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Source: *Chicago Review*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (1998), pp. 104-111

Published by: Chicago Review

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25304282>

Accessed: 21-05-2025 18:55 UTC

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Oe versus Dog Bamboo

Call me Oe. Father of the eponymous Oe Mirror which casts an unreversed image of the viewer on its concave steel surface. One day a hundred Oe Mirrors of all sizes will grace the walls of Oe Hall—my future home and stronghold. Soon I will write my memoirs describing my travels all over Japan and the United States where I was the most persuasive encyclopedia salesman in the Southwest. Along the way I strummed Okinawan folk ballads for the ladies on the riverwalk in San Antonio. I feasted with the dirt-eaters of Mississippi who confided in me their secret, tangiest banks of red clay. Most recently I earned the stars and rights to my best story—an old-fashioned atavistic brawl, my first—a glorious man-to-man fistfight in a posh Tokyo bar. Over a woman. An American. She appreciates neither the story nor the irony of her figuring principally in it. She rather wants to hear about Yuki Kara. Tell me about Yuki, she demands, with a toss of her lush cocoa-brown hair. It would take decades, generations maybe of iodine-rich seaweed and kelp, for yours to get any of the blue-black and coarser weight of hers. (I have no intention of telling her a thing about Yuki Kara. I know she hopes to cajole from me some arcane Oriental womanry to abet her own female experience.) Soon, June.

I distract her by paying attention to her cat which has approached. This will not distract her long. I think hard, but my mind is full of Yuki. I see her dark, intelligent eyes. I imagine telling her the details of my fight, truly one of my epic stories.

Once I cast always, a disparaging eye on the ranks of meat-eating, pierced-eared, broad-shouldered, low-heeled American women who pass through modern cosmopolitan Tokyo. An opprobrious eye well cast back to be sure. I've often sat listening to American coeds pontificate on the non-potential of us Japanese males. Ick, they say.

We smoke, we are unliberated and patronizing. We are Oedipal Peter Pans. We ally with our mothers to terrorize our wives. Our conversations never range beyond business and golf and we don't come home at night. Furthermore, our legs are short. We vomit after a single glass of whiskey. We are coarse and rapid lovers. We never hold open a door for them or give up our seats on the train.

Curious then that I'd answer an alien damsel's call to arms. (Credit my allure, thinks June, credit my exotic Western gravity.) Actually I was less pulled than pushed, kicked, propelled from my country's distaff. Credit a native force, Yuki Kara. Allowed hindsight's extra inch of awareness, I'd admit her eternal un-acknowledgment of me as other than ordinary was made unbearable by my being, in fact, somewhat in love with her at the time. I see now how her climactic put-down ("Keep your snout out of my work!") of my signature grids and color schemes, sent the injured superego, steeped in unrequited passion, pinwheeling onto the shoals of foreign womanhood. I might add, with the same candor, that dear, cool, beautiful Yuki, was highly probably fairly and understandably jealous of my splendid English conversation abilities.

Soon after, I left the company, resolved to become an "Evaporated Man" as is the custom in Japan when you wish to flee a sorrowful life. I moved, filed an unlisted telephone number and severed many of my business and personal connections.

I set up a new life, freelancing at a large architectural firm during the day and drinking alone at night. The hardest part of my "evaporation" was finding a bar where I could drink in comfort. The credit and camaraderie I had built over the years at my accustomed spots were not things you could transplant easily, like a heart. Sundered from my familiar haunts I felt vulnerable and alone.

One night I was down in Ginza, where street after street features building after building, each layered with a dozen or more bars, each its own world with its own clientele. There are "*Wafuku* bars" where the hostesses shuffle about in kimonos. There are "Auntie bars" specializing in motherly, elderly hostesses. I have seen piano bars staffed by delinquent schoolgirls in sailor uniforms and others manned by haughty young men in evening gowns. These strange lands are best explored in the company of senior businessmen carrying limitless

expense accounts.

I was with Den Foo, one of my firm's major clients. Den Foo is the president of McDuffy Japan, the Asian flagship of the American fast food chain. He is the titan behind McDuffy's oncologic spread to the farthest parts of Japan. Den Foo had noticed the stylish, yet functional, modular trash receptacles I had designed for the Kansai franchises. To my dismay, he took a strong shine to me, and I soon found myself obliged to accompany him to all his favorite bars and cabarets. This night, he insisted on treating me to the Club Ayakōji where the hostesses are Caucasian, and in his words, literally, "portable." We always spoke Japanese together, but he had heard of my English language abilities. I think he wanted to demonstrate some of his own.

We entered a narrow, elegantly decorated space. The hostesses were young and pretty, the sort of inaccessible foreign beauties lusted after by short-limbed, liver-lipped, boorish, misogynistic and xenophobic Peter Pans, like Den Foo. These girls were fabulously paid to breathe bad breath and cigarette smoke and cock a sympathetic ear with a smile, night after night.

The club was nearly empty when we arrived. Den Foo imperiously summoned three slender blondes to the table and commenced a lewd dialogue about bodily parts which the girls handled with professional charm. He poked and grabbed at their legs and breasts. They parried with expert pouts and giggles. I drank a glass of brandy and ate the chocolate-covered cracker sticks on the table. I listened to Den Foo's weird English—he could procure a word like "invaginate," to describe a tray of pig-in-a-blankets. He surprised me with a display of alliterative scatology that would confound your average Japanese student of the English language. At one point he produced a pack of Vick's Drops and proffered one to the girls upon his wagging tongue. Then he turned to me and said, "These are marvelously efficacious!" I smiled helplessly. A half-hour passed. Den Foo's articulate anal-excreta spattered off the jaded hostesses. Soon he was bored. He began making eyes at a dark-haired girl behind the bar. The Mama-san said she was off-duty, but Den Foo was insistent. One of the blondes went to tend bar and the brunette came over to our table. In his heavily-accented English, Den Foo asked her name

and her bust size. She said her name was June. Den Foo boasted how he had been photo-profiled recently in the *Japan Times*. He told her she reminded him of Debra Winger. Then he asked her about her hair color. Was it of uniform color all over the body? June looked at me incredulously. I feigned a cough. Den Foo did something to her under the table. She clenched both fists on the table. Then she lit his cigarette. She squirmed in her chair kittenishly and slid into his embrace. He put one hand on hers. Something was transpiring under the table. I gazed at the Impressionist prints on the wall. Suddenly there was a scream and Den Foo was doubled over in his chair, gasping. June backed away from the table, both hands over her mouth. I think she feared she had dealt a killing blow. Den Foo was in some agony, but I could see he was both embarrassed and recovering. “*Deyō!* (Let’s go!)” he barked. I explained to the Mama-san that Den Foo had had a recurrence of an old lower abdominal ailment. I accompanied him off the floor and downstairs to a cab. As we started to roll I saw June watching us from the doorway, still with that plaintive look of worry.

I called her the next evening and asked her out. She was evasive. I was sure she begrudged me my cowardly behavior the night before. I stammered something about the weather. I babbled on about my securing a patent for the Oe Mirror. Unimpressed, she began to joke on my name. “Oi-vey!” she said. “Boy-Oi!” That cracked her up. Then she said okay, she would meet me after work around midnight.

I arrived in Ginza a half-hour early. I walked about enjoying the tranquility of the streets after-hours. The storefronts were dark and shuttered. I passed a vender of roasted chestnuts shrouded within an atmosphere of aromatic vapors. There was a *ra-men* seller and a fortune teller. The streets were starting to fill with brightly-clad hostesses clattering on their heels, bound for the last train out of Ginza. I set a course for the Club Ayakōji. Unfortunately I hadn’t paid much attention to the route when I was with Den Foo. I hadn’t asked June for directions because I felt certain I could navigate by a gigantic neon sign I had noticed on the roof of the building across the way. This sign was a hot-red tube (read “Maru”) orbiting the Chinese character “Gen.” I spotted “Maru-Gen” in the sky from six blocks off and homed in at an angle. It seemed a ways too far north, but (having been often teased for being, in the vernacular, “direction-deaf”) I

assumed I had mis-estimated my distances. Also lights at night tend to be farther than their promise. So I went on for another block and another. Finally I arrived. Across the way there was an ugly, completely unfamiliar tile building, some sort of finance company. I jogged back the way I came. Soon June would be out. I wiped my glasses which had fogged and cut down an alley across the avenues. Far down the lane I spied another “Maru-Gen” floating in the night sky. I imagined June crossing her arms and looking up and down the street, frowning at her watch. I ran. Standing under the sign I scanned the horizontal roster of establishments hung on the opposite building. There was no Club Ayakōji. I calmed myself with a round of Zen breathing exercises and boldly struck a new course. A block away, I sighted another “Maru-Gen.” On the approach I could see it was distinguishably smaller than the others. Another decoy, a miniature. It was ten after twelve. I never had and thus had never been late for a rendezvous with an American girl before. How would she take it? She must never know, must never picture me rushing desperately all over Ginza, towed like a tide by these baleful, electric moons. I searched my pockets in vain for the number of the Club Ayakōji. A taxi appeared and I flagged it down. The driver knew of the club. He drove a few blocks one way, and one block across the avenue, and we were there. June was sitting on the sidewalk reading a men’s comic book. She had on jeans and a white blouse, a down jacket draped on her shoulders. She got up and said hello and offered me her cheek. I shook her hand instead which she found amusing.

“I want to walk,” she said. So I waved the taxi on. June threw away the comic. She sniffed inside her jacket and made a face.

“Those dresses,” she said. “They never wash them. You never know who’s been wearing what.” She explained that all the girls dressed off a communal rack of gowns. “I had on this silk dress tonight. It was real silk, but it really stank—like, under the arms were kind of stiff.” She shot me a look, but I showed her only an expression of earnest concentration.

We walked beneath an elevated highway, roaring with night traffic. We slurped soba from a van parked on a turnout. We lit incense in a shadowy pocket shrine, and wandered on the back roads, investigating topological variations in the terrain, the hills and dales of

ancient Edo. I bought hot sake from a vending machine which we drank in Shiba Park. She told me about life in rural Vermont where she had grown up. She told me about some fellow she left behind. He wrote her a letter care of American Express. I watched her eyes track pleasurably, the arc of her memory.

We ascended the slope under the spread legs of Tokyo Tower and arrived in *Roppongi*, settling tank for all Tokyo's beautiful people. She had in mind a club called The Charleston. A Sumo-esque youth in black tie guarded the door. He waved June in and looked astounded at me in passing, as if I were some brazen, unimaginably uncomplementary escort. Inside, I recognized exactly the kind of crowd I most hate—young, attractive, self-satisfied, ignorant, illiterate, yet judgmental. All the qualities to render inert my wisdom and charm and cosmopolitan savoir-faire. Their hip, collegiate attire made my intellectual black linen look drab and old. I felt my face flush. Except for the bartender and the waiters I was almost the only Japanese. I instinctively pressed close to June. She had this wary look about her. She was trying not to appear a part of this scene. Still there seemed to her a natural calling, some kinship there, like a disaffected bead of mercury quivering (for resorption) beside a larger pool it'd split from. I strode to the bar and ordered two cocktails. The bartender—a squinty buffoon with a hick accent, ignored me. He seemed to stare right through me as if I were mere air. I ordered again. A pale fop shouldered his way in front of me and ordered drinks which came promptly. He was telling a girl behind him how hard it was to do business in Japan. "The problem is," he said, "they don't speak a lot of English." He said he was writing a "novelization" of his experiences in Japan. Finally, my drinks came.

I found June within a small but loud crowd of baby-facers. It was like a scene from *Macbeth*. They were standing around a steaming black pot on a tripod, exuberantly forking chunks of bread into its depths. June had a drink in one hand and a long fork in the other. She reclined in the tweedy curve of a man's arm.

At first I thought he was a Japanese-American. His styled black hair had a little Malibu red in it. He wore half-tints to shroud his Mongoloid eyes. He had the slack stance and diction of an American and he had just the right amount of casual slob to his dress. Then he

singed his finger on the lip of the pot and I saw—he put the injured digit to his *ear*—regarded as the coolest part of the body by only a true Japanese!

He was being extremely solicitous to June. He directed his vapid chatter directly at her. I saw his hand close on her shoulder. He was telling her about prepping at Saint Paul's. I stood closer to him, sized him—my height but husky, laden with muscle—I thought, perhaps from a diplomat's son's unrestricted diet of beef and corn. I broke in as he was describing his scoring a hat trick in the New England Prep School Lacrosse Finals.

"My name is Oe," I said challengingly.

"I'm Ben," he said, very friendly. Good guy. A nice-guy type, patterned after a mellow California *sansei*. "Ben" my ass, I thought. More likely a wishful interpretation of something like "Benpi" or "Benjiro."

"Ben what?" I asked.

"Inutake," he replied after a pause. Literally, "Dog-Bamboo." At last, a chink in this otherwise seamless fellow. June noticed my ripening smile and cut in.

"Ben went to St. Paul's," she said.

"Inu-ta-keh," I repeated, then loudly: "Dog-Bamboo!"

The crowd tuned in to the hostilities.

"St. Paul's a good school," I said. "A first rate, second-tier school, if you can't for instance get into a place like, say, Andover, where I, by the way, studied." I actually only spent an afternoon in the library there once, reading *The Return of the Native*.

"Hey, you got a problem?" said Ben Dog-Bamboo. He asked it half-seriously, still unwilling to be coaxed from his sunny amity into my red waters. He picked a stray hair off June's shoulder. I asked him in Japanese whether by the way it was true that one of his testicles had not in fact, descended. He laughed pleasantly. I repeated the question in English. This silenced the crowd. Dog-Bamboo hugged June in close and stared at me with lofty eyebrows and a condescending expression of sympathy.

"My friend," he said, "I think you've been watching too many cowboy movies."

I knew there were, in English, certain verbal cues for throwing

down the gauntlet, man-to-man. But for all my howling, aching will-
ingness, I was unable to rally the billions of synapses responsible for
discharging my formidable English language abilities—I could not
produce the catalytic insults. The moment was passing. So I threw
my drink in his face. It was a good fight. Fast, fast and brutal. I and
he kicked into an aboriginal mode of destruction—inflict as much
hurt in as short a time possible. None of the choreographed round-
houses like the movies. I hit him once in the mouth and I got in
several good shots to the chest and I caught him in the ear, ringingly,
I'm sure. And I hit him smack in the throat. In all honesty, he did me
well too. He split my lip in a way that would require twelve stitches
and I jammed my wrist painfully when I blasted him in the jaw. We
destroyed a table and smashed a lot of glass. We made unmistakably
Japanese sounds of rage and pain. Then the bouncers were there.
They grabbed me and threw me out into a concrete telephone pole. I
waited for Dog-Bamboo to land beside me. Apparently he was being
ministered to inside. I was feeling for my glasses when June knelt
beside me and put a hand on my back.

She located my glasses and conducted me to a local hospital
where she supervised, she bullied, in her bad Japanese, the staff on-
call. The doctor worked on my face and then my wrist which had
begun to swell. Then June brought me home and comforted me with
an unanticipated tenderness. She meticulously remedicated my
scrapes. She spoon-fed me with great dexterity so as not to wet my
healing lip. We watched an old American comedy on television, side
by side. I noticed her turning to me solicitously to make sure I got the
jokes. Sometime after three, she unrolled a spread of futons along-
side her own. She wanted to undress me and help me brush my teeth,
but I waved off these attentions. So we settled down under our layers
of soft, clean quilts. June turned off the light, leaned over to me and
said goodnight. If my wrist were not cracked and my lip split I would
have reached out and brought her close and kissed her with as much
gentle affection as I could muster.

During the night, her cat crossed my length and breadth repeat-
edly. Its passing rather added to the texture of my dreams, and I slept
the restful sleep of a day laborer, the deep sleep you sometimes real-
ize on rainy mornings.