

# Don't Feed the Yao Guai!

by Colee Wong

## I. “Strange Face In the Mirror”

A niche study published in 2010 by psychologist Giovanni Caputo theorized a plausible explanation behind the classic sleepover game, “Bloody Mary.” Its tl;dr is: apparently, if you stare long enough into a mirror in dim light, you will effectively start to trip some major balls:

*At the end of a 10 min session of mirror gazing, the participant was asked to write what he or she saw in the mirror. The descriptions differed greatly across individuals and included: (a) huge deformations of one's own face (reported by 66% of the fifty participants); (b) a parent's face with traits changed (18%), of whom 8% were still alive and 10% were deceased; (c) an unknown person (28%); (d) an archetypal face, such as that of an old woman, a child, or a portrait of an ancestor (28%); (e) an animal face such as that of a cat, pig, or lion (18%); (f) fantastical and monstrous beings (48%).<sup>1</sup>*

Of course, you never were summoning Mary Tudor; she probably has better shit to do than scare pre-teens in a bathroom.<sup>2</sup>

Even as pre-teen you, it was you all along. You confronted something inside you that was more monstrous than you could fathom. But you projected a dead queen, a relic of the past that you thought was completely irrelevant to you.<sup>3</sup>

## II. Bakemono

There is a distinct taxonomy and hierarchy to monsters and spirits and legends in Asian mythology. The class of *yōkai*<sup>4</sup>, comprising the kanji for “bewitching; attractive; calamity” and

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<sup>1</sup> Caputo, Giovanni B. “Strange-Face-in-the-Mirror Illusion.” *Perception*. Vol 39, Issue 7, pp. 1007 - 1008 January 1, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> No less any teen knowing her legacy. Queen of England and Ireland, cruel ringleader of the Protestant abattoir that led to the slaughter of thousands under her Catholic rule.

<sup>3</sup> Bitch, you thought.

<sup>4</sup> 妖怪

"spectre; apparition; mystery; suspicious," can be malevolent, malicious, mischievous. Sometimes they can bring good fortune. Some of them were named by superstitious thought and natural phenomena, told in the form that ancient peoples could best understand and accept. Some of them were created by authors and artists, their own imagination birthing hideous creatures for macabre storytelling.<sup>5</sup>

*Bakemono*<sup>6</sup> are a subcategory of the *yōkai*, the names given to monsters. "Changing things," results of transformations bizarre, hideous, and mundane. Some shapeshift into common household objects; some are mysterious and metaphysical. Interestingly, they are not considered "supernatural," superseding our senses and perceptions, but were always natural—these demons were always a part of our world to begin with.<sup>7</sup>

While *bakemono* are a type of *yōkai*, they are usually anonymized. *Yōkai* have a roster of names with their own characteristics, traits, and have classic methods of summoning and smiting.<sup>8</sup>

*Bakemono* can take on a variety of forms and shapes, have myriad motivations and vendettas. Neither term has distinct, rigid boundaries that bind them to a specific form; they can either be living, tangible vessels, or an airy, haunting phantom. Interestingly, the word *bakemono* is purely Japanese; *yōkai* is a loanword from China: *yao guai*.

Fans of *Fallout 3*, *New Vegas*, and *4* will know that *yao guai* are mutated American black bears with PER 6-7 and Melee 70-85, second only to deathclaws in raw strength and speed.<sup>9</sup> Their hit also has the potential to stagger, making it much easier to maul you if you're not a quickdraw.

In other words, you better run unless you're ready to kill; they're dangerous, fast, and deadly and you probably forgot to save.

Capital Wasteland's renegade radio DJ, Three Dog, endlessly repeats: "*Don't feed the yao guai!*" At that point, I turn off the radio until the ambient soundtrack scares me, in which Three Dog resumes on my Pipboy.

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<sup>5</sup> The Akaname (垢嘗): "Filth Licker," depicted as children with clawed feet and stunted heads, who are implied to survive off the dust and grime collecting in bathtubs and bathhouses. They don't harm anyone. They come out at night, when everyone is asleep and patrons are long gone, to satiate their appetite for mold and mildew. Why? No fucking reason, apparently. (Reider, Noriko. *Japanese Demon Lore*. Utah State University. 2010.)

<sup>6</sup> 化け物

<sup>7</sup> Chambers, Anthony. *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, translated from Ugetsu monogatari by Ueda Akinari. Columbia University Press. 2006.

<sup>8</sup> See: the Akaname. How to get rid? Clean. Or else you're going to have some presumably clammy wet spots in an already damp, moist environment.

<sup>9</sup> [http://fallout.wikia.com/wiki/Yao\\_guai\\_\(Fallout\\_3\)](http://fallout.wikia.com/wiki/Yao_guai_(Fallout_3))

III. 2:00 a.m.

I have been seeing David\* for nearly two months now. I know his apartment. I know his voice, his laugh, his scent. I know his personality. I know I like it. I'm excited to see him despite my fatigue that pulls me to the ground. I am supposed to meet him at his place at 7:30 p.m.

It's the tenth date come mid-January. I stumble into his apartment, disoriented from the freezing wind. He catches me as I fall into his arms, half-dramatically but mostly-sleepy after a long work week.

(On the train over, I had fallen asleep within a blink and missed my stop.)

But here I was, warm and happy to decompress, a want and need to feel safe, small, and protected while snuggling into the nook of his arm. He lets me wear an old tee of his and boxers. As I stripped off my suffocating workwear with the rebel defiance of a gleeful toddler, literally a transmuting of work to leisure.

Even though it was 8:30 p.m., I asked for a cup of coffee. He obliged and brewed a pot, saving some for the morning. I drank two cups.

We sit on his couch. He introduces me to one of his favorite TV shows—a 90's sketch comedy. We eat Thai food, drink, cuddle. We watch until two in the morning. I ask to take a shower; he leads me to the bathroom and hands me a towel.

He sits the towel on the sink. Drunkenly, he jokes he's going to headbutt my chest. It's aggressive. I put my hands up, signaling "no." Twice my size, former football player David\* is pushing my hands back, using one to counter two. With the other hand, he gropes my left breast with a grip that left a ghostly white handprint.

I bark out a cutting "Stop!" loud enough for the upstairs neighbors to hear. My eyes are staring his down, meaning to intimidate a justification of his behavior. His eyes, usually brown, seem something darkly.

"What?" He shrugs, smiling as if it were a prank.

I hiss under my breath. I'm in shock and can't make out words.

"You're growling? You're going to growl at me?"

"You touched me. You headbutt me. You *hurt* me."

"No, I didn't." His hands are up in the air. Is he denying this in front of me so brazenly?

"You grabbed my chest! You didn't stop when I said 'no.'"

It goes back and forth. Our positions don't budge, and neither does my glare, trying to pierce something out of him.

"Okay. Let's—you take your shower, come to bed. We can talk about this in the morning." He leaves, hands still in the air, as if surrendering to the police. He closes the door, which suffers from a broken latch. I'm scared it will creak open again.

I hug myself tightly. I'm shaking and nauseated. *This is sexual assault. This crossed a boundary.* I lean against the tub for support as my legs tremble. They're flushed, and hives are beginning to appear, a stress-induced harbinger. My bare thighs are pockmarked with goosebumps from the draft, sticky with sweat. I am planted to the ground, my toes curling into his old bathmat like barbs.

Yet there is a strange desire of wanting him to come back, open the door, and begin an apology. I hear him pacing outside in the living room, muttering angrily. It feels like it's been hours in here, a jail of my own making.

I stare into the mirror. *This is the sign you should have left*, my future self I imagined saying to me now. *If you suffer far worse, this was the fucking sign that you needed to go.*

I pick up my phone and see if there's a Lyft around to pick me up quickly. At 2:30 a.m., most are seven to ten minutes away.

*But you're not.*

I exhale. I have to have closure. This might have been an especially stupid thing to do, but I wanted some kind of answer. An apology? A defense? Anything.

With heavy legs, I drag myself out of the bathroom to find him in the living room.

"What the hell just happened in there?"

"I wanted to ask you the same thing."

"Why—what made you headbutt me and grope me?"

His eyes widen, his head nodding in disbelief.

"That never happened."

"You didn't just—? You were joking and held my hands down. I thought you were being aggressive and...in the bathroom just now?" The words slip from my mouth as if I were dribbling water.

"I wasn't in the bathroom with you at all."

“The past five to ten minutes, just now, with you grabbing me in the bathroom? You’re saying that didn’t just happen?” I felt my own breast, thinking there was some kind of mark, indentation, anything—to prove it. Nothing but my own hand.

*He’s gaslighting me.* My heartbeat pulsates like a hummingbird on speed. I’m in fight or flight mode and my thoughts are racing so quickly that I can’t catch any—not a thought, nor a breath. I keep looking past him where the front door is. In his t-shirt and boxers, I entertain for a hot second that I can brave the negative-degree weather to escape.

*But why would he?*

“You’ve only been in there for, like, two minutes.”

I look for a clock. It’s 2:05 a.m..

His eyes, brown, doelike, and downturned, are watery. His panic matches mine. His voice, confident, rich, and usually one of reason, begins to plead with a quiet choke.

“You have to believe me. Sweetie, I wasn’t there with you. You asked to take a shower, I gave you a towel, I left.”

“You set it on the sink and closed the door.” I am adamant.

“I didn’t enter with you. I left it open. Swear to God.” His hands are up again, surrendering.

I still back away from him. Even as he offers his vulnerability, he is massive. His arms are spread, as if suggesting a hug in peace. I only hug myself tighter, hiding my chest in my arms and shriveling my limbs together so I stand narrowly.

“If you don’t feel safe, I understand. You can go home, sleep in your own bed. You don’t have to sleep here if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t know what I should do. I don’t know what just happened.”

“You’re exhausted, you’ve had a long week, you’re stressed out. You were barely awake coming in here. You were falling asleep watching TV...”

No! The show was bizarre with off-kilter bits, but I was sure I didn’t miss anything. “I was awake the entire time. I’m sure I was.” There were some jokes where I didn’t understand how they began or how they ended, but I figured the show was counter-culture enough to be chock full of non sequiturs.

He shook his head sympathetically.

“We turned it off, I got you a towel, and you acted really strangely. Cagey. You ran off and came out, maybe two minutes later.”

Receiving all of this information feels thick, churning in my head like mud and just as opaque.

I look down at my legs. The rash had disappeared.

In the bathroom, they were pale, speckled with red blotches and flushed with cold sweat.

In the bathroom, my tattoos were missing. I have two substantially large thigh pieces on each one, taking up more than three-quarters of the space allotted. They are impossible to overlook.

Time felt so much longer, wide-stretched like taffy and snapping back again. It was still only 2:07. My mind, formerly a blank landscape that comes with shock, hit me with every memory I thought these were. For how vivid these were, in seconds, they began to evaporate into transparency. A dream upon waking.

“It...it felt so real. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry...”

My anxiety would not wean and I could not relent. He was reassuring, despite being nearly damned to a projected accusation.

“This was scary. But it’s over. I do not and will never judge you for what you just felt.”

“If that was all *not* real, then ...that means I am going insane. This was a psychotic break.”

I collapsed into that nook, unexpectedly sobbing heavy heaves. He hugged me tightly, securely, and affirmed that I was tired, exhausted.

“No, no...” I wiped his tears with my thumb.

He affirmed another word: *sleepwalking*.

#### IV. Waking Life

Symbols are rarely so literal in reality. There are no metaphors. There is no *meta*-when there is no fourth wall, no observer outside looking in. Things are both face value and skin deep.

There are several variables at hand in The Bathroom Event:

- A. Burnout, from a months-long stretch of work implosion.
- B. Anxiety, ever omnipresent and always on overdrive.
- C. Exhaustion, the first two combined together to compound the physical-emotional.
- D. Over-the-counter Vitamin D supplements, extra strength.

One of these is not like the other.

I had begun taking them that week as a thought experiment: a message board surmised that winter and its lack of sunlight can affect mood and sleep, and Vitamin D might help.

I went over to Walgreens, picked up some dissolving strawberry-flavored tabs of 5,000 IU, and began a control trial. I thought that, at worst, they would be ineffective.

I began to feel the descent into sleepiness, which was incredible for someone who has not slept regularly for over a decade. Immediately, they produced vivid dreams. I would wake up mid-dream, the dreamt scenarios lingering in the morning with the heaviness of a fresh memory.

I searched “vitamin d supplements cause sleepwalking” and found a few testimonials reporting “intense nightmares.” Unscientific, but knowing that at least someone else out there experienced and believed similarly was a little comforting. The day after this event, I stopped taking them. I haven’t had memorable dreams or sleepwalked since, nightmares or not.

At least, this is what I tell myself.

Otherwise, how could I sleep at night?

## V. Don’t Feed the Yao Guai!

Being the over-analytical person that I am, I tend to scavenge for meaning in any given event. Dig with grubby hands at subconscious intent. Find some sort of pattern and cling on to it, because, in analysis, there is control, and, in control, there is comfort.

The Bathroom Event is so fucking uncanny. It was a metaphor that lived and breathed. It was strange and familiar, *déjà rêvé*<sup>10</sup> almost. A manifestation of the ghostly past and an ominous future, decidedly present.

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<sup>10</sup> *Déjà rêvé* (from French, meaning “already dreamed”) is the feeling of having already dreamed something that you are now experiencing.

It was every relationship-fear condensed into airy pseudo-celluloid and projected in my mind's eye. I was its star, its producer, its director. I was its audience. I was the tormenter and the tormented.

In its acts:

I: The fear of beginning a bad relationship.

II: The fear of knowing the signs of a bad relationship yet staying anyway, excusing bad behaviors or overlooking them.

III: The fear of sexual assault by a romantic partner.

All of these fears have a real-life inspiration:

I: Sadly, I have had more bad relationships than good ones thanks to lifelong low self-esteem that became co-morbid with self-destruction.<sup>11</sup>

II: Too many times have I compromised my own wants and needs for the sake of another, mistaking some of their worth as all of mine.

III: Self-explanatory, since my very first sexual experience was assault at 15 and is as hauntingly vivid now as it was 13 years ago.

In something that feels like what David O. Russell's *I Heart Huckabees* strove to capture (e.g., the living metaphor, the search for semiotics in human form), this was an exacting fever dream. As most dreams are (theoretically) vomiting, fleeting thoughts of the unconscious, this was incredibly lucid. Are these fears real, as in assuming profound validity, or are they simply *what ifs* of an anxious mind that has run amok?

It makes no sense and it makes perfect sense, put together and picked apart.

After hours and days of dissecting it, writing it down here, I have one conclusion. It was a nightmare with a moral.

When I confided this story to a couple of close friends, they all were able to ask the same question at the end: *how did you know that didn't happen?*

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<sup>11</sup> I had a conversation with an acquaintance recently about domestic violence and how its victims can't escape abusive partners so easily. I had said the issue is complex since some victims might be involved in something codependent or their partner has reduced their self-worth to so little that they feel (or are) helpless to leave. I mentioned forlornly how I am scared of being trapped in a situation like that.

"You wouldn't be in that situation. You're too smart to get into something like that. You would know immediately if you were in a bad relationship."

"...would I, though?"

She scoffed. "Yeah."

(She had no idea, and I will never tell her, about my two and a half year abusive relationship that took me 1,000 miles to completely break free from.)

“Well,” I shrug, “I don’t, really.”

Back in reality, which happened to be David’s\* living room, this was a painful truth: all evidence was circumstantial. There was no proof he wasn’t in the bathroom with me. There was no proof that he was, either.

The fourth act, the foundation of the previous acts, is the fear of commitment. At this point, I felt I had to make my feelings decisive on whether this would eventually evolve from dating to relationship, from “someone I am seeing” to “significant other.” *But what if he’s wrong for me? What if it ends badly? Do I dare disturb the universe?*

(In a minute there is time for decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse—for several seconds, I was ready to run. Several seconds later, I did not.)

Being the over-analytical person I am, I *hate* that this is the moral: David\* and I just have to trust each other. Intuition is never precise, and symbols are never literal. In the moment where my feet pointed towards the front door and my back towards the wall, his body facing mine and his arms open to embrace me, was an thick, palpable queasiness that whispered something low into our ears.

*Face your fears.*