

**SRJC 2013 Preliminary Examination  
GENERAL PAPER (8807/02)**

Paper 2 insert

This insert consists of 2 printed pages

*Tim Kreider writes about the appeal of being busy and its redundancy.*

- 1 If you live in America in the 21st century you have probably had to listen to a lot of people tell you how busy they are. It has become the default response when you ask anyone how they are doing: "Busy!" "So busy." "Crazy busy." It is a boast disguised as a complaint. And the stock response is a kind of congratulation: "That's a good problem to have," or "Better than the opposite." 5
- 2 Notice it is not generally people pulling back-to-back shifts in the Intensive Care Unit or commuting by bus to three minimum-wage jobs who tell you how busy they are; what those people are is not busy but exhausted. It is almost always people whose lamented busyness is purely self-imposed: work and obligations they have taken on voluntarily, classes and activities they have "encouraged" their kids to participate in. 10
- 3 Busy people feel anxious and guilty when they are neither working nor doing something to promote their work. They are busy because of their own ambition and anxiety, because they are addicted to busyness and dread what they might have to face in its absence. They schedule in time with friends the way top students make sure to sign up for community service because it looks good on their college applications. 15
- 4 Even children are busy now, scheduled down to the half-hour with classes and extracurricular activities. They come home at the end of the day as tired as grown-ups. Members of the earlier generation had totally unstructured, largely unsupervised free time every afternoon, time they used to do everything from browsing the World Book Encyclopaedia to making animated films to getting together with friends in the woods to toss dirt clods directly into one another's eyes, all of which provided them with important skills and insights that remain valuable to this day. 20
- 5 The present hysteria is not a necessary or inevitable condition of life; it is something we have chosen. Not long ago I Skyped with a friend who was driven out of the city by high rent and now has an artist's residency in a small town in the south of France. She described herself as happy and relaxed for the first time in years. She still gets her work done, but it does not consume her entire day and brain. She says she has a big circle of friends who all go out to the cafe together every night, and she has a boyfriend again. (She once ruefully summarized dating in New York: "Everyone is too busy and everyone thinks they can do better.") What she had mistakenly assumed was her personality — driven, cranky, anxious and sad — turned out to be a deformative effect of her environment. It is not as if any of us want to live like this any more than any one person wants to be part of a traffic jam — it is something we collectively force one another to do. 25 30
- 6 I am not busy. I am a lazy ambitious person. Like most writers, I feel like a reprobate who does not deserve to live on any day that I do not write, but I also feel that four or five hours is enough to earn my stay on the planet for one more day. On the best ordinary days of my life, I write in the morning, go for a long bike ride and run errands in the afternoon, and in the evening I see friends, read or watch a movie. This, it seems to me, is a sane and pleasant pace for a day. 35
- 7 But just in the last few months, I have insidiously started, because of professional obligations, to become busy. For the first time I was able to tell people, with a straight face, that I was "too busy" to do this or that thing they wanted me to do. I could see why people enjoy this complaint; it makes you feel important, sought-after and put-upon. Except that I hate actually being busy. Every morning my in-box was full of e-mails 40

asking me to do things I did not want to do or presenting me with problems that I now had to solve. It got more intolerable until finally I fled town to the Undisclosed Location from which I am writing this. 45

- 8 Here I am largely unmolested by obligations. There is no TV. To check e-mail I have to drive to the library. I go a week at a time without seeing anyone I know. I have remembered about buttercups, stink bugs and the stars. I read. And I am finally getting some real writing done for the first time in months. It is hard to find anything to say about life without immersing yourself in the world, but it is also just about impossible to figure out what it might be, or how best to say it, without getting out of it again. 50
- 9 Idleness is not just a vacation, an indulgence or a vice; it is as indispensable to the brain as vitamins are to the body, and deprived of it we suffer a mental affliction. The space and quiet that idleness provides is a necessary condition for standing back from life and seeing it whole, for making unexpected connections and waiting for the wild summer lightning strikes of inspiration. "Idle dreaming is often of the essence of what we do," wrote Thomas Pynchon in his essay on sloth. Archimedes' "Eureka" in the bath, and Newton's apple: history is full of stories of inspirations that come in idle moments and dreams. It makes you wonder whether the world's great ideas, inventions and masterpieces are the products of idle people rather than hardworking ones. 55 60
- 10 My old colleague Ted Rall recently wrote a column proposing that we divorce income from work and give each citizen a guaranteed pay check, which sounds like the kind of lunatic notion that will be considered a basic human right in about a century, like abolition, universal suffrage and eight-hour workdays. The Puritans turned work into a virtue, evidently forgetting that God invented it as a punishment. 65
- 11 Perhaps the world would soon slide to ruin if everyone behaved as they wished they could. But maybe an ideal human life lies somewhere between a defiant indolence and the rest of the world's endless frenetic hustle. My own resolute idleness has mostly been a luxury rather than a virtue, but I did make a conscious decision, a long time ago, to choose time over money, since I have always understood that the best investment of my limited time on earth was to have one more beer with my friend, another long talk with my wife, and one last good hard laugh with my son. Life is too short to be busy. 70