

Three Poems

by Jo Han (May 2018)



Q Train, Nigel Van Wieck, 1990

The Noble Lie

I, too, cannot live
without it,
It alone
grants me the light
to look into
the soul's dark core

and makes radiant
the opaque reaches
of the heart.

I, too, cannot love
without it,
for it sustains
the vision of beauty
even after hope
has struck like lightning
and conjured from its shock
the ashes of future delights.

I, too, cannot die
without it.
Wisdom, in its virginity,
traces the arc of passion's fall,
that for a time
defies the gravity
of melted wings
and decaying leaves
that also once knew height.

But the hunger
that grows false in us
chains the oracle as its prey,
and so freedom ever recedes from you,
still yet one more renunciation away.

On Subway Line 4

Looking out from the train
as it crosses the Han River,
cars slow down as traffic thickens
under a gray summer sky,
a mist of rain glazing the window.
I thought of the crueler nostalgia—
not for the experiences one has lived through
or for the fruit plucked from the past
that now ripens and ferments in the memory,
but for hopes one was able to entertain,
for the futures one could still imagine:
the illusions that kept us aloft and airborne.
The wings sutured across the backs

of our thoughts enabled them
to be swept up into the mind of the wind.
But a drop of blood from the wounds of ascent
marked the sacrifice of a desire
to the star of its fulfillment,
hovering for a brief moment
above the stain of its vanity, as mortal
and as earthbound as the scar
that is our sole and constant possession.

Watching Cuttlefish

You hover there, suspended in pale light,
As your crown sways in the billows
From the storm that gives out
At the ceiling of your world.

Above you looms the realm of the dead,
Where shadows grow heavy with smoke,
While below you, the currents struggle
To sweep all that dives onto the summits of drought.

But you persist in your station,
Your tentacles levitating
To the midpoint of a renunciation.
There is no wreckage to stir your appetite
On the bright and lifeless floor of your sea.

It is tempting to scavenge memories
Of carrion—a tattered fin, a shard of shell,
And the eye's solitary seed—and turn
The decay of mirages into the gifts of dread.

But you cast your eye beyond wishes,
Release from your grip the first lure fastened
On the wire that winds out of the abyss.
Though your gaze turns inward
The figment of the void that unspools from your eye
Arrests the glances of passing ghosts.
You tighten the coil between fate and hunger,
And spread your arms into the vessels walled in by hope.

I fade into your camouflage, sleepless, iridescent,

Like prey transfixed by its reflection.
Your spell casts its anchor into the depths
Lit by your serenity, but as I stretch my arm
Toward the chain, my lungs fill with air
And I awaken like a statue,
Hurtling up into the dust of an unseeing night.

Jo Han is a professor of comparative literature currently living in Seoul, South Korea, where he was born and lived for four years before moving to the United States. His areas of research include science fiction, political theory, and East Asian cinema. He is currently at work on a project exploring the afterlife of the aristocratic in modernity, focusing on the works of Stendhal, Tocqueville, Nietzsche, Flaubert, Proust, Musil, and Houellebecq.

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