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Prof. Van Herk

ENGL 335

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Works Consulted

1. Program for “The Revel Maid.” 1930. M-6882-9. F0369 Calgary Light Opera Society Fonds. Glenbow Archives. University of Calgary, Calgary, AB
2. Murray, Aife. *Maid as muse: how servants changed Emily Dickinson's life and language*. UPNE, 2009.

Tranquility

I

*“Lunar surface on a Saturday night,
Dressed up in silver and white,
With coloured old grey whistle test lights.
Take it easy for a little while,
Come and stay with us.”*

- Arctic Monkeys, Four out of Five

The e-cigarette’s tip flares a bright orange glow against Richard’s finger, giving the illusion of a fiery kiss on his skin.

He props up his head by digging his elbows into an ornate desk. The desk’s edges are accented with gold on every straight edge, to match the rest of the hotel room. The desktop is an

obsidian black hole that swallows all colour save for a blank white page resting on its surface. Richard puts his head down on the desk and prays to the gods of creation, that they may pluck forgotten words from his skull and lay it down in ink.

“Richard, you should get some sleep. This is supposed to be a vacation for you.”

Ali’s hovers her hands above his shoulders. Richard can feel the air under her fingers bristle with electricity. He shivers and shrugs away from her. He closes his eyes and admires her through her scent. Sweet cherry wood rubbed with burning phosphor.

“Maybe every day for you is a vacation.” Richard says. “But the rest of us have to work.”

“Don’t you think what I do is considered work?”

“You might call it that, I call it something else.”

“And what would that be?”

Richard puts the e-cigarette into his shirt pocket and swivels to face Ali. Her youthful beauty is hyperbolic with no bound. She radiates light in every room she enters like an ageless Aphrodite plucked from Richard’s imagination.

She was perfect in every way and thus fit to be his muse.

“I’m not falling for that trap again.” He says.

Ali smiles, knowing she has him cornered.

“Let’s at least open the curtains.” She says mercifully. “You didn’t come all this way to stare at some curtains, did you?”

When drawn shut, the golden patterns on the black velvet curtains come together to form an image of the sun. When the lights were on, the golden sun reflects light into every corner of the room.

“If I stare at the curtain or if I stare at the sun, what difference does it make? I still fell blind.”

“Is your vision impaired? Would you like me to get the hotel physician?”

“No, my vision is fine. It was a joke.”

“Oh. Well, I won’t open the curtains unless you tell me to Richard.”

“Fine, open the fucking curtains. I’ll see this fancy view that I’m paying so much for.”

Without anyone moving, the fake golden sun splits in half like an egg to reveal the real sun starting to slip beneath the horizon. The last remnants of sunlight cut through the hazy e-cigarette smoke and projects a tableaux against the back wall. A lonely old man sitting under the clouds. The golden embellishments on the bedpost and bathroom door shimmer one last time in artificial extravagance before the sun is eclipsed by the horizon.

Rocky white dunes stretch out across the sea of tranquility.

The lunar surface is still, frozen in time and space, devoid of life. In the distance, nestled between two dunes lies an altar to an old American flag. The stars and stripes are captured mid-wave in a surreal photograph of man reaching for the stars. A plaque sits on the ground in front of the flag and although he cannot make the words out, Richard knows exactly what it says.

We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things not because they are easy but because they are hard.

Behind this tombstone for American excellence, a blue marble coated in white frosting hangs perfectly like a painting adorning God's cosmodrome.

"Are you satisfied?" Ali asks.

Richard hears laughter coming from the empty page on the desk. "I would be satisfied if you could just take this pen and write down the words stuck in my head. I seem to have forgotten them."

Ali doesn't reach for the pen. She stands perfectly still and laughs at the old man sitting in front of her. The bags under his eyes sag down his cheeks and his arthritic fingers twitch under the weight of a modest ballpoint pen.

"You know I am not capable of that Richard." She smirks.

Richard stares out the window and thinks about just how easy it was to come to the moon *this* decade. A few hours in commercial zero-g, a day or two in isolation. The hardest part was checking into the hotel.

"I have a recommendation!" Ali snaps him out of a daze.

"Yes?"

"They're showing a play in the arboretum in eighteen hours! We should attend."

"Oh lord, I don't think I can handle another amateur hour production put on by virtual actors." Richard turns away from the window. Ali has already picked out an outfit for the upcoming occasion, a trim lavender cocktail dress. "If I have to sit through *No Exit* one more damn time, I might just open the airlock and find my own exit."

“No, no, this is a *real* play. No virtua-actors, human actors. The Tranquility Overlook management flew them up on their own dime. Really nice of them.”

“Do they do that often?”

“Only when they have a shut-in like you. They’re performing a play called *The Rebel Maid*. It’s a period romantic musical, doesn’t that sound inspiring?”

The blank white page on Richard’s desk is an aperture to the lunar seas engulfing the Tranquility Overlook Hotel™. The page is a harsh mistress, empty and desolate. Richard is trapped in the negative space existing between ruled lines and lunar dunes. Alone except for the shadows projected by diffracted sunlight onto a scanner darkly. These shadows used to give up their stories easily.

But it has now been 4 months of silence.

“Fine but let’s go early. I won’t suffer musical theatre sober.”

II

Why throw away months of your life to visit Mars when you can see the red planet from the comfort of the Tranquility Overlook Hotel’s™ Arboretum. Experience the thrill of space travel without leaving earth’s gravitational pull. Take in a drink at The Gernsback Canteen and enjoy a performance put on by our world-class virtua-actors.

Tranquility Overlook Hotel™: Escape into the past.

- A consortium of words written on the inside fold of a pamphlet discovered on the side of the road on the outskirts of the valley formerly called San Fernando.

The Tranquility Overlook Hotel's™ arboretum is seen earth-side as a green pimple on the face of the moon. Roots wind their ways in and out of water vents and cover every inch of the floor. Patrons walk along floating staircases that weave between the trees at unnaturally perfect right angles. All plant species, genetically modified to thrive in microgravity, have diverged far enough from their earthly progenitors to produce an inbred child of Central Park.

At each staircase junction is a golden statue of a winged woman holding the sun and earth in her outstretched hands. They are the guides of this labyrinth, always pointing towards the middle where The Gernsback Canteen sits at the arboretum's zenith. The bar is an art deco nightmare ripped from the collective consciousness of Earth's urban metropolises. Ionian pillars made of obsidian hold up the ceiling painted with a monochrome fresco of zeppelins flying over the Golden Gate Bridge.

Richard sits at his usual table and takes a sip of scotch from a cuboid rocks glass. He looks around the room and sees the same faces he had been seeing for the past 4 months. Some men sport tidy moustaches and chiseled chins, others are tall, clean-shaven and have perfect posture. The women all show their legs in seductive dresses and walk adeptly in their high heels.

All the strangers are immaculately beautiful and all of them walk without making a sound.

“I must be losing my fucking mind.” Richard says.

“You haven't even finished your first drink.” Ali sits in the chair opposite Richard. “Would you like me to get the hotel physician?”

“No, no. Not yet at least.” Richard looks around the room “It’s just that everyone here looks so familiar.”

“Of course, they do. It’s the same group that has been here the last 4 months.” She says.

“Don’t they ever leave? What are they waiting for?”

“The same thing you are waiting for.”

Actors begin to take the stage in 17th Century garb as imagined by a 21st Century costume designer. Before the house lights dim, Richard sees blemishes and imperfections on the actors’ stolid faces.

“Wow, he whispers to Ali. They are real actors.”

“How can you tell?”

“They’re too ugly to be virtual.”

The lights go down, and the opening number is completed in total darkness. The audience feels the actors’ presence through their shuffling footsteps and faux British accents.

As the drama progresses, the sun slowly makes itself known over the glass horizon. Its light turns pale violet as it travels through the polarized dome. Intense light washes over the crowd and flashes Richards eyes, leaving a purple projection of the canteen burned into his retina.

Pure light penetrates the body of every audience member. Their familiar faces disappear as light passes through them and colours the backs of their chairs purple. Richard tries to grab Ali’s hand, but she is gone.

The Gernsback Canteen is empty except for Richard, the actors, and their shadows forming one amorphous blob. In the shadows, the muses have presented themselves.

Richard runs out of the canteen.

Still blind, he feels the arms of the golden angels to find his way out of the labyrinth and into The Tranquility Overlook™ Master Hall where his room resides. He can feel the luster of the hotel's gold décor slowly eroding.

He opens the door to his room and Ali is sitting on the bed. Sunlight now fills the room and passes right through her lavender dress without so much as a shadow. He reaches for her hand and his fingers fall through the electric light that makes up her holographic figure.

“Did you remember something?” Ali asks.

Richard picks up his pen and writes his first words in 4 months.