

The Poetry of Dennis Haskell¹

These three poems vary in setting and partly arise from cross-cultural contact, but their main themes are universal. The Chiyang Coffee Café is a real café located in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. I don't speak Mandarin or Taiwanese so I used to go there to drink coffee, read without interruption, and watch the frantic traffic zoom near-by. The poem "Waiting" was written when I was waiting in the airport to leave Hong Kong, which I used to visit fairly often; I felt an affection for the place and could imagine its daily activities while I was waiting to leave it. Such activities seem ordinary to those involved but for that very reason I think them worth celebrating. These two poems are both meditations on places and the movement of mind they prompt. The third poem is an ekphrastic one drawn from an art installation at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art. It presents details from the installation and its theme is obvious.

Essences

Beside the Chiyang Coffee café,
below its lowered canvas awning
the Taiwan traffic roars and roars, an incessant
spawning of cars and scooters and trucks
rushing to who-knows-where.

We could truly say that every moment
of every day we are rushing further
distant from our birth, and fiercely closer
to the death that surely expects us.

Perhaps the drivers jointly think to be
roaring away from death; it would anoint
their disjointed rush, if the moment
of death were a fixed, still point.

¹ **Dennis Haskell** is Emeritus Professor at the University of Western Australia. He has authored nine collections of poetry, the most recent *And Yet...* (WA Poets Publishing, 2020), *Ahead of Us* (Fremantle Press, 2016), and *What Are You Doing Here?* (University of The Philippines Press, 2015), in addition to fourteen volumes of literary scholarship and criticism. He is a Member of the Order of Australia for "services to literature, particularly poetry, to education and to intercultural understanding." He has previously published both poems and critical articles in *Asiatic*. Email: dennis.haskell@uwa.edu.au; website: dennishaskell.com.au

I am sitting outside, reading poetics
not far from, carefully not near
the smokers, who steadily light up
thin sticks in a wish to bring death closer.

Death hovers in the future, as
certain as daybreak; yet poetics takes us
to where rich beliefs are rife, and grief
can be delayed, death's moment ever
unknown, as uncertain as the rush of life.

Waiting

I sit in Hong Kong Airport
hours to wait between planes,
and the mountains become
increasingly difficult to see,
their solidity dissolving
into a grey fuzz.
Everywhere is a fascinating somewhere
to someone else.

It must be raining on the harbour,
the ferries buck and rock
on their repeated crossings,
the fluctuating water
awash, splashing back,
resisting the jetties.

Today hectic airports
that once seemed glamorous
and downtown Kowloons
have steadied into repetition,
are everyday,
flush with ordinariness,

a somewhere awaiting celebration.

“I don’t see colour”

*Art installation by Fijian-Australian, Salote Tawale, PICA,
August 2021: “I don’t see colour’ is an attempt to process the
implications of (colour) blindness to race and history....”*

Only those born blind
are indifferent to colour:
it is the world’s rhythm
pulsing in our eyes
but as much shining in us
as embodied out there;
is it, then, a surprise
that colour in sea
and grass and rock and sky
spears us differently
to colour in skin?

Salote Tawale’s
is a Fijian room
whose walls are
doomed to pastels
of white, yellow, green,
a floor white, black, and grey,
a room where hardly human heads,
bald, bucktoothed, mouthless,
scowling in pinks and green
mark a way
that Fijians were seen
by white colonial masters.
Colour marked identity;
and somehow a plastic-
goggled, colourless mask
she hangs there
marks no identity at all,
its red streamer
of a beard
entirely out of place
on any face.

No colour can begin
to be crueller
than the colour of skin.