

On the Eve and Other Poems

Dennis Haskell

On the Eve

(Wed 18 May 2011)

My dearest darling Rhond,

I write this to you, or me, or to space on the eve of yet another operation, but I need to write for the horrors and anxieties – probably paranoia – that overtake me in the long, dead, dark reaches of the night – hours when every element of imagination is an ogre. I imagine having to ring our boys, your father, your sister, my mum, everyone, to say the operation has gone horribly wrong. I imagine the surgeon, someone with him to provide support – support him, not me – while he slowly and painfully tells me the hardest part of his job is not slicing apart flesh – your flesh – or reaching and tearing out organs – he can do that – but this impossible sitting down to say unaccountably something went wrong, the risk was small, but he did tell us there was a .5% chance of dying on the table. Unaccountably... he is still wearing his gloves and gown, half-human – he will go away to be haunted by this forever, but not as much as me, as us.

Then a moment of sense jumps up and says this is ridiculous! But immediately I am back in an alternative horror – you've lost too much blood, the anaesthetist has misjudged the dose, the cancer cells are everywhere like children in a playground, your body couldn't take it. It's five years of this battling disease, rising and sinking in opposition to its strength or temporary weakness, building and building – a tsunami that pushes aside or surges over the flimsy dykes of reason, and again I am, we are, swimming, floun-

dering, drowning in a hysteria of worry so unlike the impassive, unthinking march of cancer and all the science the surgeon gets to fight it. Tomorrow he will do the job, and both our lives hinge on the steadiness of his hands, and his impersonal skill. It is no match for our emotions. One day, we know, we will lose this battle – the body and all its absurdities always wins. Until then we struggle and fight and sinfully almost pray.

Renewal

Your driver's licence
renewal notice
arrives in the post
innocently enough
- after all, it's just
a notice,
part of the trivial,
pay-attention-to-this,
administrative detail
of our lives.

You must choose:
one more year or five.
"Just one"
you say, playing
the Scotsman's daughter,
"I wouldn't want
to waste the money"

and something funny
folds up
inside me
and keeps trembling
its papery breath.

Poem beginning with a line by Li Po

“Our floating life is like a dream ...”

In 1775 Shen Fu, about Yün, their lives already entwined: “I asked for the manuscripts of her poems and found that they consisted mainly of couplets and three or four lines, being unfinished ... I wrote playfully on the label of this book ... and did not realise that in this case lay the cause of her short life.” Beginning *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*.

Tianjin, Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing ladies and men by tens of thousands on tens of thousands of bicycles, mopeds, motorscooters, motorbikes, gauze their faces, handkerchief their mouths, so many particles of dust and lead pixel the air. The clouds ache, then mud and uncertainty pour onto streets while the wind swings its shrill seizures all around my windows, nature’s opera makes an immediate audience of millions.

And pausing over Shen Fu and Yün, their lives afloat, I think of our single lives, of last year, when death almost swept you away. In Hangzhou, Ferrari, Versace, Luis Vuitton arc the magnificent West Lake, obelisks of apartments arrow the ground like headstones for the living. As far as anyone’s eye can see the small, ancient villages are being swept

into the prim nostalgia of history. Now
stinky tofu in the streets, Starbucks,
azaleas in flower, a traffic soldier's shrill
whistle – ignored – the rush of feet
fills the street, and the next street, and the next, and the...
Dodging battalions of legs, on pedals, flat to floors,
coming from a three-quarters empty country
the faces come toward me, staring straight ahead, too
many to think the "What if?" of other possibilities.
I find it hard to believe in

individuality, that each gaze has
in mind fears, whispers, expectations;
Chinese count in numbers so enormous
they add up to anonymity.
No matter how many faces you see
there are always more, no matter
how many arms and hands you touch
there are always more, no matter
how many motorbikes and voices you hear
there are always more...

And beginning here without you my love,
surrounded, drenched in this dense, teeming life,
I feel as if the world itself were short of breath,
floating, and all China a stretch of long silence.

Central

Rain sticks to the smooth-faced window
as silk clothes mesh with saturated flesh.
In the mornings I walk steeply,
shin splints aching, feet flapping,
baffled head angled to my feet:
had Newton been born in Hong Kong
gravity would have had no need of apples.
The lemurs and baboons screech
from their high wire trapezium cages.
All about the green and soggy island
lit-up windows stare, unblinking but inconstant
like hints in punched card concrete code
where life is lived vertically
up and down mountainfaces
that seem to say to our hurtling sleeves
*What are you doing here, what
consequence?* Government towers,
shopping towers, escalators of possessions
soak up the fast-paced, still air.
The Hong Kong Art Museum displays the
Seven Disciples of Tian Feng almost for free
but you must really pay to see Luis Vuitton.
A world of difference lies between
Magazine Gap Road and Tsim Sha Tsui,
between St John's Cathedral and the IFC.
What is central to others, to me,
as ferries creak across a soupy harbour?