

Metal Oranges
Michael Stoppard

The scent of oranges inevitably spells decay, dissolution, and slavery. My childhood was fraught with this smell; it permeated the air every night and hung with eminent electricity, a fore bearer of misplaced words and frenzied passion. It is the scent of machinist soap, its gritty and unpleasant texture masked by freshness, this natural longing for summer days and happy endings. My stepfather would stumble into the kitchen and wash black blood from his hands. I can always see the affliction through his eyes, a skill I still employ as I soul search down the image ridden isles of the Southern Mecca, the mega-market. As with him, I've seen little life.

His eyes are glazed, cloudy enough to predict rain but not block that resilient light raging against its demise. There is a supreme clarity to this state that cannot be ignored, a sort of transcendence from pain, strife, and responsibility. An artificial smile is fixed unchanging; primal longing and guilt rise in concord, guilt for emphasizing, for craving similar release. I could have sold my soul to that smile, still can with a few bucks and a forgetting. Chemicals provide immediate satisfaction and freedom rewards rarely, if ever. The foreign blood of his veins is at once a rotten corrosion and an indispensable crutch. It is the sacrament that oils the collective machine, the bathtub-nectar of Progress.

Plates fly like saucers, identified but misfired. Tranquility is shattered on the wall. He storms off in a rage, caught up in that noxious cocktail set between his reason and action, both isolated yet screaming for unity. I can see him muttering to himself as he flicks a torch, takes a swig of that glass scepter, wondering how it got this bad. Wondering how someone can provide but can't feel. One more heavy pull of blue vapor and he enters the steam, machines clashing in tandem, a symphony of production.

The concept of work as penance and ethical law has long been woven into the American ethos, stemming from the Protestants that built the initial American "image." One particular Protestant sect, the Calvinists, wrote the doctrine that would become the precedent for all proceeding ethical consideration. John Calvin separated humanity into two groups, God's chosen elite who were destined for reunion, and the unfortunate damned, who through no force of will could join the elite. The genius of this double predestination is that deity does not make this choice apparent; each individual is tasked with self-observation in an attempt to divine their eternal fate. Of course, the main signs of an "elite" consisted of observing the common Abrahamic virtues: austerity, devotion, and most importantly, fervent allegiance to one's God-given caste and occupation. Labor became one's ticket into paradise, an ethical justification for all transgression and an outward representation of inner sanctity. This perception of personal labor as spiritual transcendence was so entrenched in the tangible morality of society that Calvin believed that "using profits to help others rise from a lesser level of subsistence violated God's will," as one must demonstrate their own spiritual efficiency through economic production (Hill 1996). A perversion of this particular doctrine has long been used to justify class stratification and demonize charity, both necessary for the smooth movement of capitalism. These virtues have become secularized artifacts in the modern world, ripped from the quaint Christian morals of their conception and applied to the doctrine of mass-production. Charity, austerity, and devotion have no place in this irreligious mechanism. Production rises as the supreme truth, supplanting deity with churning machines and clockwork attendants.

As my stepfather mumbles on the precipice of those foreboding steel factory doors, I can only imagine that he feels trapped by some divine predestination, however cruel. He only has a

vague sense of god, one of disappointment and abstraction. How can the absolute ever be relevant to this tangible prison, these societal walls that enclose him? For him, little has changed from the oppressive Industrial Revolution. Workers are still overworked in temperatures that casually reach upwards of 120 degrees, resulting in common fainting spells and an air-conditioned room with the sole purpose of preventing heat-stroke. The machines still destroy lives unimpeded, the supposed technology providing little solace for those rendered inoperable. One night a story echoed down the hall, coiling in my room and disturbing wakeful attempts at sleep. He spoke in a formal, hushed tone, cold as if delivering common news. A man lost his arm that day, the steel wire that holds bridges and skyscrapers in patchwork formation caught onto flesh and tore it indifferently, the machine continuing its reeling progress unbothered by human frailty. He let out a laugh, but it wasn't humor. It echoed up from some deep spiral, moving outwards in endless perpetuation, endless cycles. It was a chemical laugh.

My grandfather's verdict usually flowed from the end of a bottle, poison to poison, a genetic heritage. The switch and belt seared truth into my step-father's young flesh, culturing an expectation of pain he never shook in life. He had his first job at twelve, twisting gears in his father's shop to pay for lodging and supper. The machine held a fascination; cold, logical puzzles that could not disappoint, a dependability that only metal musters. The machine became his idol, the chemical reducing him to its image. One puff leads to sweet oblivion, a world sped to the point of detachment, passing by the slower fallacies of love, connection, empathy. Human connection becomes as distant as the receding speed limit signs, and about as effective.

I remember his justifications, that Meth allows him to see "beyond the problem," and, in his own words, "become the machine." It makes perfect sense that this logical reduction is desired. His days are spent reeling endless wire, repeating the process with clockwork precision again, again, again. His boss told him once he was the best worker on his block. I'm sure he is; there is little separating himself from that crank, his clenched jaw grinding the gears onward. What started as satisfaction has become doctrine, the machine assuming a tightening control over his life, forced repetition for basic subsistence.

The methamphetamine trade is booming in his company, workers investing in backyard operations quite regularly. An initial investment of a mere hundred dollars can provide one a steady, monthly supply and potential economic gain. There are, of course, some gaps between this otherwise unadulterated bliss. I recall once that a major alchemist was captured and the supply dwindled. My stepfather's joy ride met an abrupt end: the brick wall of sobriety. These moments stand out in my memory, as he would soon grovel, attempt to reconnect with those he sped by. The momentary focus was always emotionally shattering. He would plead forgiveness, include himself in everything we were doing, try to become a part of our routine. But, these lamentations were just as clockwork as his life, predictable and hollow by the fifth or sixth instance. I remember once he bought my sister a game, one he overheard her mention to her friends. She took it and threw it away. "I have it; I've had it for months." She called him by his name from then on, a stranger to his seed. These moments soon ceased altogether.

I own a slave and society condones it. My stepfather is the distant benefactor of the house, money flowing from his daily pilgrimage. We use it for merriment, travel, music festivals, food, all luxuries in which he has lost complete interest. It is a funneling of sorts, a redirection of negativity into something worthwhile. His joy comes on weekends of cars and crystal, both flowing in abundance. The only evidence of these excursions is the motley assortment of useless mechanisms that litter his section of the yard and those damned eyes, grasping for something long lost. Some believe that class stratification occurs at some grand scale, and society forces

people into these castes. This is diverting blame; stratification exists in the mind, in the family, any societal extension is rooted in the tragic realization that this separation is necessary. I write words while he toils endlessly, the two inextricably linked yet foreign. It is the economy of freedom.

It is no wonder why he reverts to the drug; what else has life offered to replace it? It provides unmatched proficiency, a localized focus that the mind simply cannot produce otherwise. It provides solace in repetition, in logical deduction, in mechanism. Methamphetamine is the capitalistic sacrament, encapsulating the reduction of production as purpose. Consumerism relies on its impetus; the factories rely on its motivation; the workers rely on its release. Within "Brave New World" Huxley speaks of Soma, a perfect opiate that renders the user detached and content. In this dystopia its use is condoned and even regulated, speakers constantly reminding the populace that anxiety can be tamed and even annihilated completely. It is the crux of this society, rendering the populace malleable and apathetic, perfect subjects of endless perpetuation. It has "all the advantages of Christianity and alcohol; none of their defects" (Huxley 54).

Like Soma, Methamphetamine has become a catalyst and crux of American society, allowing factory workers weekends of blissful indifference so they have no need to identify an oppressor, a purpose beyond production. However, even Huxley did not anticipate a drug that not only detached, but actually intensified societal values, allowing its citizens to become perfect representations of their machine masters. My stepfather disappears into an opiate mechanical paradise every weekend as his only escape from the metal reels that rule his perception, those churning mauls that soon will rip him to shreds, consume what's left of his emaciated body. This abyss is his only solace, too far gone for any meaningful social connection. What friends he has are all united in chemical allegiance, collectively avoiding the ever-looming purposelessness of their continued existence. They live now in the drug, its molecular influence lending tangibility where religion and society have failed. This is the chemical-class, those from which the consumer illusion is raised and cemented, the stratified slave labor that every great empire requires to function at the fundamental level. Rural predestination at its finest, and yet society demonizes their caretakers, locks them away as drug fiends and abhorrent rejects. Imprisonment is directly correlated with moral perception, and thus it is particularly fascinating that American wages its drug war on the individual while ignoring the cause. A facade of disdain is crafted and projected onto these gritty men, yet the machine grinds undeterred. A lack of humanity, of real choice and freewill, drives them into oblivion, and the same discards them when fully used, hollow husks consumed by unrelenting Progress.

My stepfather was apprehended with \$150 of common supplies in his trunk. It had the potential to be \$5000, his last great heist and escape. It was always his last run, made real only by flashing blue lights and cold earthen cells. He lost his freedom, but only for some years; his use was still relevant to the doctrine of Progress. Sentences are short as to most effectively utilize the captive. The only real effect incarceration had was to cement his factory bond. There was no hope of upward movement now, the system insured his continued productivity through stigma. He became a meth head, reject, provider, and martyr all rolled into one convoluted mess, he himself not sure what to believe. He missed the most important years of my sister's childhood, her stumbling steps into adulthood. He missed those summer days in Florida, nights of sand encased feet and moonlight waltzes. He missed her first excursions into religion, her first thoughts of independence and love. He missed what she has become, something so alien to his values that he now ignores her completely. Her love, our love, passed him by.

He squanders his last moments of flawed freedom anticipating capture. He now lives to simply die, the drug only a momentary preparation for the ultimate release. In one of his last spells of clarity he forced me into a wall. His cancerous eyes locked onto mine, a moment of heart wrenching connection I still cannot fathom. He told me to run, to escape, to live. When in doubt I still look back to those oil-stricken tears, rivulets mingling with the dirt. I understood then, as I do now, that this was his eternal gift: a crucifixion for my salvation.

The smell of oranges invades my house once again, the scent wafting from a neighbor's manicured tree. It stands prominent, a real rarity in the Tennessee hills. The man meticulously covers it every winter to protect against the antagonistic climate, the chill so harmful to its foreign fruits.

If only my stepfather had covered his own.

Works Cited List

Hill, Roger. "Historical Context of the Work Ethic." *coe.uga.edu/workethic*. Department of Workforce Education, Leadership, & Social Foundations, 1996. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia. Web. 5 Feb. 2012.

Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 1946. Print.