

The Banal and the Spectral

“To always omit one word, to employ awkward metaphors and obvious circumlocutions, is perhaps the most emphatic way of calling attention to that word.”

- Jorge Luis Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths”¹

A reflection of a foot. Let a banal story begin with simply that. The foot, dimly reflected on the glass wall inside a quiet suburban café, did mimic very briefly a squirrel or a small creature of some sort when its bearer, an urban dweller we will call N’, mindlessly changed her posture in the midst of a banal attempt to “kill time.” Seated next to the glass barrier where images of the interior and the exterior overlap, the eternally distracted spectator managed to amuse herself for a very short while. The creature, she thought she clearly saw, even had something in its mouth dangling like dead prey.

This is one small way in which a small fissure opens, for a few millisecond, to the inside and the outside of the boundaries of one’s habitat. For an instant before the space becomes the (artificially coherent) familiar habitat again, she almost sees it: a crack in the banal materiality of everyday, a spectral realm wherein reside the ghost squirrel or similar objects of imaginary encounters. It is a door that closes as soon as it opens. N’ is perhaps aware that it hovers somewhere between her eyes and the foot.² In fact, it is not only the squirrel that makes the fissure visible but also the jolly glory of its illusory movement. N’s consciousness rightly claims the glory was staged by “misrecognition,” but inside the fissure that very word forms a vast network with many secretive noble friends, the full list of which is not accessible to slow-witted spies like myself. They create a fleeting impression of infinity; eternity to be consumed for a flash of a second. That glittering image nearly blinds her, except her eyes are already immune to that sort of assault. “No, a wild squirrel or a rat can’t appear in a street of Seoul,” N’ hastens to assure herself. The glory evades her, and she suddenly realizes that she is alone in the world, so sweetly and heartbreakingly alone. She watches how the glory vanishes slowly but surely like the trace of a hot mug on the table. The trace launches a thin thread of solid time into the air, and it starts to float. She witnesses how memories come to birth at the edge of time.

This is a “true story” that I heard from someone who no longer exists in that material banality of the everyday. I took the liberty of modifying one small detail, a liberty that any listener ought to take to some degree, especially when the story has nearly faded away with time and its teller exists only in fragmented memories. The detail I changed is the setting: the incident did not take place in Seoul

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths,” *Collected Fictions*. Trans. Andrew Hurley. New York, London, Ringwood, Toronto, and Auckland: Penguin Books, 1998, p. 126.

² If the fissure opens for viewers looking at Oh Soon-Hwa’s works, a similar crack may also be opening for the woman inside the picture, whose gaze is either meeting yours or focusing on something outside the frame. In any case, it has long been known that the emptiness of a gaze is contagious like yawns.

but in a small foreign city where a squirrel does appear on a street from time to time and where one is allowed to be alone and lonely inside a café. The reason for or point in the fabrication is not merely to revitalize the words of the silent storyteller, even though changing the details often helps extend the lifespan of the story itself. A hint can perhaps be offered by another unrelated incident that came to my attention recently. Before I introduce to you this incident, I'd like to allow myself to finish my fabricated story.

The evasion of the ghostly squirrel is not the end of N's story. In fact, the moment of evasion is when the real spectacle begins.³ Having realized that it was simply her misrecognition that created the squirrel, N' now plays with her foot and even directs it to mimic the evasive creature.⁴ Through its absence the squirrel begins to live a fictitious life as the foot confidently recalls the look of the ghostly thing. After all, memory is what survives and matures with time. With the ghostly aura of *absence* hovering in the space, the foot becomes 'swiftly' vulgar, just as swift as a squirrel should be. This is how conscious misrecognition conspires with everyday banality. The vulgarity of banality hosts her blasé creativity. The barren space that the foot dwells on bears language. Let that language be called boredom.⁵ Boredom and its affinities dwell in the city with their own style like stray cats as we distant observers all know it.⁶ The very foot would continue to serve its primary purpose, allowing her to move around her banal habitat until the very moment in which its muscular engineering was no longer permitted.

In another time and space, an amorphous group of television viewers is furious at a television station. The crew of a popular television melodrama damaged the exterior of the beloved stone wall that surrounds a palace while shooting the concluding episode of the series, in which the hero devises a way to impress the heroine: to cover the surface of the entire wall, more than a hundred yards long, with thousands of yellow post-its that say "I love you" in all different languages. The hard fact is that those yellow post-its were not post-its at all but ordinary colored papers glued to the

³ In Ku Ja-Young's performance documentations, the overlap between projected images and actual figures lasts a long time, long enough for viewers to discern which is which. Once you got what you need from making the distinction, you are free to remix the two and devise a new engagement, submitting your own eyes to uncertainty, this time voluntarily.

⁴ The opening of a fissure usually takes place involuntarily. This means that an attempt to revisit the experience may very well prove futile, as Y.H. Chang's story suggests. But in the signs themselves, there are almost always latent possibilities for opening and re-opening the fissure. Or, on the contrary, maybe they render the impossibility of preserving multiple passages of time and space in readership.

⁵ The common ingredients of ordinary boredom include absence (in any form), traces of disappearing delights or labor, and a futile desire for misrecognition. In this sense, Kim Sookang's gum print photographs might be appropriate companions to the conclusion of my banal story. In boredom (as well as in Kim's photographic series), the spectator forms a metonymic and reciprocal (in other words, fetishistic) relationship with objects.

⁶ Has the number of stray cats in the streets of Seoul not increased drastically recently? Could the number of stray cats possibly be an indication of the depth and width of a society's boredom?

wall, and they would not come off like post-its should; the crew had to use sharp implements to scrape them off after the shooting, and they removed more than the papers. The scratched and chipped-off bits of the stones marked the wall with signs that connote some horrendous trauma. Another hard fact is that even the devoted fans of the electronic fantasy demand that its creators be responsible citizens: “A romantic spell cannot cost a precious cultural asset.” A third hard fact associated with the incident, an ironic one: the pedestrian walkway adjacent to the wall is known for the mythical belief that the lovers who follow it together are doomed to separate, and it was used in the show as a locale for the reunion of the fictitious lovers. The irony is extended by yet another hard fact: In the drama the locale is supposed to be somewhere in Prague, not in Seoul. Why bother to go through all this ado in the first place, and insist upon this particular walkway if the wall is meant to be all covered and be somewhere else?⁷ Perhaps in the feeble logic behind the producer’s lame answer lies my own feeble reason for modifying the setting for the banal story about a banal foot and a banal squirrel.

If a riddle or a proverb must omit the very word that it asks for an answer, it is to produce perpetuity, to fabricate an impression of infinity. That final word pronounces that the riddle has exhausted all possible networks of meanings; that you have reached the finite closure of a labyrinth. The system of inherent absence operates through that very absence. When the final word is spoken, as Borges has shown in “The Garden of Forking Paths,” the text closes itself, and the story reaches the ultimate closure: death. We are led then to face a question about the fissures and closures, a question about the structure of misrecognition with all of its doubles, slippery signifiers, and their material bases: Is death not the unavoidable absent field that all the “missing words” ultimately point to?⁸

Before ending this thread of thought with an abrupt disclosure of *our* missing word, let us ponder some more upon the post-its and the imaginary locale that they opened up. Suppose you as the faithful television viewer must overcome these unrelated obstacles to fully secure your viewing pleasure and celebrate the simple proverb from television’s golden era: “The Medium Is the Message.” Yes, if you are one of those culturally sophisticated gallery goers who don’t care about television dramas,⁹ you must use a slice of your imagination to grasp partly, at least, the magic -- or the logic, if you will -- of the imaginary locale that exists somewhere between Seoul and Prague, the logic that operates through layers of misrecognition. You examine every piece of the “post-its,”

⁷ In contrast, Hong Young-In’s curtains often hint at what they are concealing (note, for example, his Nagoya project).

According to Lacan, the attraction of a veil lies in the very act of concealment, even if and especially when in fact nothing is concealed – a condition in which desire metonymically reproduces itself.

⁸ Is it not also true that in Lee HyunJean’s *Corresponding* the signs of physical fatigue or formal exhaustion that coincide with the disclosure of the finite form, the picture frame, also point ultimately to death? Has the impulse of the avant-garde not been always latently Thanatoid, as the military term itself always connoted?

⁹ Yes, even if you are culturally more attuned to galleries than to television, you may too be participating in the construction of this mass desire for fantastic, spectacular signs of a romantic relationship with time and space. Is Art not yet another enterprise that feeds on repetition and excess?

and it doesn't matter whether or not you understand the literal meaning of that foreign language as long as you understand the context; the message is not in the sentence. You may offer yourself some close-ups of these repetitive objects,¹⁰ but be sure to grant yourself a long re-establishing shot that shows the entire wall. It is not the words themselves but rather the sheer excess of words that impresses you, the sheer amount of time and effort behind that excess that moves you as the fictive lover.

The lover that you imagine yourself to be must also partake of the responsible citizenship or embrace the Modernist virtue of self-reflexivity. Imagine the little details of the ruination, those materials that expose the delicacy of what you cherish.¹¹ The signs of errors and slippages coexist with your "excessively" romantic relationship with the space. You may take the liberty of using extreme close-ups when you imagine the scars. They might remind you of the indented butt of a bee whose sting is separated and stuck in human skin, or of bare flesh eternally damaged by splinters of a bomb.¹² Indeed, they bombard you with a common sign: Welcome to Harsh Reality. Or is this 'reality' another form of the imaginary locale?

"The awe of the romance was turned into absurdity and flew off," said one news reporter concerned with the fake post-its (whose words are more indicative of frustration with the spoiling of TV pleasure than of anger at the destruction of an architectural asset). The Korean word for "absurd" literally means "lacking the wooden handle in an instrument (such as a millstone)." Let us recycle these words and imagine a handle-less instrument flying in the dense sky of Seoul like a fake U.F.O. (or in the unknown sky of Prague above the fictive lovers). Let us then "blindly translate" "a bird into an airplane, and that airplane into many (in the French sky), annihilating the artillery park with vertical bombs."¹³ Do it before *and* after all the hard facts interfere with the magnificent view.

¹⁰ On the other hand, it would be a rewarding experience to offer yourself some extreme close-up shots upon the details of Yoo Seung-Ho's works even though the literal meaning of each character, often onomatopoeic and comic in nature, is repetitive.

¹¹ I for one believe that an excessively emotional response to the fragility (or even the ruins) of the signs in Oh Inhwan's works is totally appropriate. Signs are consumed, abandoned, fragmented, even burnt (like the incenses in *Where a Man Meets a Man in Seoul*), and completely isolated from their contexts before or when they are imposed with a linguistic order. Delights and gloom (or violence) come hand in hand in the act of interpretation, as communication and its breakdown always coexist.

¹² Allow yourself a sense of humor even when the signs of absurdity are extreme. In Park Yoon-Young's pictogram paintings, the smudged boundaries of the otherwise clean and clear signifier, the slippery edges of an icon, may even reinforce the humor rather than spoil it.

¹³ Borges, *ibid*, p. 120. As for the Korean sky, it's been a long while since all Korean cities managed to cover up all traces of the bombings during the war. Even the brook that used to run through Seoul before the war has been restored according to the original route.