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Noodling: Notes on the Writer Kageyama Tamio and Translation of his Short Story “Rakugo Toshi Soba”

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Introduction

The short story “Noodling” by Kageyama Tamio (b. 1947 d. 1998) mimes a *rakugo* in its rendering, while it is intended to be read, not performed live. From the onset, the title announces that what follows is a literary hybrid, and that it will be playful if not light-heartedly enigmatic. Where Toki-soba (時蕎麦 “Time Noodles”) is a well-known traditional rakugo dating from the Edo era, and a rakugo to which one of the narrators in the story alludes, Kageyama has playfully modified it to become Toshi-soba (年蕎麦 “Year Noodles”).

Word play and playfulness with language are, in fact, salient leitmotifs in the story. Ambiguous expressions and turns of phrase are employed constantly for dramatic and comical effect, as obscure personal and place names are bantered around and volleyed about as if they were commonplace.

I have attempted to translate the story as accurately and literally as possible, while capturing something of the spirit in which it is originally written — playfully and improvisationally. The expression *noodling* — meaning “fiddling around with, messing around with, or improvising music” — wiggled its way to the title of my translation.

“Noodling” is one of 12 short stories by Kageyama contained in a single volume titled *Tokyo Night Club* and published by Kadokawa in 1992. By and large the stories contain the typical elements of the traditional well-made short story, which is to say, these are stories that have a beginning, middle, and an end; there are recognizable characters engaged in recognizable actions, involved in a world that bears some resemblance to our own; and so on. Yet they also contain elements of experimental literature — self-reflexiveness, disruption of chronology, fragmentation, and attention to metadiscourse.

Striking a balance between the predictable — a manageable, self-contained story with a conventional structure — and the totally unexpected, inviting interest, surprise, and

active participation by readers, the *Tokyo Night Club* stories are on the whole thoroughly middlebrow (*chûkan bungaku*). They have the broad appeal of popular literature (*taishû bungaku*) but incorporate many of the sophisticated literary devices that challenge artistic boundaries of serious literature (*jun bungaku*).

It is widely accepted by literary scholars and culture critics today that the presumed differences between high- and lowbrow culture have been based not so much on any objective standards as on ideologically-driven criteria. This is as true in Japan as in the West. Donald Keene notes, for example, that several of Kawabata's novels are discussed together as his middlebrow novels, in contrast to his works of pure literature, though it is not always easy to distinguish the two categories. Keene explains: "Usually the distinction is made not so much on the intrinsic content of the works as on where they were first published; a novel serialized in a serious literary magazine like *Shinchô* or *Gunzô* is automatically considered to be a work of 'pure literature,' but a work serialized in a newspaper (especially a newspaper published elsewhere than Tokyo) or a magazine aimed at women readers is likely to be dismissed as 'middlebrow'" (653).

Kageyama and others of his generation, such as Yoshimoto Banana, Murakami Haruki, Akagawa Jiro, and Miyabe Miyuki, have frequently published in popular magazines and newspapers, as did writers of the preceding generations, such as Soseki, Tanizaki, Mishima, and Kawabata, who also published in prestigious literary journals. However, publication in the popular press has not tainted the reputation of Kageyama's generation, as it threatened to do to the reputations of its predecessors. The line which once separated highbrow from lowbrow had been blurred, if not completely effaced, producing a dynamic cultural landscape through which Kageyama's generation plied its trade.

Kageyama is representative of a generation of writers who had enthusiastically taken up the challenge of writing literature in a cultural market place crammed with fast-paced hyper-entertainment — television programming, video and arcade games, power-shopping, Hollywood blockbusters, *manga*, *anime*, pop music, music videos, as well as a unique and ubiquitous Japanese variety of electronic copywriting and signage. In fact, Kageyama and his generation did not simply take up the challenge of competing against these forms of entertainment, they were fully complicit in their production — in Kageyama's case, as screen writer, copywriter, actor, singer, pop music translator, and *terebi tarento*.

A number of Western writers have participated in film making (as screenwriters and occasionally as directors, consultants, etc.), but they are first and foremost identifiable as "writers." This is not necessarily the case with Kageyama and many of his generation,

who wear the hat of the terebi tarento, the copywriter, or the pop songwriter as comfortably as they wear that of a writer. Consequently, there exists a comparatively high rate of creative transfer between these mediums.

Anime and manga, video games, and popular film emphasize action (movement), striking images, and emotional impact, while barely touching upon “complex issues” like plot development or psychological, philosophical, and socio-political considerations; these are precisely the issues in much of the literature of the generation of writers preceding Kageyama’s but lacking in his own. Director Miyazaki Hayao — “anime’s first genuine auteur” (Sato 50)— serves as a notable exception among anime producers and directors, as he explores these kinds of issues regularly. But even for Miyazaki, action, striking images, and emotional impact are given special treatment, and it is primarily these elements of anime which have had a powerful influence on Kageyama’s generation of writers.

In addition to borrowing the emphasis on action (movement), striking images, and emotional impact found in manga and anime, Kageyama employs flair, irreverence, and humor, which sets him apart from not only the previous generation of writers but most of his own. Kageyama’s literary explorations go far enough to pique readers’ interest, but not so far as to disorient them. The language is often foreignizing and estranging yet paradoxically it is also comfortingly familiar.

Noodling (Rakugo Toshi Soba)

By Kageyama Tamio, Trans. Thomas Jaques

As the world has changed in untold ways, so too culinary preferences have changed considerably from yesteryear. One hates to mention such an indelicate matter from the onset, but as you probably know, that which is commonly referred to as … er … vomit is also quite different now than it was just ten years ago. Undoubtedly, it has made for exasperating work over the years for the station employees who clean it up from the stairs and platforms with sawdust. According to them, vomit in the old days, especially the stuff let loose just before the last train, was composed mainly of noodles, invariably some variety of *ramen*, the sort made with Chinese egg noodles making up the majority of these.

“Ah, yes, feeling … HICCUP … pretty good now, I’d say. And we can’t … HICCUP … ignore tomorrow. Yep, yep, one more drink, then we’ll call it a night!”

“No, no, Boss, not so soon! First, how about a bowl of ramen? Yeah, that’s what we should do. There’s a tasty shop up ahead. You know, a little ramen to sober up. Then we’ll call it a night.”

This used to be the usual course of events up until not long ago. But the purpose wasn’t to sober up, because after going into a ramen shop, you would end up ordering beer. Moreover, and this is a point well worth mentioning, the beer at ramen shops customarily comes in large bottles. In this day and age, you don’t often come across the large ones in the city; most shops just serve medium-sized bottles. It’s only the ramen shops that serve the large ones. You drink one down while waiting for your ramen, and since you’re already half in the bag, you’re guaranteed to receive a knockout blow. After leaving the shop, as you run to the station platform for the last train, you start to feel queasy. Station employees clear away the result with sawdust.

Oh yes, that scenario certainly has changed. In particular, the variety of ramen you can get these days has decreased; we hardly ever come across vomit with *naruto* ramen in it, for instance;¹ at best, you might come across vomit with Sapporo-style bean sprout ramen. Well, whatever the case, there simply is not much ramen. Instead, what you find is vomit with pizza, *nikujaga* stew, and french fried potatoes.² I’m sorry, this is all so … how should I put it … *tasteless*! On the other hand, perhaps it’s best not to think too much about the taste of vomit, whether it has more or less. Which reminds me, don’t you think pizza vomit looks pretty much the same as pizza in its original form?

Now, this is really going back a ways. Back then, if you were in the mood for a bite to eat in the wee hours of the night, you had to work a bit harder than now to conquer your hunger pangs, as eateries and such were not open particularly late, being an era when night came rather early. You had to go to the *yatai* open air stalls. When I was a boy, even in bustling Tokyo, late at night you had to go to the *yatai* which came around selling what was called *naabe yaaki udoon* — “Hot Pot O’ Noodles” to you greenhorns. I heard they were relatively new to Tokyo and, as you might expect, they sold mostly *soba*.³ When they first showed up, they served something called *ni-hachi* *soba*—one bowl for two times

1 *Naruto*: fish paste cakes.

2 *Nikujaga*: braised meat and potatoes. The main ingredients are *niku* (meat) and *jagaimo* (potatoes); included among the other ingredients are sugar and soy sauce.

3 In the original, not “Tokyo” but “Kanto,” the region in which Tokyo is located. I make the substitution in the translation to underscore the friendly cultural rivalry between Tokyo and Osaka, which is understood by the average Japanese reader but would likely go unnoticed by non-Japanese readers. The rivalry is a prominent leitmotif in this story.

eight, or sixteen *mon*.

And then there were many yatai called *atariya*. By the by, they weren’t named *atariya* after the flimflammers who would jump out in front of cars for injury money, which had become quite widespread in Osaka at one time, as you might be aware;⁴ rather, they were called that because they drew attention to themselves with paper lanterns with archery targets painted on them; you know, the type with an arrow stuck in the bull’s-eye.⁵

Those yatai located at riverbanks and other busy places for drunken denizens of the night prospered quite well. This is where the famous *rakugo* “*Toki-soba*” comes from, though it is not known very well these days, given that more than some one-hundred years have passed since you could get a bowl of soba for two times eight, or sixteen *mon*.

But today, for the most part, yatai soba stalls are not found even in the entertainment districts. Take Shinjuku, for instance, where maybe you can find *tako-yaki* and *oden* yatai; or if you go to Ginza, perhaps you can find yatai that serve *isobe-yaki*, which is, to add insult to injury, totally unsuited to consuming with alcohol before going home.⁶ Simply a hateful combination!

So, what do you suppose happened to the yatai soba stalls from yesteryear? Well, they haven’t completely disappeared; rather, they’ve evolved, into soba stalls in which you stand while eating; they’re located at station concourses and platforms. These *tachigui* soba stalls, which strangely whet your appetite, by the by, are not necessarily limited to places to go to get drunk.

At the end of a work day … “Yep, yep, no standing around drinking today. I’m going straight home for dinner tonight!” This firm decision you’ve come to lasts all the way until you get to the station, where the smell of the soba broth wafts out from the area around the turnstiles and tickles your nose — ahh! As you think about it, your feet head for a *tachigui* soba stall on their own accord. When all is said and done, you end up eating something like *kakiage* soba.⁷

4 In the original: not “Osaka” but “Kamagasaki.” Kamagasaki is one of the largest slums in Japan. Located in the south end of downtown Osaka, Kamagasaki is a one-square kilometer city within a city. It is the home to some thirty thousand day labor workers, some three thousand homeless, and close to ninety *yakuza* (Japanese Mafia) offices.

5 “Right on target” is a fairly literal translation for *atariya*, which these days can refer to the situation in which cars intentionally jump out in front of unsuspecting motorists as a scam.

6 *Tako-yaki*: “octopus balls” made from a pancake-like batter with small pieces of octopus; *oden*: a kind of stew which includes *naruto* fish cakes, boiled eggs, *daikon* radish, *konnyaku* yam cakes, and more; *isobe-yaki*: toasted rice cakes wrapped in laver.

7 (*Yasai no*) *kakiage* *soba*: soba topped with mixed, chopped vegetable tempura.

“Man, that sure hit the spot. But, I’ve still got some room in the ol’ gullet! What the hell, why not just a quick drink before heading home?” — A forgone conclusion.

You wouldn’t expect it to taste so good. But it does. The reason is that the tachigui soba noodles are not boiled after customers come in. Rather, after taking your order, they reheat the parboiled noodles in hot water. Nonetheless, it’s a puzzle how these tachigui soba stalls at the station arouse your appetite.

“Welcome! Come in, come in!”

“Yes, yes, let’s see … How about a bowl of *tempura* soba.”

“Coming right up. One *ten-so* for the gent!”

“I hate to put you out, but could I trouble you for a glass of water. I had a few drinks before, so my throat’s a bit parched. Gosh, I don’t think I can stand it much longer.”

“I’m sorry, but we have a self-service water cooler over there by that wall. Please help yourself.”

“That’s quite alright. Oh, this must be it. Say, this is really something — water glasses at a tachigui soba stall at the station made of real glass—a first for me. The other stalls use grimy plastic cups, scratched to hell, if you know what I mean. Glass is simply incomparable. The sensation you feel when it kisses your lips is almost beyond description. Mmm … this water … from this glass … like the melted snow of Mount Fuji.”

“I don’t know if it’s all that great, but thanks anyway.”

“Not at all. But it really is good … the … *mood* it puts you in. By the way, I haven’t come here to Shinjuku for quite some time, seeing as how I don’t have any business or anything like that in the area. I see that things have really changed at the central entrance to the underground. And I didn’t expect food stalls to be lined up like this behind the turnstiles. It really is splendid.”

“Yep, well, there are a lot of passengers on the Chuo line, especially when the ski season comes around; we get real crowded then.”

“Yes, that I understand. But what about the grungy places, like the curry shops and hamburger joints? I mean, the ones at the station are horrible. I can’t believe they ever get busy. Besides, as you know, leisurely slipping in a bowl of soba is the perfect thing to do before taking the Yamate-line home; certainly better than pigging out on a pork cutlet at a curry shop and *boarishly* riding the train home.”

“One *ten-so* for the gent. Your *pay-cents* is appreciated.”

“Oh, my. Would you look at this. How excellent! And, looky here, at these disposable wooden chopsticks. Yes indeed, this establishment is really something. Not only the

water glasses, but these chopsticks are tip top, too. Just what the doctor ordered. You know, the other shops give you chopsticks that split unevenly — as bad as 70:30. Yep, one becomes quite pointed. You know the type, the kind you end up poking yourself in the eye with while you gobble down your soba. And another thing, aren’t those stunted little chopsticks at Hokaben just dreadful!⁸ They’re made of some kind of weird soft wood that snaps — PEKEEN! — right when you’re in the middle of eating your lunch. It makes me feel like I’m being cursed. My god, it’s horrifying. I can’t stop myself from holding a *Mizukokuyo* service for my unborn kids.⁹ Compared to those chopsticks, these ones are excellent! I’d say they’re made from Kiso Valley cypress. They are, aren’t they?”

“They’re really nothing all that special.”

“Oh, and what do we have here, a ceramic *don* bowl? Like they say, the meal is defined by the vessel from which it is eaten, which in my view happens to be quite true. This pottery is the real McCoy, too. There are so many plastic ones these days. Well enough, if it’s plastic you want; in that case, go to Saitama on the Keihan-Tohoku line and get yourself some tachigui soba at the station there. They use styrofoam don bowls, just like the Maruchan brand ‘Red Fox’ and ‘Green Raccoon’ bowls of instant ramen.¹⁰ They’re horrible! But here the don bowls feel weighty in your hands. A real pleasure, if you ask me. And this *is* most excellent pottery. Might it be made by someone famous — say, someone like Bernard Leach?”

“We’re just a run of the mill tachigui soba stall, not the Ohara Museum of Art.”¹¹

“Oh, I’m just messing with you; I wasn’t really thinking that. By the way, Miss, how’s your spice?”

“Excuse me! Oh, of course, yes, there’s some *shichimi* on the counter. Help yourself to the leeks, too.”

“Perfect! This shichimi is right on target. These days the condiments are awful at most tachigui soba stalls. Instead of shichimi, they give you *ichimi* red pepper. And, man, is it R-E-D! But, hey, I’m not Agata Morio; I don’t have time to consider elegies in

8 Hokaben is a moniker for the Hoka Hoka Bento “boxed-lunch” chain store, whose chopsticks are a bit shorter than standard issue disposable wooden chopsticks (sized this way in order to fit into their own disposable plastic boxes); the sense is something like Mickey D’s for MacDonald’s.

9 A chopstick breaking while eating is bad luck, a kind of superstition in the Shinto tradition, not the Buddhist tradition, of which the Mizukokuyo service is related.

10 Red Fox: *Akai Kitsune*, Green Raccoon: *Midori Tanuki*.

11 The Ohara Museum of Art is located in Kurashiki in Okayama prefecture. The first museum of modern art in Japan, it opened in 1930.

red, if you know what I mean.¹² For soba, it has got to be shichimi. Take the sesame seeds and laver and whatnot out, and it just isn't any good. Then it's like *ichimi*, like a gang of violent thugs attacking your tongue. Oh, and look at these leeks; it looks like they've been properly minced and marinated. Gosh, this warms my heart.

"Let's just say that I'm a Tokyo-ite from the old school. So, I'm tellin' ya, it's beyond me what's going through the minds of those guys from Osaka who put green onions on their soba.¹³ Nope, you didn't see that sort of thing around here until the Tokyo Olympics. After then, that nonsense really started pouring in. Sometimes I think about whether or not I should set off a bomb somewhere between Osaka and Tokyo, someplace like Sekigahara; you know, on the Tokaido-line Bullet train tracks."

"You don't say. But your soba's ready. Better hurry up and eat it before it gets soggy."

"Bottoms up! Oh, just a moment, you've already put in the marinated leeks for me. Pardon, Miss, isn't this shrimp tempura?"

"Yes, we use Shiba shrimp in our tempura. If you prefer vegetable tempura, then all you have to do is ask."

"Oh, contraire! I'm not complaining. In fact, I'm really moved. I feel like ... like Hoshi Hyuma on the pitcher's mound.¹⁴ You know, these days the other tachigui soba stalls serve tempura soba with just a smidgen of chopped veggies tossed in. Nothing is more irritating than that. I mean, it makes me really angry when all they have is carrot and burdock root in it, that nonsense they pawn off — or should I say *prawn off*? — as tempura soba. But, how excellent to have Shiba shrimp from Tokyo Bay! Yes, my darling little shrimp, oh, how I've missed you ..."

"Is everything all right, Sir?"

"Quite fine. Just right, in fact. Now, as I was saying, Miss, and please don't be angry at me for saying this. Getting angry isn't good for you, you know. Well, just before, when you were bringing this don bowl over, your ... er ... what should I say ... fingers were diddling in the stock. Oh, no, no, I'm not saying what you're thinking. I'm certainly not

12 Agata Morio: performer, song writer, director, and producer. Agata had some pop hits in the early to mid 1970s; "*Sekishoku Elegy*" ("Elegy in Red") was his first. Agata is perhaps as recognizable to the average reader in Japan as, say, Michael Nesmith would be to the average American reader.

13 In the original, "Kansai" rather than "Osaka." Osaka is in the Kansai area (cf. nn. 3, 4).

14 Hyuma Hoshi is the boy protagonist in a perennial and oft recycled manga/anime drama about a father and son who devote their lives to baseball.

complaining. You know, at most tachigui soba stalls, the ones who bring your soba over are middle-aged housewives working part-time. Now, look at you, Miss, you’re probably not even twenty years old yet, are you? Your fingers are different from theirs. How to put it? … Ah, yes, your fingers are more like a band of five sweet white fish. Diddling them in the bowl like that gives one a good feeling about the stock. Yes, yes, the young ones, how wonderful! … S-S-S-SLURP … mmm … this soup is good! Absolutely delicious. And the stock is double-dipped with Tosa bonito flakes, too, it would seem. I’m telling you, I know my soba just by looking at it, even though I may not look like I’m in any kind of condition to make expert judgments at the moment. Yep, yep, I eat it all the time, so I can tell if it’s good or not with just a sip. You almost never come across the double-dipped stock at tachigui soba stalls. Add to that, with your pretty little fingers diddling in it, it’s triple-dipped! By the way, Miss, how old did you say you were?”

“I’m twenty-one.”

“How excellent! You know, as Paul Nizan — that conceited bastard! — would say, something to the effect that being just over twenty is the most beautiful season in life. Ah, yes. … Oh, I guess I should get down to business here … S-S-S-SLURP … S-S-S … mmm … oh, this is good, absolutely delicious. The noodles are nice and firm, too. And they have an excellent girth — not too thick, not too thin. These days, it’s hard to say if it’s soba or *udon* noodles they’re serving you, even though they’re handmade; but these ones here … their thickness is just right. Yes, these ones are precisely thick enough to be called soba.

“And look at this tempura. Shiba shrimp from Tokyo Bay, you say, right? These days, you just can’t tell where the shrimp are from by looking at them. A travesty! The fishmongers’ll tell you, as happy as you please, that they’re tiger shrimp. Yeah, then they’ll tell you that they’re from Zamboanga in the Philippines, that they’re fresh. The shrimp, that is, not the fishmongers. Gimme a break! I mean, then they’ll tell you they’re part of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front; the shrimp, that is. But no, not these beauties; these are genuine Shiba shrimp. When you turn them upside down, I think something like ‘Sengaku Temple Station’ is stamped on them.¹⁵ Just kidding, just kidding. Pardon, Miss, why are looking at the shrimp so seriously? A-one and a-two and … S-S-S-SLURP … oh, boy, is this ever tasty. S-S-S … mouth-watering … SLURP … tasty. I just can’t

15 This station is in Shinagawa, which used to be under a part of Tokyo Bay but has been land-filled since the Edo era; Shinagawa is a convenient station to Haneda International Airport.

get over it. It's absolutely ... S-S-S-SLURP ... magnificent!"

"Oh, come off it. It can't be that good."

"Hey, I'm not just dishing up cheap flattery here. I'm being very honest. I'm saying it's delicious because it is delicious. Of all the JR stations, this is the only shop which can claim to make tasty soba. You are fantastic! Amazing! The best in Japan!"

"Why, thank you very much."

"In fact, if I had not filled up on so much booze earlier tonight, I would order another serving. That's how tasty it is. How much do I owe you now?"

"Oh, um, one tempura soba ... that'll be two-hundred and eighty yen."

"Impossible! You've gotta be pulling my leg. These days, using genuine Shiba shrimp, double-dipped broth, ceramic don bowls, these chopsticks, and shichimi spice — all for only two-hundred and eighty yen. At other places, they'd nab you for three-hundred and fifty. It's too cheap! Are you sure you didn't make a mistake?"

"No mistake. As you can see on the menu on the wall over there, it's exactly two-hundred and eighty yen."

"What do you know, you're absolutely right, two-hundred and eighty yen. This place is the ideal model of business. If you ask me, the entire Japanese economy should be entrusted to this shop. That would do the trick, don't you think?"

"We get by with these prices."

"It brings tears to my eyes — two-hundred and eighty yen! I'm going to come here every day. I'm going to eat soba here for all my meals — breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I'm determined to dine on your soba until my dying days."

"Why, thank you very much."

"Let's see now, two-hundred and eighty yen, right? Uh oh, this might be a bit of a problem — I only seem to have small change, all ten-yen coins. You see, I was thinking about making a long distance call on that pay phone over there, so I broke down three hundred-yen coins at a money-changing machine; now all I've got is a pocket full of small change, and just when I was about to make my call, I found out that the phone only takes phone cards. If you would be so kind, I'd like to use this ... CHIKA-CHEKA-CHING ... change in my pocket. It is getting rather heavy. Just look how it's pulling me down."

"It is?"

"It sure is. A bit of a pain, but if you'd let me go with the two-hundred and eighty yen in ten-yen-ers..."

"No problem. I mean, it is our business giving change; we'll take all you can give us."

“You don’t say. Well, Missy, out with your pretty little hand then. A-one and a-two and a-three … 13, 14, 15, 16, how old did you say you were again, Missy?”

“Twenty one.”

“That’s right, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, and 28. Once again, I’d like to extend my compliments. Thank you very much.” The man left in a flash.

Casually observing this scene from the pillar he was leaning against was a man who had just wolfed down an order of pork cutlets at a curry stall on the other side of the station concourse.

“What an ass, blabbing away about all that nonsense while slurping up his soba.¹⁶ What was he saying, a guy who eats pork cutlets at the station is uncouth? I don’t see any problem with that. I mean, what’s wrong with enjoying a bit of pork. And praising the water glasses like that. Yeah, they’re more like those wide mouth ‘one cup’ sake bottles with the labels scratched off, if you ask me. What else was he saying, Bernard Leach don bowls; ichimi spice is no good but shichimi is? And he was saying something about Shiba shrimp from Tokyo Bay, wasn’t he? The dimwit; these days you can’t even get shrimp outta Tokyo Bay! Broth double-dipped in Tosa bonito flakes? If only one sip told you a thing like that, it would drive that food critic, what’s-his-name … Masahiro Yamamoto … to commit hara-kiri.¹⁷ What an obnoxious jerk. My god, he even complimented the waitress for sticking her fingers in the don bowl.”

He was mumbling this on his way up to the platform and then while riding the Marui Green Car on the Yamate Line.¹⁸

“And then he starts blubbering all happy like when he hears the price is 280 yen. That really irks me. Man-o-man, what a cheapskate, saying he’s gonna go there for all his meals — breakfast, lunch and dinner! Everyone knows that if you wanna eat at the shops behind the turnstiles, you have to buy a platform ticket. If you think about it, when you add the platform ticket price to the 280 yen, it isn’t cheap. The idiot couldn’t even figure that out. Then he goes and pays the entire 280 yen with 10-yen coins. God, that really irks me. Right when the clerk was busy, he went and made a big pain of himself. I mean, come

16 Most of the text rendered in italic typeset from this point on is intended to indicate that the speaker is soliloquizing.

17 *Hara-kiri*: ritual suicide by self-disembowelment on a sword.

18 The urban lines had colorful cars before JR was privatized, one of which was the Marui Green car. The cars themselves are no longer so colorful, but the train lines are still referred to by the colors their cars once were.

on, in the middle of paying, he asks her age. What a thing to think about! How old are you, Miss? I'm Twenty-one. Twenty-two, twenty-three. What the hell was he thinking? ... fifteen, sixteen, then asks, 'How old, Miss?' I'm twenty-one. Twenty-two, twenty-three. ... Wait a minute, that seems a little funny.'

Being one to wolf down pork cutlets at a Shinjuku Station curry stall, you wouldn't want to say this fellow was particularly keen in the head — with this occupying his thoughts: “... *fifteen, sixteen, yeah, like that How old are you, Miss? I'm twenty-one. Wait, is that right?*” He was mulling over it all through Yoyogi, Harajuku, Shibuya, and Ebisu: “... *fifteen, sixteen ... How old are you, Miss? I'm twenty-one. Twenty-two, twenty-three*” Just after the train left Meguro Station, it came to him in a flash: “*Hah, got it! That rascal — giving all that flattery to the clerk, he finagles fifty yen from his bill. Well, if he can do it, then maybe I can do it, too.*”

Though he had eaten the pork cutlets just before at Shinjuku, this business was on his mind all the way to Gotanda, where he jumped off the train, just before the doors closed. While breaking down several hundred-yen coins, he said aloud, “Hey, where are all the soba stalls?”¹⁹

He wandered up and down the platform, eventually hitting upon a tachigui soba shop.

“*Yeah, this one looks good. OK, let's see, I should start off with praise — go into the shop, start off by complimenting the ... er ... the water glasses. ... Well, here goes: Hi, open for business?*”

“Yes, of course. Come in, come in!”

“Sorry to trouble you, but could I get a glass of water. Don't you have a self-serve water cooler?”

“I'm sorry, we don't have such a machine. But go ahead and pour yourself a glass of water from that there pitcher.”

“You don't say. My mistake. Is this the pitcher I should use, the old one here? *This one with the rust floating in it? Oh, there's something printed on it ... 'Anniversary for the Conquering of Lushun'...* Yes, this is old.”²⁰ *And the glasses look pretty cheap, too. Oh,*

19 Gotanda is quite a small station compared to Shinjuku.

20 The Treaty of Shimonoseki, which effectively ended the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95, gave Lushun (also known as Port Arthur) and the entire Liaodong Peninsula to Japan. Then, international pressure forced Japan to return the territory to China. In 1898 Russia leased the peninsula and the harbor at Lushun to build a naval base. Japan launched a naval attack on the port on February 8, 1904, initiating the Russo-Japanese War, which was ultimately won by the Japanese. The Treaty of

say, *they're not glass; but they're not plastic, either; they're paper. My god, they're not even new!* Something seems to be written with a marker pen on this cup: ‘… So … Shigeru….’ Would that be *the* So Shigeru?”²¹

“Sure is. I picked that one up at the Fukuoka International Marathon three years ago; it had had some kind of special drink in it.”

“Don’t tell me you’re using cups that the marathon runners tossed onto the street?”

“Actually, not; the triathletes threw these ones away.”

“On second thought, maybe I’ll pass. So, where are the condiments? Oh, this red pepper is really red. Is it *ichimi* pepper?”

“That’s only for decoration; you can’t really use it. It’s for atmosphere.”

“You say it’s only decoration, but if the pepper is that red, it must be hot.”

“I’m telling you, it isn’t. The stuff in there is only the shavings from my kid’s red school pencil I got out of the sharpener.”

“Don’t tell me you’re putting something like that in your shop. Anyway, these leeks are a nice deep green. Marinated, aren’t they?”

“Actually, we don’t serve marinated leeks.”

“Well, they have such a fresh, *green* feeling about them. That must mean they’re fresh.”

“Fresh is as fresh looks. The truth of the matter is I went to a baseball game at Tokyo Dome yesterday and got myself a piece of AstroTurf.”

“What the! Why would you put something like that on the counter of your soba stall?”

“Atmosphere!”

“Very well, then. And how about your chopsticks? Hmm … they seem a bit thinner than you might expect.”

“These are recycled *kiritanpo* skewers. I got them from the Akita-style restaurant next door and stuck them together with wood glue.”²²

Portsmouth required Russia to remove its troops from Manchuria while permitting the Japanese to hold the Liaodong Peninsula and Korea, the South Manchurian railroad, plus a half of Sakhalin.

21 Shigeru and his twin brother Takeshi were world class marathon runners, finishing admirably in the Montreal and Los Angeles Olympics, for instance. The brothers won the Fifth Beijing International Marathon on 13 October 1985, crossing the finish line at exactly the same moment.

22 *Kiritanpo* is a dish originating in Odate city in Akita prefecture. It is called *kiri-tanpo* because one of the primary ingredients resembles a samurai training spear called “*tanpo-yari*.” The rice dumpling spear is broiled over a charcoal fire, then simmered together with wild vegetables in a chicken and soy based stock. Finally, the rice dumpling is taken from the end of the broiling stick and cut (*kiri*) into bite-sized pieces.

“I see. That’s why they’re so thin. But of course the most important thing is not the chopsticks or the condiments; it’s the vessel in which the soba is served — right — and the toppings which are served with it. *Like this guy over here; he’s eating a tasty looking bowl of tempura soba. Oh, what’s this? On second thought, maybe it isn’t tempura.* Ahem, excuse me, Sir. I see you’re eating soba with some sort of topping on it. Might that be tempura?”

“Of course it’s tempura. You can tell just by looking at it.”

“Well, no. I thought it was at first, when I glanced over at it, but then as I looked carefully, I began to wonder, and that’s why I ask. So, it is, right? I mean, it is tempura soba, isn’t it?”

“Well, I said it is.”

“I suppose it must be. But if it is, then it’s awfully funny looking. And there’s something peculiar about the don bowl, too. I mean, this guy is holding his don bowl with his left hand, with his thumb making a weird dent in it. That would never happen to real pottery. You could hardly even put that kind of dent into a plastic bowl. If it was Oyama Masutatsu, sure, he could make a dent like that, but not this guy.”²³ Aha, of course, now I see. it’s styrofoam. Miss, or should I say M’am ... or should I say granny? ... your bowls are styrofoam, aren’t they?”

“Nope, just waxed paper.”

“Outrageous. Man o man, is this ever a lousy shop. Even the soba noodles are weird looking. They’re thick like kishimen noodles but dark like soba. You use a lot of buckwheat flour for your noodles. That’s why they’re so dark, right?”

“Actually, some cockroaches got mixed in when we were making them.”

“Jeez, what a thing to say. You’re kidding, right?”

“Well, today I’m kidding.”

“My god, just look at this soup — how horrifying! You can’t even tell what’s in the broth by smelling it. Yes, it does smell a bit fishy from here ... but stronger. And it is awfully dark, too. Hmm, let’s see about this: Your broth is of course made with double-

23 Oyama Masutatsu (b. 1923, d. 1994) was a karate champion renowned for his physical strength and dedication to the “martial way.” He demonstrated his strength by fighting and de-horning bulls with his bare hands (and killing several in the process) in addition to more orthodox means of demonstrating his strength such as breaking thick boards and stacks of bricks and so on with his bare hands. Oyama is the founder of the Kyokushin “ultimate truth” karate organization, which now has more than 10 million members worldwide, making it one of the largest martial arts organizations in the world.

dipped bonito broth, isn’t it?”

“Actually, not. It’s made with Vietnamese *nuoc mam* soy sauce; you know, the kind with fermented fish in it. It’s like that, seeing as how the one responsible for our cooking is Mr. Guen Ban Dom from Cambodia.”

“Then this shop is one of those NICS or NIES countries or whatever they’re called, eh?”²⁴ The tempura is the weirdest of all. It has obviously been coated with flour and deep fried in hot oil. But there is a problem with what exactly the tempura is made of. Sure, it looks like shrimp. But it doesn’t seem like shrimp. They seem to have some kind of whiskers — a bit odd. They’re more like krill that got zapped by radiation and swelled up. Pardon, Sir, sorry to keep brothering you like this, but those are shrimp you’re eating, aren’t they?”

“Yes, I believe I am eating shrimp.”

“Why yes, of course you are. I mean, if you don’t know what you’re eating, then you can’t very well eat it.”

“Look here now, I’ve been quietly listening to you all this time. Here I am, trying my best to eat, and you keep jabbering away yada-yada-yada, talk-talk-talk right next to me. I mean, what gives — the soba is too thick and dark and it isn’t any good and the nuoc mam broth isn’t any good either, huh? Well, I like it, and that’s what I’m doing here, got that. If you don’t shut up, I’m gonna pour some nuoc mam into your ear. That’s what we did when I was a soldier in the North Vietnamese army a ways back, in a unit that captured Diem Bien Phu from the French.”

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry. *Incredible, such a horrible person is coming to this shop. Am I really in Gotanda?*”

“Excuse me, Sir, you’re embarrassing this gentleman. Could you please just place your order. Otherwise, I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

“Yes, of course, that was wrong of me. My apologies. Well, his soba looked so good, my curiosity got the better of me. Anyway, how much is the tempura soba?”

“One order of *ten-so* — that’s 390 yen.”

“390 yen, you say. *That’s considerably more than the 280 yen in Shinjuku. Boy, did I ever come to a lousy shop.*”

24 NICS refers to the Newly Industrialized Countries of East Asia. The moniker fits nearly every Asian Rim economy except The Philippines. Mexico is the newest Pacific Rim NIC. NIES refers to Newly Industrialized Economies, and is now the politically correct way to refer to NICS. The reason for this is that China insists that Taiwan is an economy, not a country.

“Well, are you going to order or not?”

“Oh, yes, I guess so. Let me have a bowl of your ... *so-called* ... tempura soba. It’s just that before I order, I’d like to ask one question.”

“What’s that?”

“May I ask how old you are, Miss?”

“Why do you ask?”

“No particular reason. It’s just that at first I was thinking you’re 18 or 19. But you’re wearing a wedding band on your ring finger, so I was afraid that you married young.”

“Be serious — 18, 19! I’m over 30.”

“You don’t look it. Well, how much over?”

“Well, if you must know, I’m 32!”

“*Let’s see, tempura soba: 380 yen; waitress: 32 years old.... OK, got it. Here goes nothing:* Can I have one tempura soba?”

“Yes of course, but we only take meal tickets here. You’ll have to get one from that vending machine over there first.”

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《SUMMARY》

Noodling: Notes on the Writer Kageyama Tamio and Translation of his Short Story “Rakugo Toshi Soba”

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Word play and playfulness with language in general are salient themes in the novels and stories by the Japanese author and television talent Kageyama Tamio (b. 1947 d. 1998). The short story translated here as “Noodling” is no exception, in that word play is woven into the very texture of the narrative. An attempt has been made to render all elements of the original text as faithfully as possible in terms of both meaning and sense. One of the secondary meanings of the word *noodling*—to improvise on a musical instrument in a frolicsome, lighthearted fashion—is used in this translation to account for the sense and meaning of the word “buckwheat noodles” (蕎麦) in the title, to infuse the translation with the double entendres and other forms of word play in the original text, and to begin that translation strategy no later than the very first word.