

Norman's Door

It was last Wednesday morning when I first noticed that Dr. John Norman, my colleague and office-neighbour, had started to change. Norman was a sedate man of around sixty with a pleasant voice and thick-lensed, round glasses. Every day he wore a version of the same suit in navy or dark grey and carried his things around in a black laptop bag. For the past five years, we'd worked together at ——— Consultants, a firm of about thirty employees which provided reports in the fields of aero- and hydrodynamics to both government and private industries. I had actually known Norman for longer than this, however, having first met him at the University of ———, where he had been a professor in the mathematics department. In both places Norman had fit in well, I thought, working hard on his research and enjoying good rapport with his colleagues. All of this is to say that before Wednesday, Dr. Norman seemed to be a more or less mild-mannered, predictable and slightly boring man.

We'd just finished a meeting with several government representatives from the Department of ———, where Norman had presented our final report for the project. He'd nailed it, I remember thinking, delivering our watertight, logical solutions at every turn. All possible contingencies had been accounted for, every outcome had been mapped. After the flurry of requisite hand-shaking and back-patting all round, Norman and I walked back through the building towards our offices. I often got lost travelling from one side of the building to the other — each floor was an essentially identical configuration of glass and stainless steel Modernist office design — and would rely on my colleagues to successfully navigate us back to ——— Consultants' floor. Norman was unfailingly good for this, and I followed his lead down air-conditioned corridors and walkways, passing by the other companies and organisations housed in the building. I remember asking him about his most recently published article — something on Newton's law of universal gravitation — and not my field at all. "Classic action at a distance," he was saying, "without physical contact, an object's motion can be affected by another object." The words he was using were making sense, but as the conversation continued I noticed that his syntax was becoming strange, the sentences circuitous and contradictory. Nonetheless, he seemed unaware of this and I put it down to exhaustion brought on by the ——— project.

The next morning I was in the office by eight AM. Most people didn't come in until around nine, especially Norman who would invariably arrive at nine on the dot. I liked this quiet hour, before even the hum of the air-conditioner had started up. I unlocked my office door and sat down at my desk, about to open my laptop, when a faint scratching sound coming from somewhere out in the hallway caught my attention.


The scratching was soon joined by a deeper, almost subsonic vibration. I stood up and stuck my head out into the hall. The sounds seemed to be coming from inside Norman's office. Approaching his closed door, I could see that it was vibrating on its hinges. Norman's voice too, came muffled through the door, but he sounded frantic and confused in a way I'd never heard before. "John?" I called, "Are you okay? What are you doing?" No answer. I went to knock and the door swung open far too easily under my hand, hitting Norman who turned out to be crouching beside it and almost knocking him to the ground. He looked up at me, ashen-faced, grimacing and sweating. In one hand he was clutching both a magnifying glass and a screwdriver, and in the other was a sheaf of paper covered in diagrams and instructions. More of these printed sheets were strewn across the room. "My door keeps changing," Norman gasped, shaking the papers at me. I stood there, shocked. "I'm going to fix my door, it keeps changing," he repeated, "I don't know how it works." I reached down to put my hand on his shoulder, tried to say something comforting or calming, but he jumped up and shuffled me out of the room. I can't remember what he was saying, then, except that he looked me straight in the eye, winked, and as soon as I was out he slammed the door behind me and locked himself in.

Panicked, I rushed through the building, towards the floor of ———, the closest organisation to ——— Consultants' offices. I caught ——— coming out of the lift, blurted out something about needing help and we rushed back to Norman's office. Norman was gone. His entire office wall was gone. It was impossible — it had been minutes since I'd been there with him. All that remained was the steel doorframe, still vibrating and strangely bent outwards. ——— and I stared at the doorframe, speechless. Beyond it, Norman's furniture was dismantled, some of it missing. Whatever happened at the scene after this point is a mystery to me. A security guard I'd never seen before appeared, along with the higher management of ——— Consultants, immediately escorting ——— and I from the building. I've been put onto a new, apparently prestigious project, but have been asked to work from home for the foreseeable future. All of my emails about the incident, or to Norman himself, have gone unanswered, and I'm anxious that the more I try to find out what happened, the more I'm jeopardising my employment. I'm worried about Norman, of course, and am completely baffled by what happened, but for now, I've resigned myself to keeping quiet just trying to concentrate on my work.

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Mokumokuren

If you think mokumokuren has turned up in your house, it can mean there are other yōkai around too. You might not see them right in front of you, but basically any household object or even part of the house can become inhabited by a kami spirit and turn into a yōkai, doing cheeky or weird things like moving your pillow to the end of your bed in the night or licking the ceiling or running around the house. Yōkai can also be animals, people or other beings, but for our purposes I want to talk to you about tsukumogami, household-object yōkai.

Mokumokuren take the form of doors, usually sliding doors, which have become damaged through age or neglect. In the holes and cracks that appear in the door, mokumokuren has eyes which peer out at you.  is the ancient form of the kanji 目 (eye) in mokumokuren's name, which as you can see is an human eye which has been flipped from horizontal to vertical.

Other than looking at you, this yōkai doesn't do very much. When I was a kid, my door became a momokuren and would look at me when I was trying to sleep. This was actually so scary but I worked out a way to deal with it, I would stare right at the eyes until they eventually disappeared and I could go to sleep. This worked quite well but it would often reappear right when I'd started to forget about it and I would have to do the stare-off all over again.

The “God trick”

In her 1988 article, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” Donna Haraway puts forth her argument against the notion of a universal, “neutral,” objective position from which knowledge can be deduced, and suggests that knowledge is always embodied, partial and situated.

In naming this former framework as the “God trick,” Haraway characterises the implicit ascribing of omniscience to this position — here, in the context of contemporary Western scientific knowledge systems — and reveals it as illusory and in fact, impossible. She writes, “This is the gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the un-marked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation.” Here, the unmarked category is understood to be any dominant, normative subjectivity — particularly the gendered “man” and racialised “white.”

Drawing on feminist standpoint theory, Haraway writes that all knowledge is produced from particular social, political and historical contexts and perspectives, and therefore can never be absolute, unbiased or distanced. But rather than doing away with a concept of objectivity, Haraway attempts to redefine it as a mutual project of many situated knowledges, where partiality contributes to, rather than detracts from, the quality of the knowledge developed. In particular, she privileges historically and currently subjugated positions, writing “there is good reason to believe vision is better from below the brilliant space platforms of the powerful,” — while simultaneously cautioning against both appropriating and romanticising “the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions.” Further to this, Haraway warns against essentialism — it is possible for one to both occupy these “subjugated” positions while at the same time operationalising the power of the “God trick” in all its distanced unaccountability.

Finally, Haraway argues that the “God trick” is an attempt at rational mastery over a presumably knowable, non-agential object. In comparison, “situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor or agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of ‘objective’ knowledge.” That which is being considered is never completely knowable, then, and must be understood to maintain its own agency.