

宮沢賢治の『蛙のゴム靴』の英訳と一考察

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The Frog's Rubber Boots

A Translation of and Reflections on Kenji Miyazawa's 『蛙のゴム靴』

George Wallace

In a forest of pine and oak trees there flowed a deep stream. Its banks were overgrown with thorns, day flowers and smartweeds. Under a cluster of a dozen or so day flowers was the home of Kan frog. A bit further on, at the foot of an oak tree, was the home of Bun frog. Just beyond the forest, in the shade of some pampas grass, was the home of Ben frog. The three frogs were all about the same age and size, and all three were equally cheeky.

One summer evening, Kan, Bun and Ben were sitting in the grassy clearing of pearlwarts in front of Kan's home, watching the clouds go by. As a rule, frogs love to gaze upon the tops of summer clouds. In fact the tops of clouds — looking like white fluffy chalcedony-like rice dumplings or grapes carved from opal — are beautiful to anyone, but to frogs in particular they are something special. They never tire of watching them drift slowly by. Part of the reason is the top of a cloud looks a bit like the head of a frog, and also a bit like its spawn in spring. Just as the Japanese like to go cherry blossom viewing and to gaze at the moon, so frogs love to look at clouds.

“They are really nice, aren't they? They're slowly turning Peneta-shaped.”

“Hmm, they're a whispery gold. Makes you think of the eternal stretch of time, wouldn't you say?”

“They certainly do. They are as close to perfection as you're likely to see.”

The clouds slowly took on the shape of the Peneta, a smooth shape which is particularly loved by the frogs. The clouds gradually started to break up, and it began to grow dark.

“Recently, *helons* all seem mad on rubber boots.” (‘*Helons*’ are what frogs call humans).

“Yes indeed, it seems like they're all wearing them.”

“I wouldn't half mind getting my hands on a pair!”

“Me, too! With a pair of those on, you wouldn't have to worry where you put your feet any more — you could even walk on chestnut burs.”

“Oh, I would die for a pair of those boots!”

“I wonder if there isn’t some way we could get hold of a pair . . .”

“There must be a way. The only problem is our feet are a totally different shape and size from helon feet, so even if we did get a pair, we’d have to do quite a bit of work on them first before we could actually wear them.”

“You’re right there.”

The clouds had all scattered and the twilight was drawing in. Bun and Ben bid Kan “Cheerio!” and swam home across the stream.

Later in the inky darkness of the night, Kan folded his arms and pondered. After a good long while he croaked twice before waddling off into the next field. In a very low voice he called out, “Mr. Field Mouse? Hello? Mr. Mouse? Are you there?”

Whereupon a field mouse returned his call and appeared before him. His face was so dark, Kan could hardly see it in the gloom.

“Good evening to you, my fine sir. I have a favour to ask of you. Would you be so kind as to hear me out?”

“Of course! I’m all ears. Please tell me how I can be of help to you. After all, I am hardly going to forget the great kindness you showed me last autumn when I fell ill after eating all those soba dumplings.”

“Well, you see, what I was wondering is this: do you think you could get hold of a pair of rubber boots for me? Don’t worry about the shape and size — I’ll fix them up myself.”

“That’ll be no problem. I’m pretty sure I’ll be able to bring you a pair by this time tomorrow evening.”

“Really? Well, thank you very much indeed! I’ll be much obliged to you. Cheerio!”

And with a big smile on his face, Kan went back home and fell fast asleep.

The following evening Kan was back in the field.

“Mr. Field Mouse? Hello? Are you there?”

The field mouse arrived, with big black bags under his eyes, looking exhausted, and sighing deeply. He was in a foul mood. Without a word of greeting, he threw down a pair of small rubber boots at Kan’s feet.

“There you are, Mr. Kan. They are all yours. But I had a right old time of it getting them for you, I don’t mind telling you. I risked life and limb, I did. I’ve paid back the debt I owe you, and then some again, into the bargain.”

And with that, the field mouse turned on his heel and was gone.

Kan was so taken aback by the vehemence of the mouse’s outburst, he stood there dazed for

a few moments. Then thinking it over, he realized the mouse's fury was only to be expected. First the field mouse had had to ask the rat. Then the rat had had to ask the cat. Then the cat had asked the dog, then the dog had asked the horse, who had had to use all his wits to get the rubber boots as he was being fitted with a new pair of shoes. Then the horse had given the boots to the dog, who had given them to the cat, who had given them to the rat, who had given them to the mouse. With everyone involved expecting the favour to be repaid before too long, and with no doubt a few choice words exchanged somewhere along the line, and with the horse getting into trouble once the disappearance of the boots came to light, yes, it must have been quite some business. The field mouse would of course been only too well aware of all this, and would have been worried sick. No wonder, then, he was in such a foul mood.

But then Kan looked at the boots, his splendid rubber boots, and he couldn't help but feel as happy as a bird, cooing over them with delight. Without a moment's ado, he set about pummeling them this way and that, fashioning them to fit his feet just so. Then, he yanked them on, and with a smile that stretched from ear to ear, he spent the whole night walking about in his new boots, until tired out, he went home at dawn and fell fast asleep.

"Kan! Kan! Get up! It's time to go cloud-watching!"

Kan looked up from his bed and saw Bun and Ben shaking him with excitement.

And sure enough, they were right: the crest of a pale golden cloud was soaring up beautifully in the eastern sky.

"Hey, you've got a pair of rubber boots! Where did you get them from?"

"Oh, I had a terrible time of it. I had to go to all sorts of trouble to get these. It was a real headache, but I got them in the end. There's no way either of you could have done it. Do you want to have a look at me walking round in them? Not bad, eh? Walking round with these on, I look a star, don't you think? Just like that whatshisname, you know the one I mean . . ."

"Yeah, those boots really are the business. We'd love to get our hands on a pair, too, but there's not much chance of that happening."

"No, not a lot we can do about that, is there?"

The cloud shimmered silvery, its peak rising up majestically. But Bun and Ben had no time for clouds now - their eyes were glued to Kan's rubber boots.

Just then a beautiful frog peeked out shyly from behind a day flower. She looked at them, blushing slightly.

"Good evening, Miss Lula. And what can we do for you this fine morning?"

"Father wants me to find a husband," Lula said, tilting her head slightly to one side.

"How about me?" asked Ben.

“Or put another way, how about me?” Bun added.

Kan didn't say a word. He just walked up and down, and back again.

“Well, I think my mind's made up already.”

“So, who's it to be?” Bun and Ben asked, blinking at her in their excitement. Kan was still busy swaggering about in his new boots.

“He's the one for me!” Lula said. Hiding her face with her left hand, she stretched out the fingers of her right hand, and pointed at Kan.

“Hey! Kan! The young lady's chosen you!”

“What's that you say?” Kan asked, looking at them nonchalantly.

“The young lady says she's set her heart on you!”

Kan rushed over to them.

“Good evening, young lady. Is there some way I can be of assistance to you? Oh, is that so? I see. I understand completely. So, when shall we set aside for the happy day? For our wedding ceremony...”

“The second of August would suit me.”

“Yes, the second of August should be fine for me, too.”

Kan looked up at the sky. The top of a passing cloud was Peneta-shaped.

“So, that's settled. I'll go home and tell everyone our news.”

“Good.”

“Goodbye.”

“Goodbye now.”

Bun and Ben were seething. In a fit of pique, they turned tail and stomped off home. They swam back across the stream, in two jumps. Meanwhile Kan's joy knew no bounds. He walked about in ecstasy, only returning home when the three-quarter moon was rising in the east.

Meanwhile Lula had all manner of things to see to; after discussing them with Kan, gradually things started to take shape.

At dawn, two days before the wedding was due to take place, Kan decided he'd walk round to see his friends and invite them to the ceremony.

But as luck would have it, it started to pour down almost at once, and continued to do so all morning. The forest was awash, and the grass in front of Kan's house filled up with muddy water. Nevertheless Kan happily set out on his mission.

The water level of the stream had risen dramatically, and the water was cloudy. Many smartweeds and day flowers were completely submerged. It was enough to make a frog afraid of even sticking a toe in. But not Kan. In he jumped with a big splash, using a smartweed as a

springboard. He swam with all his might, but the current was too strong, and he was carried off downstream. Paddling madly, he only just managed to scramble up onto the bank opposite.

He walked over some mossy ground, cut across some worm-trodden tracks, and with his rubber boots squelching in the falling rain, he finally reached Bun's house beneath the oak tree. In a loud voice he called out, "Hello, there! Anyone at home?"

"Who's there? Oh, it's you, is it? Come on in!"

"Thanks. This rain is just awful. There's not a soul to be seen out on the Passen High Road today."

"Is that right? The rain must be really bad."

"By the way, as you know, I'm getting married the day after tomorrow. I'd be really happy if you could come."

"Oh, right. Yeah, now that you mention it, a little bird did tell me about it the other day. Yeah, sure. I'll go."

"Thanks. I'll be expecting you, then. Right, well, I'll be off then. Cheerio."

"Cheerio."

Kan squelched his way back through the forest and the pampas grass until he reached Ben's house.

"Hello, there! Anyone at home?"

"Who's there? Oh, it's you, is it? Come on in!"

"Thanks. The rain is just awful today, isn't it? Not a soul to be seen out on the High Road."

"Is that so? Well, it must be bad."

"By the way, I expect you know already, but I'm getting married the day after tomorrow. Please try and make it if you can."

"Right. Yeah, I thought I heard something about that the other day. Yeah, I'll go."

"If you could, that'd be great. Cheerio!"

"Yeah, right, cheerio."

Kan set off once more through the forest, swam across the stream, and arrived back home where he could finally relax.

At just about the very same moment as Kan was putting his feet up, Bun was walking the last few steps that would take him to Ben's door.

"Hello! You at home?"

"Coming, coming. Oh! It's you! Come on in."

"Kan's been to see you, hasn't he?"

"Yeah, he has. He's a cheeky so-and-so, isn't he?"

“You’re right! Damn it, I’d just love to get one over on him, I would!”

“Well, I’ve had an idea. This is what we’re going to do: tomorrow morning, once the rain’s stopped, let’s invite him to join us for a little walk before the wedding. Then we’ll take him down to that field where all that miscanthus has been cut, and we’ll get him to walk over it. It’ll hurt us, too, of course, but we’ll just have to grin and bear it. And you know why? Because it’ll totally ruin his rubber boots!”

“Nice one! I like it! But let’s not stop there. Once the wedding’s over, let’s take them to the wheat field where that big hole is. We’ll cover it with leaves to hide it, and trick them into falling in. That’s what we’ll do. It’ll be great!”

“I like it! I like it a lot! All we’ve got to do now is wait for this rain to stop.”

“Yeah.”

“Cheerio.”

I expect you’re fed up hearing all these frogs saying ‘cheerio’ to one another. But don’t worry. There’s not much more to go now. Just bear with it a little while longer.

The following day just after lunch, when the rain had finally stopped and the sun come out, Bun and Ben went over to Kan’s house.

“Congratulations on your big day! Here we are, as invited.”

“Thanks.”

“There’s still plenty of time before the wedding, so why don’t we all go for a little walk? It’ll bring some colour to your cheeks.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Let’s go!”

“Let’s hold hands as we walk.”

Bun and Ben each took one of Kan’s hands.

“Doesn’t the air taste just great after the rain?”

“It sure does! So refreshing and nice!”

The three frogs came to the miscanthus field.

“The views are stunning, aren’t they? Let’s walk along here.”

“No, let’s give this field a miss. Come on, you two, let’s go home now.”

“What? Head back already? Having come all this way? No, let’s go a little further. Come on, don’t drag your feet.” Bun and Ben dragged Kan along by the hands, and walked him over the cut reeds, even though it hurt them like mad.

“Stop it! Hey! Stop! Leave off! We can’t walk here; it’s dangerous. I want to go home!”

“But it’s as pretty as a picture round here. Come on, let’s walk a little faster.”

Bun and Ben were keeping an eagle eye on Kan’s boots which were still holding up in spite

of the rough terrain.

“Stop it, damn you! This has gone beyond a joke! Stop! It’s beginning to hurt! Oh! Now look what you’ve done! My boots have gone and got a hole in them!”

“Isn’t this just something else? Just taste that clean fresh air. Don’t you just love it?”

“Let go of me! I want to go home!”

“Yes, the view round here really is quite unbeatable.”

“Let me go, dammit! Let me go! I said, let me go!”

“Crikey! Looks like something’s bitten you on the foot. Don’t fidget so much. We’ve got a good hold of you.”

“Let go! Let me go! Damn you! Let me go!”

“It’s really got its teeth into you, hasn’t it? It can’t be much fun. Let’s make a dash for it. Run it off, that’s what we’ll do.”

“Ow! It hurts like nobody’s business! Let go of me, can’t you! Let go!”

“You can run quicker than that! Come on, put some effort in! That’s the way! You’ll be ok now. Oh! But look! Your boots are all in shreds. What on earth could have done that?”

It was true. Kan’s boots were in a right mess, hanging in tatters from his feet, a mere scrap of their former self. Kan stood there, his face a picture of regret, his mouth firmly shut. In fact, he was trying to gnash his teeth, but he couldn’t — being a frog he didn’t have any teeth to gnash. Bun and Ben finally let go of Kan’s hands and showered him with compliments.

“You shouldn’t take it so badly — it doesn’t matter about the boots now — you’re soon to be married, after all!”

“It’s about time we got going. Come on, let’s go home. We can wait there for the wedding to kick off. How about it, Kan?”

Downcast Kan trudged off home, looking like a frog whose world had just crumbled all around him.

The three frogs all went to Kan’s, and after a while, from way over in the distance, the bridal procession appeared carrying butterbur leaves and cat’s tails flowers. As the procession drew near, the bride’s father, a frog by the name of Ganro, turned to his daughter and asked, “So, Lula, which one of these three is to be your husband?”

Lula blinked her little eyes in confusion. You see, the first time she had seen Kan, the only thing she had really noticed about him was his rubber boots. Now, with the three frogs all lined up in a row side by side and barefoot to boot, she was in a jam. All she could say was, “I can’t really tell from here — let me have a closer look.”

“That’s right — you take your time. We wouldn’t want you to make a mistake here, now,

would we!” the go-between said.

However, the closer she got, the more confused Lula became. The three frogs looked so much alike with their big mouths and their black eyes that stuck out just so. All in all, Lula was really in a fix. However, just then, the frog who had been standing furthest to her right opened his mouth wide, took a step forward and bowed. It was Kan. Lula breathed a big sigh of relief, and said to her father, “He’s the one!”

And so, finally, the wedding could begin. The ceremony was so magnificent and the party after so splendid, it is difficult to do justice to them with mere words. Be that as it may, once the festivities had come to an end, the bride’s family all went back home, just as the tops of the clouds were looking their best.

“Right! Now it’s time for the honeymoon!” Ben said.

“We’ll walk a little way with you, to see you off,” Bun added.

With a sinking feeling, Kan set off with Lula on the start of their honeymoon. And in a short while they had reached the place where the frogs had laid their trap, covered with leaves.

“Be careful! The path is not so good here. Mr. Newly-Wed, shall we lead you by the hand?”

Before Kan had time to escape from their grasp, Bun and Ben had each grabbed him by a hand, and walking carefully around the edge of the trap, they dragged Kan right over the top of it. There was a sudden slithering of leaves as Kan’s feet sunk beneath him. Bun and Ben spun round and tried to get away, but Kan held on for dear life. The frogs’ legs twitched and jerked as they struggled to break free, but it was too late.

‘Crack! Whoosh!’ They all fell down through the leaves and landed with a splash in the muddy water below. Looking up from the bottom of their hole, all they could see was a small circle of sky, and just a glimpse of the glistening top of a cloud. However hard the frogs struggled, there was nothing for them to grasp hold of to pull themselves out. Just then, Lula, displaying a knack for the 600 metres she had first learned as a very young frog, ran home to her father’s as fast as her little legs would carry her. But Ganro and his friends had all fallen into a deep drunken sleep. No matter how hard she tried, Lula couldn’t wake them. So she rushed back to the pit, running round and round in circles, wailing hot tears. Slowly night drew in.

Slip! Slap! Slop! Slip! Slap! Slop!

A new day dawned. Lula ran back once more to her father’s. But no matter how hard she tried to wake him, he wouldn’t stir.

Slip! Slap! Slop! Slip! Slap! Slop!

Night fell. Lula ran back once more to her father’s. But no matter how hard she tried to wake him, he wouldn’t stir. The clouds’ peaks shimmered.

Slip! Slap! Slop! Slip! Slap! Slop!

Another day dawned. Lula ran back once more to her father's. But no matter how hard she tried to wake him, he wouldn't stir. The clouds' peaks took on the shape of the Peneta.

It was just about this time that Lula's father finally woke from his slumber, and decided to go and see how his daughter was getting on. He found her sitting with her arms folded on her chest, her face looking pale and tired. She was fast asleep.

"Wake up, Lula! What's the matter?"

"Father! They have all fallen in this hole! They might even be dead already for all I know!"

Taking care not to fall in himself, Ganro put his ear to the hole and listened. There was a faint splashing sound.

"They're still alive!" He cried, then rushed home to fetch all his friends. They gathered some vines from the forest which they dangled down into the pit; one by one, they pulled up the three frogs from their dark dank hole. They were half-dead, with white distended bellies, eyes closed, and mouths firmly shut. Everyone brought herbs to rub on the frogs in an effort to revive them, and eventually it worked. Kan, Bun and Ben were saved.

From that day onwards, Kan and Lula lived together happily, as frog and wife, while Bun and Ben turned over a new leaf and lived a good, honest life.

Notes on the translation

When I tell people that I am translating one of Kenji Miyazawa's stories, invariably they start talking about 『銀河鉄道の夜』 and assume I must be producing an English version of it. When I inform them that there are already more than enough translations available and that I am working on one of Kenji's lesser known works, I always get the feeling the conversation is not progressing quite in the way my companion would have hoped. If I am brave enough to mention the title of the story I am working on, I usually get a blank look and a comment along the lines of, "Oh, I don't think I've heard of that one. What's it about?" In the case of 『蛙のゴム靴』 I might say something along the lines of: "It's about three friends who fall out when one of them wins a pretty girl's affections by impressing her with his fancy boots. Oh, and by the way, all the characters are frogs." Of course that simple plot summary does not do justice to the story, but I always hope it will elicit a wry smile in my companion. To my dismay, it rarely does. Somewhere I have the sneaky suspicion that if it isn't 『銀河鉄道の夜』 then it doesn't matter what you say. If it's Kenji,

it must be 『銀河鉄道の夜』 or at the very least 『注文の多い料理店』 and anything else just won't do. Frogs falling in and out of love and friendship, and all because one of them decides to start wearing fancy boots, is admittedly not on the cosmic scale of Giovanni's night train to the stars. Nevertheless there is more than enough to keep us reading, and smiling, and mulling over in our heads what a fascinating writer Kenji is.

The chief attractions of the story are Kenji's three frogs Kan, Bun and Ben. They are in many ways similar to Toad of Toad Hall from "The Wind in the Willows"; they are quarrelsome, petty, vain, and yet in spite of these failings, we cannot help but warm to them. Indeed perhaps it is precisely because of these failings that we find them so difficult to dislike — they remind us of ourselves. They are frogs, and we love them warts and all.

The story contrasts humorously with Matsuo Basho's haiku 古池や蛙飛び込む水の音. This poem is one of the few pieces that are widely known to a Western audience. It is famous as much as anything for its extreme economy, its brief, austere, Zen-like form seeming to sum up Japanese culture (or what is perceived to be Japanese culture) in a nutshell: the love of nature; the economy of language managing to convey so much with so few words; the ambiguity of the meaning behind the words; the words like the ripples on the pond reverberating long after the action described (the frog jumping into the pond); the everyday incident being imbued with a resonance that lifts it up out of the humdrum and makes us reflect on the wider world.

Compared to Basho's haiku, with its nameless frog jumping like some Olympic diving champion into the pond, making a momentary splash, before disappearing, leaving nothing but some ripples on the surface, Kenji's story is all noisy effort, full of splashing and struggling as Kan in his rubber boots nearly gets carried away by the current.

Compared to Basho's frog which inspires the poet to greatness by simply jumping into a pond, Kenji's three frogs Kan, Bun and Ben are sorry specimens, who make fools of themselves over an equally gormless female frog. They are vain, spiteful and two-faced. Which is precisely why they make such interesting characters; instead of frogs that do nothing but jump into ponds and perhaps croak in the evening, here we have frogs behaving in a way we can relate to (and of course laugh at). If Kenji had written a story about three human friends falling out over a pretty girl, it would have been rather dull. It is by making his heroes into frogs that he brings the story alive. Frogs, after all, are not the most beautiful of creatures, and so when we read of Kan strutting his stuff in his new rubber boots, puffed up with vanity like Toad of Toad Hall, we cannot help but laugh at the incongruity of the scene. Frogs are amphibians and therefore have no need for rubber boots. With their skin they have all the protection from the water of the river, the pond and the rain that they will ever need. Yet Kan's idiotic vanity makes him crave rubber boots. Frogs being vain is in

itself a wonderful conceit around which to base a story; but by making the object of their vanity such a clearly unnecessary object, Kenji has engineered a plotline that cannot fail.

The theme of vanity is one that recurs in Kenji's stories. In 『革のトランク』 the hero Heita has left his hometown in disgrace after the buildings he designed are found to be so fundamentally flawed as to be unusable (a two-storey building has no staircase). After a long stay in the capital from where he has sent letters telling everyone of his great success, he is summoned home as his mother is ailing and wants him by her side. Heita's vanity leads him to buy a large leather trunk which he hopes will symbolize his success in the big city and impress everyone back home. The irony is that Heita has nothing to put in the trunk. Just like Kan wanting a pair of rubber boots, something he does not need, simply because of how it will make him look, similarly Heita, a man with no possessions, buys a trunk in the erroneous belief it will make him look successful. In both cases, the desired object is the cause of much discomfort and pain: in Kan's case, his feet hurt when he is made to walk over the cut miscanthus, and he almost dies in the trap set for him by his erstwhile friends; in Heita's case (or trunk, even), he is lumbered with a heavy load that brings him nothing but ridicule and humiliation, as even the local schoolchildren can see how cheap and shoddy the trunk is.

In another of Kenji's stories 『土神と狐』, we see another example of vanity being the cause of a character's downfall. The fox is described as "wearing a dark blue suit fresh from the tailor's"¹ and like Kan in his rubber boots, the fox has a pair of "light brown leather shoes that squeaked slightly as he walked". He carries about a book of Heine's poetry with him and impresses the beautiful birch tree (the female interest in the story) by his knowledge of the stars and by lying that he has ordered a telescope from Germany. The birch tree is won over by him, much to the disgust of the earthgod who is a rival for the birch tree's affections (much as Bun and Ben are for Lula's). In a fit of pique the earthgod kills the fox. The trigger that makes him forget himself is "a sudden glint of sunlight on the fox's brown leather shoes". The footwear of the fox, like that of the frog, is directly responsible for his downfall. Footwear for foxes and frogs are an unnatural affectation and this weakness will prove to be their undoing. Behind the humour lies a clear message: beware of trying to be something you are not.

And yet the moral of the stories is not always as clear-cut as it may at first appear. In Kan's case, it is obvious that his boots are the trigger that set his two envious friends against him. Bun and Ben are incensed that Lula prefers Kan to them, but they never reflect on what sort of a prize Lula is. Do they really want a partner who is quite so easily won over? Do they want a partner who is so concerned with superficialities that she cannot recognize Kan without his rubber boots? They are annoyed not because Kan has won, but because they have lost; they feel slighted by Lula

and tricked by Kan. They exact their revenge but it doesn't quite work out as they intended. Indeed, as cautionary tales go, its denouement is highly unusual: the vain and devious Kan is punished for his vanity and deviousness, but like Gloria Gaynor he does survive, and in the end he is still together with Lula, living happily with the woman he was only able to win thanks to his rubber boots. He has to survive three days of discomfort in a dank muddy hole, but surely that is a small prize to pay for a lifetime of happiness with the frog of his dreams. And the punishment is shared by Bun and Ben who are dragged down into the hole too. All the frogs are equally stupid and blameworthy; none of them emerges with any credit from the story. Even the frogs on the fringes of the story are depicted in a far from flattering light (Lula's father Ganro is a drunkard).

The element of vanity touched on above combines with another favourite theme of Kenji's in the frogs' penchant for cloud-watching: the importance of the role of nature. Yet even the frogs' love of nature is narcissistic; they love gazing upon clouds and particularly value the shape they call the Peneta because it looks like a frog's head or frogspawn. In effect, the frogs like gazing upon themselves. Nature is only considered beautiful when it reminds the frogs of themselves.

The reason for the frogs' vanity is simple: the frogs are ciphers for human behaviour. They are all given human attributes and act in anthropomorphic ways (celebrating marriage by getting drunk being just one example); they are being used by Kenji to draw our attention to the fickleness of our ways. By substituting frogs for humans, the story is made humorous and the moralizing tone is transformed into a light-hearted jibe at human foibles.

And yet, interestingly, in this world where frogs act in a human way, walking and talking like humans, falling out over who gets the girl, sulking, plotting revenge, and so on and so forth, there are also humans present, if not on centre stage, then only just out of our line of sight. The rubber boots are objects of such desire for Kan and the other frogs precisely because they are the latest fashion in the world of the *helon*, the frog word for us humans. No humans make an entrance into the frogs' world in the forest, but without the presence of humans nearby, the story would not take place. There would be no boots, and thus no reason for the frogs to fall in love and out of friendship. Lula would have to use different criteria when choosing her mate, and Kan would have to do more than waddle up and down in some boots to win her heart. It would appear that the human world is partly to blame for the frogs' misfortune. Unwittingly perhaps, the humans have corrupted the natural world of the frogs, and disturbed the natural balance that would otherwise have existed there. Indeed, once the offending boots have been destroyed, and all trace of the *helon* world banished, the frogs are able to revert to their peaceful and productive lives.

The mention of the frog word for humans brings us to the topic of language, and in particular Kenji's unique way of using language in his stories to create a distinctly unusual world. One of the

most striking things about Kenji's frogs is their names. Three of the four main characters have names that are neither traditionally Japanese nor traditionally Western: Kan, Bun and Lula (the exception being Ben which is a common boy's name in England and also the name of a famous London clock). The names are written in *katakana* (the script used to write words borrowed from foreign languages) which serves to emphasize their foreign-soundingness. In many of Kenji's other stories his non-human characters are given very functional names, such as the fox, the earthgod, the birch tree, the mountain cat, etc. The difficulty with such an approach here is that there is more than one frog. Kenji's solution to this problem is inspired: he uses the opportunity to add another layer of humour. The hero is given the name Kan frog, or in Japanese カン蛙 (*Kan-gaeru*). The name is a pun: it means both Kan (the) frog, and also 'to think'. True to his name, Kan is the frog who thinks up a clever way to win Lula's heart. He is *Kan-gaeru*, the thinking frog. The problem facing any translator of the story is how to convey this pun without recourse to footnotes.

There are many other problems facing translators of this story. Starting at the beginning, always a good place to start, there is the tricky business of the title. It is easy enough to understand the meaning, but in translating it, how can we avoid the trap of making the English title only understandable to a certain section of the English-speaking world? *The Frog's Wellington Boots* would probably not make a lot of sense to anyone outside the UK. Similarly, Americans might find *The Frog's Galoshes* to be perfectly acceptable while to British readers it would mean very little at all. *The Frog's Rubber Boots* is the safest option but it is not the most natural-sounding equivalent for British readers. An earlier translation (by Kazuo Nishi in 1958) has the title as *The Frog's Rubbers*, which is short and punchy, but unfortunately might lead some readers to mistakenly assume the story was about a Frenchman's condoms.

Putting aside the title, we next come to the problem of how to transliterate the *katakana* words and names. Should it be *Rura* or *Lula*? Or even perhaps *Loula*? For fans of Eric Clapton, it would be tempting to play a little freely with the sound and have her become Leyla.

When the field mouse first appears in the story, its reply to Kan's calling out to it in the twilight is "Tsun" (ツン). From the context it is not clear what this means. Perhaps the mouse is clearing its throat; perhaps "Tsun" is a form of greeting in the language of the field mice.

The frogs' word for humans ヘロ also presents a problem. When we come to write this in English, should it become *Heron* or *Helon*, or indeed *heron* or *helon*? As we usually only capitalize a word when it is a proper noun, perhaps it would be sensible to leave the 'h' uncapitalized. *Helon* with a capital 'h' and an 'l' in the middle would be very close to the woman's name Helen. If the story were read aloud to an audience, the 'l' sound would perhaps confuse listeners who might wonder why the frogs wanted Helen's rubber boots. Similarly there would be a certain amount of

possible misunderstanding if we made it *heron* with an ‘r’ ; the frogs would appear to be aping the fashions of long-legged wading birds. In a way, it would be tempting to make it *heron*; to a frog, a human might appear quite similar to a heron, being tall, long-legged and upright.

1. The three quotes are taken from John Bester’s translation “The Earthgod and the Fox” which first appeared in “Winds from Afar” (Kodansha International, 1972)

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