“Placating the Dead: Folk Rituals and Recurring Life”

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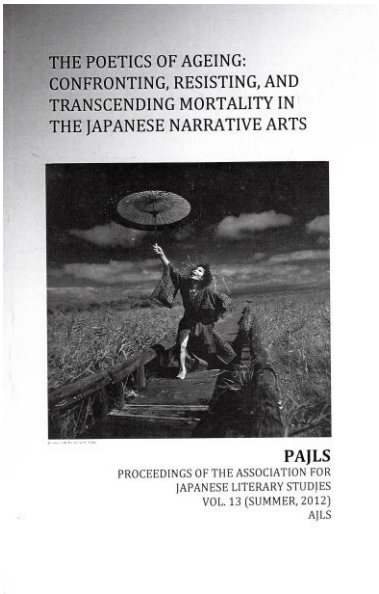

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Placating the Dead: Folk Rituals and Recurring Life

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Disaster and Literature

Since March 11 of 2011, I have had a restless urge to state something, and yet at the same time, I have felt that I have nothing to say or that words do not suffice for this situation. This is perhaps more so because I am a scholar of Japanese literature who studies classical works. In the aftermath of the catastrophes of March 11, Kamo no Chōmei's 鴨長明 (1155-1216) *Hōjōki* 『方丈記』 (1212) has often been cited for its depiction of earthquakes and natural disasters in the late twelfth century. Compared to Chōmei's descriptions, March 11 was truly an "unprecedented disaster" due to the explosion of the nuclear reactors, something which of course was irrelevant at the time of the *Hōjōki*. And yet we also see similarities between the urgency with which the disasters of the *Hōjōki* are described and the efforts of contemporary novelists and writers to publish their versions and visions of post-March 11 Japan.

The explosion of the nuclear reactors in the Tōhoku region caused widespread radioactive contamination, leading to the pressing issue of contaminated food. After a nuclear disaster, one would expect that the most urgent need would be to secure the survival and health of those exposed to nuclear fallout; yet the response of the Japanese government was to immediately raise the "safe" level of lifetime exposure to twenty times above the former allowance. For most Japanese, the degree of danger was difficult to ascertain since the government repeatedly affirmed that radioactive contamination would not immediately impact one's health.[1] Certainly, there may have been no immediate risk of death since internal exposure takes a considerable amount of time before

[1] In their attempts to reassure the public about the state of the nuclear reactors, representatives of the Japanese government often stressed that there was "no immediate threat to health" (*tadachi ni kenkō ni eikyō wa denai*) in the press conferences by the Chief Cabinet Secretary, Yukio Edano.

becoming fatal. But clearly these announcements were aimed not at saving lives but at ensuring a swift economic recovery. In view of the government's actions, many writers responded to the crisis by swiftly publishing new works that considered the problem of society exposed to unprecedented risk.

This paper will examine one such work, "God 2011" (「神様」 Kamisama, 2011), a short story by Kawakami Hiromi 川上弘美 (b. 1958-), and consider why this tale uses a bear as one of its main characters and what this choice may signify. In tracing bear representations that predate Kawakami's work, I will examine, first, a story by Miyazawa Kenji 宮沢賢治(1896-1933) dealing with the ritual traditions of the Ainu, and, second, Satō Yūya's 佐藤友哉 (b. 1980-) novel called *Dendera* (『デンデラ』2009).

Between *God* and *God 2011*

Immediately after the Great East Japan Earthquake, tsunami, and ensuing meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, Kawakami Hiromi published a short story called "God 2011."[2] The work appeared in May 2011 in the monthly literary magazine *Gunzō*. It was the author's response to the events of March 11. It was likely the first novel published after March 11 to deal with the nuclear incident. As is often the case with artistic works, Kawakami's literary contribution seemed to presage Japan's current situation.[3]

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[2] Kawakami Hiromi, "Kamisama 2011," *Gunzō* (June, 2011): 104-8. Hereafter I will refer to the first version of the story as "God" and the second as "God 2011," though a recent English translation uses the more descriptive rendering of "God Bless You." Ted Goossen and Motoyuki Shibata, trans., "God Bless You, 2011" *Granta*, October, 12, 2011. http://www.granta.com/New-Writing/God-Bless-You-2011. Later, it included in the commemorative book, *March was Made of Yarn: Reflections on the Japanese Earthquake, Tsunami, and Nuclear Meltdown*, eds. Elmer Luke and David Karashima (New York: Vintage Books, 2012).

[3] Kawakami's work caught the attention of other authors. Takahashi Genichirō states that he was impressed by Kawakami's "Kamisama 2011" and thus decided to write his *Koisuru genpatsu*. Sasaki Atsushi and Takahashi Genichirō, "Koisuru genpatsu: Shojosaku e no kaiki to shōsetsuka no honnō," *Gunzō,* January, 2012: 216-30.

Tsushima Yūko's *Higuma no shizuka na umi* (The Brown Bear's Quiet

The plot of *"*God 2011*"*is a reworking of her debut novel "God," which was published in 1993. It depicts the narrator taking a walk with a bear (referred to simply as "bear" or *kuma*) over the course of one day.

> The bear invited me to go for a walk to the river, about twenty minutes away. I had taken that road once before in the early spring to see the snipes, but this was the first time I had gone in hot weather, and carrying a box lunch to boot. It would be a bit of a trek, somewhere between a hike and a stroll.[4]

Kawakami revised the opening scene in the 2011 version to read:

> The bear invited me go for a walk to the river, about twenty minutes away. I had taken that road once before in the early spring to see the snipes, but then I had worn protective clothing; now it was hot, and for the first time since the "incident" I would be clad in normal clothes that exposed the skin, and carrying a box lunch to boot.[5]

The minor addition of *ano koto* (translated here as the "incident," but more literally rendered as "that thing") shows how a momentary event can completely transform the world. Kawakami's reference to the "incident" highlights how one thing can serve as a source of great change. The narrator and the bear see workers in

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Sea) also seems to draw from Kawakami's work. It echoes Kawakami's representation of a bear by describing a brown bear escaping an earthquake and swimming away in the icy sea. *Shinchō* (December 2011): 8-23. In the afterword of Tsushima's *Ōgon no yume no uta* (The Golden Dream Song) (Kōdansha, 2010*)*, she notes that her interest in oral stories came out of reading *yukar*, the epic genre of the Ainu. Thus, while not directly related to bears, this novel also can be seen as coming from the same set of beliefs related to bear gods.

[4] Goossen and Shibata, 48.

[5] Ibid., 37.

protective suits, masks, and waders carrying out decontamination work in the field zone. The location is close to Ground Zero and has been isolated as a roped-off area for a long time after the "incident." They discuss their dosage limits and use a Geiger counter to detect radiation after the trek. Although it is not mentioned, clearly, the "incident" refers to the Fukushima nuclear incident or possibly other, similar events elsewhere in the world in either the past or the future.

The road they traverse is now freshly paved, after having previously cracked and been left untouched. Nobody walks the streets and the cars that pass slow down and avoid the two pedestrians by making a wide circle around them. The original story similarly describes cars slowing down, but the reader assumes they are simply yielding to the pedestrians. In the 2011 version, we are led to believe the cars decrease their speed and then pass by when they see that the narrator and the bear are not wearing protective suits. This scene shows the disparity between the well-protected and uncontaminated versus the barren, polluted area. Currently in Japan, the media is focusing on how contamination may have affected crops and livestock; however, Kawakami reveals the significance of the underlying problems and the vulnerability to discrimination suffered by people seen as contaminated.[6] For example, in both versions, the bear asks for a hug after the trek. In the original version, the narrator seems to hesitate as a natural social response, whereas in the 2011 version, the hesitation implies fear of radioactive contamination from the large-bodied, naked beast. The act of embracing now involves overcoming not only social awkwardness but also fears of invisible contamination.

A novel by Takahashi Genichirō 高橋源一郎 (1951-) entitled *Koisuru genpatsu* 恋する原発 (Loving Nukes) includes a literary analysis of Kawakami's short story.[7] Takahashi uses brackets to indicate the difference between the two versions of

[6] My own friend from Fukushima has voiced her concern that the marriage prospects of those living in Fukushima might be diminished in the future due to such notions of invisible contamination, something we have seen in Japan with relatives of AIDS patients or the mentally ill.

[7] Takahashi Genichirō, "*Koisuru genpatsu*," (November, 2011). Republished as *Koisuru genpatsu* (Kōdansha, 2011).

Kawakami's story, showing what was elided in the 2011 version. According to Takahashi, the value of the revised tale is in how it can be juxtaposed with the earlier version, with missing components arising like phantoms or illusions. He suggests that children have disappeared from the story:

> If the children are ghosts, and therefore, the dead, then when and where did they die? On "that day"? Yes, perhaps, since many children died. Or, if we follow the politicians' assertions that the incident of "that day" posed no "immediate threat" to health, then these may be the dead of the far-off future. According to my reading, those beyond the protective clothing who speak to us like far-off ghosts, these "children" are the "dead of the future." This is because I see "that day" as having killed the "children" of the distant future or having prevented these children from being born.

Although the setting of the summer trek is the same, the world before and after "the incident" is completely different, and thus the meaning of the story has been transformed. The original story is based on the fanciful notion of a bear moving into the narrator's neighboring apartment, conjuring up images of a children's story; but in the 2011 version this same move to an apartment has more foreboding overtones: it can be seen as necessitated by the bear's evacuation from the mountain due to nuclear fallout.

The title of the work comes from their final parting, when the bear says to the narrator, "May the Bear God bestow his blessings on you."[8] Two months after the events of March 11, *"God 2011"*foretells the deadly reality of life in Fukushima. Kawakami included an afterward about her motivations for writing the work.

> I had no intention of standing in the pulpit and preaching against the dangers of nuclear power.

[8] 「熊の神様のお恵みがあなたの上にも降り注ぎますように」Kawakami Hiromi, "Kamisama 2011," 108, 112.

> Rather, my purpose was to express my amazement at how our daily lives can go on so uneventfully day after day and then suddenly be so dramatically changed by external events. The experience left me with a quiet anger that still has not subsided. Yet, in the end, this anger is directed at nothing other than myself. Who built today's Japan if not me---and others like me? Even as we bear this anger, we will carry on in our mundane lives. Stubbornly, we refuse to give up, to say the hell with it. For when all is said and done, it is always a joy to be alive, however daunting the circumstances may be.[9]

Kawakami's sense of knowing, yet having done little is a feeling shared by many intellectuals after the March events. Kawakami's literary approach is unique in her effort to parallel the bear god with the god of uranium. She explains the gods and the traditional beliefs of ancient Japan as follows.

> Many such gods existed in ancient Japan. There were gods who presided over all aspects of greater nature: gods of the mountains, of the ocean and the rivers, of the wind and the rain. There were gods connected to daily life as well: gods of the rice fields, of human habitations, of the hearth, the toilet and the well. Gods who punished, animal gods. There were demons, too, giants and tree spirits that ranged across Japan, from the north of the archipelago all the way down to Okinawa.
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> It would be an exaggeration to say that I believe in all these gods from the depths of my heart; yet when I wake on a heaterless morning in these days of electricity rationing and feel the warm rays of the sun pouring through my window, my immediate reaction is, "Aah, the sun god has returned." In that sense, I still retain the sensibility of

[9] Goossen and Shibata, 47-48.

the Japanese of old.[10]

Despite pledging not to believe in such notions as the myriad gods, Kawakami feels a divine presence in her daily life much like the "bear god" who blessed the narrator in both stories. Considering the variety of gods from which she could have chosen, why did Kawakami focus on a bear as a divine symbol? What might the bear signify?

Representations of the Bear God

The bear god is known as the most important deity for the Ainu people. *Kimun Kamuy Iomante* is the ceremony to see off a bear god to the spiritual realm.[11] Traditionally, an Ainu community would raise a baby bear for one or two years and then kill it and eat it communally. During the ceremony, speeches would be given to offer prayers to the bear god and to repeatedly beg for forgiveness on behalf of the weak and vulnerable humans who are reliant on the gods.

The religious scholar Nakazawa Shin'ichi 中沢新一 discusses the relationship between the bear god and the people in *Chaier Sauvage II: From Bear to King*,[12] a lecture series carried out two weeks after September 11, 2001, and heavily influenced by the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Nakazawa examines a short story by Miyazawa Kenji called "The Fur of the Glacier Mouse" (Hyōga nezumi no kegawa 「氷河鼠の毛皮」, 1923). This story can be interpreted as a warning against overhunting in the northern lands. The story takes place on a train traveling to the North Pole and describes an arrogant passenger named Taichi, who wears several fur coats made from various animals. He proclaims that he will hunt down 900 black foxes to fulfill a bet. Suddenly, the train stops and twenty people dressed in beautiful white bear and fox furs board and arrest Taichi at gunpoint. A young man wearing a denim

[10] Ibid., 44-45.

[11] *Kimun Kamuy* is the mountain god found in Ainu oral literature. The bear is regarded as the king of the mountain gods.

[12] Nakazawa Shinichi, *Chaier Sauvage II: Kuma kara ō e* (Kōdansha, 2002).

jacket (thought to be a projection of the author himself) fends off the bears by telling them "Hey, bears! What you're doing is right, but there's nothing we can do about it. We need clothes to survive, just as you need to catch fish. I'll tell him to be more careful and not to be so outrageous, so forgive him this time!"[13]

Nakazawa carries out a contemporary reading of this story by interpreting it in terms of the post-9/11 political world. He sees it as a means of explaining the structure of terrorism and how this is often caused by asymmetrical power relations in the world, which discourage communication and the fair distribution of wealth. Miyazawa Kenji noted this imbalance not only within the human world but also between humans and animals. He proposed that injustices in human society are linked to the dissociation between the human and animal realms. Nakazawa interprets the white bears as terrorists who try to change the asymmetrical situation through violent means because terrorism is ultimately the only path left for the most vulnerable and weak.

Nakazawa's structural explanation for terrorism may be open to debate, but he situates his argument within the larger problem of the environment and capitalism, as seen in the title of his book, *Midori no shihon ron,* literally, "Greening Capitalism."[14] His aim is to offer an alternative to our current system, and he thus proposes the festival model, in which gift-giving is central, as one possible approach. Nakazawa has even gone so far as to found a political party, the Green Party (or Midori no Tō) which uses his new book, *Nihon no daitenkan* 『日本の大転換』 (Japan's Major Transition) as its manifesto.[15]

Returning to Miyazawa Kenji's story, it is interesting that

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[13]『おい、熊ども。きさまらのしたことは尤もだ。けれどもなおれたちだつて仕方ない。生きてゐるにはきものも着なけあいけないんだ。おまへたちが魚をとるやうなもんだぜ。けれどもあんまり無法なことはこれから気を付けるやうに云ふから今度はゆるして呉れ。』 *Kōhon Miyazawa Kenji zenshū* vol. 11 (Chikuma shobō,1974), 139.

[14] Nakazawa Shinichi, *Midori no shihon ron* (Shūeisha, 2002).

[15] Nakasawa Shinichi, *Nihon no daitenkan* (Shūeisha, 2011). In an interview appearing in the literary periodical *Shūkan dokushojin* on October 7, 2011, Nakazawa states that his recently published *Nihon no daitenkan* (2011) should be understood as the manifest of his new political party.

the bears are depicted as a warning to human society. Within northern hunting societies the bear often represented the animal world as a whole. According to the sociologist Marcel Mauss (1872-1950), animals are connected to humans based on the gift-principle, which is why people required ceremonies to entertain and placate the gods. According to the gift-principle, the act of giving occurs without expectation of return or recompense and is thus at odds with the notion of profit-earning.

In *Chaier Sauvage II*, Nakazawa explains how profit is based on asymmetrical inequality. He contrasts this with societies in which the gift-giving principal is central, which he characterizes as symmetrical. Once society is based on the construction of a king or a nation, this symmetrical relationship disappears, thus Nakazawa refers to the symmetrical relationship as the "mythological mind."

Within modern, rationalist societies, mythological thought has been banned or characterized as barbarian, making it difficult for myths to survive. The ceremonies of the Ainu over time came to lose their primary ritual functions. According to the Ainu scholar and activist Kayano Shigeru 萱野茂 (1926-2006), who attended and recorded the *Kimun Kamuy Iomante* ceremony of seeing off the bear god, the focus of the ritual shifted over time. He witnessed the ceremony eight times from 1932 to 1977. In the first two cases, scholars paid to see it performed, but from 1955 it was regularly held as part of sightseeing tours.[16] As a result, Kayano notes how some traditional dances lost their value through commodification as the performers chose to highlight those that were seen as palatable to paying guests.

Throughout the world there still remain, however, ceremonies and rituals that are clearly based on mythology. Allusion to this can be seen, for example, in Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintarō's 石原慎太郎 (1932-) notorious statement that the earthquake and tsunami were both forms of divine punishment, or *tenbatsu*. According to Governor Ishihara, the Japanese people had become greedy and selfish, and thus the tsunami represented an opportunity to purge such egoism. His statement was widely

[16] "Commentary" accompanying 1977 recording of *Kuma okuri Iomante: kami to Nibutani Ainu no katarai*, released by King Records in 1978.

criticized as being insensitive to the suffering of the people in northeastern Japan and he immediately issued an apology (a rare occurrence for Ishihara). Although it was an irresponsible and insensitive utterance to make as a politician, most Japanese shared some sense of the disaster being a measure of wrath from the gods. And support for Ishihara did not wane—during the election that immediately followed, he won a fourth term.

One right-wing politician noted how anti-nuclear activists should be seen as "hysterical," but perhaps it is those who subscribe to the idea of gods meting out punishment in the form of a tsunami who should be regarded as the most hysterical. After the earthquake, a sense of hyper-empathy pervaded due to the regret felt by those who failed to act or to even consider the inherent dangers of nuclear energy. Yet the movement opposing nuclear energy expanded only very slowly, despite the population having witnessed this catastrophic event. In part, this is because TEPCO (Tokyo Electric Power Company) is a major media sponsor, and media outlets therefore kept silent when it came to voicing anti-nuclear perspectives.

This silent mood and absence of criticism in the media infected the people with paralysis and a sense that politically contentious, and particularly anti-nuclear views, could not be openly stated. This mood can be paralleled with the postwar Red Purge, in which Communist and other so-called anti-government forces were contained. This era politically emasculated Japanese society, leaving many afraid to state their own political views for fear of death or punishment. The work of author and novel prize winner Ōe Kenzaburō 大江健三郎(1935-) provides a useful example in this context. His novels make an effort to represent this problem, particularly the series of stories that depict his homeland of Shikoku.

In reading *The Silent Cry* (『万延元年のフットボール』 *Man'en gan'nen no futtobōru*, 1967) and *Letters for Nostalgic Years* (『懐かしい年への手紙』*Natsukashī toshi e no tegami*, 1987), I did not immediately recognize this theme of fear, but I finally saw it while reading his late trilogy of works: *The Changeling* (『取り替え子』 *Torikae ko (Chenjiringu)*, 2000), *The Infant with a Melancholic Face* (『憂い顔の童子』 *Ureigao no dōji*, 2002), and

Farewell, My Books! (『さようなら、私の本よ！』 *Sayōnara, watashi no hon yo!* 2005). In *The Infant with a Melancholic Face*, the protagonist, Kogito, is often beaten and injured badly, but he seemingly never seems to feel fear. *Don Quixote* acts as a meta-story for this novel and the work is frequently cited and paralleled as Kogito's life unfolds. Based on Ōe's novel, it would seem that only people in their old age are able to act like Don Quixote. In contrast, we are presented with Gorō, Kogito's old friend and brother-in-law, who commits suicide and acts as a foil for Kogito. The attack by gangsters and suicide of Gorō seem to mirror the atmosphere that kept ordinary people from being political active throughout the postwar period, something that still continues today.

This fear and castigation of political resistance is now compounded by a fear of death related to the nuclear catastrophe, leaving people in a double-bind. I've heard many intellectuals voice their feelings of guilt at failing to act to change the situation. Perhaps we can view the bear god as representing the symbolic conquering of this guilty feeling and a breakthrough to a new state as we reevaluate our positions. Let us return again to the bear god and its identity.

The Bear as a Ferocious Animal

To clarify this point, let me introduce another example, Satō Yūya's 佐藤友哉 (1980-) novel *Dendera,*[17] which was recently made into a movie, released in June 2011. The novel can be seen as the second arc of *The Ballad of Narayama* (『楢山節考』 *Narayama bushi kō,* 1956) by Fukazawa Shichirō 深沢七郎 (1914-1987).[18] *The Ballad of Narayama* is based on tales of

[17] Satō Yūya, *Dendera* (Shinchōsha, 2009). Although *Dendera* was published before March 11, Satō Yūya has addressed the problem of a contaminated society through his writing. His recent short story *Itsumo dōri* ("As Usual") deals with food contamination. *Shinchō* (February, 2012). In the story, the mother uses contaminated ingredients to cook for her baby, while assuming that her child will die. The tale can be read as an allegory for the current food situation in Japan, with the mother representing the Japanese government and the baby the Japanese people.

[18] Fukazawa Shichirō, *Narayama bushi kō* (Shinchōsha, 1964).

Ubasute, a custom found in mythical narratives, in which elderly parents are abandoned in the mountains.

Yanagita Kunio 柳田國男 (1875-1962) described this practice in *The Legends of Tōno* (『遠野物語』*Tōno monogatari*, 1910), referring to it as the "Dendera field" (or *Dendera-no*).[19] Satō Yūya borrowed the word *dendera* from Yanagita and used it to name the village of abandoned old women. This story re-imagined the village as if the abandoned women remained alive in the mountains.

According to the story, at age seventy, old men and women would go to the mountain with hopes of entering the Pure Land. When one woman, Mitsuya Mei, arrived, she chose to survive and founded the Dendera commune of women. Since it was men who created the custom of abandonment, she chose to save only women and left old men to die. Now 100 years old, Mitsuya Mei's ardent wish is to descend on the village and kill all men, and she bides her time until there are a total of fifty women in her community. The protagonist, Saitō Kayu, arrives as the fiftieth woman. When the time comes to attack the village, a giant brown bear suddenly appears at the village of Dendera seeking sources of food. The bear appears to be a ferocious animal, but the abandoned women in the commune have also left the "civilized" world and they, too, live in the mountains like animals. The final fight of the old women against the bears brings an end to all killing.

This novel is written in the manner of an oral story, similar in style to Miyazawa Kenji's narrative. The story's point-of-view is embodied by the bear as it dreams of a fruitful mountain and later lies injured, quivering in pain. The relationship between the bear and the people is not primordially adversarial. Rather, the bear is the living existence of the shared mountain. The people of Dendera do not have guns, making it impossible to kill the bear. In the final scene of the novel, Saitō Kayu runs to the village in order to provoke the bear and lead it to the village. The ending could be read in two ways: first, that the bear attacks the village as Mitsuya Mei desired, or second, that the bear is shot and killed by a village man. The movie leaves us to conclude that the bear was killed and that the primary contrast between the societies

[19] *Yanagita Kunio zenshū* vol. 2 (Chikuma shobō, 1997), 165.

is whether they possess a gun or not.

However, in the original novel, the bear narrates his recurring fear of guns, and the women comment that it is impossible to conquer a bear without a gun. The ending can thus be understood as Saitō Kayu having resisted and thereby returned peace to the mountain. Although the novel depicts numerous deaths at the hands of the bear, it leaves the reader with a sense of life's energy and vitality.

The bear in *Dendera* contrasts with the beasts described in Miyazawa's *The Fur of the Glacier Mouse.* In this work, the white bears attack the humans as a protest against overhunting. *The Fur of the Glacier Mouse* depicts the dissociation between the human and animal realms as seen in modern, ordered society, with the guns the animals carry reinforcing this separation.

In *Dendera*, the protagonist Saitō Kayu is depicted having simply obeyed the rules of the community instead of acting independently. However, after being abandoned in the mountain, she is forced to reconsider and to think for herself in order to survive. The cruelty of winter creates an imbalance on the mountain and thus the bear must attack people to survive, just as the old women on the mountain can only survive by breaking the rules of the village. Like the humans who plan their approach, the bear also muses about how to survive and how best to attack the women, suggesting that careful consideration and decision making are at the heart of both human and animal concerns. The living creatures aim for survival at any cost and the bear becomes the symbol of that quest for survival.

Ritual ceremonies held for and by living people often have connotations related to death, such as the *Kimun Kamuy Iomante* and its ritual killing of a bear. Reflection on life is equal to reflection on death, thus both life and death are connected to the bear (gods). Based on the bear representations I have just examined, it seems that the bear acts as the boundary between these two realms, as a symbol of survival. As we face the prospect of continuing with life after death and destruction, we, too, can perhaps look to the bear god for guidance and hope, like Kawakami's narrator, for its blessing.