

THE ROUND-EYED JAPANESE

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Every Sunday at my house, my friend and "informant" eats lunch with me. He is separated from his wife, has no children. I am a confirmed bachelor. He lives off dividends, the few there are; I am a translator, with some savings, in addition to owning my house. Nothing in particular worries us; not even eventually getting old – we've passed our forties, we're contemporaries, our exact birthdates belong more to the realm of the imagination than to reality. In this respect, I am genuinely optimistic, because I don't think that we're that bad off; we jog on Ibirapuera Park's track on Sunday mornings and after showering we reward ourselves with a generous take-out lunch from the restaurant down the street: the street extending to the wide boulevard, that vast boulevard which was once merely the riverbed for Sapateiro creek's muddy waters.

I mention that beyond being a friend, my friend is an informant because he is the person who on Sundays re-introduces me to the things of this world. Not that I don't have ideas. Of course I do: I have a slew of them! But he is, so to speak, the one who first announces, who first points out, describes, interprets. I hold back. I usually keep quiet. When the clash is too great, however, I respond. In short: he is my ultimate source of information about things; I simply react. What I have and what I know are basically my own business. I let impressions accumulate, then I allow them to sift to the bottom

and form a deposit there. By contrast, my friend is the one who gives birth to this accumulated world, and everything in it: a sort of vortex in reverse that might be put into motion by way of a word from him, and widen infinitely in ever-increasing circles: my house, the neighborhood, its streets; ultimately, the ideas, the cities, perfectly formed concentric fortresses that no one would claim could arise from the undefined nature of these types of deposits. This being the case, my depending on his information to establish my own, I rightfully consider myself his counter-informant. My defining our reciprocal manifestations of friendship as acts of information and counter-information shouldn't cause concern. After all, like all those with whom we collide while walking around more or less upright, we were onlookers in the counter-revolution of '64 (which my friend insists on calling a revolution).

Aided by the summer's gully-washers, stray rivulets run off course from Sapateiro creek – or from some other source I never knew existed – managed to erode the foundations of my land. Half of my front yard wall collapsed. I hired two bricklayers to rebuild it tomorrow, perhaps I'll even sue the city for damages... As for today:

A new landscape opens up before my friend and me. Directly before us, my neighbor the drycleaner's house suddenly appears up close and vivid. I hadn't realized before, but my neighbor doesn't work on Sundays either. He walks back and forth along his property, stands up, sits down, eats lunch, tends to his azalea hedges. He smiles, nods to us:

Stiff and precise, my friend informs me of this act:

"Sly like all Japanese. Did you notice his smile?"

I remain quiet, as is my wont.

"Did you notice his smile?"

At first I think it best to answer with another question, to see if I can steer him from the dead-end course down which his unbeatable rhetoric usually leads him. I venture:

"What smile?"

"What a stupid question! And quite frankly, way out of line! Whose smile could it be? Yours? I wouldn't waste my breath describing it. The fallen wall's? Do walls by chance smile? And even if they did, would *this* wall have a particular reason to smile?"

I remain reasonably calm. I chew my lasagna, take a sip of red wine, fumble with my napkin. I even risk the absurdity of a cliché.

"It looks like it's going to rain."

My informant licks his index finger and sticks it out the window into the muggy heat of the day to see from which direction the wind is coming: it comes from no direction. At the house across the street my neighbor the drycleaner observes him and the smile widens, becomes almost a laugh. Startled, my friend withdraws his finger; he returns to the subject:

"You still have the nerve to ask me *what* smile?"

It's hot in the room, I'm already tired, and concede:

"I suppose you are referring to the drycleaner, my neighbor, right?"

"Japanese!"

I feel I have the right to show my indignation by tossing my napkin down on the table. My friend ignores me and brings up the subject again:

"Did you notice the smile? If you didn't before, now's the chance because the faker still has his mouth open!"

Although my neighbor couldn't possibly figure out my informant's words, I make up for them by greeting him several times: I wave to him, I shake the napkin furiously as if it were a warning flag.

"Go on, go on," taunts my friend. "You might as well throw yourself out the window and go kiss his feet! Convenient innocence! What if he were a spy?"

"A spy?" I am confused, I stammer, I see that I've fallen into a trap. I must backtrack. Re-direct the conversation. I move the glass of wine aside, I try to be as sharp as a tack, I speak, stressing the syllables:

"My friend, what makes you think that we have before us a *Japanese drycleaner*?"

My friend and informant simply retorts, his eyes glued to the other side of the street:

"Did you notice the *nature* of his smile?"

"It's very frank, very open, I'll have you know. It's particularly friendly."

"Exactly, therein lies total duplicity: therein also lies the clue. My God, my God! You really are simple-minded! Would a feigned smile that presents itself as honestly feigned really be that way? Huh?"

His impeccable logic shuts me up.

"Would a falsely frank smile, however, be relevant to this case? Of course not, because a smile of that sort could only come from an honest nature that hides itself out of modesty and disguises its most sincere manifestations out of shyness, do you follow me?"

I nod with approval and take another sip of wine.

"Now, tell me, what do you think of an *honestly honest* smile? Eh?"

I smooth down the tablecloth and allow myself to belch out loud to show that not only am I in my house, but I am *very much* at home in *my house*. But my friend is deaf to all that is unrelated to his relentless argument. He continues:

"It's in a display of absolute frankness, in a totally open smile without any hesitation, that maximum deception is manifested! That being the case,..."

Irritated to the point of anger, I interrupt him:

"Very well! And what are you driving at?"

My friend calls time-out. He takes seconds of lasagna. Rarely on Sundays have I seen him so sure of himself and so self-satisfied:

"My dear man, I'm not leading up to anything because I've already made my point. Your neighbor the drycleaner's perfectly honest smile naturally expresses nothing more than the capacity for total deceit, typical of his race!"

"What race?"

"Are we going to start all over again like we did with the smile? What race, indeed! The yellow one, yellow! Japanese, Japanese! Do I have to keep repeating myself like a broken record? Yellow, yellow! Japanese, Japanese!"

I take a deep breath, wipe the sweat from my brow with the edge of my napkin, a gesture I recognize as distasteful, and that I never expected to do in front of others. My friend looks away from me with a hint of disgust, in one of those spontaneous gestures of rejection, that not even the best of

friends can always avoid. I repeat the question, pronouncing each syllable:

"What leads you to believe that you have before your eyes a Japanese citizen?"

"Well, as if his smile weren't enough, how about his profession?"

"And why must we assume all drycleaners to be Japanese?"

"My good man, not all are. But look, without wanting to call you stupid, I gather you know something about Japanese immigration, about the various jobs they took in the urban centers of the state of São Paulo, after the descendants of the first Japanese having left the fields..."

"That's enough!"

"Okay, enough. I didn't mean to offend you. But when you combine a typical profession with another typical trait, say, ethnic or cultural, such as the feigned smile, what else do you need to convince you?"

I feel my jugular vein throbbing. Never before today had I thought about my jugular vein, never before had I considered uttering its name; I even have doubts that it is indeed my jugular vein, but something on my neck is throbbing insistently, as if at any moment it will jump out of my skin. My words trip on one another, I push away my wine glass and breathe in deeply as I say:

"If other signs weren't enough for you, I have the pleasure of affirming that there before us is a Brazilian drycleaner! A Brazilian drycleaner, no more, no less!"

"You mean a `nisei'?"¹

"No, I don't mean a `nisei.' He's a Brazilian drycleaner, Brazilian! Whose father, in addition to not having been Japanese, wasn't Portuguese either! Nor African, nor Italian!"

"Oh, so what is his name, *this* `Brazilian' gentleman of yours?" My friend puts quotation marks in the air around the word "Brazilian" with great dramatic flourish.

"Marcus Czestochowska! I'm not sure I'm pronouncing it correctly, not that it matters."

"Of course it matters! Divine Providence! Czestochowska, Kurosawa! What else do you want?"

"What do you mean, what do I want?"

"So, don't you know the Japanese film director, Akira Kurosawa? Don't you see that we're talking about twin names, with the same vocal cadence, derived from the same root?"

I'm fed up and I don't hide it:

"Don't be ridiculous, it's a Polish name, in fact, it's the name of a Polish city. Haven't you ever heard of Matka Boshka Czestochowska, you illiterate? It's a Virgin Mary, an image of the Virgin Mary hanging in a church in Czestochowska! The tendency to use the name of the city as a family name probably came from some ancestor going back further than fathers or grandfathers, inspired by, who knows, some uncontrollable surge in exalted nationalism or in triumphant catholicism, for all I know."

My friend shakes his head with pity for me and my efforts. Insignificant questions and vague notions won't dissuade him, not when something of true consequence lies before him. Not him! He enumerates out loud, counting on his fingers:

"The *smile*, the *profession*, the *vocal cadence*, three factors. As if those weren't enough, the *fourth* one reinforces and confirms the other three: the concealment of his nationality (with or without the alteration of documents, which is irrelevant here). Oh, my God, if this were War time, when Brazil declared war on the Axis, I would simply turn him in, demanding that this Japanese be sent to prison!"

Flies buzz in my head. I can't see them because they fly around internally, but I imagine them colorful; they're blowflies, thousands of them, their wings are iridescent, they hit against the internal section of my skull; their wings are like mica in the sun, scintillating, fragmenting into thousands of others, filling my head with sound, gravel, and madness. I hang onto the few scraps of reason that remain, I try to stay afloat, and I counter-argue:

"Wait till the man turns toward us, look, he's coming to work on the hedge again. Take advantage now that he's in full frontal view; observe: what color is his face? Is it yellow? Pale? Black?"

My informant responds unflinchingly:

"Rosy, I don't deny it. And I don't have any reason to."

I gradually gather strength, and continue:

"Okay, now, pay close attention. And his eyes, are they slanted? Almond-shaped? Slitty? Half-closed?"

My friend gives a little leap and suppresses a scream of delight, which, because of the closeness to the subject, reminds me of the samurai fighting sound I always hear in movies. He charges:

"Did you want to snag me along these lines? Oh, Christ, we've stooped to such infantile behavior! So, what's real for you is what's immediately apparent, is that it? At your age!"

I don't want to listen to his nonsense, so I insist:

"His eyes, answer me, what shape are his eyes?"

"Gladly, I'll answer gladly: Round, they are ROUND!"

The blowflies return through my ears; they enter with my friend's words and dance inside my head. But I mechanically plow on:

"And their color?"

My friend responds with the confidence and glee of an innate color analyst:

"Blue, they're blue! You doubt that? Look over there!"

On the other side of the street, in the garden of the house opposite mine, my dear neighbor Marcus Czestochowska's eyes shine like two celestial beams and flash curiously in our direction. They'd already detected movement too exaggerated for a simple luncheon setting.

My friend will now present his concluding lecture:

"You may watch little television, perhaps believing it to be a minor form of entertainment, a plebeian form. That's too bad. If you'd watched it as regularly as I do, you might have known that a Japanese series was very popular in this country for a period of time. It was a cartoon, in episodes, called *Taro Kid*. Well, then, the hero of this series had what kind of eyes? Slitty, perhaps? They were round, totally round. If you were to turn on the TV even today to see a Japanese cartoon, you'd find the same thing. But it was *Taro Kid* who first called attention to this fact, that's why I bring it up. If you could overcome that inertia, unglue your butt from Vila Nova and go for a walk around Liberdade, you'd find other Japanese comics in which, with few exceptions, the heroes have eyes?"

"Totally round," I answer in a very low voice.

"In your blindness, you'll say that this happens for reasons of cultural adaptation, for export, etc., etc. Without the least inhibition you'll invoke (I know because I've gotten to know you very well since '64) hundreds of heterogeneous factors: industry, capital, alterity, multiculturalism. And you'll put all this baggage in motion for what? To complicate it. And everything to what purpose? To stubbornly refuse once again."

"?"

"The perfect duplicity!"

"?"

"Typical of the race!"

"?"

"The yellow race!"

My friend still hadn't finished:

"And it doesn't just show up in the cinematographic image, no sir, it spreads to the human level, and once there, penetrates the skin, the very content of this movie image! Of course, you've read (or at least I hope so) something about Japanese immigration to the U.S.?"

"No, I haven't had the opportunity to do so."

"That's a shame, a real shame. Well, I'll tell you; you won't miss out on knowing, not on my account anyway. It's like this: even without mixed marriages, without any factor of miscegenation, certain physical characteristics of these immigrants began to change: initially they recorded changes in average height, probably due to different nutrition, climate, etc. Now, listen to me."

I'm perfectly still with my head slightly tilted toward my friend so that the hot sun hits my ears. They're burning madly like two fiery flames, two blazes squeezing my skull. For all practical purposes, I'm indeed 'all ears.'

"Listen," my friend insists, not satisfied with my visible, attuned docility. "Listen, listen because it matters. You (and you can't be a scientist, even a layman like me, if you don't have some creative imagination, if you don't toss a grain of audacity into the rigidity of logic!), have you ever thought

about what great depths of deception we can reach by the appropriation and control of this possibility to alter physical traits? Miscegenation, and what would first seem like the most evident, easy and total simulation, is another thing entirely, in reality it denies it and for that reason must be disregarded from this line of reasoning. For in the case of miscegenation, the disappearance of racial characteristics won't take place through their concealment – what is of interest to us here – but through their 'confusion,' through their 'immersion' or 'dissolution' in contact with other genes. It would be, in fact, the extinction of concealment itself, a distinctive mark of the subject in question" (and at this point my informant pauses briefly, gives a quick wink, and points significantly with his chin to the house across the street). "Just imagine how the control and development of this possibility of physical alteration *without* cross-fertilization can become much more serious precisely because it occurs, so to speak, on the surface, remains external, manipulating the physiognomy to make it serve as a smokescreen? Now indulge me in going from scientist to poet! Imagine, as you think of this type of disguise, about the secretive nature of screens, of the rituals in preparation for the opium pipe (I digress toward the Chinese, but no matter), of the ingenious and silent sliding doors (or walls!) made from rice paper (back to the Japanese and their *visibly* enigmatic architecture), in short: think about all this and more; think about how these possibilities would work openly; like a mask with an infinite number of recourses behind which, in any circumstance, can always hide..."

I complete his sentence because there's nothing else I can do:

"The Japanese, the Yellow, the Oriental."

"That's it," my informant emphasizes, wrapping up his sermon with a gentle admonition:

"So, you shouldn't be concerned with the fact that your neighbor's eyes are blue, much less with the fact that they're round! Following this line of reasoning, why would it surprise you to find these same eyes set in a rosy face and probably (from this distance I can't safely attest to it), a face dotted with freckles? and (notice that I fear nothing, I leave nothing out in my description), framed by curly red hair and, I venture

further, even further, everything supported by a spinal column and two legs that, together, add up to a frame of at least one meter-ninety, and then some? And if I have no fear, why should you be concerned? Follow my example, look straight ahead, in the literal and figurative sense of the term because they both apply to this situation. Look straight ahead and stay alert: alert, however, to the *hidden meaning* of all this, the underlying meaning. In short, analyze without restraints and free of emotion this curious space which advantageously opens up before us for our mutual intellectual enjoyment. Observe in it the rigorous non-coincidence between the average image of the common Japanese and the rich and complicated display of diverse colors moving beyond the azalea bushes! And I guarantee that if you're relaxed and free of prejudice, if the red wine hasn't gone to your head, you'll undoubtedly know how to reach the right conclusion."

A pause lingers in the still air like a sloth. Bread crumbs and splatterings of sauce and wine have soiled the tablecloth. My friend and informant doesn't fear a halt to our friendship. It's as old as this neighborhood, it has its habits, its ever-recurring disagreements, some deeper and more definitive than this one, like the story of the counter-revolution to which my table partner always takes the opposite side with the theatrics of someone who unleashes his sword and severs with one fell swoop a head from a body. No doubt he was cut out for absolute situations, and what will remain is his iron-clad logic, his handcuffed logic, as perfect as the circumference of the blue eyes I distinguish between one azalea and another, wildly leaping in the pure yellow of summer.

I said that my status as counter-informant was born and developed out of the information given by my Sunday lunch partner. This is true. What I didn't say, however, was that beyond the initial phase of audible dialogue another one develops, always resistant but invisible. Like the undersoil of my land, my counter-information has a type of porousness that allows it to perpetually shift, and move about what it supports. The neighborhood, the township, and the world, the foundations upon which I rest, gently sway; perhaps they won't withstand, but I like that. That makes sense. That's my business. I open myself up reflexively, without resistance, I give in

because my nature is like the black earth of my neighborhood:
it's no good, it won't establish cities or codes.

It won't stay put.

TAVARES, Zulmira Ribeiro. *O japonês dos olhos redondos*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1982. p. 29-44.