

Tlaloc

Tlaloc blesses us
At the Mexican restaurant,
Granting us shards of corn
Which we baptize blood red.

The diners favor Quetzalcoatl
And a plumed serpent leers at us
As we study the menu.
In the kitchen a cook
Frees tortillas from plastic bags.

We will not set foot in the Temple of the Sun.
The last codex has been burned,
And our hearts remain with us
As we flay the waiter for such poor service.

A resin Tezcatlipoca stands by the bar,
Coatlucue grins at the faded picture of Cantinflas
And Huitzilopochtli hovers above
Frozen on the wall---
Such is the fate of conquered gods.

Inferno Redux

If Beatrice were consigned to a modern American hell
That hell would be something very like
A downtown parking garage.
Dante would encounter no boatman
That job having been automated.
And he would drop coins down a metal gullet.

Cerberus, having assumed human guise,
Would be sprawled at the foot of steps
Stinking of stale urine and lost hope,
A corona of broken glass around the stuporous form.
Dante would walk by slumbering metal giants,
Oozing dark excrescences, the ichor of a culture.

Hell would be a low efficiency regime:
Leaking pipes,
Scabbarous paint,
Chipped plaster—the scrofula of neglect.
Here and there the walls of this man-made cave
Would be covered with impromptu messages
From the East Side Locos
The Bloods or the Crips
Or similar lost souls drifting through
The nether regions of society.
Spiritless guardians would occasionally drift by

Dante would encounter American demigods:
Jefferson who failed to
Grip the wolf by the ears,
Punished by a ravenous wolf that
Eternally gnaws at his great heart;
Jackson condemned to shed
A Trail of Tears;
Robber barons and princelings of industry
Punished by the theft of their souls;
Politicos never to seize
The ever receding prize;
The vainglorious in search of long departed youth.
Dante would search for Beatrice as in the original story.

How to Gut a Poem

Scale the silvery scales
Until the dull meat remains.

 Cut off the head.
Ignore the pearl-like eyes.
 Sever the flashing tail
And remove the heart.

Take a sharp knife and
Guide it along the poem's plump belly.
 Remove the viscera.
Drain the blood.
 Discard the spine and the small bones.

Soak the fillet in buttermilk
To remove any strong taste.
Poach the pale flesh.

Last of the Yahi

Relict of a slaughtered tribe,
A simple soul,
A simple heart,
Ishi stumbled into the twentieth century,
An object of curiosity—
Much like curios collected in a Victorian home,
Barnum's omnium gatherum,
Or the cabinet of curiosities of German princelings.

Of course Ishi was a sensation,
A boffo hit—
Until the novelty wore off.
And the last of the Yahi
Succumbed to the White Plague*
That killed so many then
--- A noble savage among savages,
A victim of the Twentieth Century.
And that microbe that we call progress.

- Tuberculosis

Villanelle for the Bluesman

So hot that even the angels sweat,
The bluesman sings under a smoky blue light,
Rasping the notes as he tries to forget.

He sings about drinking, of hard work and debt
Of two timing women, of too many fights--
So hot that even the angels sweat.

He plays for dull-eyed, beaten men-- and yet
The music burns in the dark delta night,
Rasping the notes as he tries to forget.

Life is a wager and he's lost the bet.
Life is a song that he just can't get right---
So hot that even the angels sweat

He sings of the dirt, of the pain and yet
The music throbs in the dead of the night,
Rasping the notes as he tries to forget.

Love words not spoken, promises not kept
Sharp sting of failure, mountain of regret---
So hot that even the angels sweat
Rasping the notes as he tries to forget.