

JOHN KEATS AND THE UNLIMITED TIME EXAM by Harry Friedland

I'm sure that the university authorities who dreamed up the concept of the unlimited time exam, had good intentions. But it was just an experiment, and it never got repeated. They probably thought that it would accommodate those poor hacks who are really doing their best and just write and write and write and basically just dump out everything in their barren skulls in the hope that something in there will ring a bell for the examiner and drag them over the threshold between a pass and a fail. I know, because I've been there. I'm not that fucking smart that I can afford to sit back and laugh at anyone. They probably thought, what the hell, what can it hurt, some poor dumbass planned his time wrong or got into a tailspin when his pen ran out of ink, so give him another 15 minutes -no, what the hell, let's give him 30 - no, wait, let's just give him as long as he likes, he'll run out of steam soon enough! Let's not show prejudice against stupidity! So they did this experiment and they called it "The Unlimited Time Exam". After all, what kind of an asshole is going to sit in a cold, drafty exam hall for endless hours after all the really promising students have buggered off down to the pub if he really doesn't have to do that and actually has something to say?

But they obviously never thought about the stoned ones. Unlike drunks, who will at least be struck by the realisation that they have lost an hour here or there, stoners have no idea - nor do they care.

I will never forget that exam. It is as clear as a 17th Century stained glass window - which is appropriate in my case because it was an English poetry exam and you could either answer a whole bunch of shitty little questions or you could do one big critical analysis of John Keats' poem "The Eve of St Agnes". I had never read the poem in my life but Keats was a personal friend of mine and I distinctly remembered him talking about it one day on Signal Hill while we were sharing a joint and he was planning the thing, so when I cast my eye on it, it all came back to me in a flash. It was love at first sight, and I just knew that that poem was mine.

We had spent the morning smoking it up in the maid's quarters of my friend's house in Camps Bay. Then I had to go to a dentist appointment at 12 so I had taken my Honda from Camps Bay to the city centre just before 12 but somewhere along Hof Street as I was passing through an arch created by beautiful old Oak trees, a squirrel, which was obviously planning to swing from one tree to the other, lost its grip, fell into the road right in front of my bike, and became road kill. I was so strung out one way or another by the time I got to old Doc Navias, my dad's dentist, that his nurse checked me out with a beady eye and refused to let me in. Thank Gd the dagga cookies must have kicked in right about then because otherwise I would probably never have made the drive through to university.

The old paranoia which had just about settled by the time I got to the exam room, started up all over again when I realised that I couldn't hold my pen. It took about twenty minutes to figure out how to do that, and then I got started on this critical analysis of "The Eve of St Agnes".

Oh, how I wrote. I wrote and I wrote and I wrote. After about three hours, my classmates started closing their answer books and one by one they left the exam hall, but I wrote on. Eventually I was the only candidate left in the hall. The sun moved from azimuth to horizon, and I wrote. It grew dark outside, and I wrote. The stars came out, and I wrote. The exam invigilators coughed and shuffled, and I wrote. Eventually out of the corner of my eye I could see them conferring. One of them came over. "Look" he said, "you don't need all of us to be here, I suppose it'll be OK if we go and one invigilator stays?" I shrugged. They could all go, for all I cared. I was writing, damn it. Writing!!!

I forgot about the whole thing but then one day just before the exam results came out a little note appeared on the notice-board board in the Dept of English: "Will Harry Friedland please make an appointment to see Prof. Gillham as soon as possible". I didn't see that because I didn't know that there was a notice board, or where it was, but someone told me about it (someone always does, don't you know).

Prof. Gillham was a dry old Englishman who probably didn't like Jews very much, I'd never spoken to him in my life, but he did his best to be nice. I was uncomfortable as hell in his office. He wore those funny little half-spectacles - reading glasses - and he peered at me over the top as if I was a laboratory specimen, or a pygmy, or something.

"You wrote a most remarkable essay, Mr Friedland" - he said it as if it was a question. Clearly, he expected an answer. Or an explanation perhaps. I was feeling my lack of culture and breeding acutely. I wasn't about to tell him how that essay really got written, but clearly, from what he could see on the other side of his desk, some sort of explanation might help. I don't remember what I told him.

I got the class prize. It covered all my varsity fees for the following year, and my textbooks, and a really cool trench coat and a pair of binoculars which I have to this day.

I never saw John Keats again, and I never did read his poem. But I think about him every time I sit on my porch and use those binoculars to watch the Southern Right whales and the dolphins cavort out beyond the surf in Table Bay. Good old John!

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Written quite a few years ago

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