

Belief

Dennis Haskell¹
Westerly Centre, University of Western Australia

You never see him move
but now he sits silent
in the expectant corner
of every room you enter.
It is his appalling serenity
that hurtles you
into lip bitten anger.
Though he stares ahead
as blank as eternity
his eyes never leave you,
toast your anger into melancholy,
melancholy into the concession,
the bathos of self-pity. Injustice
finds you everywhere. You can declare
that this is your room,
your house, trespassing
will not be tolerated
but he knows who is trespassing
on your useless proclamations
and will never forgive them.
His silence is the future of noise,
his poise the futile end
of restless striving. Arriving
in each room you
may close your eyes
and resolutely say you do
not believe in death.

¹ Dennis Haskell is the author of 7 collections of poetry, the most recent *What Are You Doing Here?*, published by the University of the Philippines Press, and 14 volumes of literary scholarship and criticism. He is the recipient of the Western Australia Premier's Prize for Poetry, the AA Phillips Prize for a distinguished contribution to Australian literature from the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, and of an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from The University of Western Australia; in June he was made a Member of the Order of Australia for significant service to literature, particularly poetry, to education and to intercultural understanding. He has a new collection, *Ahead of Us*, to be published by Fremantle Press in February 2016.

But, true or untrue, death
will never
not believe in you.

Drinking

I strike a match, bash
the light switch off
and, candle flickering,
drop into another century
when thought was slower:
I need its pace,
this slowing of the mind,

as another mug of tea
you've asked for
but been unable to drink
is swallowed by the sink

and I lean silently
over the benchtops
swallowing hard

while the tea
gurgles and gargles
in the sink's
metallic throat.

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, Louis 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.

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 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 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 against 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, floundering, 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.