“Mountain Road” was published in November 1938 in Chūō kōron 中央公論 (Central forum).¹ This was Tamura’s penultimate story before she left for China. Of the stories that Tamura wrote in the 1930s, the style of this one harks back to the golden age of her writing. In many ways it parallels her story “Lifeblood” (Ikichi),² published in 1911 in the inaugural edition of Seitō 青鞜 (Bluestocking) magazine. Both stories are vignettes, rather than plot-driven works, in which the reader is made privy to the inner thoughts of the female protagonists. In both cases, the women regret their relationships with their male lovers. In “Lifeblood,” as the couple walks through the hot humid streets of Tokyo’s shitamachi 下町 (downtown) area, the woman mulls over the night she spent with her lover and what this means. Metaphors of the sullied female body and its noxious sexual smells are replete in this work. In “Mountain Road,” again the reader is taken into the mind of the female protagonist who, as she walks with her lover down the mountain road of a hot-springs resort in a traditional Japanese onsen town, ponders parting from him. The main difference between “Mountain Road” and “Lifeblood” is that in the former, Tamura no longer includes detailed descriptions of female sexuality that were once her trademark, although the sense of loss and longing remain.

Many scholars contend that “Mountain Road” is really Tamura’s confessional about her love affair with Sata Ineko’s husband Kubokawa Tsurujirō 窪川鶴次郎 (1903–1974). I have argued elsewhere³ that while on the surface this work can be read in such a way, it is a coded story about the parting of a woman not only from her lover but from her country, whose aesthetics, which she loved, have vanished in the face of militarism. The description of the menacing mozu 百舌鳥 (black shrike) chasing away the sweet hōjiro 顔白 (bunting bird or songbird) is a comment not only about the romantic scenery of the onsen

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² Tamura Toshiko, “Ikichi” (Lifeblood), Seitō, September 1911. This story also appears in Hasegawa Kei and Kurosawa Aiko, Tamura Toshiko sakuhinshū 1: 187–99.
³ See Sokolsky, “Not Just a New Woman Writer.”
town where these lovers have been but about the destructive power of fascism, which by 1938 would have been in full swing in Japan.

A striking aspect of this story is the way in which the characters are named. The two main protagonists are referred to as “onna” 女 (woman) and “otoko” 男 (man). There is some conjecture that this was done on purpose by Tamura to hide her identity and Kubokawa’s. Toward the end of the story the woman and man meet a couple who are referred to as “tsuma” 妻 (wife) and “otto” 夫 (husband). Thus the Chinese characters reveal the difference between the two couples. The former are not legally married, whereas the latter are.

Mountain Road
(Chūō kōron, November 1938)

“Hey. I hear a songbird chirping.”

A couple was walking on a mountain road in a hot-springs resort area. Autumn had just begun.

“Hmm.”

The man stopped to look for the small bird in a thicket of trees.

“There it is!” The man said spotting the bird immediately.

“Where?”

The woman was having trouble finding the bird. Her eyes followed the man’s voice, tilting her head to search for it. Rays of the golden sun shining under the blue sky scattered in between the gaps in the leaves that the woman made with her head as it gently hit the branches of the tree. The woman mistook the outline of the leaves, thinly gathered together, to be the bird’s body.

“Look! Look! There it is!”

The man lowered his body to match the height of the woman’s, his cheeks aligned with hers, as he guided her eyes in a single line with his finger toward the tree where the small bird was resting.

“Look! There.”

If she did not look quickly enough, the bird might disappear completely. The woman was getting impatient. “Where was it?” She thought to herself. Her

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4 Often it is difficult to figure out who is saying what because Tamura rarely uses “he said, she said” after direct quotes. To stay faithful to the style of the original text, including all its ambiguity, I have tried to minimize adding any extra information about who is speaking.