



A Hunger, Petra White

As the speaker in *By this Hand* restlessly begs “Listen”, White explicates a collection fraught with a desperate yearning. Throughout White’s *A Hunger*, beings in a variety of circumstances must reconcile their ephemeral, fickle human lives with an impartial, effacing cosmos which cares not for our transitory existence. This struggle manifests in *By this Hand*, where White conveys the impetus to immortalise and “preserve” one’s love by engraving it in the ostensibly permanent ‘black lines’ of poetry. White employs a subversion of structure, as *By this Hand* fulfils the typical fourteen line convention of a lyrical sonnet, yet omits the corresponding rhyme scheme. White’s stylistic decision exudes a subtle displacement and incompleteness which pervades the speaker’s urgent attempts to chronicle their love. As with the zenith of a “thousand suns” in *Truth and Beauty*, geological time is imbued throughout White’s collection, and arises in *By this Hand* through White’s tangible simile of “whispered words that try to put a dint in stone”. This evocation mirrors the fickle actions of humans against the greater scheme of space time. White imbues the speaker’s urgency with high modality in “these words must preserve, and outthrive” in order to highlight the desperate human initiative to reify their existence, especially in the face of the encroaching “crowy lines” which underscore the collection wide theme of decay which incites self-preservation, a notion which resounds strongly in *Truth and Beauty*. The speaker is lulled in close proximity with the self reflexive half-sonnet as the poem denotes its own terminal consumption with “line ten”. “four more lines to kill your absence”. Ultimately, the reader’s impulse to “bury” their love is successful, as the speaker makes direct reference to the “cold reader”. However White evinces the limits of the textual medium through the dual faceted connotations of spring” which exude seasonal and cyclic undertones whilst accentuating the vivacity of love’s “rushing and stillness” which the “black lines” cannot encapsulate. The poem concludes with a bleak tone with the speaker’s lamentation “Oh words that cannot spring you here”, and “hungry time” tragically prevents.

White furthers her exploration of the combative human spirit in *Truth and Beauty*, observing the speaker’s struggle to confront the gradual erosion of her youth. Similarly to the marching indomitable pace of *By this Hand*, the “young woman” is placed on an inexorable trajectory, as White evokes the imagery of “coming at her is an older self’s body ever so slightly angled towards decay”. The inconsistent lineation of the first stanza emulate the speaker’s total disassociation from her “older self”, which White elucidates through the metaphor of the woman who “grabs handful of her youth”. The woman’s fragmented sense of self as she traverses the “Styx of middle age” are understandably erratic, as portrayed through the atomisation of the celestial forces which “ration her beauty” into obscure and disturbing headless “figures”. The deceptively uplifting galvanisation of action and defiance is unearthed when the woman “does not grieve”

and asserts that she “will be radiant”, willing her inner “radiance” to shine as her outer beauty fades. The effervescence that White prescribes the woman is redolent of the “slim girl’s” “mounting dance of being” in *Ricketts Point*, as White examines the contrasting facets through which the self exerts its fleeting significance. As White deploys the polarising metaphor of the “Styx of middle age”, the process of decay and the irrational terror which arises is powerfully evoked. And as White extrapolates her personification of the forces which inflict decay through the “Darkness, it whispers” the excruciating reality of aging is evinced; ultimately, the “stomaching power” “pushes her forth” into “middle age”, analogous to the “hungry time” which consumes and digests the reader’s attempts at preservation. Thus, White contemplates the glaring reality of our lack of agency in the face of intangible and cruel forces which efface our “fleshbound mystique” and all remnants of our ephemeral existence.

However, this unfortunate reality dissolves into the background of *Ricketts Point*. Through its self-contained, stable stanza, White tacitly reminds the reader that they are experiencing a “brimming” immediate moment, rather than the passage of time which plagues the other two passages. Indeed, unlike the metaphysically displaced women in *Truth and Beauty*, the “slim girl” communes with the web of existence and enacts her place within it, deliberating whether it is “large or real enough to include them”. White gently critiques the girl’s self-centric approach, however, as she evokes the theme of exchange in its most unadulterated form through the “separate joy of the girl” who “magnifies” the joy of the other beings in the poems. White’s deliberately unspecific characterisation of the “two bearded men” is evoked through the colloquial “perhaps her father and Uncle”, thus, White decides that the “separate joy of the girl” is predicated on her feeling of connections and subconscious protection which the “strangers” exude even participating in their own buoyant joy that won’t stay under”. Yet, White’s sated and [picturesque] portrait of the human experience is complicated by her capricious personification of nature. The amniotic undertones of “sea water cool as milk” oscillate between the “hospitable” nurturing, and a sibilant hostility as elucidated by the “sea’s hearth’ and “hissing welcome mat”. Nonetheless, the girl is able to indulge in the grandeur of the numinous natural world and “marvel” at its momentary, albeit capricious beauty.

From the three passages, White cultivates a collection which anchors the woes of the human experience in tangible, yet tantalisingly relatable illustrations. As the speaker definitively asserts “never say love is mortal”, White enriches the human spirit with an indomitable quality, despite the inescapable and “stomaching” forces of cosmic and natural world which pervade all facets of our existence.