“Night Waitress” and “Counting in Chinese” 
by Lynda Hull

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Introduction

Lynda Hull’s poems often depict the act and substance of remembering, and settings of these memories are often decidedly urban. These gritty environments are experienced at street-level. One gets that sense that she’s not looking into or down on her subjects, but rather out of them, or through them. This is probably because she experienced, first-hand, struggles similar to theirs in her teens and twenties, when she ran away from home and lived check-to-check and hand-to-mouth in a number of Chinatowns across the country. She survived this life lived “on the other side”—amongst the perils and depressions of poverty, AIDS, and drugs—returning from the underworld of the street to the white-collar world. Hull went on to get several degrees and to study and publish poetry until her tragic, early death in 1994. However, she never leaves that former life behind, but returns to it again and again in startling and evocative detail in her poems.

In “Night Waitress” we can see that the poet has imagined her way back to working the late shift as a downtown waitress. She’s in a kind of eternal, “lyric,” present tense of vivid memory. Notice how the pervading sense of weariness and imperfection work against traditional notions of beauty. Desire itself, so often exalted in poetry, has succumbed to a utilitarian, almost animal need, as basic and ubiquitous as an empty plate. Yet, though the entire affair is decidedly “not romantic,” though the notion of beauty has faded almost to the point of invisibility, though the scene is fraught with all the tawdry, insomniac poverty and pain of a cheap diner, Hull’s language crystallizes into a thing of loving, intricate detail. The soul sings through the memory of pain. As poets from William Wordsworth to Larry Levis have done, Hull remembers her reckless, haphazard youth with a sober appreciation and keen sense of loss. It’s almost as if she needs to retell her past to herself to actually believe who she was and where she came from, that she survived and is still the same person. In a sense, many of her poems ask about the past, as she does in “Counting in Chinese”: “Why must it take so long / to value what’s surrendered so casually?” Her striking use of image and subtly crafted lines are virtually unparalleled in American poetry. With resonant detail, rendered in sonorous, muscular, controlled lines, she evokes a sense of incredible beauty and adventure mixed with incredible tragedy, danger, and loneliness.

In “Counting in Chinese,” images of the moon, a lantern, an odor of a mock-orange plant, and a Kung-Fu movie echo with correspondent images from her former life. All of these images are connected over an expanse of time, stretching from her past, lived deep in the bowels of some Chinatown, to her present, in “a small midwestern town.” Memory and the recursive, obsessing mind travel and trouble this expanse. The steady flux of time and mind comes to be embodied in the figure of the wind, which has “traveled years, / whole latitudes, to find me here.” Hull’s echoing images come to center upon the memory of her first husband, a Chinese immigrant, and their shared life in a “single room” in a “cast iron district / of sweat-shop lofts.” In her long lines we can sense her mind’s restless, careful, ironic re-tracing of these memories’ contours. Captivating, her images seem to have taken her captive in their turn. They spread out around us and coat our senses like the mist of a kind of “blessing.” In a sense, too, Hull not only gives but wishes to receive such a blessing, or absolution—presumably for leaving her past life behind. Thus, with the poem having turned into a direct address to her former husband, she says poignantly: “Forgive me.”
Night Waitress

Reflected in the plate glass, the pies
look like clouds drifting off my shoulder.
I’m telling myself my face has character,
not beauty. It’s my mother’s Slavic face.
She washed the floor on hands and knees
below the Black Madonna, praying
to her god of sorrows and visions
who’s not here tonight when I lay out the plates,
small planets, the cups and moons of saucers.
At this hour the men all look
as if they’d never had mothers.
They do not see me. I bring the cups.
I bring the silver. There’s the man
who leans over the jukebox nightly
pressing the combinations
of numbers. I would not stop him
if he touched me, but it’s only songs
of risky love he leans into. The cook sings
into the grill. On his forehead
a tattooed cross furrows,
diminished when he frowns. He sings words
dragged up from the bottom of his lungs.
I want a song that rolls
through the night like a big Cadillac
past factories to the refineries
squatting on the bay, round and shiny
as the coffee urn warming my palm.
Sometimes when coffee cruises my mind
visiting the most remote waystations,
I think of my room as a calm arrival—
each book and lamp in its place. The calendar
on my wall predicts no disaster
only another white square waiting
to be filled like the desire that fills
jail cells, the old arrest
that makes me stare out the window or want
to try every bar down the street.
When I walk out of here in the morning,
my mouth is bitter with sleeplessness.
Men surge to the factories and I’m too tired
to look. Fingers grip lunchbox handles,
belt buckles gleam, wind ruffles my uniform.
and it's not romantic when the sun unlids
the end of the avenue. I'm fading
in the morning's insinuations
collecting in the crevices of buildings,
in wrinkles, in every fault
of this frail machinery.
Counting in Chinese

Past midnight, September, and the moon dangles mottled like a party lantern about to erupt in smoke. The first leaves in the gutter eddy, devilled by this wind that's travelled years, whole latitudes, to find me here believing I smell the fragrance of mock orange. For weeks sometimes, I can go without thinking of you. Crumpled movie handbills lift then skitter across the pavement. They advertise the one I've just seen—Drunken Angel—Kurosawa's early film of occupied Japan, the Tokyo slums an underworld of makeshift market stalls and shacks where Matsu, the consumptive gangster, dances in a zoot suit to a nightclub's swing band. The singer mimes a parody of Cab Calloway in Japanese. And later, as Matsu leans coughing in a dance-hall girl's rented room, her painted cardboard puppet etches shadows on the wall that predict his rival's swift razor and the death scene's slow unfurling, how he falls endlessly it seems through a set of doors into a heaven of laundry: sheets on the line, the obis and kimonos stirring with his passage. And all of this equals a stark arithmetic of choices, his fate the final sum. Why must it take so long to value what's surrendered so casually? I see you clearly now, the way you'd wait for me, flashy beneath the Orpheum's rococo marquee in your Hong Kong hoodlum's suit, that tough-guy way you'd flick your cigarette when I was late. You'd consult the platinum watch, the one you'd lose that year to poker. I could find again our room above the Lucky Life Café, the cast iron district of sweat-shop lofts. But now the square's deserted in this small midwestern town, sidewalks.
washed in the vague irreal glow of shopwindows, 
my face translucent in the plate glass. 
I remember this the way I’d remember a knife

against my throat: that night, after 
the overdose, you told me to count, to calm
myself. You put together the rice paper lantern
and when the bulb heated the frame it spun

shadows—dragon, phoenix, dragon and phoenix
 tumbling across the walls where the clothes
 you’d washed at the sink hung drying on
 a nailed cord. The mock orange on the sill

blessed everything in that room
with its plungent useless scent. Forgive me.
I am cold and draw my sweater close. I discover
that I’m counting, out loud, in Chinese.

Questions

"Counting in Chinese"

1) In “Counting In Chinese,” Hull bridges the present moment to memories of the past with scenes from a movie. How does such bridging create the sense of time passing?

2) What are some of the repeated images in the poem? How are they connected over an expanse of time?

3) In the seventh stanza, there is the question: “Why must it take so long / to value what’s surrendered so casually?” Do you think the question is answered in this poem? If so, what is the answer?

4) Notice the stanza break between stanzas 7 and 8. What effect does it create?

5) The phrase “counting in Chinese” both serves as the title of the poem and appears in the last line. What do you think it symbolizes? What kind of emotional responses does it evoke?

"Night Waitress"

6) In “Night Waitress,” one long sentence that starts with “she” (the mother) and ends with the lyric “I” spans from line 5 to 9. Examine the syntax of the sentence. How does Hull orchestrate the sentence and the lines within the sentence to connect the life of the speaker’s mother to her own?

7) Lines 10 and 11 form a declarative statement: “At this hour the men all look / as if they’d never had mothers.” What does this statement mean?

8) What are the most striking images in this poem? What kind of emotion do they evoke?

9) How would you describe the dominating mood of the poem?

10) The last five lines of the poem read: “I’m fading / in the morning’s insinuations /… in every fault / of this frail machinery.” What do you think “this frail machinery” refers to?

Writing Prompts

1) Write a poem about a past experience that you haven’t revisited for a while, an experience that you want to relive and understand more about.

2) Write a poem that connects the past and the present with repeated or parallel images.

3) Write a poem that uses movie scenes to bridge your own experiences.

4) Write a “work poem” that vividly evokes through images (sights, smells, textures, noises) your experience working some job. Try to recapture that particular sense of place, with its particular character, and characters.