

Swallowing Monsters

BRANDON CHEW

*I have't. It is engender'd. Hell and night
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.*
—Shakespeare, *Othello*

It was a night like any other in Ikebukuro, a district like many others in the orgiastic architectural expanse that is Tokyo. Blinding neon lights screamed from the façades of blistering, multi-storey department stores, as if arguing back and forth in the language of commercialism. Middle-aged salarymen, dressed ubiquitously in grey suits and pasty ties, jostled on the street with teenaged Gothic Lolitas, dressed ubiquitously in black lace and patent leather platform boots. I was on my way to the hotel, back from twelve hours' worth of culture shocks and sensory jolts.

It was late, and I wanted food. As I walked down Ikebukuro-dori, a small, anachronistic, hand-painted store sign whispered to my eyes. I stopped to make sure I wasn't imagining things.

ラーメン, it whispered again. Ra-me-n.

I needed no further persuasion. I pulled aside the well-worn curtains of the *ramen-ya* and walked in.

If the Japanese are to be believed (and they are always to be believed), ramen is food elevated beyond food, beyond art, to the level of intricate horology. Noodles are baptized in boiling water with a degree of precision that *al dente* doesn't begin to describe; soup stocks are simmered for at least twenty-five hours (as if to say a whole day's work isn't enough); and even then, the dish could be a failure if the sliced pork belly, corn, scallions, and bamboo shoots, collectively and almost ignominiously called "toppings," are not treated with the hallowed preparational reverence usually reserved for surgical instruments. The process is so demanding that most of the traditional *ramen-ya* in Japan serve only ramen and nothing else. Even then, they devote entire life-

times to mastering one particular way of preparing the dish, like a swordsman trained to deliver one stroke with divine perfection.

The specialty of the *ramen-ya* in Ikebukuro was *miso ramen*. I decided to have my meal on one of the tables outside the restaurant. My tryst with Tokyo was not done yet, even though I was exhausted from a whole day of taking pictures, souvenir hunting, and *irashaimase*. I wanted more of the city, wanted to gulp down as much as I could. I waited for the master chefs to assemble their particular brand of food-as-art, took my bowl outside, and began to slurp my meal.

The noodles, as it turned out, were perfect.

But so was everything else.

In between messy mouthfuls, I realized that I had become complicit with the mystique of the city. With every new spoonful of broth, it was as if I were drinking even more of the moment in, becoming more and more inspired. Couples on the street, with their bleached hair and double eyelids, filled me with a Petrarchan longing (slurp); a distant, recorded voice announcing the arrival of the Shinjuku-bound JR train was like pouring honey into my ears (slurp); the buildings themselves coaxed, as I sat, transfigured and transfixed, in Tokyo's twilight. My meal was a strange potion that granted access into the pulsating nexus of the city.

I remember reading about Japan when I was young. As I gazed wistfully at photographs of the world's biggest street crossing in Shibuya, I decided that if the beauty of the universe lay in its cities, Tokyo was the center of the universe. For years, I begged my parents to take me there, and when they finally acquiesced, I steeled myself for the journey by taking Japanese language classes and studying the local cuisine.

Perhaps it wasn't surprising, then, that I stopped at a nondescript, innocuous looking *ramen-ya* in a district known more for its themed food courts and international brand stores. There, in the glitzy heart of Ikebukuro, it bleats its Siren song; and that night, I was listening. Only I did not chain myself to the wheel.

Looking back, my experience wasn't just about the ramen, although the ramen was very good indeed. It was about the location, the romanticism of the android metropolis. It was about the cold winter air that seemed to draw people into themselves and into each other in some kind of inexplicably gentle fellowship. It was about my being fortunate enough to actually *be there* to soak it all in.

It was about all those things, and one more: an unseen, emotive force lurking in the corner, gobbling up the moment and regurgitating it over the surface of my brain.

I must have been eating for no more than ten minutes when I heard the strains of guitar music. A guitar-wielding duo had set up on the pavement right next to the *ramen-ya* and was performing ballads from another time. I could not understand the lyrics, so I made up my own translation. To me, they sang about love and longing and profound isolation and the fact that I had grown apart from my best friends. Their song contained my most crystallized thoughts and memories.

This, I thought to myself as I finished my meal, is beautiful. I have to remember it all—the sights, smells, sounds, tastes. I don't want to forget.

Slurp.

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On another day in the capital, I took the subway to Shibuya, the effulgent mesa of materialistic adolescence. There was no need for street lamps here: screens the size of battleships illuminated everything within a ten-mile radius, and the ersatz gems that cover the cellphones of Japanese youth sparkled like the eyes of a thousand cats.

Subcultures thrive in Shibuya, from the machine-tanned, blonde-haired gaudy *ganguro* girls to the semi-anti-establishment *kogyaru* in their long, flaccid tube socks and schoolgirl uniforms revealing just the right amount of too much skin. For them, style is anything but spontaneous—everything from what they wear to how they speak and the boys they date has to conform to the unwritten laws of the social collective. As they traipse around the district's shopping havens, they're completely aware that they are homogeneous products, as mechanically Daedal as the electronic billboards that tower over them.

Dressed in my best that evening, I still felt like an abscess on the city's pellucid complexion. The denizens of Shibuya were hyenas and jackals and wolves, their furs belying their identities; my outfit, garishly stylish as it was, left me naked. *This shirt should not go with these jeans, at least not if you wanted to look like a member of this social herd*, I thought. I walked with my tail tucked firmly between my legs, hoping that Tokyo would forgive me for my sartorial sins.

It seemed, however, that the city's judgments were not as scathing as my own. Salespeople greeted and conversed with me in Japanese, even though it was obvious that I was a crudely conversant outsider. They even complimented my flair for the language. Once, I caught a gaggle of androgynous teenagers taking pictures of my red trolley bag, their expressions exuding envy. Communion saturated the night air, and for a moment, I, too, was of the people.

In my voracious desire to assimilate, I used to delve into tourist guides and cultural commentaries, absorbing as many details as I could. When I joined the millions of commuters bustling through the Shibuya subway station, I kept an eye out for the one visionary piece of art hanging from its walls, the very same one my guidebooks told me the people of Tokyo, in their everydayness, tended to ignore.

Called 明日の神話, or *The Myth of Tomorrow*, the mural is thirty meters wide and five and a half meters tall, and depicts the 1945 atomic bombing of Hiroshima. A stylized human skeleton dominates the center of the painting, bursting into brilliant squiggly flames as small stick figures suffer a similar fate against a maelstrom of painted destruction. Frozen at the climax of a nation's anguish, the corpse and his companions bear down hopelessly on the shopaholic citizens of the future.

What would Okamoto Taro, the mural's artist, have made of the irony? Drafted during World War II to fight in China, Okamoto came home to find his works destroyed in an air raid. Embittered, he would later proclaim, "Art is explosion," but his other works have little to do with overt detonation (Interview). Most of his paintings are multicolored depictions of misshapen faces and objects, and his sculptures, including a 70-meter tall phallus-tower of white, red, and gold, are garish mutations of familiar forms. Unlike conventional weapons of mass destruction, Okamoto's art does not reduce everything to dust; instead, like the Hiroshima bomb, it disfigures, transforming people, moments, and ideas into disconcerting caricatures. His art is not so much explosion as collision—the dalliance between reality and the imagination, and their bastard children birthed on canvas and stone.

And on paper, and in my head. My encounter with *The Myth of Tomorrow* and my crystalline moment at the *ramen-ya* in Ikebukuro constitute my own points of impact. Both nights, I lapped everything up, gulping globules of time until I was gluttoned with experience. Moments of beauty collide with my senses, and I spurt my recollections onto the page. In Okamoto's mind,

Hiroshima is *The Myth of Tomorrow*; in my mind, Ikebukuro is the bowl of ramen, the winter's air, the acoustic guitar music.

Thinking back to the moment now, I hear the mural speaking to me, its hollow eyes awash with the emotion that Japanese youth lack. I also feel the mellow air tingling the nape of my neck, sending shivers of ennui down my spine. I see myself pausing in front of Okamoto's art to ruminate. An appreciation of the avant-garde and the allusive stopped me in front of the mural, just as a canny receptivity to—the archetypal Japan, perhaps—led me to the *ramen-ya*. In both moments, something invisible called out to me, and when I reached out to embrace it, the sparks set off an emotional chain reaction. The moments endure. I'm still constructing lingering, haunting images in their wake.

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One of the most fascinating archetypes of *anime*, Japanese animation, is the tentacle monster, a figure whose very name obviates further description. The creature has its own genre—触手強姦, *shoukushu goukan*, or tentacle rape—and seems to be one of the very few aspects of Japanese culture that has never caught on overseas. Tentacle rape *anime* involves creatures with tendrils and slithery appendages doing exactly what you think they might be doing—typically, to another archetypal *anime* figure, the underage schoolgirl.

Surrounded on all sides by water, the Japanese have been seized by variants of *shoukushu goukan* for centuries. The legend of Tamatori-hime tells of a princess who steals a precious pearl from the palace of the Dragon King and is pursued and killed by all manner of sea creatures. A variation of the legend suggests that during the confrontation, Tamatori-hime experiences some kind of enjoyment in the chase. More explicitly, a 19th century woodcut depicts two cephalopods sexually cavorting with a fisherman's wife.

One of Tamatori-hime's contemporaries gave me my first encounter with *shoukushu goukan*. I remember the first time I watched *Bible Black: Origins*, a two-part, semi-pornographic *anime* about a high school deeply obsessed with Satanism, orgies, and witchcraft. The first episode was predictable and ludicrous in its premise, and horrendous English dubbing only added to my consternation. The second episode, too, was unremarkable for the most part, but the last ten minutes left me rubbing my eyes in disbelief.

In the climactic scene of the series, a megalomaniac high school student, Takashiro Hiroko, succeeds in summoning the Devil to do her bidding. To

her inexplicable surprise, the Devil shows no desire to follow the orders of a teenage girl, and proceeds to sate his barbarous thirst on the person who called him forth. I was treated to an extended sequence in which multiple tentacles burst forth from the Devil's groin and then had their way with a moaning, pleading Takashiro. Five minutes later, the Devil is satisfied, his victim convulsing in a pool of her own fluids.

After the credits rolled, I remember sitting quietly in front of my screen, trying to process what I had just seen. This was something my readings of Japan had not prepared me for, this masochistic celebration of the invidious. The scene was meant to be evil, and yet, Takashiro's groans sounded more like gasps of pleasure than exclamations of pain. I'd never seen anything like it.

Takashiro's ambitions are unmistakably Frankensteinian. Like Shelley's mad genius, she becomes obsessed with bringing forth a demonic beast she can control. Also, like the good doctor, she soon realizes, to her dismay, that the creature has a will and mind of its own.

But Frankenstein's beast did not rape his creator, and therein lies the difference between the Japanese and Western monsters. The fearsome kraken that so plagues Captain Nemo; Scylla, one-half of Odysseus's moral dilemma; even the Norse ouroboros Jormungandr, which encircles the world and can cause its end—these creatures offer no sexual reprieve; they impregnate fear from a distance. Sadistic and destructive, they drift menacingly on the periphery of our imaginations. But their Eastern counterparts show no qualms at all about close contact.

And when they appear and ravish, we discover that they are not so bestial after all. Their victims consort, couple, and collide.

Something sinister is afoot. As I write this, the taste of miso lingers on my tongue. I see a saccharine nymph announce the launch of a new cellphone at a store in Shibuya, and I swear I can hear the exact same tune the band in Ikebukuro had played.

My mind seems to be playing the role of the mad scientist. Moments short and long become conflated in the depths of my mind's Sargasso Sea, agglutinating into an all-seeing, slippery-appendaged monster. As I sail across, I have no idea what manner of chthonic being, coalesced from anecdotal plankton and the detritus of experience, dwells under the surface. A brute stitched together from patchworks of thought and sensation, a sphinx waiting to bite off my head if I can't answer its manifold enigmas, a sea-mon-

ster wrapping me up in its slimy tentacles—what is recollection and reflection, if not an encounter with the monstrous?

My addiction to the re-creation of an exploding past seems the work of a sadistic urge. I am my own bomb-manufacturer, responsible for the collisions within me. But I too am the sense maker. Someone has to collect the choice bits from the brain's fecund fields. Someone has to reconstruct them. Frankenstein's very name has become a metonym for the diabolical, while his own beast lives under cover of anonymity. The craftsman, not his work, is to blame for the artistic preservation and exposure of the dastardly qualities.

I've prepared my entrée with the utmost precision, arranging and stacking images on top of a steaming bowl of tangled memories. Yet the Eucharist remains in my head even as I offer it up for others to devour. When my work is done, I hurl it out into the great unknown, stopping my ears and closing my eyes, but it remains there, a steaming offering.

Julienned, seared, and stir-fried, my creation is ready for consumption, but its persistent presence consumes me. My heady feast splatters on the page, bursting into a mess of words and symbols, yet it remains in my head, floating around like some obdurate homunculus. My moments are frozen on impact, mockingly staring up at me.

The knowledge I gained from researching Tokyo—imagining it from a distance—captivated me, girding me for my oriental odyssey. But actually being there, seeing and touching and tasting what I'd only read about in books, was no fairy-tale. My trip was a confabulatory, unreal experience, and the persistence of that experience in my mind has become something terrifying, like a disobedient Devil called forth from the world below. It fuels me, it consumes me, it grabs me by the throat and swallows me whole.

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In Ikebukuro, I finished my ramen just before the store closed. I remember walking up to the counter to return my bowl, saying *gouchisousamadeshita*, giving my thanks for a hearty meal, and going back to collapse on my bed, well-fed and fortified.

But before I walked in, I spied a chef sitting at one of the cramped indoor tables, nursing a freshly prepared bowl of *miso ramen* that was identical to the one I had just devoured. The man looked at least sixty, and had probably spent most of his adult life honing his art—boiling the noodles to the right

texture, braising the pork belly until it falls apart at the touch of a chopstick. He looked like an artist for whom the art had become routine.

And yet, he was slurping down the noodles with more vigor than I ever could muster. Between spoonfuls, I heard the ghost of a sigh escaping from his lips, as if eating a bowl of his own cooking were the very source of his happiness. I asked him if he ate *ramen* every day, and he said he did.

Looking back, he reminds me of the Titans of Greek lore who ate their own children to prevent them from rebelling. But his was more an act of amorous veneration than of fear. He loves his art and, in his affection, does not hesitate to consume the fruit of his labors, day after day.

Even if, like Zeus and his ilk, his children might one day burst out of his brain to ravage the world, he nourishes them.

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In the *anime Neon Genesis Evangelion*, Tokyo is under siege. One by one, seventeen grotesque aliens, dubbed “Angels,” try to destroy the city; one by one, they are foiled by a paramilitary organization that has at its disposal yet another *anime* archetype, the giant robot.

After all seventeen “Angels” are murdered, Japan turns on itself. The Japanese military, fearful of the organization’s power, decimate Tokyo. As the world ends around her, a military officer pauses long enough to proclaim, “Mankind is the 18th Angel.” We are our own monsters.

She is right, to an extent. I initiated my own devouring of Tokyo, whose voluptuous murmurs toyed with my obsessive mind. My passion for all things Japanese anointed my body like gasoline. I became the explosion, the shade crouching on the stairs, the octopodes swimming in the blood-dark sea, the sum of my beautiful and terrible and poignant moments.

But in my obsession with the uncontrollable, with the diabolical birthing of monsters, I’ve forgotten one critical thing.

I’ve forgotten that like the old man in Ikebukuro, I too am a ramen chef.

My own moments of *shoukushu goukan* violation are ambivalent. I am inadvertently seized by an urge to remember, and in doing so, enter an affair with the beings in my mind. But I am both victim and monster, both chef and cuisine. My obsession has made me eager to purge my creations; but Frankenstein’s progeny only turned wrathful when his creator would not accept the creation.

Here, Okamoto has thrown me off. “Art is explosion,” he declared, as if his works were volatile things that had to be thrown away (Interview). But the artist didn’t hurl them contemptuously out of his consciousness onto murals and sculptures. Like the chef eating his own ramen, Okamoto masticated his works with reverence, savoring the kaleidoscope of tastes on his tongue.

He knew that he could not be without them. *The Myth of Tomorrow* is static in its message, kinetic in its ability to ensnare the mind. That desiccated skeleton in the middle of the mural resides in the artist’s mind and on the canvas; in both cases it waits for me to drift invitingly into its domain. When I get close, it encircles me with its tentacles; the mating begins, and the cycle is renewed.

The monster secreted away in my ramen violates me, too, in this manner, as do the monstrous masses of Shibuya. I am forever a *goukan* victim.

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Shinjuku is empty at 11 p.m. on the last day of 2009, my last day in Tokyo. If I squint, I can see silhouettes of the daytime multitudes that pepper the thoroughfares of Tokyo’s commercial center. In all likelihood, these cogs of the East Asian economy are in *izakayas*, filled to the brim with *shochu* and *unagi kabayaki*; or in the Meiji temple in Harajuku, silently contemplative under the watchful gaze of candlelight; or in a karaoke lounge, arms around the shoulders of coquettish escorts with fake eyelashes and bad teeth.

My senses dulled by the copious amounts of sashimi I have eaten for dinner, I am tempted to go back to the hotel, sprawl in the basement lounge and guzzle champagne cocktails until the first of January arrives in all its pomposity. But something repulses me from that idea, pulling me like a rag doll out onto the streets. *The night is for reflection*, it murmurs. *The night is for remembering*.

I like to think I know my way around. I’ve been to Tokyo more than five times now, my lust intensifying with every visit. Every day I spend in the city I run my fingers down the small of her back, taking in every sensation. Like any good paramour, I know every inch of my lover’s skin, feel every rush of blood pumping through her arteries, savor every last drop of her honey. I am familiar, at ease. And yet, I want more.

Enshrouded by the moon, Tokyo’s curves change. Black adopts a physical form and has its way with the topography of the city, bending and transfiguring roads and structures on a whim. Paths that should be familiar to me are

not. I am blind, deaf, and speechless once more, a sensory virgin stumbling across the urban landscape.

I find myself on an overhead walkway. I'm not too sure how I got there. Street lamps cast pyramids of light onto the gravel, and every ten steps I momentarily turn into an avatar of limewater white. Above me, the Shinjuku skyline radiates shadow and glass; below, the sepulchral tarmac is ever-sanguine. A cool wind combs secrets through my hair.

The sudden peal of a bell rouses me, and I realize I have wandered into a new year. Discomfited and disoriented, I try to find my bearings. At this moment, in Minato-ku's Zojoji Temple, thousands of white balloons are being released into the void. The balloons are inscribed with hopes and wishes for the future, supplications to some divine force in the clouds. I remember scribbling one such message on a paper leaf in the Meiji Jingu shrine earlier in the day, in barely passable Japanese. ラーメンが食べたいよ. *I'd like to have some ramen.*

Before I head back, I take a photograph. I don't know when I'll be able to feel the Japanese night again. When the sun rises, the lounge lizards will return to the office, and I will be on a plane, heading thousands of miles away. I raise the digital camera to my face, bring the picture into focus, and click the shutter. The result, a black-and-white view of the stairs leading up to the elevated walkway, pulses with the spirit of the city. A street-lamp glows, wisp-like, at the top step; the shade of a building segues into the background; the icy winter claws at the railings, leaving damp marks in its wake. It feels like Shinjuku itself is perched on the bottom step, twiddling its thumbs and peering at me.

I pore over the photograph in my hotel room. My own Myth of Yesterday, it reminds me of my tête-à-tête with the darkness only moments before; it suspends me in the past just a little longer. If I squint, I can even see myself, frozen in one second for all eternity, bloated with pathos. I'm conversing with the tenebrous centre of Tokyo, its maw yawning and yawling . . .

Slurp.

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As the parent of writhing infants, I am torn. Every day my children enter me, taking me by force. Their grimy palpations scar me for life, but I find the pain erotic. I can't bring myself to loathe the products of my fertile imagina-

tion, offering up a half-hearted protest before I give in. I swallow my own children, monstrous as they may be.

But now I realize that I like the taste, and do not attempt to regurgitate. I am addicted to the intercourse. I carouse, collide, and climax, and in those orgasmic explosions, I am once again eating ramen, once again shopping in Shibuya, once again swimming in ecstasy. Ever present, my monsters drift menacingly beneath, waiting to burst forth at their leisure.

This is why I continue to remember. This is why I need to summon my memories. They cause me pain and torment, but they are also my pride and inspiration and seduction. I need them, want them, love them.

One day, an unsuspecting mind will find herself near my waters. She will be piqued by my endless tirade on Japan and my descriptions of its quirks—and its food. Lulled and intrigued, she, too, will forget to chain herself to the wheel.

That's when I will let my monsters loose, ready to plant their seeds, and ready to satiate her hunger.

Slurp.

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