

ANDY COUTURIER

## Fry It How You Like It

IN A TINY CHROME and Formica restaurant on the sixth floor of the Tokushima "City" department store, Kenji and I are wrestling with the language barrier. We are stirring cabbage, onions, eggs, prawns and Worcestershire sauce on the small cast-iron griddle between us. Piles of clean, finely chopped ingredients are obsequiously placed on our table by a uniformed and cheerful waitress.

I look around me and try to experience the *okonomi-yaki* restaurant feeling. Each mini-environment here in Japan compels a certain mood, which, being Japanese, you invite. Nestled in this booth with my ex-DJ friend, I exert myself to take in all the carefully constructed details that spell the experience: *okonomi-yaki*.

Roughly translated, *okonomi-yaki* means, "Fry it how you like it." In the translation, the words "you" and "it" have been inserted to make sense in English. In Japanese, the focus is on the actions: "liking," "frying." Subjects or pronouns are rarely deemed necessary.

The shiny decor, colorful plastic paneling, bouncy Japanese teeny-pop music, and the employees' spiffy pink and white uniforms—all synchronize to intone "okonomi-yaki" into the back of our consciousness. The mood is all ready and waiting, and "you" become the interchangeable part. Personality is irrelevant.

Kenji is telling me that since the disco closed, he has been working in a factory that makes "*butsudan*"—wait a second, Kenji, please, I have to look that up in my dictionary—I read: "Buddha shelves."

I look up, puzzled. Then I get it: those carved teak and mahogany cabinet/altars in older people's homes. I usually see them filled with fruit, sticky rice cakes, embroidered cloth, sake, ancestor's names painted on small wooden shingles, and, of course, a little statue of the Buddha.

I frown. I have never liked *butsudan*. For one thing, they are made from tropical hardwoods which the Japanese economy is literally devouring.

Also my understanding of the Buddha's teachings is far away from the chanting of sutras to assorted inanimate objects. The empty, soft and alert mind of my meditation practice feels very foreign to their beseeching images for favors.

As usual, I don't have the vocabulary to express my thoughts. What a trial not to voice all my opinions! I have to leave it alone, to let it be. So I take my cue from what the culture expects: I feign interest.

"Butsudan? Ah, so, interesting ..."

I pick up the shiny steel spatula. Its lines are clean, its heft and balance in my palm are flawless. Looking out the window I watch the buses coming and going in the open-air station below us.

AS I STIR THE YELLOW-ORANGE MIX, I remind myself that I'm trying to make conversation here, not evaluate my friend. I rein in my judgmentalism. This is not a land where one is defined by, or is accountable to justify, one's work. You work because you work. The very word "choice" was imported from English: *Choice-suru*, "to do choice." It seems that the Japanese language didn't have a concept that encompassed the utterly optional connotation from the Land of the Free. Or perhaps the traditional word for "choice," (literally "select,") didn't excite their imagination in the same way that the sparkling new import "choice" does.

In Japanese, words are pictographs, not phonetic combinations, and are thought of as icons, representations of fundamental and subliminal human experience. Half through imagination, half through observation, I have developed a theory about the Japanese importation of English words: each one becomes a pointer to invoke some part of the talismanic power of "America" and the wide-open freedom of James Dean and the endless road trip.

Kenji is pretty forthcoming, not afraid of telling me details. I also notice a lack of the familiar "nice behavior with the foreigner." He's just being himself. I relax. Conversations here have definitely been worse.

Apparently he is just back from Korea. I perk up. Korea? In all my time here, I've never met anybody who actually *wanted* to go to Korea. (That's why I'm making all this money teaching "American" English.)

With comparatively little prodding, Kenji volunteers that he went over as a company rep. His boss wanted to know what happened to all the money. I piece together from comprehended fragments and guesses that part of these Buddha shelves have been sub-contracted out to a certain Korean gentlemen and his ostensible firm in Kwonju.

Kenji's face becomes animated with that rare emotion among Japanese: anger. He dips his basting paintbrush into the little beaker of syrupy brown sauce and bastes his *yaki*. "Keep sending money!" he says. "Korean keep asking money ... never finish (something or other)." Then some reference to the Korean being fat, perhaps.

The result of his excursion (I think) is that all the money is gone and the business relationship is over. He concludes with the statement, "Regarding Korean, dislike."

The word for "dislike" and the word for "hate" are the same in Japanese. One is, I suppose, to discern the difference by tone of voice or contextual clues. Or is this

putative difference just a conceptualization of ours, based on categories unique to the English language? We become so used to the connotations of certain thought boxes that we tend to confuse them for reality.

And, as usual in Japanese, there is no subject in this sentence. Kenji hates? His boss hates? His company hates?

But most confusing for my precision-addicted mind is whether his hate is for this Korean or for all Koreans. Japanese is a language which does not require a clear distinction between singular and plural. (Just imagine, for a moment, my many fruitless hours trying to explain to my English students why one would need such a distinction. They certainly have survived without it for all this time.) There are a few marker words that one can insert to clarify if it seems necessary, but in this case, apparently, it didn't. And, as every individual is but a representative of their group, whether that be family, company or nation, does the distinction really matter?

But to my consciousness, raised in the church of Good and Evil, Right and Wrong, identifying this distinction between individual hate and collective hate seems crucial. Is this racism or personal grudge? My mind aches to know what exactly this person is saying. The school of Hollywood cinema taught me to determine who is the good guy and who is the bad guy. A racist is a bad guy. My culture demands evaluation. Is this guy O.K.? Is Japan O.K.?

I want to know; so, being American, without a second thought, I ask Kenji, "What exactly do you mean? Who hates? Hates who? Just dislikes, or *really* hates?"

The perky waitress comes up to the table, bows, refills our cups with green tea, and then bows. Kenji leans back

against the red vinyl of the booth, and I read the block letters on his black sweatshirt, "In Paradise, Just Another Days."

I've lived here long enough that I should not still be shocked when someone simply does not answer a question, and yet I am. Kenji tilts his head, his eyes grow slightly larger and he looks past me, or through me, as if in confusion at my prying. He says nothing.

It seems that the conversation, or at least this topic, is over. Any further prodding from me would be trying to squeeze blood from a stone. I meet my old nemesis: the fog of supposed incomprehension of that which does not want to be discussed. (Remember: no actors, just verbs.) My further curiosity will undoubtedly meet only a quiet stepping aside, a silence in the face of my clutching.

And so I have it. Another entry in my installment course in releasing, in letting go. But my brain is steeped in the English language, that cult of exactitude. I want a yes or a no. I want him to explain to me just what he means. English is the international language of science and industry: a tool with precision. But this is not the Way.

We Americans believe that communication is an absolute. We cling to our values as facts. This way of thinking, this belief system, veers right off the Japanese haze of gentle subtlety, of interpretation, of nuances blending into each other. Perhaps this is why Japanese are so much closer to their poets.

So my mind throws its hands into the air—as if after trying to figure a Zen koan for too many years—and rests, if still a bit uneasily, with this uncertainty wriggling around my brain.

I baste my yaki. □

## PHILIP TERRY

# Do-It-Yourself Fable

1. WOULD YOU LIKE TO READ the fable about the fox and the crow?

*If yes, go to 4.*

*If no, go to 2.*

2. Would you prefer the one about the fox and the raven?

*If yes, go to 12.*

*If no, go to 3.*

3. Would you prefer the one about the vixen and the cock?

*If yes, go to 6.*

*If no, go to 1.*

4. A crow sat in a tree holding in his beak a piece of red meat that he had stolen.

*If you would prefer meat of another color, go to 9.*

*If this color suits you, go to 5.*

5. A fox, longing for the prize, began to flatter the bird with honeyed words.

*If you wish to know how the fox flattered the bird, go to 7.*

*If not, go to 14.*

6. A vixen, attracted by the scent of something, followed her nose to a tree in which sat a cock, holding in his talons a piece of Edam cheese.

*If you would prefer another opening, go to 8.*

*If not, go to 11.*

7. "Ah, you blessed bird," said the fox, "the delight of gods and men! What beautiful plumes you have, what bright eyes and what gracefulness of form! Your shimmering breast is like an eagle's, and your sharp talons would