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NOTES:

“Assembly Line”

Over our heads in a row
The assembly line of stars
Stretches across the sky.
Beside us, little trees
Stand numb in assembly lines.
The stars must be exhausted
After thousands of years
Of journeys which never change.
The little trees are all sick,
Choked on smog and monotony,
Stripped of their color and shape.
It's not hard to feel for them;

We share the same tempo and rhythm.

Yes, I'm numb to my own existence

As if, like the trees and stars

--perhaps just out of habit

--perhaps just out of sorrow,

I'm unable to show concern

For my own manufactured fate.

Let us begin by placing ourselves in context with the universe and questioning our own existence; such is the journey explored in Shu Ting's "Assembly Line". Shu Ting's "Assembly Line" is divided into three stanzas. The first stanza is written like an introductory paragraph or the first chapter of a larger story; we are introduced to the setting, characters, and themes of the work. However, in this piece Shu Ting's use of personification allows the setting to become the character; thus thematically linking us to a shared existence not only with other humans, but also with a legacy of natural creations.

In the first line, Shu Ting personifies time by granting it ownership of an "assembly line" (1) in which "Night presses against night" (2). This creates a dark canvas from which there doesn't seem to be any relief, as we are never granted a glimpse of daylight. Our own role within "time's assembly line" becomes clear as "We come off the factory night-shift [and] march towards home" (3-4). The use of the word "march" (3) evokes an image of soldiers trudging along in neat rows of obedience. However, the relevance of "towards home" is ambiguous. Perhaps they are headed home to rejoin their earthly families. Perhaps they have been released from this life and their spirits are headed home to their creator. This ambiguity is extended to include the fate of all of humanity under the canopy of "we (3 & 4) and "our" (5), which indicate a shared existence. However, this canopy is shown to exist under a higher banner as we are eclipsed by "the assembly line of stars" (6), which is "over our heads". They too are aligned "in a row" (5), indicating an order and design to their existence, but the connotation of "over our heads" refers to more than just their physical location; we are aware of them but an understanding of their design is beyond our logical comprehension. Shu Ting makes it clear that they are still an active force that "Stretches across the sky" (7). The choice of the word "Stretches" rather than "stretched" implies activity and current force, rather than passivity and past tense. The significance of the "assembly line of stars" (6) is

also evidenced by the amount of lines devoted to it in the first stanza; the first two lines are allotted to “time’s assembly line” and the third and fourth line are devoted to us. This is clearly reinforced by the punctuating periods at the end of lines two and four. However, “the assembly line of stars” is granted three lines (5-8). Furthermore, it is important to note that while time was granted ownership of an assembly line, the stars are not given the same liberty; the assembly line is “of” (6) them but not owned by them. This indicates the transcendence of their importance, which exists beyond us and beyond time. Meanwhile, our comrades in arms that stand “Beside us” and share our predicament are described as “little trees” (8). The contrast between the infinite grandeur of “Stretches across the sky” (7) and “little trees” (8) once again puts into perspective the role that earthly inhabitants play in a much larger work. Like us, the “little trees” (8) are granted but two lines in which to “stand numb” (9) in “assembly lines” (9) that do not belong to them.

The second stanza returns our attention to the condition of the stars and provides us with a manipulation of parallel structure. The first stanza places us in relation to the stars “over our heads” (5) and the “little trees” (8) standing “beside us” (8). In the second stanza, this structure is manipulated by placing us in relation to the stars and the trees. It is significant to note that in this stanza, both the stars and the trees are allotted three lines and we are the only character limited to two lines. Once again, Shu Ting personifies the stars and the trees by allowing them the human ability to “be exhausted” (10) and “sick” (13). By humanizing them, Shu Ting evokes our compassion and we find ourselves sympathizing with them. However, our perception of the stars continues to be more complex than that of the trees. In reference to the “little trees”, Shu Ting uses the definitive “are” (13) before telling us their condition; this creates a concrete statement that we are not intended to question. They share our earthly conditions of “smog and monotony” (14) and “it’s not hard to feel for them” (16). Meanwhile, in reference to the stars, Shu Ting utilizes the verb phrase “must be” (10). The modality of “must” indicates an inference on the part of the speaker. In this case, the state of the stars is assumed based on the “thousands of years of journeys which never change” (11-12). We are left to infer the many implications of this modality; is it epistemic, deontic or ambiguous? The certainty of a “thousand years” (11) and “never” (12) seem to relieve any ambiguity. Meanwhile, the stars are not under any obligation to feel exhaustion which relieves them from a deontic interpretation. Therefore, we can infer an epistemic interpretation of “must” (10). In this sense, the factuality of their exhaustion “must be” (10) true because of their circumstance. It is very important to note this because it contributes to constructing the dynamics that thematically govern this work. This stanza concludes by pointing out that “We share the same tempo and rhythm” (17) as the “little trees [that] are all sick” (13). Meanwhile, this also shows a similarity between our connection to the trees and the circumstance of the stars.

Ultimately, we are placed in close proximity to the trees, but also connected to the stars and these connections exist under the all-encompassing banner of the first sentence; we are all “In time’s assembly line” (1). The “thousands of years” (11) that have caused the state of the stars, also produces the “monotony” (14) that has “stripped” (15) the trees and makes us “numb to [our] own existence” (18). The shaping force of time creating our “manufactured fate” (23) places us in context with the trees and the stars; we are “unable to show concern” (22). We are concerned, but like the stars and trees, we are unable to express our concern. Time is granted the only possession in this piece and each stanza grows shorter in length as evidence of the limitations that time places on us and on all things.

" Assembly Line "

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