

DALE ROBERTS

The Nearness of Green, 2016
Encaustic on panel, 41 x 45 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JENNIFER PENKETHMAN

Art is the Opposite of Evil

(an excerpt from *Extinction*)

“I’ve been feeling very . . . different lately,” Hamilton Davis was explaining. We were on a dirt path, along a mostly-dry concrete riverbed, which seemed to follow parallel to the town. I wondered how I’d never encountered this particular spot before. Angela was walking several feet behind us, gazing at the landscape.

Hamilton Davis continued: “It’s like I . . . was going on one path, and then I all of a sudden realized I was actually going down a totally different one. I’ve felt like that a lot, since I met you.”

I looked at the ground, waiting for the moment to pass. Angela did not register any reaction that I could tell.

“It’s like, before I was seeing silence as kind of a growth, like it was something in and of itself,” Hamilton Davis said, both slowly and quickly. The phrases themselves were quick, but spaced between beats. “But now I can see that it’s nothing, it’s just death, just letting things rot and die for no reason, just because I feel sad, or because I feel bored, or apathetic, or whatever.”

“Uh-huh,” I said.

“I’ve been writing so much poetry,” he went on, “and it’s all about—about how I think I’m lost in this forest, right, but I realize that this was where I was trying to get to. Like all the time I was somewhere, when I completely thought I was nowhere, or if not nowhere then somewhere else entirely.”

“Like inside and outside,” I said.

“Sure.” Hamilton Davis seemed to have broken through some kind of verbal limp. “Although I’m interested in what you have to say about all of it, I mean, what you think of all this crazy stuff.”

“She thinks you’re crazy,” Angela said, and she did it in just the right way, pitched right between seriousness and irony, that we all laughed.

“I think . . .” I thought. “I think it’s entirely possible that there is a space that we can’t even access, or think we can’t. I think there’s some kind of space we can’t get to.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly it,” Hamilton Davis said. “Like I thought I knew where that space was, before, but now I really know where it is, and I really know how to get to it.”

“So how do you get to it, then?” This was Angela.

Hamilton Davis looked down at the ground, grinning. “I guess it just has to do with love, that’s all.”

She shot me a definite Look, one I didn’t respond to.

“I think it has to do with intelligence, and thinking,” I said.

We had reached the end of the path, which opened up and disappeared into a sizable park. The only group of people was on the far side, around a baseball diamond. We walked to the tree and sat down without anyone having decided anything.

“Or with art?” Hamilton Davis continued the conversation.

“I guess,” I said. “But maybe more about science, or something.”

“Like what kind of art?” Angela asked.

Hamilton Davis said, “But see, art is just a means, it’s nothing in and of itself. You can’t make art about art itself, you need something to put in it.”

I didn’t really have a response for this, so I said to Angela, “Any art. Visual or poetry or music, whatever.”

Comprehension dawned on Angela’s face. “You never show me your drawings.”

“Well,” I said.

“Oh, you should see them,” Hamilton Davis said. “They’re perfect. They put the ‘art’ in artifice.”

Angela laughed. I smiled.

“So what kind of—what kind of poetry do you write?” Angela asked Hamilton Davis.

“What do you mean, ‘what kind’?”

Angela looked embarrassed. “I mean, like, is it rhyming poetry or, like, blank verse, or whatever . . .”

The smirk on Hamilton Davis’s face made me a little disgusted.

“I guess blank verse.”

“Cool,” she said. “Cool.”

I tried to catch Angela’s eye, to give her my own Look, but she was looking at the ground, examining something there.

“I’ve written entire books of poetry and thrown them away,” Hamilton Davis said. “Just because of, you know, artistic integrity.”

I had to admit this sounded vaguely intelligent.

“Poetry is the best form of art, because there’s no such thing as realism,” he went on. “There’s no such thing as ‘realist poetry.’ It’s all just artifice, obfuscation.”

“Uh-huh,” Angela said, after a moment.

“I don’t think that’s true,” I said.

Hamilton Davis looked at me. “No?”

“No, I mean . . . what about, like, those Robert Frost poems we had to read in junior high?”

Hamilton Davis waved his hand. “Those are fantasy,” he explained. “A fantasy of normalcy. Like everything we look at is. Really, there’s no such thing as ‘realism,’ if you want to get down to it. People who say they practice ‘realism’ are just interested in a certain kind of fantasy, one that’s insidious, and I can’t stand it.”

I thought about how much he had progressed since that first day we had met; he explained and expounded like a famous artist being interviewed. It occurred to me that I would probably never work as hard at any craft as he did. An intensity shone from him as he spoke, one that had matured somewhat in the last few months, into something complex and self-assured. Now that we were away from the confining walls of the coffee shop, Hamilton Davis could be fully himself.

“So you’re interested in art?” he asked Angela, who looked too surprised to answer at first.

“Um, yeah, definitely. I read poetry sometimes—like, Sylvia Plath, a lot.”

“You know that art is a war,” Hamilton Davis said with a grave face.

Angela hesitated. “Well . . . sure, I guess so.”

“Sylvia Plath, though, she’s pretty fantastic. She’s one of those that when I read her, this thing happens, where I feel like I *am* her. I lose my entire identity, and it gets absorbed into Sylvia’s.”

“That’s exactly how I feel,” Angela said.

“Who else?” Hamilton Davis asked.

“Well, I guess, um.” Angela looked up into the tree, as though seeking an answer there. “Jack Kerouac?”

Hamilton Davis’s expression dulled. “He’s okay.”

“I like him,” I offered. “I think *On the Road* is hilarious. And awesome.”

No one responded to this, so I kept talking.

“There’s this part where Neal is, like, driving through the snow, and the windshield is blocked so he’s hanging his head out the window, and he’s wearing these crazy goggles, and Kerouac describes how he’s like this mad monk who’s reading the snow like a, you know, like a, a scroll, or something . . . while he’s barreling down the road . . .”

Angela smiled again. I marveled at how unlike herself

she was now, full of a benevolence I’d never seen because there was always something to hate nearby.

“Why do you think,” Angela said to Hamilton Davis, “that art is a war?”

Hamilton Davis took a few seconds to think before answering.

“It’s like this,” he said finally. “There are two forces in this world. Creativity and stasis. If you’re not practicing creativity, you’re being consumed by stasis. Stasis is the evil of the world, the reason wars happen, the reason people learn to hate each other and close themselves off from nature. It’s because they have been taught one thing, and they never change. Creativity is change, which is the way of the universe. By being static we are rejecting our real destiny, going against ourselves. We are resigning ourselves to forever being unhappy.”

“But what about people just building things, and building and building all the time? They’re not static, but they’re not, like, doing good things,” I said, annoyed with myself for my inability to express my thoughts.

“Just because it’s movement doesn’t mean it’s creativity,” Hamilton Davis explained. “You can be in motion but still really be static.”

Both Angela and I sat in silence, pondering. It was very hard to resist the wisdom in this pronouncement.

“Death is the ultimate stasis,” I said.

“Maybe,” Hamilton Davis responded.

“So then art is . . . the opposite of evil?” Angela asked.

“Sure,” said Hamilton Davis. “Art is the purest way to embrace that creativity. I mean, there are ways of being creative other than that, but art is the purest form, like I said. There’s no functional value to art. It’s only to serve creativity.”

“I feel like my creativity is more in my life than in any art I ever make,” Angela announced.

“That’s good, nothing wrong with that. As long as you’re not letting yourself decay.”

Angela looked out into the baseball diamond, considering. “I don’t think I am,” she said.

We sat for a moment. Hamilton Davis seemed to be propped up by some invisible force or vitality, at his spot by the side of the tree, rising from the ashes of his previous form. It was a stunning transformation.

Then, after rooting in his backpack, he pulled out

manila envelope and handed it to me. It was light; looking inside, I saw only a couple of pages.

“This is for you,” he said. “Let me know what you think.”

“Okay,” I said.

He stood up, thrusting his backpack behind him. He looked, to the two of us still sitting, like some kind of out-size statue.

“I have to go meet someone,” he said, and turned and walked away.

Angela and I watched him until he disappeared, around the corner, finally. Then she turned to me.

“Fuck, Jude, you didn’t tell me how smart he was,” she said.

“I guess I didn’t think of it,” I said, feeling completely lost.

Jen Penkethman grew up and resides in California and received her MFA in creative writing from University of Notre Dame in 2010. She has a story, “Gift,” published in the online journal *> kill author*. She recently completed the manuscript of a novel, entitled *Extinction*, and she is currently working on a book of short stories, which is about 85.49% finished.