

Scenes of a Korean City

i.

I saw that there was a
clear shot from the Namsan tower, and
seeing the opportunity before me
atop the electrical city, sparked another flash and I
could view back to the
photo and contemplate in
the sound second what happened
across that moment.

ii.

On the jihachal¹ above,
below the Olympic Bridge²
the concrete supports accrue
dormant rust - creeping brown scars -
over the Hangang jostling
back and forth,
rushing by the Hyundais
and the blue buses
on the parallel lane. He
sat alone alongside the
company of indifferent
passengers.

iii.

She stared off into her phone
messaging someone,
as her friend sat beside her
messaging someone.

iv.

Down the bright alleys of Jamsil in the live night, another generation
jumps thru pubs existing on soju again,

¹subway

² 1988

jumbled telephone wires intersect into tangled chaos, invisible except for the reflecting shine off the black cords,
warm windows generate the setting of the scene – young Koreans in late night *maekjus* halls and jjampong, the shade of underground nightclubs dimmed with uv laser lights
sleazy tall guy, scruff on his chin, in the bucket hat with the stained marlboro slipping off his lips says he's offering oh-maanwon³ whores up the second floor with a single amber light lighting up the concrete steps
the BB gun target game through the window with each ping ping ping shot by each shooter,
a mix of K-pop and sporadic white noise – trite scratches of conversation blah blahing to static
the pungent spice of vendors filtering tteokbokki
who then stared at homogenous women in symmetry – copying all fashionable fads in regionalized Vogue and Ceci
and walk past fourth floor internet cafes, deviants sitting stimulating at burning computer screens with faded pixel stains booting up starcraft in those rooms always crippled in darkness,
attached to the façades of these concrete five to six story floors were the linear, bulb-backlit signs promoting velvet pool rooms, karaoke bars, attached by two steel beams on the side to extrude out claustrophobic eleven story clothing malls lined up linearly sporting anomalous fashion of bart simpson patterns and snoopy the beagle cramped with the piling of thrift store vintage t-shirts in burlap sacks and bootleg handbags and pirated DVDs
cancerous, wrinkled men, wearing white tennis hats, sitting on green plastic chairs so abundantly found smoking their dunhills ditching and stepping on them in torn chestnut loafers, pilling up with the rest of the smudged flyers for pork shops and finished butts wasting away,
all in the confined traversing backstreets and alleyways with all their one stop shops, like puzzling labyrinths and rocky unpaved streets complete with cracking potholes and infinite rumbling of the air conditioner high up, its metallic discharge drip dripping onto the damp road.

v.

³ \$50

In a modern museum
two photos adjacent another,
frame in clear glass
against a whitewashed wall.
In one, the men and their wives
stand before the sitting
grandparents and children;
all wearing the Hanbok.
The next is the same positioned photo
unchanged with the exception of time⁴
and absent:
four husbands
a boy with light black hair
and a mother.

vi.

On the corner of any street you'll see the printed ads,
of promotional celebrities standing with their counterpart models,
stickered against the glass pane of a 7eleven
with other messages reminding them
that there's always dunhills and coca-cola
and Lotte shit here too
beside the lotto tickets.
And with its blackened floors
dirty from the grime of footsteps;
aisles with shelves reaching
the ceilings collect dust on potato peelers
and plastic chopsticks sitting
there since the store's grand opening.
Her shift was beginning to end
and she was still too young
to wear the uniform.

vii.

The Korean keyboard player,
with the bald head,

⁴ 1953

plays the chords on the grand piano
and pounds the keys vigorously like
they were bleeding over the
worn white and black keys;
to the drummer who,
naturally, snaps on the drop cymbal
and hitting triplets on the snare
and the upright bass plucks each baritone
string deep surrounding the brick room underground the bar
in its sonorous vibration.
In conscious jazz, these are the rules.

viii.

400 years when the peasant
walked into Gyeongbokgung under the guise
of a rice farmer and Sejong was
still huddled in his chamber writing up Hangeul;
he glorified in the basking sun and
of hibiscus courtyards and the magnificent
stature of the palace – temples surrounded
by stone wall and the lavish reflecting pools
that surfaced the prosperous image of royalty.
The farmer's home the spot of a relatively
successful Starbucks and
tourists clamoring in the now arid courtyard,
not a tree for shade,
asking the guide when the tour's about to end.
It was just too hot⁵!

ix.

I didn't need to be here, but she had insistently told me
to come because she wanted to recreate a scene that
she had seen from some tv drama. We were out by the
Namsan, nothing more than a place where dipshit
tourists bought a cable car ticket just for a view. She
bought a padlock on the way and she had Sharpied
our names around a scribbled heart. She checked the
railings for an empty spot; there were none she could

⁵ 105 degrees.

find so, slipping it on a decorative tree branch, she threw the key that locked our heart from the platform and pressed against me, holding my hand. I didn't know why I had felt so indifferent.

x.

Her father addicted to work
and mother bullied for her success,
stringent days in classrooms which you so despised.
I asked you what you enjoy
and you couldn't answer me.
Only yes or no, either/or and
I prayed for your opinion to
say anything you acknowledge.
You are not Antoine Doinel
but just as unheard.

xi.

From the lifeless flat
I could see the pollution sunset⁶
fall⁷.

xii.

Where are you now,
as grandfather night eats away?
Padlocked away in this cage of
a two room apartment, bedroom-kitchen
bathroom in Hoegi shuttered away at the
loss of your house, crying because
you couldn't recognize my face
after all these years and what a man

⁶ That invariable moment from the sub balcony of the 27th floor in concrete middle to high class five room apartment housing near Gangnam where, overlooking the Hangang and northern Seoul, the smog of the city reacts to the sunlight deriving from the sun 92.96 million miles too close, twinkling in the carbonic air, the blinking red and green signal lights spotted from the barely visible Namsan mountain in the deep ochre haze with the glaze of sunlight hitting the other apartment complexes blinding - and it was a spot for every sundown that I witnessed over the course of the good month.

⁷ 7:18 PM

I transformed to and the lonely existence
you face when I inevitably depart.

Is this like the crowded roofs
of boxcars – huddled in UN blankets
with the burnished ground shelled,
the dying grass polished with snow
and infantry lifelessly rolling past in tanks
escaping the 38th parallel over the horizon
of this dead country.

You told me that the stone bodies,
faceless in the streets
meant nothing near the end and that the crumbles of brick
and concrete powder covered them anyway.

When hal-abeoji⁸ left in the September
of that year⁹ – when he taught me *hatu* a month before -
the only lasting memory I can recall of him -
voice and face forgotten ad infinitum.
How lonesome you must be there alone
sleeping on your stone bed and watching
the news every minute – for what is left to
do? your son and daughters whose
new phones are always off – but could
that also be your fault?

and when we walked one last time you couldnt even go off too far
because the walk would only hurt your back to the station and i
wouldn't let that happen to you and i shed a few tears embracing you
one last time with no guarantee, being that inevitable grandfather
night may swoop you away until our next arrival, and i walked down
the cobble brick alleys of hoegi and staring back you waved and i
waved back multiple times and i turned a corner and you went back
in, and i walked back to see if you were still at the top of the street
and you weren't, you probably walked back in your tiny complex and
that was the final glimpse.

⁸ grandfather

⁹ 2005

and I sat in the jihachal thinking only
about the day and I think but still,
I stop somewhere, waiting for you.