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WRIT 105C

5/4/2020

The Hollow Valley

“The eyes are not here

There are no eyes here

In this valley of dying stars

In this hollow valley.”

-T.S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*

No matter how old I get, home will always be home. There is a comfort like no other walking down a street and seeing the sweet, nostalgic memories of your childhood come alive around you. The park across the train tracks will always be the place where my dad taught me how to ride a bike. The supermarket a few blocks from our house will always remind me of the ice cream my grandpa would buy for me there during his visits. The mountains that hug the valley will always be the first place I said “I love you.” Nostalgia embedded meaning into my surroundings. I could drive around my city for hours watching my past play out before my eyes.

Like so many things, home became more complicated as I grew up. It had to share its identity with that of the prestigious, world renowned “Silicon Valley”. I liked to keep both of these identities separate. This way I could sit in class and critique the horrendous elitism and social inequality that was occurring around me, while still being able to love my home like a security blanket. Mr. Johnson’s 4th period class ultimately became the melting pot where the two

identities were mixed together: one big mess of contradicting ideas, no longer inseparable from each other or myself.

The entire class of high school students sat motionless waiting for him to speak, for him to explain. We had just spent a chaotic thirty minutes trying to understand a cryptic poem Mr. Johnson had laid out for us. Despite the statue-like look of the room, the anticipation in the widened eyes and flushed cheeks would make it impossible to miss the liveliness in the air. Although we didn't know much about life, we knew Mr. Johnson did.

“This is a passage from the poem ‘The Hollow Men’ by T.S. Eliot. Like everything we have spoken of in this class, it could be interpreted in an infinite amount of ways,” Mr. Johnson’s voice was a crescendo, challenged by the passion from the poem to rise beyond his usual soft spoken nature. “Yet, I like to see this as Eliot’s provocation of the American Dream: the ideology of success surrounded by a white picket fence. There is a deep desire for this image, a symbolism for material goods, within the subconscious of our country. Eliot is proposing the irony that perhaps achieving this dream is what will leave us hollow in the end. A man stuffed only with material goods unable to die at the brink of death because they are only a mere resemblance of humanity.”

I didn't really realize what he had said as I left the classroom. Or as I discussed the poem with my friends at lunch. Or even as I reminisced about the day as I drove myself home. The depth of Mr. Johnson’s message only registered when I pulled into my driveway at the end of the day. I sat in my car as motionless as I had been in the classroom. Except this time, anticipation is not what paralyzed me: fearful realization was. My eyes were fixated on the white picket fence that surrounded my front yard.

It's as if I was shown the same beautiful painting all my life. One that I stared at for hours on end. Then, Mr. Johnson came along and traced his fingers along a small missing piece. I spent so much time looking at it that I had forgotten how to see it. Yet, like ignorance, once you see one thing missing it is practically impossible to be blind to another. Now, all I could see were small little pieces cut out of the canvas. I felt like I was really seeing it for the first time. It was ruined. A painting filled with holes: filled with imperfections. Home became Silicon Valley, and along with this shift I saw just how empty it really was.

At first, I saw it in the buildings. Or rather, the lack of buildings that were torn down in favor of the same shiny variation of a "commercial property." I was walking around downtown with my father and realized he had stopped in his tracks in front of a bookstore. An "Out of Business" sign glared back at him. He had stopped not because it was a surprise to see, but because this was *our* bookstore. Or it had been. The insides had been scooped out in preparation for the city to carve it a brand new, innovative face. The tall shelves that felt like a forest of books I could run through with delight as a child: gone. The second-hand books along with their sweet, yellowing scent: gone. The old calendars my grandma used to admire for hours when she would visit from Brazil: gone. I pressed my face into the glass and could no longer see the memories come alive. The somber, desolate inside made it feel like only the ghosts of my memories now lurked inside.

In the past 10 years, major tech companies, such as Google and Apple, have expanded their reign from a total of 6 million square feet to 47.8 million square feet of commercial space across Silicon Valley (Avalos). Silicon Valley is slowly hollowed for the shiny and expensive, and the poem whispers:

*“Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion. ”*

Then, I saw it in the people. My group of friends in high school always ate in the same place at lunch, leaning against the old buildings and uncomfortably shifting on the concrete floors. Much like our location, topics of conversation didn't vary much. We talked (read: competed) about one thing and nothing else: college.

“I got a perfect score on the ACT last week actually,” Caroline challenged. It was the first blow. Julia narrowed her eyes.

“Well, I applied to do research with a college professor. My mom said it's an absolute *essential* part of standing out in your college applications,” Julia was no stranger to the game and delivered a beautiful counterattack.

Every talk about the future felt like being a rubber band being stretched to its maximum. Before I would have jumped in saying how I got a perfect score on my math test or how my essays for the UC's were turning out great: a swift defensive move in a competition where one's future seemed to be at stake. Yet, only now I could tell that it all echoed with an empty sadness. What were the subtle brags and haughty comments for? What were we hoping to win?

The Mountain View Voice conducted a study at my high school, Mountain View High School, and found that “24% of freshmen students and 33% of juniors reported feeling "chronic" sadness or hopelessness in the last year” (Forestieri). The conversations at school became scooped of the same life that was hollowed out of book store, while the poem crackled:

*“Between the desire
And the spasm*

Between the potency

And the existence

Between the essence

And the descent

Falls the Shadow.”

And, finally, I saw it within myself. It was one of the many days I sat at my desk: the kind of times that you look back on that are blurry with insignificance. The test I was studying for I do not remember. I do remember the stacks of notecards. Sorted into clean, neat piles, whose edges were smoothed back by my anxious hands. I also remember the noise. My grandparents were living with us for a month, and nothing is louder than my grandpa reminiscing about his past with a beer in his hand.

Stories were the backbone of my family. Ever since my childhood, I had been shown that stories are what gave life to moments. Anything was left unfinished for a story. My mother believed this more than the rest of my family. This is why she had already entered my room three times asking me to take a break, to enjoy the feeling of our family packed together in one country instead of two.

“It’s not whole without you, *filha*,” she frowned.

“Mom!” I barked, anger filling each syllable to the brim. “Leave me alone! Don’t you understand? If I don’t get a good grade on the test, I won’t get a good grade in this class. If I don’t get a good grade in this class, I won’t have a good GPA. If I don’t have a good GPA, I won’t get into college. And if I don’t get into college, I will have *nothing*.” My voice got quieter with each word, a stark contrast to the echoes of my grandfather’s throaty, rich voice below.

All she had to do was look at me. No matter how disappointed she was, the love within her could not be contained and always overflowed into her soft brown eyes. Guilt flattened my anger to the edges. Without a word, she left, leaving the room empty. I turned back to my notecards. They were stacked so precisely, so neatly they almost looked like a white picket fence.

We are not born hollow. We become it: from the media we consume, the discussions we have with our peers, and, of course, the kind of success we desire. The A on my transcript became the white picket fence in my American Dream. It became my vision for a life filled with shallow, materialistic, and selfish success. It became the loss of what made me whole. I became the painting filled with holes.

The poem tells me, defeated:

“We are the hollow men

We are the stuffed men.”

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