

PART I

Students' Conversations with Dante

FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup_best_practice)
Students' Conversations with Dante, pp. 25-93, © 2021 Author(s), CC BY 4.0 International, DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-458-8.04, in Sonia Fanucchi, Anita Virga (edited by), *A South African Convivio with Dante. Born Frees' Interpretations of the Commedia*, © 2021 Author(s), content CC BY 4.0 International, metadata CC0 1.0 Universal, published by Firenze University Press (www.fupress.com), ISSN 2704-5919 (online), ISBN 978-88-5518-458-8 (PDF), DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-458-8

La divina foresta: Earthy Paradise and Liminal Thresholds in Dante's Purgatorio

Fern Casey

In the anthropological models of Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep, the mid-way point of the rite of passage, the liminal stage, is ambiguous and fluid. An individual has relinquished claim to their former self, and not yet fulfilled the requirements (ceremonial in nature) to ascend to their aggregation or reincorporation, the new identity they will inhabit upon re-entering their community—they are initiates, unable to step back and unready to step forward. The initiate “is betwixt and between all familiar lines of classification,” (Turner & Turner 1978, 2) and their identity is in transition. The explicitly deconstructive nature of the limen finds parallel in the Purgatorial setting: each terrace of Dante's *Purgatorio* extricates the worthy penitent from their mortal sin through specific purgation. In that process of purgation, they are simultaneously relinquishing (or cleansing) the characteristics of their former selves, and yet cannot fully step into the next phase of their actualised selfhood. Purgatory and liminality are states and spaces unto themselves, but they are curiously transient in nature, and less articulated in existing literature. Moreover, the Earthly Paradise is unique from the few other forests which Dante traverses in his journey through the afterlife, both descriptively and thematically. The infamous dark wood of the *Inferno*'s first canto was described as: [...] *una selva oscura [...] esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte [...] (Inf. 1.2; 5)*. A wild, disorientating setting characterised by fear and darkness. Likewise in the suicide wood of *Inferno*'s thirteenth canto was,

[...] un bosco

che da nessun sentiero era segnato.

Non fronda verde, ma di color fosco;
non rami schietti, ma nodosi e'nvolti;
non pomi v'eran, ma stecchi con tòsco (*Inf. 13.3–6*).

A forest unmarked by any path, sick with bleakly coloured leaves and gnarled branches riddled in turn with poisonous thorns—a holistically malicious setting purposed with punishment for the souls who dwelled within it. In both instances within the *Inferno*, the forest is a place of danger: in the first instance, for what it conceals; and in the second, for the nature of its function.

Furthermore, the function that Dante as a protagonist embodies in each of these forests—and the *Inferno* more broadly—is fundamentally reliant on his earthly self (his ‘former’ or pre-pilgrimage identity). Dante is recognised and defined by his political career whilst traversing through Hell—in Purgatory, when he is recognised, it is as a poet. Naturally, the interactions in Purgatory are more cordial than in Hell, but this invocation of poet rather than politician speaks to an identity transformation (or regression, one might argue) which James McMenamin (2016, 225) characterises:

Dante [...] allegorizes his afterlife journey within the context of life’s ages of man relating the pilgrim to a figurative state of *adolescenza*, essentially condemning the protagonist to a developmental *fall* from the author’s more advanced age with the poet/narrator emerging in his actual state of *gioventute* (i.e., maturity) recaptured through the completion of his afterlife experience.

What complicates a reading of Dante’s *Purgatorio* against the anthropological models of van Gennep and Turner is the regressive identity formation at the heart of Dante’s transformation from politician to poet, to pilgrim: he is returning to the Edenic, pre-Fall state of humankind; free of sin and mortal tidings. This is the final aggregation phase which van Gennep describes, in which the rite has been completed and the individual ascends to their new identity: Dante’s re-entrance into society is a reincorporation into the Kingdom of Heaven, which necessitates the attainment of a spiritual purity akin to a childlike state. It is a reversal of the traditional child-adolescent-adult progression associated with rite of passage dynamics.

Moreover, when comparatively read against Campbell’s phases of journeying, it becomes apparent that much of Purgatory can be read as a liminal space or expansive threshold, in which Dante is continually relinquishing elements of his previous identity (his more bitter, aged self from *Inferno* as McMenamin might argue) whilst initiating towards, yet not achieving, his final identity—a spiritual ‘adulthood’ in which he regains the innocence or purity of pre-Fall humanity, which is only achieved after drinking from the rivers Lethe and Eunoe in the Earthly Paradise. Earthly Paradise, in Campbell’s thesis, might be articulated as the return threshold—the point at which the protagonist returns to their home, as the Kingdom of Heaven is Dante’s supreme and final home—but this assertion is unsatisfied by Campbell’s concept of returning *from* the divine to *re-join* the mortal, which is the opposite, more or less, of what Dante is doing. Perhaps, to Campbell, this is more akin to the threshold of baptism. Because of the reversed-progression dynamic at work, it is difficult to conceptualize: but certainly, what Campbell (1968, 84) does account for is the transience of the threshold in the protagonist’s initiation:

And so it happens that if anyone—in whatever society—undertakes for himself the perilous journey into the darkness by descending, either intentionally or unintentionally, into the crooked lanes of his own spiritual labyrinth, he soon finds himself in a landscape of symbolical figures [...] In the vocabulary of the mystics this is the second stage of the Way, that of the ‘purification of the self,’ when the senses are ‘cleansed and humbled,’ and the energies and interests ‘concentrated upon transcendental things’; or in a vocabulary of more modern turn: this is the process of dissolving, transcending, or transmuting the infantile images of our personal past.

Virgil’s sudden departure in the Earthly Paradise, to this paper’s assessment, is a fundamental demonstration of how Purgatory dissolves the image of Dante’s past—it is regularly signposted throughout the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* that Virgil will guide Dante to Beatrice but no further, and thereafter Beatrice is set to be his guide for his pilgrimage through the upper tiers of the afterlife. When Virgil heralds his coming departure at the threshold, decreeing to Dante that he is capable of self-decision, “Lord of yourself I crown and miter you” (*Purg.* 27.142), there is a quietude that falls over the mentor. He will not speak to Dante again.

When Dante enters the Earthly Paradise, it is lush with greenery and mystical botany preserved from before the Fall from the garden—moreover, it is brightly lit under the sunlight of the dawn and sweet from the fragrance of flowers. *This* forest draws Dante in—he is soft-footed and slow in his meandering through the verdant, ancient setting, and enveloped by it immediately. He loses track of the entrance, he notes, being so thoroughly absorbed by the Earthly Paradise. In less than twenty lines after entering the forest, Dante’s quiet reflection is broken when he spies an unnamed woman frolicking in a flowering grove—a river divides them, and he calls out to her, shattering the quietude. In the course of that new, sprightly conversation and subsequent procession, Beatrice descends and reveals herself. Her arrival leaves Dante “mute with awe,” as he turned “wide-eyed” to Virgil—a gesture almost *Orphean* in nature, being that Virgil has already bid him farewell at the threshold to the forest—and finds his mentor gone (*Purg.* 30.36; 44).

Virgil’s absence (and his final, lingering silence) should mark the apparent purgation of Dante’s former, earthly self—yet this purgation is incomplete before Dante’s purification in the rivers Lethe and Eunoe, which precisely the point to which my paper draws attention. I return to its underpinning curiosities. Why did Virgil bid Dante farewell and continue to follow him, spectrelike, through the Earthly Paradise? What can this peculiar interaction, or lack thereof, reveal about the liminality of that Edenic setting atop Mount Purgatory? Dante’s immediate and powerful grief for Virgil’s absence demonstrates one grand, penultimate act of purgation: Dante losing the symbol of his worldly pursuits, his paternal (and poetic) guide, and his binding to individual love. This latter point is a thesis of its own, but certainly it is reasonable to argue that Beatrice, unlike Virgil, represents a divine love which incorporates the individual into the collective—the loss of individual identity in *Paradiso* is worthy of its own prolonged consideration.

While this paper cannot claim to be conclusive, I have rather aimed to expand an underestimated theoretical framework for reading Dante; the transformational nature of Purgatory is itself underrepresented in contemporary scholarship, and anthropological models like those present in this paper might provide an improved means of articulating such. Although these models are not directly transferable in some instances, careful application demonstrates worthwhile findings: the Earthly Paradise evidences the notion that a threshold is both an ending and a beginning, therefore drawing the individual taught between transformation. Once Dante is baptised in the rivers Lethe and Eunoe, and has drunk from them, the physical mark of his sin is washed away (the *peccato*) and the metaphysical weight of it is taken from him. Dante loses Virgil, and gains Beatrice; he loses connection to his mortal life (through the dissolution of his memory of sin), and gains connection to the Kingdom of Heaven; his eyes turn from the verdant Eden of the Mountain's summit, and towards the stars above. He is transformed, and is purged of a former self. Reading these events with a framework of ceremonial identity configuration—*rites of passage*—yields a new manner of articulating the purgatorial process, as this paper has demonstrated. This allows for an understanding of Dante's pilgrimage through the afterlife as a journey from sin to the elysian state, with distinctly identifiable instances of transformation.

References

- Alighieri, Dante. 1961. *Il Purgatorio*, translated by John D. Sinclair. New York: Oxford University Press. First published 1939 (New York).
- Alighieri, Dante. 2004. *Purgatory*, translated by Anthony Esolen. New York: Random House, Inc.
- Alighieri, Dante. 2005. *Inferno*, translated by Anthony Esolen. New York: The Modern Library.
- Campbell, Joseph. 1968. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Novato: The New World Library.
- le Goff, Jacques. 1984. *The Birth of Purgatory*, translated Arthur Goldhammer. Aldershot: Scholar Press.
- McMenamin, James. 2016. "The Poet's Inner Child: Early Childhood and Spiritual Growth in Dante's 'Commedia'." *Italica* 93 (2): 225–50.
- Turner, Victor, Turner, Edith. 1978. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- van Gennep, Arnold, Vizedom, Monika B. 1960. *The Rites of Passage*, translated by Gabrielle L. Caffee. Illinois: The University of Chicago Press.

A Mad Flight Into *Inferno* Once Again. The Party

Chariklia Martalas

We caught the excitement in our throats. The air was thick and heavy like a summer night that had tasted ecstasy. The laughter bounced off our skin and the jabber spiraled out of our mouths. Our words brushed our lips with fire and snapped our teeth to the rhythm of music we had not heard yet. Dante looked uncomfortable, pressed in the crowds, his body surged against other bodies in illicit closeness. He couldn't understand why dead souls had such tight clothes and showed so much skin.

"It is as if they are naked, they are so exposed. Do they not feel vulnerable?" said Dante.

"Did you also notice that they are beautiful?" I replied. Dante blushed as red as his cape. *Inferno* was clearly a state of mind that he was not ready to inhabit. At least Dante knew one thing that made sense; God was clearly not present in this circle of hell for desire had crept into every outline of space and fluttered there, palpitating in union with the vibrations of the crowd. Dante felt the heat rise in his belly; he believed he was going to pass out.

"We close to Minos, Dante. Then you will be able to get some air."

There stood Minos with his balding head and a pony-tail tied with an elastic band, his shirt was off with his muscles wet with sweat. Minos wearing sunglasses and chewing a piece of gum exuded the misplaced glamour of an over-aged man controlling the fate of the youth—even if this fate would only last a single night. A giant that towered over us, his body the perfect form that was occasionally caught by the music that seeped out from behind him. His claim to fame degraded from who he was before. He now was exalted as the flawless guardian of the door to carnality. It was the anticipation of rapture that rattled the beings belonging to the crowd so that they pushed against each other to get closer to Minos, the God of their fate so close at hand. He held a list in his enormous fingers, examining the names and providing judgement of whether the soul could enter but first they had to confess something to him. Dante thought it was pen-

ance. I knew better that a secret to Minos was a guarantee that you were worth an entrance, that you were deemed enchanting enough, that you could give others pleasure as much as getting pleasure yourself. If anything, there was the morality of the command for mutual reciprocation. If you weren't on the list Minos would flick his tail in your face and you would have to go to the back of the line in a wave of misery that felt like starting again was the abyss. Who would have thought that the son of Zeus and Europa would land up as a glorified bouncer relishing his power as he winked to the girls and high fived the boys.

"Oh, you who have come to the abode of pleasure," said Minos to me licking his lips. "But unfortunately, it doesn't seem you on the list. I would let you in, but I am not that benevolent"

"No need for that Minos, I am with Dante," I replied. "An old friend of Francesca."

"You've changed Minos, I almost did not recognize you." said Dante.

Minos laughed, "Ah Dante, I can only be my alter-ego just for an evening. But please be careful how you enter and who you can trust for your delicate sensibilities might be a little bit insulted by modern ways."

He then winked at Dante and ignored me.

And so we entered. Dante was both intrigued and cautious until he felt the wind on his face and knew he was in the right place. Everyone's hair was blowing in the wind at the exact same speed as all those perfume ads Dante had not had the pleasure of seeing. The wind was hot and sticky and blew a scent of roses into the air. Everything was red. Red sofas placed in no order, where people draped themselves over as if they were scarves. Red curtains that flapped against the wind as if they were dancing seductively but seducing no one as at this party, unlike all others, no one was standing alone. There were also flowers everywhere—roses, red chrysanthemums, blossoms, and wild irises. Everyone was running around barefoot as the red carpet was so heavy and soft. Dante refused to take his shoes off, I agreed with him, I grew up with a mother more content with smoking than bare feet. Which reminded me to light a cigarette—this circle of hell was about delighting in intoxicating vices, and I planned to do so, readily. Dante asked for a puff and then coughed till his eyes were as red as the curtains.

"Where are the wails?" were the words he managed to cough out.

"Oh, they will come later."

I felt terrible to tease him so much. But on that cue came the music Dante labeled as "suing Inferno." It had a heavy beat to it that buried into the floor to make my feet wish to obey its patterns of time and a singer so filled with languor that her melody twirled at my hair and left me with the feeling of longing.

"The wind is weaker than I remembered."

Dante at that moment turned to find giant wind machines, spinning their heads as if they were mad.

"Did God create those?" he asked.

"Francesca probably ordered the wind machines deliberately," I said to him.

Dante was now very confused. Since when did Francesca control this circle of hell? When did God need machines to make wind?

So, he turned to me.

“Who are these people that are so whipped by the wind machines?”

“Dante, I think it is best to introduce yourself.”

Dante found two men kissing ardently. He coughed to announce himself though covered himself in awkwardness in the process.

What Dante didn't know was that there was a rumour that those from the circle of hell for sodomy were planning to hold their own party. Posters had already been distributed with the byline “Sodomy is a little bit more dangerous than lust.” They decided to hold it a different night for if Francesca invited you, how could you say no? They all couldn't say no. How could you deny a party where ephemeral temptations could move to the beat and a lover was never too far away to be agonizing and never too close to be ordinary?

“Oh, poor souls, why are you in Inferno?” Dante asked.

He was hoping for a straightforward answer but knew the futility of it. What was then Dante's motive other than a curiosity? Curiosity can be as intense as desire, in this sense I finally understood why Dante and I still belonged to the party since both of us were the only ones not chosen.

“Oh yes we are in hell,” answered one as they winked at each other.

When they realized that Dante was serious, they nearly choked on their champagne in laughter.

“Well, I had a duel with my wallpaper and lost all because he threw me under the proverbial bus,” said the one with the luscious hair and the only one fully dressed in a coat and suit (so Dante appreciated him, as did I for many more reasons).

“My creation is running around here as well. You must meet him, he is marvelously beautiful, his name is Dorian Gray.”

Dante politely smiled, his curiosity rapidly growing that he could not stay only with one couple. Lust was a grand sin with many devoted followers. He spied some old veterans. There was Cleopatra and Mark Anthony having an argument with Mark Anthony looking as petulant as a small child. Helen was flirting with Paris, twisting her hair around her fingers, and posing like one of the graces. It was hard for me not to fall in love with her as she turned to smile at me, with eyelashes long and feathery and a smile that rejuvenated my bones. Semiramis made her grand entrance to much adoration, her regal stature highlighted by the many people coming to kiss her feet, the true queen of Assyria was not reprimanded for her passions. There was Achilles and Patroclus clinging onto each other as if they would both die again, as they gazed into each other's eyes there was something more than desire that glimmered between them. Dante remembered them all but couldn't believe the happiness that radiated from their cores. Inferno was now becoming extremely confusing.

“Aren't they beautiful?” I murmured. “All the great lovers of history in one room.”

“You romanticize them. Are they not supposed to be punished?” Dante asked.

He felt pity for their perverse ill before but that was when the wind was ripping their limbs apart and rendering them silent. Pity had no place here anymore nor understanding of what Inferno has come to mean these seven hundred years later. Now he was the one that couldn’t hear the words slurring around his brain because the music and the crowd ensured that he could feel the thickness of the sound in the room.

“The 21st century plays a very different game with regards to love. Hell has always been a mirror. Inferno is more complex than just locking its victims in its jaws.” I said loudly.

“God creates no mirror,” Dante replied, as petulant as Mark Anthony.

It seemed as if our conversation had ended so I decided not to tease Dante further. He hadn’t spotted the gift shop that was at the opposite end of the party with teddy bears with hearts, chocolates and greeting cards. I was thinking of buying him a rose that said “you are my paradise,” but decided not to.

Dante was itching to leave and so it was important to find our host, Francesca.

“Dante!” she cried.

As Francesca came towards us I understood why she was an incarnate being of Romanticism. Though she looked too happy to match her paintings.

“Dante I am so glad you came.” She then turned to me and asked who I was, every word I spoke to her was accompanied by a blush.

“Francesca, Inferno is very different to what I remembered. When did God need wind machines?” said Dante.

Francesca laughed at Dante’s confusion.

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous. This is not the second circle of Hell, this is my Second Circle of Inferno themed party. Paolo has just gone out to get some more wine, but he will be back in a bit.”

“A Party?” Dante asked.

“Oh yes, passion is now quite celebrated even though it can cause a few sad endings. Do you know of Romeo and Juliet?”

“But you are still in Inferno?”

“Yes, but we are in Limbo for there is a question surrounding our damnation.”

Francesca’s tone softened and turned more serious. It was incongruous to the scent of the roses and the taste of wine on my lips. Limbo has always been the state of the philosopher, and Francesca had fallen into the trap. Though she pretended that she had not, especially tonight.

She began to speak, and we knew her words were the only things real at this party even though they came out of some place other, some place not belonging to the champagne, to the flowers, to the motions of the music. Her words were a puzzle piece that was always present but could not quite fit elegantly into the picture of the wild hedonists and the overwhelmed lovers.

“We are in Limbo because God is waiting. For what is he waiting for? We do not know for mortals shall never know God’s plans. All we know is that we do not belong and that we will never be admitted to Paradise. But Inferno or Pur-

gatory? Who can decide? Morality is both timeless and tempestuous. God hasn't relinquished our free will to reconsider what is right. But no one knows what is right, especially not those philosophers thinking about virtue, especially not me. So, we will have to see how the 21st century goes. *Inferno* has become a little experiment. Only Paradise is pure enough, Godly enough, to not change at the whims of human hands."

Dante furrows his eyebrows and his lips vanish.

Francesca laughs as if she has spoken something prohibited. However, the seriousness returns when she kindly looks upon Dante's face.

"Ah Dante, I have said too much. Too much of the world of the *Commedia* has changed in these few words I have spoken. Should I have left the story alone? Yet I felt compelled to be honest that human choice has started to matter more than it ever did. Things are now less determined, more volatile, such is modernity. Judging human souls has never been harder."

She then looks at me and asks what she knows I can't answer.

"Who will be your Beatrice when the world is more human than it ever has been?"

She then smiled and put on a mask of frivolity, the mask she greeted us with and asked if we wanted more wine.

Dante refused and I accepted only if there was champagne. Almost instantly I felt the rhythm return to me. I joined again in the patterns of longing that rippled through the crowd.

She smiled again and as she was about to turn away, I shouted

"And so why a party?"

"Why not a party?" she replied. "Why not something a little dangerous with a couple of wind machines when everything is so uncertain?"

A Mad Flight Into *Inferno* Once Again. Canto XIII
Now Smells Like Roses

Chariklia Martalas

As Virgil had resurrected those years past
Dante had come back to the infernal wood
And I was standing there
In the aporia of insight and confusion
For I had been through insanity
And I was still insane
Things had changed in hell
Because everything is dictated by time
But *Inferno* was still an exile from sanity
And so I could be no servant of God
Dante, I said to him, can I lead you?
He was used to greatness
Not a lowly writer with demons unremarkable
But he couldn't choose who came out
Of the wood with poisoned thorns
And knotted branches like screams
Even though he remembered
The Harpies with tear dripped cheeks
And mouths red from cuts burst open
It must be excruciating, I said
To remember the moans that pierced ears
Like a needle in the mind
The sadness and anguish
Souls wrapped in brown leaves with wounds
On hands and feet like bullet holes
And memories of Pier della Vigna
Whose head had left scraps of itself
On the walls of two prisons
Internal and external the bars had shut
One of his keys turning the memories

Dante and I then saw a beautiful woman
Walking towards us with a dress of gold
A rose honeyed melody coming from her throat
 'Dante, my darling we all know
 That you didn't wish to be back
 In the second ring of a lost Saturn
 But I should tell you about my home
As Queen of Carthage I still have royal duties
 It was more than the betrayal
 That sent me to build the funeral pyre
 Of all the memento mori he gave me
 From a young girl your God
 Gifted me the euphoria of sweet grace
 Where the brightness of a broken fire
 Trickled into the base of my skull
 Until it was crushed, disintegrated
 By a sadness no Inferno could rival
 That drowned my lungs
While turning my veins into burnt paper
I was already tired by the time Aeneas left me
 The sword had loomed in my eye
 For decades so I fell into knotted garlands
 My soul trapped in the misery of the cycles
 I had tried to escape
 Those Harpies eating my limbs
 With the sweet breath of rotting corpses
 Hell only hurt more
 Because of the nature of its perpetuity'
 She was silent
 Now's your chance, I said
 Dante my sweet sister will not upset you
 'Why has this ring changed wounded soul?'
 She sighed like a note in mourning
 'We had not anticipated
 That we could uproot ourselves
From the decaying soil with our putrid limbs
 That our branch like skeletons could walk
 So we climbed to the edge of our world
 Harpies and beasts of the wood
 Biting at the corners of our bones
 But we carried on till our skeleton fingers
 Grasped the gate
 Us, with our weeping and wailing
 With our gift of tears
 We called to God

Faced him like the unburnt bush of Moses
So God considered us
For the world was changing its mind
On the plight of the Suicides
And God wished to change his mind as well
We had already been forsaken in life
With minds that turned us to Hell
With minds that made us feel like angels
With minds that were sinless
Despite the blasphemy to reality'
Take the twig, I said
Come break the illusion
Dante was handed a piece of a bush
From the sleeve of gold
Holding it gently, scared for the soul
Whose agony he had once caused before
As soon as he snapped it memory dissolved
And Dante stood in shock
Underneath a sky of blue silk
And silence as peaceful as the word of God
Overpowered by a thick scent
Of roses that were blooming
Over their life giving stems
Rose bushes that surrounded us
Like a field of petal faces
Bushes that didn't moan
Roses that didn't break words or blood
Was it Paradise?
It had to be for the garden
Was kept sacred by a loving hand
Dido with her bittersweet touch
Caressing some of the flowers
As if her hands were kissing them
'We had lost our bodies
When we had turned into pained wood
But most of us wanted peace
Instead of searching for the remains
Of a life we wished to leave
And so God made us beautiful
In a silent bliss
That makes heaven smell
Like souls forgiven'
She said goodbye
For her memories made her tired
She kissed me on the cheek

And began to turn into her own rose bush
With golden petals that gleamed
In the sun that warmed our spines
And I cried because there is hope
Hope in the beauty
Hope in a garden well cared for
And Dante cried because his sadness
And the agony he felt
In his memories could disappear
Down the Arno
The scent of the roses
Cleansing him from the anguish of the past
As it weaved around his thoughts
I needed to come lead you here
I said, it was important to know
He thanked me
For this was a new beginning
We then sat in silence
But I still read in him
Something left to be said
And he read in me the same
Are you going to stay in the rose garden?
Dante asked me
He was used to being lead by the dead
But I am still of the living
So I told him its time for me to go
Home is not the Rose Garden
One day, someday it will be
But I promised
That it would not be today
Or anytime soon

A Mad Flight Into *Inferno* Once Again. The Dream or The Ghost of Ulysses

Chariklia Martalas

The scene is Dante's new office. Ever since he retired as a poet he decided to become a therapist. The room is large and spacious so that there is still air to breathe despite being filled with furniture. His desk, messed with papers, has a portrait of a beautiful woman in a gold-plated frame, the only touch of the personal. On the walls is a signed poster of the Aeneid.

(Dante Enters)

Dante goes right to his desk and begins signing copies of the Commedia.

(Chariklia Enters)

Chariklia wants to be a writer. She had asked Dante for his permission to rework the Inferno through a modern lens. He not only agreed but volunteered to go back to Inferno with her for her research purposes. Inferno is not a place to be alone he said. She didn't tell him that Virgil had asked her to be his guide.

But before they embark, he suggested a therapy session.

CHARIKLIA: There's only one place where we can begin. We can speak later about how my nerves have made my hands like unwoven threads and that my mind is wooden. I need to speak about the dream I had first. It was one of those dreams where every moment seems to matter as if God had given you the dream and you were experiencing divine intervention. I woke up and had to place my fingers on my pulse in order to remember that I was real.

DANTE: I have had dreams consume me like this as well. You could possibly have called them visions. What happened in your dream?

CHARIKLIA: It feels like my tongue is on fire and my whole mind is whipping in the wind.

DANTE: I know there are no tongues with which it can be told but one must try.

CHARIKLIA: I was on a ship. I was both alone and not alone. There were many crew members but all of them had my face. All of them moved with my movements and spoke with my voice. And so, I was surrounded by myself

and something other than myself at the exact same time. These selves liked to talk with each other, and we spoke about this yearning for home. We felt a yearning for our parents and our siblings, a love we had deeply missed so much so that it made our bones brittle. Home was where our souls needed to return and so we mouthed this one place to each other as if it was a holy chant—*Ithaca*.

DANTE: I should restrain myself; my lips should not move. Virgil has always been better talking about the Greeks.

CHARIKLIA: Dante, please speak, for my sake. I am Greek but that has not made these dreams any clearer. You know Inferno, is that not where this dream belongs?

Dante nods. He recognizes and so he worries.

CHARIKLIA: There was one of us that felt different. Call her x. She had this yearning for something more. She couldn't quite describe it because it was unknown even to her. It was as if her yearning belonged beyond the horizon, beyond where the earth would end. And we felt her yearning deeply. It radiated through us as if a flame had kissed us and left our insides shaking. And so, we decided not to go home, to forsake our loves and follow her.

DANTE: What happened when you didn't return home? Why didn't you turn back?

CHARIKLIA: We saw magnificent cities, cities that were birthed from the earth and the skies. We saw cities that had fallen still touched by their own ways of beauty. We touched Seville with our right hand. We had left Ceuta. We had grown old, our faces looking as if they had been left too long in water. Finally, the Pillars of Hercules rose up from the sea like an invitation or at least a forbidden challenge. And the one we followed began to speak. She knew the yearning now. She could give it a name.

'Sisters we have reached the point that men should not pass beyond. But aren't we glad that we are not men? What remains to us is not the place of the darkest unknown but a place of unending light. A world where you will find beauty in words not strung together before. A world where language can fall through you. Transgress the boundaries to write. Write what could never have been written before. Write for those that don't know what it is like beyond the edge.'

DANTE: You are Ulysses.

CHARIKLIA: I am not good enough with words to be Ulysses.

DANTE: You are Ulysses.

CHARIKLIA: But I didn't even want virtue and knowledge. I only wanted language. Ulysses already possessed that.

DANTE: Did Ulysses have a nobler pursuit?

CHARIKLIA: Yes, I think so. He was at least a hero. I am not that either.

DANTE: But he went beyond the limits.

CHARIKLIA: So, did you?

DANTE: (*Dante getting angry*) That was different.

CHARIKLIA: Yes, I forgot. Ulysses and I didn't have divine sanction.

DANTE: So, did you die in your dream?

CHARIKLIA: No. We thought our mad flight would send us into the raging wildness of the ocean. We thought our ship would sink. Instead, as soon as we left the straights the ocean disappeared and there was just an all-white emptiness. There was nothing beyond the limit.

DANTE: How do you interpret this?

CHARIKLIA: I've thought about it. I have probably thought about it too much. It can only be that there must be nothing beyond the language we already have. Beyond the edge is just silence.

DANTE: Do you think that silence is then the true language of God?

CHARIKLIA: Anything else is a transgression... Dante am I really like Ulysses?

DANTE: Well, you are Ulysses in the dream. And you are the crew. Which is interesting in itself, don't you think? Why? Don't you want to be?

CHARIKLIA: The idea that the language from my lips could be the reason people are sent to their deaths bothers me. Ulysses sold them false promises. And it is worse that it was a promise that he believed himself. What if I am the same?

DANTE: You won't be the same.

CHARIKLIA: How can we know? If Ulysses wrote something I am sure it would have been astonishing.

DANTE: He was a hero not a writer.

CHARIKLIA: And I am a writer not a hero.

DANTE: Do you really not want to be like Ulysses?

CHARIKLIA: Yes, please, God, yes.

DANTE: So let me ask this. Is it virtue that guides your pen? Is it virtue that fills your words?

CHARIKLIA: If it does not, I'll stand by Ulysses and be covered in flame.

A Mad Flight Into Inferno Once Again. Eating John Vorster

Chariklia Martalas

God had forgotten my country.
For some years the Devil enjoyed the malevolence that stuck onto the bones and
teeth, pouring out of mouths like disease.
The evil that forced black and white to not only be separated but for many a white
to forget all humanity at the Devil's door.

What do you say to horror Dante?
What do you say to the murders of flesh and mind?
Cutting the soul into bits to feed the State

What do you say to Apartheid?

Dante, it was run by men who the devil would be afraid of

Luckily God remembered South Africa
Though intermittently for it was years
Before we were saved

What do I say to horror Dante?
How do I describe it?
You described hell why can't I?

For Inferno had risen up to engulf a land

Because hell follows human beings.

*

Look here Dante

Look at the man who created hell on earth

He was bent over a head whose face had been scratched fleshless.
He was bent over a head until he noticed us.

He looked up
His teeth covered in skin and blood.

He was eating the head.

Dante had seen this before yet his eyes could never find such a sight familiar
I stood paralyzed waiting for the courage to look away

“They are making me eat my friend,” the man wailed.

Looking at us through his squinted eyes checking to see how we would react
When Dante didn’t show instant pity, he sat up straight and adjusted his tie.

Some people always watch for the perfect audience.

The perfect audience can be made by some adjustments

Flesh in teeth
Head or no head.

We were meant to be won over

“Hendrik Verwoerd is my name.”

He gives us his hand to shake. It was covered in skin and hair.

He knows I know him

He relishes this opportunity to be remembered

“Maybe you can answer me. Why am I here? What have I done? They make me eat my friend’s head! John Vorster was a good man and so am I. I don’t deserve this ill treatment by public opinion or by God. See I just had a dream of good neighbours, just a dream of harmony between whites and blacks. I had a dream of us all knowing exactly who we are and where we stand. It was a dream of care—two separate worlds but both equal. When I received my judgment, I should have been crying. But I am a hard man even as I knew my future—to be hated now for what crimes?”

*

A man in a prison uniform sprinted towards us

With his knife determined to meet Verwoerd’s heart

He stabbed him

He stabbed him four times

Quickly as if he rehearsed it

Both Dante and I weren't prepared for Verwoerd to curl around John Vorster's head and continue eating it again.

The man spoke:

"He is not allowed a voice"

We nodded our heads.

Feeling ourselves speechless when all we wanted to do was to question

"His crimes too great to ever use language to evoke your pity. His punishment forbids it. Eat your head Verwoerd before I stab you again just like I did that day in Parliament."

I recognized him.

He was buried by some of my community
An unsung hero nearly was lost to an unmarked grave

"I know you Dimitri Tsafendas"

*

"Did Verwoerd eat his children too?" Dante asked.

"No." Tsafendas answered

"He ate more than limbs, he ate the threads of a whole country's humanity. Sharpening the teeth of the State until families were lost, lives were lost, hope was lost."

*

Dante was sitting with a question, a question with wide implications and unseen possibilities. However, it is impossible to sit with such a question before it devours.

How can a man who has murdered watch over a murderer?
Have God's commandments changed?
Tsafendas was not made insecure by our hesitant eyes
He seemed to understand where he belonged in God's plans

*I was tortured after my act.
Electric shocks forced their way through my body.
They hanged me until I lived.
But have you forgotten?
I am still not in Paradise,*

*I cannot even climb the steepness of Purgatory.
I am bound to this iciness
Lost are my dreams of being greeted by Cato on that beach*

*My fate is with Verwoerd,
Justice is always a matter of intertwining*

Tsafendas didn't doubt his morality
Why should he?
Why should we doubt his morality at all?

*I told God what I told the two priests.
I would be guilty by God if I did kill him
But I believed I would be even guiltier by God if I didn't.*

Tsafendas knew madness better than anyone
Tsafendas knew madness by not being mad
And yet, it is madness to kill to save

*They called me mad but my mind was clear.
The real madness was Verwoerd.
The real madness was letting him eat South Africa to the bone.*

Should I have told him that the evil carried on?

*

I could be the one to tell you, Dante, about Verwoerd's crimes

That colour was shot down by a white gun
Bullets that ripped through a crowd in Sharpeville, Soweto
Screaming, so much screaming

Uprooted from homes and old memories
To be placed in a land made deliberately lost
Separate but equal only a game of words
As those with black skin were shunned
Not just from the word citizen but from the word human

The game Verwoerd was playing was domination
The architect of a form of slavery
Make them pay for what Verwoerd?
Make them pay for what?

I cannot be the one to tell you Dante about Verwoerd's crimes.

Unspeakable was the pain
Unmentionable was the alienation
Unspeakable was the destruction

*

Dante sits down and stares at Verwoerd.

“Hell has many more monsters now doesn't it?”

Tsafendas stays silent. I stay silent too.
What else could we say to a man realizing that the Inferno he had been to before was too small?
That God had to make it bigger.

And then we saw it, the line of heads on a shelf waiting for Verwoerd's ravenous mouth.
I read some of the nametags written underneath them, reading:

P.W Botha,
D. F Malan,
J Strijdom.

Inferno had to be bigger, there were many of the devil's men that Verwoerd had to eat.

The Storm

Helena van Urk

*An African Remix,
with Apols and Compliments,
of Dante's Canto Six.*

My name is Dante Alberti. These pages
I name Maro; Guide through this litany.
Let me tell you a tale for the ages...

I was born in fine Florence, Italy,
a bright child who earned nought but praises,
son of a leader in the polity.

After leaving school I wrote my thesis
on the Establishment Clause in Sicily,
training for a life where no beauty lives.

For my first love was language and poetry,
which I could not but see in all God does,
and wished dearly to share with humanity.

I had long given up this dream, convinced
by black tongues to mind Ulysses' duty,
not indulgence. Still, I was comforted

that I could make beauty in another way,
for to live a life as one having served,
is to see the face of God, they say.

I entered public service with hopes and dreams
to right the beloved nation, gone astray.
I would speak for those who had no means,

those Others that tend to live forgotten,
widows, orphans, refugees in all their streams.
For when Kings spurn and scorn the downtrodden

and Popes keep proudly silent in the face
of cries for justice and indictment, when
cities are stuffed, bursting, with avarice

and their leaders, fraught with deadly envy,
spend their days in sating lusts and debase
office and duty in their gluttony,

then by Divine law of men and nature,
the land where not one man of justice be,
will reap but bloodshed and usurpature.

And such were the leopards, lions and wolves
that awaited me in this hated labour.
Demons that would rival Milton's delves

into Pandaemonium bespoilt
the cities, poisoning the land and wells,
sowing dragon's teeth as they toil't.

Soon dark forests closed in as I neared Hell:
my first Dark Night, as I referred to it,
when the entire world seemed not fit to dwell.

After my suicide attempt I was
sent away, in exile till I "got well,"
as it could harm the political cause.

All good that sterile sanatorium
held, was the freedom to write as
I pleased, to drive away the tedium.

I was near the middle of my life then,
and could not bear to remain numb
to the world, yet had no place therein.

So I wandered the world, with a journal
as my only comfort and companion,
named in tribute to my namesake's Virgil.

I hoped to find a simpler road, narrow
and clear, no twists and sharps that court fall,
with as my guide the Light of Tomorrow.

Like Solomon I pled to be given
Wisdom, of mankind's fall and great sorrow,
if beauty still dwelt in this blighted Eden.

From this quest of Maro and I sprung the tale
of The Storm, within his bindings written,
so all may be warned to keep their souls hale.

Restless travels brought me to Africa,
the cradle of humanity's tale.
But this part of the Gold Coast, after a

history spanning centuries of pure
gluttony, had again fallen to a
bloodbath of wars, unceasing, without cure.

In this place even the trees bled heartsblood,
suffering of ages wailing from verdure.
Convinced now that Man was devoid of good

I once again turned to writing, pouring
portraits onto paper so that all could
see of greed and Man the Truth, imploring.

Never had I seen such a forsaken land
reflected with terror in eyes always jumping,
and in every grubby outstretched hand.

All the wealth locked up in minerals
and precious bounties of the motherland
that would raise her people to pinnacles

of the Earth were never seen by these men.
All that was left was to run, from rebels,
famine, and history, time and again.

A thousand times I wept for what I saw:
a world of only misery and sin;
and would not return to God my awe.

It was this wealth, diamonds precisely, that
ensured a certain Infernal Crew's draw
to this place, the strife-ridden boiling vat.

I met them one day at a black market,
selling contraband and weapons as they sat
and asked if I from the same cloth was cut.

Never in Our Good Lord's Eternity
had such a bevy of human scum and fat
been collected in perfect enmity.

There was a world-renown zoologist
named François the Rapist, a lusty
voyeur, to envelop his perverse gist,

some farmers, "Trekboers" from further South,
having fled here from warrants of arrest
for brutal mass murders, by word of mouth,

a gentleman who was in a late life
called Man of God, but sold his office out
in service of Apartheid's racial strife,

wizarding doctors, with no power ordained
and no love for men, only with greed rife,
countless men of force and might, having served

God's children only to betray their oaths
at the altar of something bigger, looked
inwards with riches their only goals,

a statesman so famed for hypocrisy
during his reign over a land so loath
his Janus face was baked into pastry,

from across the seas had come two posh,
prestigious men of England's fine gentry,
Roberts and Kitchener or some such tosh,

brilliant tacticians and counsellors two,
but minds and tongues in devilry awash.
Another gentleman was with them, who

spoke of how he and Bell Pottinger
shared ears of kings and presidents through
secret missions to stoke discord, anger,

a man named Retief, full of suspicions,
who cheated a warlord, full of rancour,
out of jewellery under false provisions,

a Prince, Dingane, of his birth the victim,
had committed the worst, most heinous sins
in slaying his brother for a kingdom,

for traitors of nations, shameful heads hang
across the continent: there were plentisome
here from all countries, creeds and colourings,

finally, a man of whom all seemed scared:
Kajunga from Rwanda and his gang,
who held none of their neighbour-guests sacred.

But their Dear Leader was the worst of all:
A slight man, feminine, but people erred
in believing him to be harmless. Small

was the avarice of any who had
come before him: his gluttony stood tall
as a monument, with a lording hand

held over his own gang, the Extractors,
so called due to the fame of this awful band
in obtaining and moving their benefactors'

raw materials: oil, drugs, gems, charcoal,
rare woods and beasts, these beastly attackers
even stooping low as human chattel.

They were loyal, to death, to their master
who was only ever named as "Cecil";
their words raw sewage on a silver platter.

The scheme was Cecil's, from the first.
He secured the diamonds, as a matter
of favour for an old friend, now immersed

in the DRC's military mess,
with no cash to fuel the war till disbursed.
His soldiers had found these raw gems, they profess,

by the bucketful; now what they needed
was to get thousands of carats across
the Mediterranean, rendered,

and finally sold in Europe's shining
streets. Cecil would do it, for a cut, and
smuggle the profit back to their thriving

compound. For this job, he had assembled
the Infernal Crew, with a defining
offer for their careers. Because he had

no intentions of returning,
and fewer involving surrendered
millions; his gluttony demanding

more, a ravenous beast that spares no-one.
His heart's kin needed little persuading;
he convinced them all that in one job done,

they could live in splendour for all their days,
like lords, kings and princes, every one.
They heartily agreed, with no delays.

And how did Maro and I, you may wonder,
come to learn all this on our holidays,
see ourselves recruited into this endeavour?

A sense of morbid curiosity:
may God forgive me, no other hunger,
was what sapped me of humanity.

Cecil asked me to be their chronicler,
and recount faithfully their gluttony's
fruits. Instead of tears, my chosen mission, or

my destiny, inflamed the thirst to learn
all I could of evil's human nature.
My Teacher, all our souls should beg and earn

God's forgiveness who were there, the living
 even more than the dead-long returned
 to their set place by Minos' handling.

Therefrom I tell the tale of the Storm:
 so men may hear and believe, repenting
 before it is too late and Furies swarm.

We set out onto the beach before dawn,
 it was a Good Friday, and its blest norm
 would ensure few patrols and attention drawn.

The Extractors had wheedled from a friend,
 a rude, loud man by the name of Charon,
 a small motor-boat, to see us sent

across the stormy seas by sunrise. Under
 Cecil's watchful eyes the heavy load went
 to the hull, lifejackets tossed asunder.

I stood aside, to better sketch the
 Crew start the manning, fiddling with the rudder
 when suddenly the cool air ruptured in a

furious noise—three men came bounding
 down the banks, three faces twisted into
 maws as they brandished their weapons, snarling.

Cecil said not a word, simply tosses
 a roll of dollars to each promising
 not to betray us to their bosses.

No sooner had they turned, his words to heed,
 than the Crew's guns were aimed at their faces.
 They died bleeding, in the agonies of greed.

The moment this evil task was complete,
 Heaven poured out its response; to impede
 our journey and deal Cecil a sound defeat.

But like Ajax of old, the Infernal
 Crew showed at God's Divine Wrath no retreat,
 Offering only curses to the Eternal.

The rain beat down ceaselessly, unchanging
in rhythm or quality. Blue-purple
ink covered the sky and whipped the waves, scourging.

But hubris was stronger than the cold wind
or the hail that would soon pelt us unceasing,
and we left the safety of land behind.

It was on that voyage where I first learnt
of rain's lash like acid, how it may rend
one's back and leave no body or limb unhurt.

Hail, cold as the most merciless snow,
hammered our little boat with its worst brunt
and left the Crew's bodies cold, stupid, slow.

Winds had whipped the waves into a tempest
which like a cork or roiling body would throw
us from course, no longer to lands abreast.

For forty days and forty nights the Storm
raged on, the Creation in union menaced
and made us to pitiful wrecks deform.

Our torment seemed unceasing; the Final
Trumpet and Rapture itself we would welcome
though we would face Divine Power hostile,

and in our Wholeness find more perfect pains.
I recalled words once studied in idle
from the *Summa Theologica's* aims

of instruction in hope and damnation:
for just as Happiness may lay its claims
only when it lasts eternal, at Perfection,

so may punishment conceived by the Lord
only be Just if without cessation.
The terrors of fate, regret and time roared

through my soul, and I wish I could report
the same from the others who were onboard.
None, despite my pleas, turned to this resort.

But another lesson of Aquinas
 that of man's free will and judgement, in short
 Christ's greatest gift of love to us,

would form how the tale of the Storm would end.
 For no hellfire or watery fracas
 saw me delivered and them condemned.

Our battered and rusting boat was leaking,
 and couldn't afford the weight of those it crewed,
 let alone the gems it was carrying.

These blood diamonds saw our journey ended
 on a shore where the torrential raining
 had the sand banks to a stinking slush churned.

It was not gentle or soft-handedly,
 is all I remember of how I stumbled
 back on the soil of my beloved Italy,

for that is where the waves and torrents had
 brought us to, before it had finally
 sunk the boat and saw the diamonds dragged

down to the icy cold, and the waves like
 furious dogs snatched at us, snapped and rolled
 us all beneath the surface to graves alike.

How I found my legs again I don't know;
 I had fought madly till I felt feet strike
 that blessed realm and its safety below.

I next tried to recover my eyesight.
 After the shipwreck and with the dawn's low
 blush still veiled by rain, there was little light.

In this sickly grey world I awoke in,
 I soon saw the most mournful sight
 of all my years of heartbroken living,

and it moved me to bitter tears as I
 fell to my knees in impassioned weeping.
 All across this wretched strand lay strewn my

companions, my fellow men face down,
prone upon the earth, forever pinned by
God's Justice; in water and muck to drown.

Their bloated corpses resembled Hogs at
the trough, the same gluttony was now sown
and reaped, and had to them all death begat.

My tears mixed and disappeared in the rain
without trace as I jerked Cecil to a sit
to hear his last breaths and his dying pain.

I remember him, their fates, to others
here, on pages saved from water's stain
by some blessed bits of oilskin wrappers.

I remembered too as I sat watching
both Noah and Jonah's different chapters,
awaiting the Storm's final breaking.

Our journey was not unique, not special,
nor the Crew, their sins and my forsaking
of God, as I am human, weak and venal.

The sea was washing up Cecil's bloodstained
dollars, seemingly cleansed of its penal
sins by depths of pain, loss and grief unnamed,

as every time one crosses its waters,
one merely follows a road others tamed.
The Truth of Men answers to no borders,

and I was now convinced that what drove
me from my homeland and back, those tortures,
was mere "fantastic, wanton woe" that throve

in what was only ignorance. For while
these waters, I reasoned, and this cove
was not spared the hand of greed's vile

history, the anguish visited
upon others that crossed the waters, mile
upon mile of grief, in bondage said

to be so cruel that death seemed a blessing,
should not compare to Infernal men, now dead,
nor a Young Man of Fortune's small suffering.

What ever of these Others? Their blood-sweat
which had brought and continues to bring
uncharted wealth to the North's icy cold seat

of hegemony bound for omission,
and the gluttony that drove them set
as the Golden Calf of innovation.

Limbs and corpses piled high at the foot
of this heathen altar of perdition,
to which weary war-torn bodies stood

a permissible drunken sacrifice.
From my travels in search of wisdom I could
now see the world as it was: rife with vice

that only flood or fire could ever
annihilate. But what, then, would tice
gratitude for life in me, this tremor?

Perhaps the answer lies only with God,
where I, perhaps foolishly, endeavour
to keep faith in eternal Hope and Good.

For there can be no hope in forsaking
my Salvation when I feared, unmoored,
to see this in dawn a just redeeming.

I feel the sun on my broken skin, warming,
as the Storm breaks, heralds a new Morning.

The Lodestone

Thalén Rogers

1. The Beach

*Dolce color d'oriental zaffiro, che s'accoglieva nel sereno aspetto del mezzo, puro infino al primo giro,*¹ made the sea a deep azure as I stood on the edge of the continent contemplating the end of existence. What regrets would I have, were I to die today? The sea heaved huge sighs bemoaning the fate of this land. The sand shifted softly beneath my feet as I walked into the waves. Girded by water, I looked over at the rock pools from where worshipful singing resounded. There I saw a group of people, some of them on the rocks and some in the sea, gathered around a single figure. The tears of the sin of the world were washed from his face as the congregation of the baptism praised god. I submerged myself in the cleansing saltwater and faced the penetrating stare of the sun.

*Già era 'l sole a l'orizzonte giunto lo cui meridian.*² I left the water to join an old man on the beach. He was wearing a faded black suit with his tie hanging loosely around his neck and his shoes next to him. The noose was yet to tighten. He was reclining in the sand enjoying the feel of it through his frail toes. I sat down next to him and read the stories written on the leaves of his dark papyrus skin. They told of rivers running red with blood and of boys who were men. They told of bulldozers and guns, burning tyres and children dead in the streets. They told of innocent prisoners and an ominous name—Vlakplaas. The years of guilt weighed me down like a lodestone curving my back towards the floor and preventing any communion with the sun. The weight of the world is suffering. Is there a purpose to this pain?

When it was time to leave, the old man folded his skeletal form and rolled onto all fours, bowing before the glory of the sun. He slowly pushed himself up like a toddler taking his first steps. I held out an arm and he took hold of it. Three-legged, we mounted the stairs. I watched him with my hands as I felt his balance and where

¹ “The gentle hue of oriental sapphire / in which the sky’s serenity was steeped.” Mandelbaum, *Purg.* 1.13–4.

² “By now the sun was crossing the horizon / of the meridian.” Mandelbaum, *Purg.* 2.1–2.

to steady him. It was the blind leading the old, but we reached the top of the stairs safely. We could hear music as we made our way towards the car. Parked next to us was a kombi taxi spilling its innards of human bodies, beer, and music onto the pavement. Pulsing with the arterial throb of the music, the bodies loitered around a sign commanding, “No alcohol on the beach.” The all-singing crowd languished and forgot their way. The tarred road to redemption stretched out before them but they tarried on the shore. Is a country healing, a country purging?

Clothe yourself in humility and walk the path to redemption.

2. The Car

I drove a quaking beast breathing foul smoke out of the parking lot. As we left the shore, curtains of thick jungle rolled across the sea. The sound of cicadas pierced the heavy folds of leaves. People walked beside the road. They walked in shade and seemed to have no shadow—like ghosts, too insubstantial to block out the rays of the sun. *Ohi ombre vane, fuor che ne l’aspetto!*³ South African ghosts, they waited in limbo, paradise denied because of the stain of the past and present. *Ch’i’ non averei creduto che morte tanta n’avesse disfatta.*⁴ What do we need to do to attain the Garden of Eden here in our country? I looked down at my shadow falling over the gearstick and was comforted that my body remained solid and warm, drenched in sun. I was not yet reduced to a shade who leaves her bones on the shore like forgotten sun-bleached driftwood.

As we drove, the old man spoke of his life. He had lived in District Six. His neighbour had six children. They played in the street all day and were only chased inside by the departing sun. Although they were hassled by police on many occasions, they always came back out to the street. But inside their house, their mother was tired and sick. One day, she came to see the old man to tell him that she was dying. It took a year, but she was gone, and the six brothers had to take care of themselves. The eldest had a job in the city. They had their scrap metal home and they had each other. “I watched over them without interfering. It was a brother’s law amongst them. I used to sit outside and watch them playing soccer on the dusty street as the sun crept down into exile.” The old man didn’t have any children of his own. He had led a solitary life. He told me about the avocado tree he planted when he first moved out from home. “It was a king of trees that one.” *I’ mi ristrinsi a la fida compagna.*⁵

3. The Airport

The dense fog of a bus’s exhaust fumes rolled back to reveal islands of exotic fruit to tempt the weary soul—a crowd of patterned headdresses, skirts, dress-

³ “O shades—in all except appearance—empty!” Mandelbaum, *Purg.* 2.79.

⁴ “I should never have believed / that death could have unmade so many souls.” Mandelbaum, *Inf.* 3.56–7.

⁵ “I drew in closer to my true companion.” Mandelbaum, *Purg.* 3.4.

es, and shirts got off at King Shaka airport. *Beato se', grifon, che non discindi col becco d'esto legno dolce al gusto, poscia che mal si torce il ventre quindi.*⁶ We parked nearby and I got our luggage out of the boot. At the front of the building, a man sat with his worn fingers flitting across an mbira while he voiced a sweet melody. I tossed a handful of coins to the gatekeeper as we walked through the door. The aural aroma of music followed us ins.

On the tarmac near the aeroplane, we waited. We had passed through the security—"Keys and wallets in here please"—; were accosted by a shoeshiner, "Come sit, I make quick"; and finally found our way to the gate. As I climbed the stairs into the aeroplane, supporting the old man alongside me, an angel wingbeat of air brushed my face. I must not look back, my forehead scarred as it was with the sin of the land. We were politely wished a safe flight. The old man hobbled behind me into the plane. We moved along the narrow passage between the seats. Many bodies obstructed our way. I got into an argument with a burly Sowetan whose baggage took up the entire overhead locker. After stiff words, I was resigned to putting our carry-on luggage under the seat in front of us. We sat down and seatbelts snaked around our waists. *Più di cento spirti entro sediero.*⁷

I was sitting next to a lavishly bodied, perspiring African woman who was fanning herself with the on-board magazine. She said she was flying to Jo'burg to see her children. I asked how old her children were. Half an hour later, I had heard about her two baby daddies (each of whom had moved on to other women), her job in Durban cleaning a house that was not her home, and her three children (aged two, three, and six) who lived with her mother in Alexandra. She told me about the fussy old lady for whom she worked who had moved to Durban with her quadriplegic daughter the previous year. "I have been looking after her daughter since she was born, and she said she couldn't find someone else to look after her in Durban. What was I to do? I love that child and I know someone else might not care for her as well as I do. But I am getting old, and I can't keep carrying her up the stairs to her room, which, she insisted, is on the upper floor." She said she agreed to move with them, as long as the woman paid for her to travel back to Jo'burg on the weekends to see her children. The woman agreed to pay for her to fly back only once a month, but she moved with them anyway. She said she sometimes pays for a taxi to get back to her children but that it is expensive, and really not safe at all. "Those taxi drivers think they're kings of the roads but really they're just back alley butchers who are paid for roadkill." I told the woman that not all taxi drivers are so bad. A little over a week ago, a taxi bumped into the back of my car and the driver got out apologising profusely and offered to pay for everything. She looked at me sceptically and made a disbelieving noise in her throat. On my right, the old man had fallen asleep a long time ago.

⁶ "Blessed are you, whose beak does not, o griffin, / pluck the sweet—tasting fruit that is forbidden / and then afflicts the belly that has eaten!" Mandelbaum, *Purg.* 13.43–5.

⁷ "[M]ore than a hundred spirits sat within." Mandelbaum, *Purg.* 2.45.

4. Take-off

Finally, all the late comers having boarded, the plane started its slow taxiing to the runway. The woman next to me was still muttering about taxis, but I assured her this type of taxiing was quite safe. The stewardesses—all long, slim, and beautiful with perfect hair and pencilled eyebrows—stationed themselves at intervals along the aisle and proceeded to demonstrate the safety procedures. I distinctly heard a man in the row in front of us say that he'd rather have a parachute under his chair than a life jacket. "I mean, if the plane bursts into flame and careens out of the sky, I'd rather have left it before it hits the ground." I was more preoccupied with thinking about how much hairspray you had to put in for your hair to maintain such a perfect shape.

Angel wings snatched the aeroplane from the infernal landscape.

Clothe yourself in humility and walk the path to redemption.

5. Ascent

As the plane gained height, the old man continued his stories, "I remember a day, a Tuesday, as I was coming home from work, I heard a strange grumbling. I could see a fine mist of dust hanging over the place. Soon I was stepping over corpses of homes and their occupants alike. I saw some people running—those who were lucky enough to get away in time. In the distance, hulking bulldozers presided over the scene—judges presiding over a wrecked courtroom. 'What kind of justice is this?' I thought to myself. When I got to where my house had stood, I knelt down within the toppled crown of my avo tree and wept. Checkmate." All around him were black people white with dust. But too late to appease the white man who coveted their land. My companion never saw the brothers again.

Turning away from the old man, I looked out of the window. A foul smog obscured the receding landscape like a haze of rage.

The plane juddered and dropped a few metres. When my neighbour exclaimed that the flight was turning out to be as bad as a taxi ride on roads full of potholes, the stewardess robustly assured her, "There are no potholes in the sky." Despite being jostled around by the turbulence, her hair was still perfectly intact. I decided she must have mixed concrete into her hair to sculpt it in bas relief.

When the turbulence had calmed, I found myself drifting into sleep. I do not know when my visions became dreams. I saw the burnt-out husk of the plane, charred seats scattered like bowling pins in a game of mass destruction. I heard a voice: "*Non isperate mai veder lo cielo: / i' vegno per menarvi a l'altra riva / ne le tenebre etterne, in caldo e 'n gelo.*"⁸ Bodies littered the scene, the blood of sacrifice seeped into the ground. The carnage of the soul in plain sight. Through

⁸ "Forget your hope of ever seeing Heaven: / I come to lead you to the other shore, / to the eternal dark, to fire and frost." Mandelbaum, *Inf.* 3.85–7.

the stillness I could hear that strange beatings *risonavan per l'aere senza stelle*.⁹ Turning around, I saw the old man slumped on the floor with his pulsing heart held in his right hand. He fumbled at his chest trying to put it back. "In life, I was ravaged by greed and corruption. The fertile soil of my skin was marred by lust. Murder and torture, racism and corruption have lined my skin with age." Blood continued to drain out of him leaving nothing but a wraith clasping life in its wasted hand, pleasures denied by the all-consuming task of holding in his heart. *Questi non hanno speranza di morte*.¹⁰

6. Questions to the Sun

Waking, I thought the plane was on fire. Light roared through the cabin and there, at the window, peeked in the sun. A garden of clouds stretched out below us: majestic crowns of cumulus, streams of cirrus, and a vast plain of stratus. I faced the penetrating light of the sun. It washed over me and cleansed the filth of history, past and present, from my sweat-soaked brow. But it was not enough. I had to know, "When will my country heal? When will the corruption and suspicion, badly healed wounds and inequality be purged from the land? How will the scar of sin be smoothed from the face of the country? Do we have to suffer so much for redemption?" Next to me, I saw the old man's face smoothed by pure sunlight—age and decrepitude melting in the warmth of grace—until a young boy grinned at me—*rifatto sì come piante novelle rinovellate di novella fronda*.¹¹ He dissolved into the light—*puro e disposto a salire a le stelle*.¹²

7. The Lodestone

As the day turned dark, the plane could go no higher. *E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle*.¹³ Below, the landscape was draped in strings of smouldering jewels. Inevitably, we fell back towards the infernal landscape, sucked towards earth by the magnetism of sin. All that's left is to await the crash. *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'intrate*.¹⁴

⁹ "Were echoing across the starless air." Mandelbaum, *Inf.* 3.23.

¹⁰ "Those who are here can place no hope in death." Mandelbaum, *Inf.* 3.46.

¹¹ "Remade, as new trees are / renewed when they bring forth new boughs." Mandelbaum, *Purg.* 33.143–4.

¹² "Pure and prepared to climb unto the stars." Mandelbaum, *Purg.* 33.145.

¹³ "That we emerged, to see—once more—the stars." Mandelbaum, *Inf.* 34.139.

¹⁴ "ABANDON EVERY HOPE, WHO ENTER HERE." Mandelbaum, *Inf.* 3.9.

Her Anatomy: A praise poem inspired by Francesca da Rimini

Luyanda Kaitoo

I was inspired by African (*Swati and Zulu*) praise singers in writing this piece. Praise poetry is in these cultures quite significant, as it is used to pay homage to important figures, specifically royalty. This form of performance art is however not only confined to singing praises. It can also be used “to break the ice” and entertain guests at special events—ranging from parliamentary sittings to weddings and birthdays. In 2019 an IsiXhosa praise singer-poet opened parliament for the presidential State of the Nation Address. Praise poetry is an integral part of South African culture. It is performed and passed down through generations in the oral tradition. As such it is rarely transcribed. Praise singers are thus considered essential contributors to culture, as they are fundamental in passing down the baton of these proudly African ideals to the youth and communicating them to the world.

I decided to apply this poetic style, with the hopes of shifting the negative narrative so often attached to the female libertine. Instead of criticizing and judging ‘her’ I rather took a feminist approach—choosing to highlight and applaud her sexual liberation. And in using Dante’s Francesca as a stencil, I was able to fabricate an archetype of the damned *innamorata*¹ within the vibrant African context.

I structured the poem in traditional free verse (attributable to the African praise poem) which emphasizes the emancipation of the modern-day woman, from the shackles of both outdated mindsets and traditional conceptions that refuse her progression.

Her is she and she is her²
The holy grail of life
Literally!
See how beautifully molded she was by our creator
Miraculous!

¹ “One’s female lover”—Italian.

² She is the modern-day reincarnation of Eve, the mother of humankind.

Fissure upon curve—bend upon crevice, pulchritude adorning the finest details
of her every flaw
Imperfect is her form, yet she wears it with such pride (astounding is it not?)
Hers is a beauty misunderstood by man
One in defiance of morality and all seedlings of virtue
An allure that defies the trivial standards of splendor and brings epiphanies to
the eyes of the pious

Self-assured and head held to the clouds, she reigns in a world of moralistic lechers
Yet owns her sexuality
For she is woman
Still untamed, yet paradoxically a creature of grace
She is hedonistic at heart (as foretold by her dreams) reckless in spirit and a
slave to felicity -
You know, the kind tainted by substantial pleasures, fear and emancipation.
OH, being of majesty!
Ignorant (by choice)
She hears not the judgements and hatred hurled at her by the beautiful hypocrites
of our Earthly realm
Or rather, she refuses to yield her power –
By lending an ear to their slanderous hymns
Either way her selfhood is unbroken
Her wisdom still but an innate mystery
And her confidence simply enviable
Forever battling the voices that try to oppress her
Telling her to “cover up! “Sit properly” and “act decent””
She always chooses to expose the cacophonous brush strokes, that make her the
masterpiece she is
The very loathed stripes and burn marks that adorn her every atom
Making her art in its most pristine form.

*Kumkanikazi*³

Contoured by enigma in every fold of her ebony canvas
She is the embodiment of divinity
The epitome of tacit sex appeal
And the universe
A goddess of existential inferno
And proud cherub of hell
She is my soul
And I will fear her no more
For hers is the abstract life force
Transcribed in my genes and sourced from her radiant chalice

³ “Queen”- isiXhosa.

My ancestral empress
She is a ruler of the nebulous night sky and
Queen of the shadows
The one who dons the crown reaching for the heavens, even in the abyss.

Beatrice

Lesego Petra Maponyane

She walked on me so softly, like nobody, barefoot and milky hose, dancing while making bloom hydrangeas on rolling hills. But now she lies down and sleeps in that style of dress that is so large and fussy—as if she is eaten by a great flower, like as of fire, or the light in the sky.

There is no individual quite as trivialised as the young girl - the mix of youth and femininity creates a recipe for aloof dismissal. The figure of Beatrice in *La Vita Nuova* and *La Commedia*, ironically, is an extraordinary incarnation of this. Beatrice's powerlessness is blatant, her fortitude similarly so, yet their relation and its resulting complexity minimally explored. But, perhaps, there is no irony. For Beatrice is simply the indistinct figure of Beatrice Portinari, a body mostly foreign to Dante, upon which he projects his messianic imaginings of her, imaginings that primarily record Dante's infamous complexity over that of Beatrice. This is a distinct literary tradition, wherein out of the body of a woman, speaks the voice of a man; Beatrice is the alpha and omega of his literary existence, but only because Dante makes her so. Yet, one cannot help but feel that this cannot be the be-all and end-all of a woman so vividly constructed, so artfully written and so fervently glorified—that, in Beatrice, one must find more than Dante. Indeed, Dante's appropriation of the body of Beatrice is incredibly nuanced and unconventional, and the product is a figure omnipotent in her ingenuousness, all-knowing and innocent, illuminated and obscure, dichotomous and whole. Beatrice, the body, possesses an equal ambivalence, that of having the strange power to make herself both the centre and periphery of Dante's writing, the genesis of a revolution within and without Dante. She may not be the mind, just a mere body, but she is the body without which Dante's mind could never think. The conception of black womanhood in South Africa is not far removed from the Medieval one. Similarly, black women occupy a distressingly ambivalent space—in which they are hailed as harbingers of liberty they cannot possess, are emblematic of fortitude, yet subject to oppressive vulnerability. The objective of this reflection is to develop an understanding of the ambivalence of Beatrice

as an unorthodox conception of femininity within its historical, political, and philosophical context as well as that of our own country.

Dante's imagining of Beatrice is intricately woven from her exultation and his subjugation. Naturally, it begins in *La Vita Nuova*. As suggested by the composition's title, it is through Beatrice that Dante is given 'new life'. The emptiness of his "book of memory" prior to his "new life" indicates that this is equally true of his literary life (*V.N.* 1.1). This life begins upon their initial encounter as children. From childhood, Beatrice is attached to birth, genesis, and motherhood, a station blatantly superior to the one she ought to inhabit. She ingenuously exerts a premature and supernatural creationary power akin to that of a god, or the Madonna, over the boy Dante. It is an interesting play on the idea of ingenuity and ingenuousness, which are strangely congruent and disparate. Both reflect a new or unadulterated quality in the subject (from their shared root *ingenuus*); however, the quality of ingenuity denotes the possession of knowledge, virtuosity, and autonomy that the ingenue inherently lacks. Such is the image of Beatrice as a being from which things come. The image of Beatrice as diminutive and unformed—as she is, at this stage, only a little girl—yet somehow wielding inexplicable superlative capacity is extrapolated and exemplified in her age at the time of their first meeting, "the beginning of her ninth year" (*V.N.* 2.8). The number nine is a reflection of three threes, a trinity of trinities, and so a hyperbolic iteration of the wholeness and holiness of the Trinity. It seems to suggest a state of esoteric perfection, as it calls on one to conceive of heightened completeness, a rather oxymoronic and unintelligible notion. It becomes attached to her throughout *La Vita Nuova* and *La Commedia*, which is to be discussed. That is largely how Dante frames Beatrice throughout her appearances in his work—as a Formal being, in the Platonic sense. It is an example of the remarkable way in which Dante made repeated and wide-ranging use of Platonism despite it being very unlikely that he would have encountered the works of Plato. Continually, she is out of his grasp and only just in sight; from that vague perception of her, he is able to garner an incomplete, yet overwhelming sense of her true self. Their initial encounter is the only unmediated one; from then onwards, a rotation of mediators appears and disappears. There is first Dante's personification of love, Amor, in *La Vita Nuova*, an intermediary produced by Beatrice:

Though her image, which was always present in my mind,
Incited Love to dominate me, its influence was so noble that it
Never allowed Love to guide me without the faithful counsel of
Reason, in everything in which such counsel was useful to hear (*V.N.* 2.34–7).

Beatrice, like a Form, produces a liaison that only partially reflects her nature, but fully informs the subject, Dante's, experience of her. Then there is Virgil in *La Commedia*, who is similarly an agent of Beatrice:

I was among the souls in Limbo when
so lovely and blest a lady called to me
I asked her for the grace of a command (*Inf.* 2.52–4).

Both of these messengers establish an intellectualism and temporality in Beatrice alongside her mysticism—Amor rules Dante with reason, and Virgil is notoriously sober and analytical—and, thus, establish another facet of Beatrice’s wholeness or perfection. Amor is equated with reason, righteousness etc. i.e not carnal or bodily, not lusty. Dante indicates that what he feels is not infatuation, but is a whole love—intellectual, spiritual and bodily. A trinity of loves. It is perfect, it is formal, that is why he daren’t go near it, why no one could understand it. The association is vividly explored upon her appearance in *La Commedia*. Both Amor and Virgil appear in the second sections of their respective texts and fall away in Canto 33 of *Purgatorio*, when Beatrice appears unmediated for the first time since Dante’s childhood. This illustrates a progression from penultimate ‘two’ to the perfect ‘three’, from the perfect ‘three’ to the incomprehensible ‘three threes’ or ‘nine’. It is a numerical representation of Dante’s elliptical odyssey away from and towards Beatrice, a closing of the cycle from “nine” to “nine.” His unmediated boyhood experience of her spiritual power experience of her is potent and excessively physical:

[...] the moment I saw her I say in all truth that the vital spirit, which dwells in the inmost depths of the heart, began to tremble so violently that I felt the vibration alarmingly in all my pulse [...] the spirit of the sense which dwells on high in the place to which all our sense perceptions are carried, was filled with amazement [...] (V.N. 2.12–5).

He has a sort of sensory overload upon seeing, something akin to staring at the sun. The incomprehensibility of Beatrice’s perfection, the idea of Beatrice as a Form, is powerfully illustrated by the paradoxical obscuring light she emits throughout their journey in *Paradiso*, which is transfixing to Dante, who almost fanatically notes its gloriousness as it shines through her “eyes so sparkling” and smile. This, of course, is reminiscent of the consuming sensory experience he had of her as a child, seeming almost to explain it years after it first took place:

‘If I flame up in the fires of love
more than is ever seen in life,
overcoming your eyes’ power,

don’t wonder; seeing perfection
causes it, which, when grasped,
motivates our motion towards it.’ (Par. 5.1–6)

The light is not only indicative of her perfection; it is a rather blatant manifestation of her enlightenment. The above extract is one of many instances in which Beatrice expresses her erudition, acting as a source of clarity or lucidity for Dante. It hearkens back to the image of her as an all-knowing ingenue at the beginning of *La Vita Nuova*. The journey is circular; it begins and ends with celestial cycles (the sun revolving around the two in the beginning and the rose-like realms of heaven at the end). He begins with Beatrice in such a direct manner, inducing vivid, sensual reactions within himself, takes on a mediator, then an-

other, before shedding it and being again with Beatrice, blinded by her light. What is made clear by Dante's depiction of Beatrice is the understanding that perfection isn't just simple in the divine sense, but complex too. This is precisely what makes it perfect—the unintelligible ability to house everything, even that which is contradictory, within a single body. To him, that body is Beatrice. Her body is a symbol of catharsis and her soul catharsis itself. He journeys from her remote body into the essence, the form of her soul. His devotion is complete: divine and sublunary. Dante is the pilgrim, Beatrice the monument.

Nonetheless, there remains the question of Beatrice's ontology and the counterproductive power dynamics it may possess. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's translation of *La Vita Nuova* contains the description of Beatrice as "the glorious Lady of my mind." This is very a lucid description of the nature of Beatrice's ontology. Beatrice is made manifest in Dante's mind. Her being is not much based in reality, and it is not particularly independent. She seems almost a "screen lady" for the authority of Dante's authorship—she appears to rule over Dante through the force of her perfection and the awe that it inspires in him is made manifest in his creation of monuments to her (*Vita Nuova, La Commedia*). But really, Dante is the creator of that force, that perfection, that desire and those monuments. Dante causes Beatrice to be what she would not have otherwise been, for the living Beatrice's relation to Dante was completely passive. Everything she has comes from him, is created and permitted by him. Yet, Beatrice exercises power. She causes Dante to do what he would not have otherwise done, and to be who he would not have otherwise been. And she does so passively. Is that not greatly powerful? In doing that, or rather, in producing that, she causes Dante to create her newly. None of it exists without Beatrice's body and her body is hers. It is a subtle power; it comes from her as if it comes from nothing, as if it comes from Dante.

It is no revelation that black women the world over have been made to endure unparalleled oppressive forces—both for their race and for their gender. South Africa presents an extraordinary instance of this. The course of its history has culminated in a succession of oppressions, first Colonialism, then Apartheid, and now Gender-Based Violence. Out of this arises the paradoxical marriage of strength and vulnerability—strength as a result of vulnerability, a strength that fails to conclusively vanquish vulnerability. The strength is nonetheless unrelenting and has spawned the all too familiar image of the black woman as unwaveringly formidable. This prescribed strength is oppressive as the systems it challenges; like its counterpart, vulnerability, it is not altogether self-determined—it is authored by the actions, requirements or will of the men that incite them. It is doubtful that Beatrice should reveal anything about dismantling of the legacies of colonial, Apartheid, and Gender-Based Violence—she barely reveals anything about herself, who was as real as any of these institutions. At the very least, what she can reveal is something very beautiful about womanhood: It is perfect. It is perfect, not because it is flawless, but because it is comprehensive and, thus, complete. Like Beatrice herself, it encompasses omnipotence, ingenuousness, erudition, innocent, illumination, and obscurity. She gives women,

black women in particular, the space to be more than strong or vulnerable, one, both, or neither. In this way, perfect humanity may be enacted—not perfect as in flawless, but perfect as in comprehensive—one can live every and any femininity, all of them at once or none at all. So varied, so full, it evades true description.

References

- Alighieri, Dante. 1899. *La Vita Nuova*, translated by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Ellis and Elvey: London.
- Alighieri, Dante. 2004. *La Vita Nuova*, translated by Barbara Reynolds. Penguin Books: London.
- Alighieri, Dante. 2005. *Inferno*, translated by Anthony Esolen. Modern Library: New York.
- Alighieri, Dante. 2019. *The Divine Comedy*, translated by Steve Ellis. Vintage Classics: London.

Yet, I had not discovered you

Erin Jacobs

My childhood was filled with fairy tales and epic stories,
and reading was always encouraged in our household.
As the first born, my brother had a library filled with books.
He took an interest in sports and mathematics, and consequently
these shelves of treasure filled pages remained untouched,
spines uncracked
and words unread.

My love for literature sparked when I opened my first reading book in grade 1.
I sped through the words and made sense of the pages,
at a rate significantly higher than all my fellow students.
By the time I had completed my grade 1 academic year,
I was already reading at an average of 194 words per minute.
By the time I had completed my grade 2 academic year,
I had already completed over two thirds of the books in my brother's treasure trove.

My love for reading developed from the age of six until sixteen,
when I was invited to join my high school's advanced programme for English
literature.

Once again, I was certain that *this* is where my love for literature developed.
My high school curriculum consisted of a blur of South African authors,
Such as Athol Fugard, J.M. Coetzee and Antje Krog,
As well as international literary geniuses,
ranging from Wordsworth, Blake, Eliot and Tennyson,
to Golding, Salinger, Swarup, and Orwell,
Yet, I had not discovered you.

It was only when I selected a seminar in my second year of university,
that my love for literature was solidified.

I stopped reading because I had a requirement to do so,
or because I was interested in a specific author or topic.
Instead,
I started reading because I had this unquenchable
desire to *know*.
I found myself captivated,
by every single word on the page,
and by every canto I encountered.
Dante Alighieri,
I fell in love with literature when I fell in love with you.

Your reputation is that of a man who went to hell and back,
but you did more than that.
C. S. Lewis confesses that your writing is worthy of inspiring conversion,
and Kelsen accredits your role in informing legal traditions.
Botticelli, Dali, Rodin and Blake owe their artistic masterpieces
To your name alone,
While Lord Byron, Shelley, Chaucer and all the men whose works I studied in
high school wrote extensively on your personal impact on them.
On their lives.
On their writing.

I stand in awe before your greatness,
I admire your influence—not just as an author,
But as a man who influenced art,
Literature,
Politics,
Philosophy,
and ultimately,
a man who single-handedly shaped the world as we know it.

Your influence reaches far and wide,
And yet, I had not discovered you.
Dante Alighieri,
Your name is that of a man who changed the world,
and silently stepped back into the shadows,
watching your words fill up someone's bookshelf.
While your books remain untouched,
spines uncracked
and words unread.

Until
the reader opens your pages,
speeds through the words and makes sense of the pages,
and their love for you is sparked.

A spark that never dims, never dulls and can never be extinguished.
I thought I knew when my love for literature developed,
yet, I had not discovered you,
and consequently, I had never discovered literature at all.

My Discovery of Dante and the Apocalyptic Crisis: My Dantesque Ulyssean Return to the *Commedia*

Ross Smith

The Gothic genre has always been a profound interest of mine. Its intense stillness and the openly dark and opaque effulgence of its dramatic emphasis appeals to my love of the sense of mystery and the occult. During my undergraduate years and through my study of the Romantic and Realist eras my interest in the Medieval piqued. I had always been interested in The Renaissance and the vibrant beauty of the expanding golden light of the germination of the modern age. My desire for knowledge of what predates the Renaissance and what led to Elizabethan Golden Age and Shakespeare drew me to the Medievals. Since my first undergraduate encounter with Dante and other narrative poems like *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* it slowly revealed itself to me that the Medievals did not inhabit a Dark Age but an age of immediate connection with the spirit world and a superstitious hegemonic belief in the afterlife. At the zenith of this age is the *Commedia*. It is this vivacity and colourfulness of Medieval literature which led me to become a medieval scholar.

I was first introduced to Dante in my high school years when my Italian teacher, Raffaella, would occasionally recite the opening tercet to me in Italian. I was the only student who decided to take Italian as an academic subject in Grade 8 and subsequently I was the only Italian student in my year and class for the next five years. As a result, I received intense one-on-one teaching and exposure to the language and after a few months, maybe years—I don't remember exactly how long—of learning, to Italian literature. We went through a brief tour of Italian literature: Nadia Ginzburg's familial descriptions, not *Lessico Familiare* yet, this was to appear in my university Italian years, but the delightful short story *Lui ed Io*; Stefano Benni's *Il Racconto dell'uomo col Mantello: Oleron* from *Il Bar Sotto Il Mare*, and other short stories and poetry which now escape me. As I was the only student my classes were flexible—thanks to the intense plasticity of Raffaella's classes and her willingness to feed my curiosity for poetry—we did the setworks as outlined but continued with other poetry she thought I would find interesting and would enjoy like Sergio Solmi's *Sotto il Cielo Pacato di Novembre*.

This is one of the poems that Dante did not write that stayed with me for many years after my high school days. It was the intense emotion and immediacy of experience that I remember: “Invece / cancellarmi vorrei, tanto mi sento / un estraneo accidente in queste splendide tue geometrie, non piu che una confuse / macchia, una pena, un vagabond errore” (Solmi 1968).

This gem led to a discussion of Dante’s suicide forest. *La Commedia* had remained with Raff who was able to recite selected lines. She also described to me the conical depiction of Hell with an intensely icy Satan at the apex. She remembered these details of the *Commedia* and to this day I remember her telling them to me beneath the trees of our open-aired classroom. All our lessons were outside on benches or picnic tables that were a permanent feature of my school. She detested the formal teaching environment and favoured learning and experience over a formalized approach to examination and structure. (This also made Italian my favourite subject and the one which I remember the most post-school.) She also introduced me to cappuccini which I now only say in Italian as I was only taught the word in Italian, much to the incredible annoyance of my friends who say “cap-a-chino.” Before this time, I did not drink coffee. It was with a cappuccino that I had the first canto of *Inferno* read to me—not in translation. Our classes had become a mixture of English and Italian and always started with: “Ross, vai a prenderci il caffè per favore, e di’ che pago io dopo la lezione.” *La Commedia* mi veniva letta nell’italiano originale di Dante dal sin dall’inizio, con il suono delle parole e il tonfo delle descrizioni: *e caddi come corpo morto, cade* (*Inf.* 5.142). Ancora ora, quando penso di Raff penso sempre a queste parole musicalmente descrittive. We had also read other sections of the *Commedia* that were particularly beautiful.

Dante’s sonorous rhythm stayed with me as I began my undergraduate degree in Italian and English. I wanted to be exposed to more of Dante and other literatures in Italian. But I always returned to the Renaissance as my field of interest. At least at the time I thought I was most interested in Renaissance literature. As a result, I signed up for all the Renaissance and older literature courses that were offered, and also as an escape from Post-Modern literatures. It was during this time in my second year that I officially encountered Dante in an academic setting. I signed up for the Dante elective which focused on *Inferno* and my formal training in Dante studies began. It was also during this time that I realised that my true interest was actually the Medieval and that I was interested in the Renaissance as a development of Medieval literature. The graphic descriptions and the horrific images of Count Ugolino gnawing on his companion struck me as something out of a modern-day horror film. This was the beginning of my fascination with what I now know as Gothic and eerily-dark images which confronted readers.

The third year of my undergraduate studies was noticeably grey and contained only Modern and Post-Colonial literatures. I missed the colours of the Medieval period and vibrant imagination of their poets. In comparison, the modern material was dull and threadbare and without the intrigue of mythology and dark figures of opaque significance.

When I completed my undergraduate degree, I immediately enrolled for an Honours. I decided to pursue an Honours project in Dante—I had unfinished business like a ghost stuck on Earth. I could not let it go and I could not bear the thought of studying the colourless material that other supervisors offered. Ultimately it was my supervisor who noticed what I was truly drawn to in Dante's works. I was interested in the darkness of his images and imagination, but I was also intrigued by figures who seemed simultaneously to mean nothing and everything. The horrific images such as the prophets swinging their heads like lanterns and popes buried like upturned cigarette butts in the ground point to what I understand as the apocalyptic undercurrent of *Inferno*.

I had taken Maths as one of my subjects and it occurred to me that mathematical thinking could be used to approach literature texts, specifically definition by negation. I could discuss what the apocalyptic undercurrent of the canticle was not. The opacity in its significance and the slippery allegory of scenes like the opening canto rendered it somewhat impossible to discuss what it actually is—for my honour's research project anyway. I decided to create a graph of the apocalyptic instances in which the asymptotes of each line of clarity would define a grey area in the middle. It was (and still is) this grey area of apocalypse that I am interested in. My honours research focused on the apocalyptic undercurrent of the *Inferno* and how exactly this canticle can be considered part of the Medieval Early Christian apocalyptic genre while referencing to Classical apocalypses.

When I submitted this research, the feeling of unfinished business with Dante had not dissipated but had grown. I still could not rationalise his slippery allegory and it felt like one of those Hagfish that coves itself in mucus and resists capture as it slides out its own mucosal bubble. I was to return to Dante, specifically Dante in the *Inferno*, similar to Dante-poet return to the figure of Ulysses in *Purgatorio*. The allegory of the *Commedia* is notoriously illusive, and I still could not fathom it. I had experienced its elusive nature and I wanted more. It is also, ironically, for this reason why the *Commedia* retained my interest and fascination. Dante had written this allegory 700 years ago and after 699 years of Dante scholarship we still had not come up with a definitive answer to his allegorical voice. Critics had tried, some of them like Auerbach and Mazzotta and Barolini quite convincingly, to explain this allegorical voice, but each response had loopholes and debatable tentative parts. I, like many other Dantisti, was also not finished with this equivocal allegory. In a similar way to Dante's Ulysses of Canto 26 searching beyond the bounds of human knowledge, I would search for the significance of certain episodes and figures like the Gran Veglio which seemingly do not belong in the Hell's landscape. It was this quest for knowledge and significance of perplexing figures that drove me to my master's research. It is still this quest for the meaning of Dantesque allegory that draws me to return to my research and to undertake a PhD at a future time and to write articles about Dante's unique ubiquitous apocalyptic allegorical imagination. My journey with Dante and the *Commedia* reflects the journeys of Ulysses and Aeneas: I am simultaneously drawn back to the *Commedia* and its gothic apocalypses like Ulysses to Ithaca, and to journeying toward a rational Rome-founding explanation of

his miry allegorical imagination. The extent to which we can decipher Dante's imagination is yet to be determined and the fat lady of allegory has not yet sung.

I had decided to focus on the apocalyptic animus of *Inferno*, using Dante's slippery mucosal allegory and his representation of time and history as the basis of my investigation. I explored how the combination of these two elements of the canticle contributed toward the apocalyptic overture that runs throughout the 34 canti. My answer to the illusive allegory and opaque significances of allegorical emblems is Dante's apocalyptic voice. The driving force behind his dark scenes and teleological *passe* could be his apocalyptic imagination.

Yet this apocalyptic imagination is still murky and while it does provide one solution to the significance of allegorical emblems debate, it does probe at more questions that render the *Commedia* and instances from the *Commedia* open to even more interpretations. It is still this allegory and the impossibility of finding a definite meaning in it which is spurred on by the human condition searching for complete understanding to any question that intrigues me. Dante has painted allegory that evades definite and complete interpretation. This question has shaped my research, especially for my master's dissertation. I have no doubt that it will guide my future research for my PhD project and other research papers. Dante's apocalyptic animus in the *Inferno* and his apocalyptic imagination which displays itself throughout the *Commedia* inspires the allusive illusive allegorical voices that peppers his poetry. It is this peppering that is intriguing to me and which my rational mind must untangle.

After I submitted and graduated with my master's the feeling of unfinished business still remained with me. The horse was not yet dead and there is still more argument to be made about Dante's apocalyptic animus and the apocalyptic features of the *Commedia*. I intend to revisit Dante's apocalyptic imagination—although I have not really left it—in a couple years.

However, I decided that I need slight change in career paths but also one that would continue my fascination with the individual's position in history and a perceived, possibly internalised, eternity. This is what I explored in the *Inferno*, and now I am going to explore it without poetic presentation of the subject's relationship with time and existence. I am about to begin another Master this time in Psychology which will focus on Existential Psychology and how the human subject copes with the realisation of the fleetingness of time and the awareness of what Blake terms the "eternal moment" which is inherently transient when one becomes aware of inhabiting it. As I see it, this is not necessarily a change in topic but a change in approach. The temporal distance between Dante's experience of his exile which led to the opus magnum of the *Commedia* and our modern position does not influence the way we experience the apocalyptic moment, maybe the way we interpret it, but not the way we experience it. It is this experience which interests me—Dante experienced it precipitated by his exile and position in historical events which were contributed to by the welcoming of the new century in his lifetime and the political unrest of his beloved Florence; but the emotions he experiences and which he describes in the *Commedia* resonate with our modern experiences of political

unrest, plague, and not least of all the anxiety surrounding the recent welcoming of the new millennium.

At certain instances in the *Commedia*, such as the forest of suicides, Dante divulges into an exploration of the human psyche. The distorted thinking of suicide subjects is reflected in the language which he uses to describe their condition. This canto, for me at least, is one which makes Dante's *contrapasso* the most understandable. It is also one, like many of the others, that directly links to psychology. The field of Psychology had not yet been developed at Dante's time of writing but even a preliminary reading of any canto of the *Commedia* results in Dante's presentation of quintessentially human emotions and characteristics, something that Auerbach has discussed at length in relation to the representation of reality and realness in literature and the emotional exchange between Dante-pilgrim and Farinata and Cavalcante. It is particularly evident in the forest of suicides. It is this realist representation of human figures that casts Dante-poet as a poet exploring human psychology. Auerbach relates Dante to Rabelias's "abstracteur de quinte essence" for his ability to conceive and present the human condition and to distil the essences of their human personalities.

It was my reconciliation of Auerbach's theory of realist representation in the *Commedia* and Dante's apocalyptic imagination which seeps into his poetry, that formed the basis of one of my chapters of my dissertation. It is also Dante's realist representation in relation to the apocalyptic subject position and how the souls of *Inferno* are not able to view the apocalyptic significances of their death or of their elevated position in time and eternity that spurred my interest in modern day psychology and how people deal with their transient position in a secular world, that lacks Christian mythological apocalyptic significances given by an eternity to which one would be admitted post-mortem. In a similar way, the individuals who experience anxiety disorders or who have been diagnosed with a mood disorder occasionally cannot integrate their position in their own lives and fail to see the significances of the events occurring around them. This anhedonism drains the emotion out of life and it becomes an endless void of an experience of nothing. It is through the individual's perception of these events from nothing to something that should be savoured, that their position in time and history is simultaneously realised, in the sense that it is made real, and experienced. It is a similar moment to the moment not perceived by the souls of sinners in *Inferno* that must be experienced to create the shift from anhedonia to experience. I believe this to be even more pertinent now in our (pseudo-)hyperconnected online presences. It is once this is overcome that experience and enjoyment begins. I think Dante understood a version of this idea and chose to present a difference facet of this notion in the *Inferno* in a hegemonically Christian context. This modern anhedonism corresponds to the souls of *Inferno* not perceiving the apocalyptic significances of their position in the afterlife or of their deaths. I plan to orientate my psychological research around this idea and the perception of the Danteque apocalyptic moment.

It is the allegory of the *Commedia* to which I always return and the idea of capturing the meaning of Danteque allegorical emblems, searching for their sig-

nificances within the bounds of the human domain. It is also this allegory that links the apocalyptic undercurrent to the overt features of the text. Additionally, and ironically, it is the apocalyptic animus of the text that makes this allegory accessible to me. It is also this apocalyptic moment and Dante's apocalyptic vision that encourages me to find other instances of Dantesque apocalypses outside of literature and outside of the medieval period: like in our current society and community (one which is also ironically battling a medieval plague). I believe we should view the allegory of the *Commedia* as we view mood disorders in individuals—from a holistic perspective which is elevated above the events which transpire in quotidian life, like the pilgrim's viewing of the fraudulent counselors in what appears from his perspective to be a valley of fireflies.

References

Solmi, Sergio. 1968. "Sotto il cielo pacato di novembre." In *Dal Balcone*. Milano: Mondadori.

A Tree In Hell

Kai Lötter

The first time I met Dante, I was spaced out on several different kinds of new medication.

It was important to my psychiatrist that I did not call what I was experiencing hallucinations. *Visual distortions*, he called them. When the floor heaves and groans beneath your feet—visual distortions. When the walls breathe, and you see the hallways stretch out towards infinity—*visual distortions*. When the colours of the world drift like water paint—*visual distortions*. Language was important, my psychiatrist had insisted, you call them what they are—they are not hallucinations.

I did not care so much about the jargon, but these *visual distortions* had been making it progressively more difficult to live. Consequently, I wanted to die.

I struggled to attend my university classes. It was difficult to walk across the quad of Solomon House when, at any moment, you felt like gravity was going to switch off. Later, I would be diagnosed with temporal lobe epilepsy. The name visual distortions would be replaced with partial seizures. But, on the day that I first met Dante, I had walked through the heaving floors and breathing walls and drifting colours to sit beside my friend and listen to him talk about this new class he was taking for English Literature. I had an unlit cigarette hanging from my lips. My face was pressed against the sun-warmed brick. I could barely hear what he was saying. The only thing that reached me was what he said about the trees.

“In the *Divine Comedy*,” he said, “Those who commit suicide are punished by becoming a tree in Hell.”

And I, coming down a spiral of suicidal ideation, simply said, “That doesn’t sound so bad.”

I rather liked the idea. It held a certain appeal. I thought of stretching, up and up, towards the sky with leaves of bright green. I thought of being still, being silent, no longer human but not entirely dead. It did not sound so bad to become one with nature so utterly. To be a tree in Hell was the kindest result of death I could think of.

But my words had made my friend angry. He looked at me with fires in his eyes so bright it almost pierced my dreamlike state with the feeling of warmth. He shouted at me, “No! It’s bad! You’re entombed in there, trapped in the bark, and you’ll bleed when the Harpies swoop down to tear at you with their claws. It hurts. Its torture. Don’t you get it? It’s *Hell*.”

My friend was not religious, but in that moment, he believed. Not in Hell, not in God, but in Dante. Who was this man, I wondered, who was able to inspire such faith in a faithless man? What had he done? What had he written?

But I did not follow Dante. Not then, not yet. The truth was that I hated Dante for what he did, for taking my happy Hell away from me. I questioned how he could punish suicide in such a horrific manner. I had already grouped myself with the suicides. Even before I died, it felt like my inevitable end. I could not forgive Dante for being so unnecessarily cruel. Had we not suffered enough already? Across seven hundred years, across an entire hemisphere, I hated him for putting me in Hell.

It would be a long while before I met Dante again. A series of strange and inexplicable events occurred that eventually led me to a mental hospital. Looking back, it began with the violent death of a childhood acquaintance but ended with my sudden retreat from life. I walked away from my friends and family. I walked away from my university education. I understand now it was a kind of self-imposed exile. For my entire life, I had been on a single set path and, suddenly, it was gone.

All I remember from the trip to the hospital was the view of the trees through the car window—the dark, obscure forests of Johannesburg. In winter, the branches are stark and bare, scattering through the blue skin of the sky like bright, white veins. I reminded myself that Johannesburg is unique in being one of the largest manmade forests in the world. Other cities did not have forests like this, and other cities did not die like this in the winter.

When I think about the people I met in the hospital, I remember them as shades of themselves, but I knew them in a way their friends and family never would. I saw them at their worst, and I saw them at their best. In the end, it was difficult to tell the difference.

There was a man named Edmund. He barely spoke, but when he opened his mouth to give me a smile, I could see two rows of small, black teeth. He was one of the permanent residents. He seemed happy, floating down the halls slowly, and he never bothered anyone. Except, occasionally, he would look at me in confusion and say, “You’re not supposed to be here.”

At first, I thought it was a compliment. “You’re right, Edmund,” I wanted to say, “I was always such a good girl, doing everything right. I shouldn’t be here. Thank you, Edmund.”

A nurse stopped me before I could speak, though. She leaned in and whispered in my ear, “Don’t mind poor Edmund. He’s fallen a little from reality. He’s in a kind of Limbo. Has no idea what year it is. Still thinks it’s the 1980s. Still thinks it’s Apartheid, and the hospital is segregated.”

“Oh,” I said.

“He gets confused, scared, if you try to tell him what year it really is. But, if you like, you can tell what day of the week it is, when you see him. It doesn’t fix it, but it helps.”

For the month I was at the hospital, every time I would see Edmund, floating down the hall looking for something he so desperately desired but could not find, I would wave and say, “It’s Monday. It’s Tuesday. It’s Wednesday” and on and on until I left. Edmund stayed behind, locked in a limbo of Apartheid South Africa.

There was another woman there that I spoke to every day. I sat patiently as she explained to me, in profound and epic detail, the true heights of her sexual libido. She moved around like a flock of birds as she told me all about her boyfriend—who was black, whose name was Ezekiel, like the angel, and he was the only man who loved her. The only man who could keep up with her. She was very proud when she fell pregnant. “It’s the new South Africa, darling! We should all be having mixed race babies!”

And then she lost the baby. That’s why she was there, in the hospital, poking at her odd, fleshy belly and saying, “Hollow. It’s just hollow now.”

Ezekiel visited and spent the whole two hours wrapped around her. His face pressed into her neck and his hands in her hair. His back was curved, his spine protruding, and for a moment I almost tricked myself into thinking that I could see his wings.

“Come home,” he would whisper, “Please come home.”

But she was still there when I left the hospital.

They had colour-coded us with these little wristbands. White meant that you could walk around freely. Orange was for underage teens. Green was suicide-risk—that was me. And blue was for the drug addicts, the alcoholics, and pill poppers. They put the people with eating disorders in the blue group with the addicts. The logic was that it was all to do with consumption. No matter what, they all shared the same relentless obsession, the hunger that did not wait, that just ate and ate, or spat it right back out.

The alcoholics pulled along IV stands filled with a shockingly yellow liquid that they called ‘Jet Fuel’. It was supposed to stop them from going into withdrawal. But it didn’t always work. Once, I turned down a hallway and there was a man collapsed on the floor, struggling to get out of a puddle of his own piss, blood, and jet fuel.

I watched a man try to trick the nurses into giving him pain medication. He was viciously charismatic and good-looking. I fell for every lie he ever told me. I watched an over-weight woman sob into her food, “It’s not enough. It’s never enough. I’m so hungry. Why am I always so hungry?” I watched a skeletal girl wink at me before dropping her slice of toast down the front of her shirt to hide it from the nurse who would come to check if she had eaten.

Sometimes, I was jealous of them. I did not feel hunger or desire. I felt nothing at all. I pressed my fingers against my pulse to check if I was still alive. I jumped in a pool to check if my body still had weight if I still sunk. I did. I sunk all the way down.

One night, I woke up to a great crash. The sound of breaking glass echoed through the quiet halls of the hospital. The next day, a hallway was curtained

off with red tape. There was an angry river of broken glass scattered across the floor, along with patches of dried blood.

“Last night, someone tried to break out of the fishbowl,” Someone explained to me. “He threw himself through of the observation window there.”

“The fishbowl?” I asked.

“It’s where they put the people who need twenty-four-hour supervision, because they’re violent and can’t be out here with the rest of us.”

In my sedated state, I could not comprehend the levels of rage that was needed to throw one’s body through a pane of glass. I still don’t.

At the hospital, there were people from all backgrounds. Drug addicts and burnt-out corporate lawyers. Teenagers with self-harm scars and old, deaf men with guide dogs. We were all different, but we all agreed on one thing—we all hated Lerato.

No one would speak to her. No one would sit with her at mealtimes, or pair up with her in group therapy. I would be sitting alone in a room and suddenly feel this wave of nausea wash over me, only to turn around and see that Lerato had sneaked into the room. I would leave in disgust.

The reason we hated her was simple. She had broken one of our most sacred rules.

When we had asked her why she was at the hospital, she had said, “Every day, I would wake up and get in my car to drive to work. I would get stuck in traffic, then I would get stuck in a cubicle, then I would drive home, and I would get stuck in traffic. Every day, for ten years, I would do this. Then, one morning, I had an idea. A beautiful idea. The best idea I have ever had. I’ll pull the steering wheel. Drive straight into oncoming traffic.”

We were all silent as we realised the true horror that she had done.

“Another car crashed into me. My head hit the dashboard. His body went through the windscreen. He was paralysed from the waist down.”

Lerato was attacked with a barrage of, “How could you? How dare you? Don’t you know? Don’t you know that your suicide is only meant to have one murder victim? What you did was violence against your neighbours, and it’s a sin.”

“It’s not right,” Melody had said to me, “It’s fair. Even when I threw myself out of the moving car, I made sure that there was no one around and it was just me. I didn’t want to hurt anyone else. Just me.”

But that was still a problem, wasn’t it? A murder with only one victim is still a murder. And I think that it was finally beginning to dawn on me. I was finally understanding why Dante put me in Hell.

I looked at Melody. She believed in God but knew nothing about Dante. She sometimes told me that God loved me, like He had told her that morning while she brushed her teeth. So, I thought, she must be a good person to ask.

“Why is suicide a sin?”

“Sins aren’t sins because they hurt *God*,” Melody said, “Sins are sins because they hurt *you*.”

She sat across from me, tearing open sugar packets, and stirring the grains around with the tip of her finger. I watched her in silence and thought about

suicide. I thought of all the unnatural shapes you had to twist yourself into just to get to that state where you could fight against the single most important instinct there is—the instinct to stay alive. To get to that point, you must lie to yourself, you must warp reality around you, until you have perverted the world into something that is dark, that is not the thing that God created.

I realised that was what it meant to be a tree in Hell—a twisted and unnatural thing that was irrational and perverse in its ability to destroy itself. It was not a good *place* to be. It was not a good *thing* to be, a tree in Hell.

I left the hospital thinking that I was fixed, that all the pills and the therapy had worked, and I was better now. I insisted that I had grown out of every diagnosis that I had ever been given. No more manic depression, no more acute anxiety, and no more temporal lobe epilepsy. I am cured. I screamed until my throat bled. I am better now.

But I was so heavily sedated on the pills that I did not really know what I felt. I was moving through water and all I felt was this elephant sadness.

And then I met Dante again. He greeted me like I had never hated him, like we were friends all this time and, perhaps, we had been. I read *Inferno* just before the pandemic forced South Africa to shut down and we had to stay inside for weeks, just before Purgatory, where every single step I had taken since the hospital was tested. If my mental health could make it through a global pandemic, then it could make it through anything. Trapped inside, I climbed the walls like Dante climbed Mount Purgatory. I read his journey, I followed his footsteps, with my fingers clutching the rope around his waist. I did not like to be far away from him anymore.

If I could speak to him, I don't think I would ask him any profound questions befitting my education, or what the beasts in the first canto symbolised, or any of the other mysteries contained in his great work. No, I would look at Dante through seven centuries, an entire hemisphere, and say, "Please don't leave me. Please don't abandon me in the Seventh Circle. I don't want to be a tree in Hell. It doesn't sound like a kind death, not anymore. I want to come with you. I still have time. I am still alive. I want to walk to Paradise."

When I left the hospital, I thought I had been cured. I thought I was better. I know now, like Dante knew then, that to find the right path after you have lost it, you must go the long way round. You have to climb down into Hell, then climb up the mountain of Purgatory before you can ascend into Paradise and walk among the planets. It is there where you will find it—*l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*. The love that moves the sun and all the stars.

I have not reached it yet. I have not found it yet. But I will because now I know that to get to it, you must first go the long way round.