

Bevis Hillier Creative Writing Competition 2017

A. Huang

Still lying

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night. Waking at four to soundless, lurking dark, I stare. In time the curtain-edges will grow light; but until then I see what's really always there: unresting death, a whole day nearer now.

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It's late, and my study is a butter-licked cavern of shaded-lamplight; a soft yellow wound on the tender night. My study is prodigiously heated and the cream walls are illuminated with a deferential flush. The subdued glow from far-away buildings burn hazily in the inky darkness, like golden objects lost in deep grass. I lie and gaze at thin and crystalline sprinkling of the stars with an existential angst - the kind that plagues a man in the hours before dawn - for I, am still questioning the purpose, meaning and value of my exam revision: the excruciating wrist-slashing absurd monotony that has propelled my life into ennui. Indeed, for Lent I even 'gave up' my soul: for no exam-passing machine appreciates the true (ineffable) beauty and complexity of art or language or science; instead, one must embrace each exam-question with a pathetic reverence, sciolism and half-heartedness that is unnatural to the human mind.

A painting above my overloaded desk seems to cradle the innocent dew that was still on me as a three year old; I stare at it with a certain grief. My uncle in a few deft brush-strokes (and with a sweetish pipe in his mouth) captures the frail, wet, hazel of the eyes, impeccably pure and candid; he disguises the cheeks and ears that lit to a lovely flame, like the thrilling flush of children after they had entered the refrigerated indoors from the enervating, evanescent summer day. I breathe, and into my heart an air that kills. I now remember the inability of the lips to endure boredom as well as the face that lacked the ill repose of maturity - so sad, so fresh, the days that are no more.

As with any object that may bear the notion of the past, the present is never too far behind. However in the glass reflection of the wooden frame, I do not see clarity, but rather an unfortunate elision between an adolescent exam-sitting teenager and an eighteenth-century prostitute. I see someone who is preparing, who is so-called 'revising', patting his face with make up and wearing wigs to hide his authentic self. I watch someone who will soon enter the brothel of an examination hall, using sesquipedalian and meretricious words to perform a lexical tease on lined paper: in hope that the examiners do not revert back to their perpetual floccinaucinihilipilification. A frightened boy I see: he knows these sexually frustrated markers want the lucidity and transgression and titillating *jouissance* of infallible exam scripts - nothing too lengthy, nothing that precipitates the paradox; that is, of course, of hedonism. I faintly discern a fierce lustre in his dingy eyes, but it is quickly marred by an unclear disgust held in suspension by his face. I notice his young forehead with its furrows of fretful and unprofitable pain from the syphilitic scars of previous encounters; I understand his scrunched-up eyebrows. They are indelible marks caused by the boy's clamber and struggle to push a bolder idea up the same precipitous hill of understanding - but never quite able to reach the apex; only to watch it roll down again from the same side. I do not 'imagine' him happy. I lament.

Suddenly remotely conscious that I am no longer doing any “absolutely necessary revision” (to remark too many of my teachers), a glaucous blush spreads over my face, dissolving all of my previous expressions into a vast ineffectuality. I stop my puny reverie and continue to ‘revise’.

I can resist everything except temptation. And my ear distinguishes yet another distraction: this time, a continual tapping in the still ambience. I peer out to find my neighbours having a lively garden party. The raised wooden patio and the dark green prayer rug of turf are one. The incandescent red paper lanterns lay asleep amongst the mass elder trees and the tips of their flames tickle the air; the fiery ringlet paths of mosquitoes and *libellules* are revealed at last, quavering in the velvety breeze. Behind the guests’ garrulity and bourgeoisie gourmandizing, through the tremulous cherry blossom, my eyes catch a woman. She is a soft-looking, cherubic youth in a silken evening dress. Her mind and body hover on the brink of inebriety, but sober and suave remnants still persist on her. She is of languid disposition, yet her gait is full of vim and vigour; and her penetrating blue ocean eyes are ostensibly emphasised by the reddish pallor of her round face. Her hair bursts into lovelocks and waves and curlicues of ash blonde and silver. Her upper body sways vehemently back and fourth and back to the mellow syncopated bass: she is free. All of it, an almost facetious reminder of how my Rodinesque shoulders droop – mortality weighs too heavily on me, like unwilling sleep.

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The lingering sunrise is so dreaded. I lie down again with an impatient lethargy, but I am still not ready to sleep.

There is no sight, no sound, no touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with, nothing to love or to link with! I - relinquish...