

Dante Enters Hell: Canto III of *Inferno*

Through me you go to the city of lament.

Through me you go to everlasting pain.

Through me you go where all ill souls are sent.

*Justice moved my builder. This domain
was pre-established by omnipotence,
by primal love on wisdom's highest plane.*

*No created thing took precedence
if not eternal. And I shall endure.*

Abandon hope, ye at your last entrance.

These words, of color deeply dark, obscure,

I saw above the gate that all souls fear.

I said: "O Master, vexed I am, unsure."

Virgil

And he to me, that sharp, perceptive seer:

*"Your grave misgivings must be left for dead—
your timid hesitation must end here.*

We come now to the land, as I have said,

*where you will see the sufferers' sad disgrace,
and those who've lost the intellect's good stead.*

And when he looked at me with lighter face

and took my hand, and I was comforted,
he brought me well inside that secret place.
From here, laments and groans and pleas sore pled
resounded through the starless atmosphere.
We'd reached the vale of tears. My own were shed.
Diversity of tongues we now could hear,
with words of dolor, accented with rage,
the sound of slapping hands, voices loud and clear
or soft: all joined in swirls of verbiage
throughout the blackened air, particulate
as rising whirls of sand. I, at that stage
and in my greatly horror-stricken state,
said: "Master, what's the noise within this haze?
Who are the people trapped within the gate?"
He said: "These are the wretched sorry ways
of creatures who lived middling lives, so that
they earned no infamy, yet earned no praise.
So they are mixed with that infernal spate
of angels not among the mutinous band,
but not with God—who just stood separate.
And Heaven, so that its beauty ever stand,
rejected them, whom deeper Hell has spurned,
lest it might gain some glory on that hand."

And I: “Why then are they so badly burned
that their laments come thus, so howlingly?”
His words were brief, but this is what I learned:
“They have no hope of dying, which would free
them from this blind life that is so base
that they would trade it, and most gratefully,
for any other. They’ve gained not fame nor praise.
Of piteous justice they are left in want.
Enough of this, now that you know their place.”

I saw some kind of banner in a flaunt,
flung round and round in such a rapid wind,
as if a restful pause it ne’er would grant
to souls who marched in single file behind,
a line so long I never would have guessed
that such a number death could ever find.

When I had recognized some there impressed,
I saw and knew the shadow of a man
who made the great refusal his behest.

perhaps Pontius Pilate

Immediately I understood the plan
for these, displeasing both, displeasing Him
and all of those who counter to Him ran.

These wretches, whose lives’ lights had shone but dim,
were naked and were sorely onward urged

by flies and wasps that flew in tightening trim.
They bit and stung, and blood and sweat were merged
and flowed down sullen faces, and the lees
were lapped by worms that at their feet emerged.
And then I saw, some way beyond all these,
a crowd that jostled at a riverside.
And so I asked him then: "O Master, please,
who are they? The light is weak, but I've descried
a great impatience there to go across."
"You'll understand these things," he soon replied,
when we suspend our passage and take pause
upon the dreary banks of Acheron."
And I cast down my shame-filled eyes. Because
I feared I might offend if I went on,
I withheld speech until we reached a pier.
Then toward us, then quite near, a boat was drawn.
Within an ancient man with snow-white hair
gave shout: "All woe to you, you peccators!
Do not expect to see the heavens e'er
again. I've come to take you to the shores
of everlasting dark, in ice or flame.
And you, you living soul, you who ignores
the peril. These souls are dead. Go back whence you came!"

But when he saw that there I'd firmly stay:
"By other ways, another port! Another shame
you'll see on other shores. But not this way!
You must go by a boat of lighter wood."

the boat to Purgatory

My guide: "Charon, it's not for you to say.

This has been willed where it is understood
His will is done. No more of questioning."

This wooly man was silenced and for good,
he who had around each eye a fiery ring,
this pilot on the fetid, muddy stream.

But those naked wretches fell to chattering
their teeth, and all changed color, it would seem,
as soon as they had heard him roughly plead.

They cursed their God, their families, the teem
of humankind, the time, the place, the seed
of their selfsame conception and their birth.

They huddled tightly, as if it were of need,
beside that wicked river or that firth,
which waits for those who do not fear the Lord.

The glowing-coal-eyed Charon brings them forth.

The demon beckons them to come aboard,
and, if they tarry, beats them with his oar.

As in the fall, when each leaf breaks its cord,

and each spins down until there are no more
upon the boughs, all raiment on the ground,
in such a way did Adam's evil seed
go riverward, one by one, and at a bound,
as birds swoop when they're lured, at Charon's bid.
They glide across that river, rank and browned,
and very soon, when they are still amid
the depths, still other souls will start to band.
My courteous master then explained: "My child,
they come together here from every land,
those who've died while still by God reviled.
Because it is celestial command,
they are so keen to go and go so mild:
their darkest fears have turned into desire.
No spirit that's been good can pass this way.
If Charon gave examples of his ire,
you now know well what he had meant to say."
As soon as this was said, a fearful gyre
came up and rocked the ground, and to this day
I'm drenched in perspiration at the thought.
Across the tear-soaked vale, the storm then burst
with claps of thunder, sending sudden hot
flashes of vermillion. Confusion-cursed,

I sank as if to sleep, though I did not.

—translated from the Italian by Stephen Binns

Wife at Rest

The holding close of all that she withholds:
the sharing of a stasis this affords
brings me the nearest, farthest I come towards
the Dantean Empyrean she enfolds.
I see it as a color's deep display,
the love I have for her. She goes away
and leaves me only this, the love itself,
a blue of skies, perhaps the blue of Delft,
Viagra blue, perhaps, or larkspur blue.
This light that I behold had never bore
else but this simple image, held in store,
this thickness, this impasto of a hue,
for it is always what it was before,
and she herself became its metaphor.

Wife from Afar

Affording still these glimpses like the first,
those moments you were yet without a name.

Between us was the distance untraversed:
the bringing into being what you became.

I give a honk: the Kansas in me now.

You turn and wave: the Sicily in you.

The way sometimes you can't stop saying *ciao*,
you wave and wave, the way Italians do.

Four times I glance into the rearview mirror,
each time a Kurosawa axial shot:
you're here, then there, then there, then disappear.

It's perfect, and yet then again it's not.

It's culturally askew. I've still to find
Antonioni space for ambient,
in which you'd walk and walk, while from behind
the camera fails to see what it has meant.

In closer focus, modestly you blur.

My contract player: I can't be your auteur.

Wife: Verso

The rump not swell but hip-braced, bracketed,
as unitary as her very head,
replete, so sweetly, with a kind of face,
this compact Greek omega, lowercase, ω
cleft wide enough to hold a shadow in,
this end of her: it's where I might begin
if love were not what we can't itemize.

As she has grown to fat, the once-boy's thighs
ballooning into masses she must heave,
this all alone is what growth chose to leave,
the desk-bell breasts now all but disappeared,
the tendriled bush now shrunk to Freudian beard.

The void she left around her now is she,
as neatly rounded as a bumblebee.