particular gift—her magical synthesis of mountain and village, if you will—is to transcend the binary opposition of these demands. Through this character, Ōba insists that men and women are equal and forever interdependent.

Yamauba is a heroine of the story as well as its narrator, who tells us that the yamauba lives in ourselves, the women of the sato (village). The heroine, narrator, and readers become one in our recognition of yamauba.

By the time she wrote *Yamauba no bishō,* the central themes of Ōba's literature and the vision of her narrative world had emerged clearly, with yamamba as its central heroine and metaphor. One such central theme is Ōba's search for male/female relationships, sexual desire, conception, and birth. Men and women seek each other, desire to possess and control others, conceive and bear children, and create families, but the author sees this more as a natural and functional drive for survival than a quest for modern love and self-fulfilment. Sexual desire yields the energy by which we live and perpetuate, the energy to fulfill our own ego and selfhood: In *Funakuimushi* (Ship-Worms, 1969), Ōba uses the motifs of sterilization and abortion to underline the individual's desire to survive: desire for reproduction and sterilization derive from the same desire for survival.

This transformation from the author's search for individual aloneness and the desire for the possession of the other to the more primitive, or I would say, matriarchal desire for survival, led by and centered on the desire of woman, emerges through her adoption of a narrative method integrating the experiences of many women, mainly her relatives, and multiple voices taken from legends, folktales and stories of olden times. Experiences and feelings of modern individual women become fused with those of women in stories and folktales, with blurring of the demarcation between self and other. After *Yamauba no bishō,* Ōba's works, her world of stories, move steadily from the framework of the novel to that of the *monogatari,* and further toward a *monogatari* or saga of the clan of mountain witches.

Sex and the desire to control others are themes which Ōba continued to explore throughout her life: desire as the source of life-affirming energy and selfhood, and yet a source of conflict—an enormously destructive power. We find the theme expanded in *Urashimasō* (1977), stories based on the Hiroshima aftermath. Ōba's homebound journey took her to her families and relatives in Niigata in the way a salmon returns to the original river to conceive, and from there further to Hiroshima, a symbolic final depot of Meiji modernization and the unavoidable starting point of Japan's path to rebirth after the war.

In *Urashimasō,* desire resides in the national drive for control over other nations, cultures, and civilizations, as well as in the individual sexual desire of man and woman to possess and control the other's ego (existence), and in the drive for life and survival.

The main woman character, Ryōko, is clearly depicted as a yamamba figure living in the freedom and solitude of a secluded life, away from the city and modern civilization; she is also a mother figure, manifested in the way she "consumes" her family. The mother-figure as the locus of desire is further embodied in the character of Fu, in Ōba's 1980 work *Kiri no tabi* (Journey in the Mist), the great aunt of the heroine, whose uninhibited behaviour has made her a legendary bad woman among the relatives.

In 1970, Ōba returned to Tokyo from Alaska, and her journey continued to Kambara in Niigata and on to Hiroshima, the places which became the symbolic topoi of her subsequent work. In the 1970s, the first decade of living again in Japan, Ōba wrote two major works, *Urashimasō* and the first part of *Kiri no tabi*, an autobiographical work which appeared serially in the magazine *Gunzō* from the October 1976 issue.

Kiri no tabi and *Urashimasō* are epic works written around the same time, some ten years after the publication of *Sanbiki no kani*; I see them as bringing to fruition the discovery of a new narrative structure and a new narrative discourse encapsulating all that she had written during her years in Alaska. *Kiri no tabi* and *Urashimasō* are both works in which the author—having "come home" to Tokyo, in a sense an anonymous, nondescript metropolis—directly faces the questions of where we came from, where we are going, and who we are.

Ōba summarizes the nature of her protagonist in *Kiri no tabi* when she describes her as a young girl brought up on the stories of all nations: mythologies and folktales, fables, Andersen and the Brothers Grimm, classical and modern novels. This enables her to be both a teller and a consumer of stories, the main theme of the work being her journey of self-determination as a narrator of her own life.

The metaphor of fog (*kiri*) permeates the work. For Ōba, fog was first a natural phenomenon, something that crept across the Alaskan landscape every day, shaping the moods of its people. Recall that *Sanbiki no kani* also begins with fog. Part I of *Kiri no tabi* opens with the story of a girl named Fu, who is at the centre of a foggy scene in the narrator Yurie's memory. The setting is the rural isolation of Niigata prefecture during the war; here Fu lives as she pleases, far from the wartime crisis and the drift of the times. She has a child by her husband's younger brother; her husband knows about this from the outset and her relatives soon learn of it, but she continues, unperturbed, to live with her husband. At the end she meets a tragic death, just as do all of Ōba's mountain witches. She lives, in the foggy memories of our ancestors, as the archetype of the mountain witch. Once upon a time there was a woman.

Yurie, Fu's niece, leaves for Tokyo and enters a university; she meets men, experiences love and sex, gets pregnant by one of her lovers, and has an abortion. In her conflicted encounters with men, she finds herself neither able to kill the desires of others nor give effective shape to her own. In Part II of the novel, Yurie marries, moves to Sweden and from there to Scotland, and then to America; she has an affair with a married man, becomes a mother, and follows the same

path as her aunt Fu. After her husband's death, she returns to Tokyo, to live in an isolated house in a wooded suburb; her daughter Mizuki goes to school in the United States.

All the while, Yurie is *listening*—to the stories of the men and women, the mothers and fathers of her family, starting with Fu. She reflects on her own experiences, observes her friends, her husband and the other men around her, peers into their souls, reads the world's stories in print, and fashions them all together in her mind. Desire, she learns, draws strangers together and throws them into bruising encounters, but no matter how powerful the ties of life, sex, or love may be at any moment, no resolution of these encounters can be reached so long as the underlying truth—of human nature, of the essence of relationships—remains unknown. So it is that the fog envelops us all in solitude, uncertainty, loneliness, confusion, despair and joy.

We find a certain embodiment of the author in *Kiri no tabi,* a sense of Ōba's own journey of self-discovery. It is her self-begetting story to be born as a writer, to give birth to her own Yamauba who has been hidden in herself, to let her emerge as a heroine of her story, as well as a narrator and listener of the story. To exist as both listener and speaker, as herself and as other: Ōba always held this to be the secret to her storytelling, the last trump in her hand.

The writer is born as a narrator and the narrator can be seen as the object of the narration: the narrator-author-reader integration will later be achieved in the "story beyond the story" of *Naku tori no* (Birds Crying, 1985), the sequel to *Kiri no tabi,* published ten years later.

Another important work of this period is *Urashimasō,* Ōba's masterpiece which completes the framework of her *monogatari* of her prior writings. *Urashimasō* is a work which explores the relationship between human desire and civilization, by rendering the "mountain witch"—the archetypical woman at the centre of *Kiri no tabi* and *Yamauba no bishō*—as an atomic bomb survivor. Ōba herself was working in a factory near Hiroshima as one of the students mobilized for military service when the war was lost, and the experience of entering Hiroshima immediately after the bomb was dropped can be said to have deeply influenced her writing.

The story takes place in Tokyo, burgeoning in economic growth and development as though it had forgotten the experience of war; its people seem barely to have time to gasp for air as they hurry to fulfil their own desires, even if it means the collapse of the world around them. The protagonist, Ryōko, who had seen hell in the burning ruins of Hiroshima, lives with Morito, who saved her from it, and her repatriate husband Ryū in a house in the woods on the outskirts of the city. She lives withdrawn from the real world, keeping the memory of that wartime experience in her heart—a mountain witch in her own right, who acquires and consumes two men in her determination to survive.

Morito's half-sister Yukie, who had been studying in America, then comes home and brings her American lover with her. To the three survivors, Yukie represents a new generation of Japanese who know nothing of the war. Ryōko has

a mentally disabled child with Morito; the child is cared for by Natsuo, herself an illegitimate orphan of the war: Natsuo's father was an American soldier and Morito has adopted her as his daughter.

In an effort to understand these "strangers," hidden away in the house in the woods that Tokyo seems to have left behind, Yukie ventures to Hiroshima and then back to her former home in Niigata. It is a voyage of self-discovery, across space and time: a spiritual return to Japan from the world of postwar America, via all the encounters she has with the survivors of the war. Natsuo discovers that she is pregnant with the child of Rei, the mentally handicapped child, and decides to have and raise the baby.

The story of this spiritual return to Japan, this voyage of self-discovery, is also the story of her loss of a home to return to. Those who returned to the burnt legacy of the atomic bomb, those who did not know, those who knew but acted as though they did not, erecting one new building after another—they are all figurations of Urashima Tarō, the Rip Van Winkle of Japanese folklore, returning to a world in which they no longer have a place. This sense of loss pervades the novel.

In the final chapter of *Urashimasō,* entitled "Smoke," the house in the woods is sold. Just as the youth of Urashima Tarō in the Japanese legend goes up in smoke when he opens the mysterious box he received from the Empress of the Sea, the three "outsiders" who lived in the house disappear, their whereabouts unknown, and with them all their hopes and desires. Yet the novel insists that the hopes and determinations we try to keep alive, even with the loss of others—that even the anguish and jealousy we feel—are all proof of life.

Ōba has said that from all the energy she put into the writing of *Urashimasō* came a sense of liberation, a revolution in her inner world. It was a world comprised of two sets of experiences: one of Japan—of wartime defeat, of Hiroshima and the bomb; the other of America—its hopes and hungers, its spirit of rationalism. Poised between them, she wrote *Urashimasō* to unravel the complexity of human desire, working upstream to its source to discover a new life-energy. This was the tale that Ōba absolutely had to write, a story for those who must live in the aftermath of Hiroshima. What she wanted her novel to be was a fortress of hope.

With *Yamauba no bishō, Kiri no tabi* and *Urashimasō,* Ōba constructs an imaginary space where the boundaries between our own stories and legends of old are blurred by design, where a story may be told in many voices, transcending the present and the sense of individual self. Like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, it is a fictional space for stories that are at once personal and held in common from the historical past.

In her work of the 1980s, particularly with *Katachi mo naku* (Without Shape, 1982), *Naku tori no* (Birds, Crying, 1985) and *Umi ni yuragu ito* (The Line Swaying in the Sea, 1988), Ōba pushes the stories she told after *Urashimasō* out of the fortress, destroying it as she experiments with form—with Ōba's own genre of *monogatari* narrative, what we might call the non-story, or perhaps the storyless narrative.

The departure from the world of *Kiri no tabi* and *Urashimasō,* into a new territory of narrative land of the stories of human desire, saw its fruition in *Katachi mo naku,* the work which marks a turning point in her writings and her literary world. The two central characters of *Katachi mo naku,* in which private lives and legend overlap, grow up as close as brother and sister; they each marry, and the two couples live next door to each other. Before the "events" of the novel itself, the man's wife and the woman's husband have an affair—which the central characters discover when their partners are both killed in a bus accident during a secret trip away together. Time passes in the shadow of the betrayal and the fatal accident, long and uneventful, formed of dreams and conversations without conclusions. *Katachi mo naku* is a story of the aftermath of a story, an epilogue: beginning at the end, as it were, it has neither plot nor resolution. It is, in postmodern literary terms, an "anti-*monogatari.*"

The use of legend in *Katachi mo naku,* drawn from the *Man'yōshū* classical anthology of poetry—the tales of the goddess Izanami, of the Emperor Nintoku, and the love triangle of Princess Nukata, Prince Naka-no-Oe and Prince Oama—is meant to underscore that the lives of the four contemporary characters are not unique or distinct, but rather embedded in human history; their story has already been told, in a story that dates from ancient times. The philosopher Lao Tsu declared that "all which existed before heaven and earth were formed, and all things therein, were formless and unconnected"; in this way the characters in *Katachi mo naku* are absorbed into and become just another part of nature. The distinction between self and other is blurred, the two narrations almost indistinguishable. Even as one, they never stop speaking in their innermost selves, telling of a life impelled by power beyond the conscious volition to live. Although *Katachi mo naku* clearly marks a turning point, a new departure to her world of *monogatari* without plots and stories, Ōba says it is a condensation, a simplification of the essence of her previous work.

Naku tori no, extends, on the other hand, the tale of Fu in *Kiri no tabi,* the archetypal mountain witch in Ōba's world, to a kind of family chronicle. Fu herself is long gone; Yurie is now a middle-aged author, and the story turns upon the life of Fu's daughter, Mizuki. It is a family of mountain witches, each living in what Fu once called "the dark confine" of the interior life, each with a link to Fu, each finding compromises between her own desires and the desires of others. The family chronicle is a tale of ties without beginning or end, transcending space and time, like a light conversation on a family trip, with no particular aim or emotion.

The stories in *Naku tori no* and *Katachi mo naku* are variations of tales the reader is already used to hearing. They use the basic material we find in *Urashimasō*—of victims living through trauma and surviving—but seem to have no main character, no subject. The protagonist is dead, and that story is already legend. In this meandering tale without beginning and end, not even Ōba's previous "narrated narrator" is clearly defined. This in turn leads her to *Umi ni yuragu ito.* With the use of the silent fisherman as the narrator of that story, her fictional *monogatari* world undergoes a further transfiguration.

Umi ni yuragu ito tells of the friends and neighbours the author knew during her years in Alaska. There is a certain sense of reassurance in the author's revisit to Alaska, as though the Urashima Tarō of the folktale, transported back to the village of his youth and disappointed there, were to find his way back to the Dragon Palace beneath the sea.

The story has a light and casual joy to it, a sense of liberation from all desires. The anguished narrator of the earlier Alaskan stories is gone; what this work tries to do, in fact, is to annihilate the author and narrator itself. The stories unfold as a chorus of many voices, and above that is a single anonymous voice that does not so much narrate as cast a fishing line into the sea of memories—the memories of its subjects. The author fishes dreams and fragments of stories from the bottomless, grey Alaskan sea, draws the characters into herself, even becomes them. She herself is unnamed, and it does not matter that the subjects are called by unfamiliar foreign names or by none at all.

Umi ni yuragu ito makes another significant shift from *Naku tori no*. The author is driven, not by the urge to tell a story, but by those stories that have not been told. The *monogatari* becomes a kind of requiem for the people who have died without having spoken or been spoken of, a fishing line in a sea of anonymous dead memories, stretching on to the hereafter, to the netherworlds of death.

In the author's vision, the rootless wanderers actually living on the Alaskan shores become primordial figures emerging from the fog. The figure of the mountain witch also appears, but here she is not a woman living only to fulfill her own desires, but rather a sorceress who internalizes the lives of others and serves as a conduit for their voices. The world of the *monogatari* unfolds like a scene of small creatures dotting the landscape, which stretches deep into the ancient forest, shrouded in the fog. Alaska revisited, after journeying back to Kambara and Hiroshima, is now transformed as the locus of a nameless primordial power.

Urayasu uta nikki (2002), a book of tanka poems and essays, stands out as a representative work of the Ōba's last ten years. It was in the years of confinement in her house and in bed after she had a stroke in 1996 that another turn and transformation of her *monogatari* world gradually formed a clear shape.

What has changed most drastically in this last decade is the way she handed her *monogatari* to her readers. Ōba narrates and Toshio writes it down. Her daily life is spent in the combination of Minako narrating and Toshio writing it down, and Minako imagining and Toshio recording the daily life matters in his dairies; and Minako dreaming while Toshio works at his daily chores: cooking, doing dishes, laundering, shopping for food and household necessities. He has been a meticulous and tireless recorder of everything in their life. Minako, who had not kept diaries, used to say her *monogataris* are her diaries, but Toshio tells us that many stories and episodes are taken from his dairies and that in her last years Minako used more often to ask him to read entries from his diaries. Already in the stories in *Umi ni yuragu ito,* the stories which were written a few years before she

fell ill, the narrator is an anonymous fisherman, fishing the stories of people from the deep sea of human unconscious and memories.

It seems to me that the formation of the anonymous narrator as a fisherman (or fisherwoman) was made possible as her dependence on Toshio increased for her survival, not only physically but as a writer. Toshio's impeccable care and undoubted devotion to Minako as a woman and writer was what Yamauba would have desired. According to Minako, men and women live controlling and being controlled by each other, not really understanding each other and not giving up their own desires and freedom, despite the fact that they desire with passion to control each other. Ōba used to insist that men and women are different creatures; they meet and desire each other and form a kind of connection at a certain time of their life, but they never understand each other truly and they can never be one existence. Ōba's works written in her last ten years, however, could be seen as the products of the man and woman, Toshio and Minako, merging into each other to become one existence.

In her last days of life and of writing, Ōba could become a pure narrator, a medium for all human stories, but this was made possible because she had fulfilled her desire to be the yamamba, the desire to possess a man who desires to be caught by her. Thus she completed and perfected her world of *monogatari* with the central figure of Yamauba, herself, as the narrator and heroine to be narrated at the same time.

Ōba at Urayasu is not seen by the readers, but is only presented through Toshio's typewriter. Ōba there is a dreaming Yamauba: although narrating endlessly, she is a medium, whose empathy for those whose stories have gone untold led her to surrender her role as a narrator and relinquish that power to another voice. In that sense, when her work is considered in stages, those of her declining years stand out as distinctly symbolic. The works of that period exist only as what she dictated to her husband Toshio, a seamless blend of narrating and writing, of living and being made lived, their two voices that in the end become only the diaries of his time as her care provider.

This is the final metamorphosis of the narrator, and the perfection of Ōba's discourse. She had exhausted herself in the effort to bring into being a unique fictional space, a story (*monogatari*) "fortress" to unite living and writing, the world and the self—and then demolished it with a "*monogatari* without story" anti-story and a vanished author, an epilogue in which the silent fisherwoman and the author are one. Finally, the narrator becomes the sorceress, her presence known to us only in the echo of her husband's written words; her voice, too, is absorbed into another's. Ōba's fiction itself becomes legend and fairy tale. "Once upon a time," the narrator says, "there was a woman."

Through the exceptionally large canon of her works we see that Ōba created a grand saga of yamamba, and an archetypal woman with unshakable desire for life, selfhood, and self-expression emerges: it is the *monogatari* in which every episode starts with "Once upon a time, there was a woman." All the women in Ōba's

monogatari are descendants of Yamauba, who narrate their stories possessed by Yamauba in a process of medium narration. There the speaker, the listener, and the reader immerse themselves alike. The distinction between narrator and audience, between long-dead protagonists and modern characters is blurred. The narrator is a conduit for many voices, and the author is unseen. Only a writer-fisherman who records the narrator's stories is seen. Ōba's expression and assertion of self, paradoxical as this may be, is not "I am such-and-such a person," but rather, "I am the sounding-board for the voices of all the men and women whose stories have come down to me from the past." It seems appropriate indeed to talk now here at Rutgers of Ōba's life and work, made coherent by *mukashi onna ga ita.* From *Sanbiki no kani* to *Urayasu uta nikki,* from Alaska to Urayasu, from a writer to a narrator, from a wife to Yamauba, Ōba's life and literary journey took her far on its itinerary and back to her original starting point in the legendary beginning: once upon a time there was a woman.

What Ōba has achieved, I believe, is a benchmark for contemporary women's literature, and more: it takes its place beside that of Faulkner and probably Ōe Kenzaburō—whom she herself revered—in the great canon of modern fiction as a whole.