

NEW DANTE WORLDS

This new section was established to foster creative contributions that demonstrate Dante's continuing vitality and power to inspire the next generations of poets, writers, and artists. We inaugurate *New Dante Worlds* with *After Dante*, a poem by Nathalie F. Anderson.

About the Author

Nathalie Anderson's books of poetry include *Following Fred Astaire*, *Crawlers*, *Quiver*, *Stain*, and the chapbook *Held and Firmly Bound*. She collaborated in 2021 with artist Susan Hagen and poet Lisa Sewell on *Birds of North America*, and her new book, *Rough*, is forthcoming in 2024 from The Word Works. Anderson's poems have appeared in such journals as *Atlanta Review*, *DoubleTake*, *Natural Bridge*, *The New Yorker*, *Nimrod*, and *Plume*. She has also authored libretti for five operas, in collaboration with Philadelphia composer Thomas Whitman. Anderson has recently retired from Swarthmore College, where she taught as Alexander Griswold Cummins Professor of English Literature, and served as Director of the Program in Creative Writing.

AFTER DANTE
NATHALIE F. ANDERSON

1.

Entering the Inferno, I thought to find my
Charleston forebears there, pity them their benightedness,
profit by their punishment, measure against them my

obvious enlightenment. Any damned fool
might have warned me, that's
not how it works in hell.

2.

Disappointed. What my stepmother used to say
before she belted me. Oh, and *this will hurt me*
worse: her open hand. No wonder I grew up

dubious, recalcitrant, irreligious. When Dante says
the so-called god of love requites our earthly pleasure
with a battering, with mud crammed down the throat,

forgive me, I don't see the loving. But I've seen
disappointment, I've seen true disappointment,
say when a boy I've taught expects me to greet him

kindly and with love, and the other teachers say
he's back-slid, and I look stern, speak coldly, as
I've been taught I ought to do, and see the light

fall off his face. Understand, I'm not confessing.
My shames aren't your business. But yes, I
see myself, and yes, I'm often

disappointed.

3.

Traversing the Inferno, I feared to find
my grand-dams there, white Southern women both,
and blinkered by it, hobbled by it, though

from them I learned how to be conscious, how
to take responsibility, how to be kind. Never ones
to run from anything, but I see them running now

still hampered by their habits, their habiliments, their
habitations, yet shedding all that, choosing now to strip it off,
to drop it shred by shred by shred: here a frayed thread, there a
hair,

a chip, a grit, a smut, a soot, a splinter, an unexamined
odium, an unconsidered animus, slow-paced still,

and still deluded – but I want to think they're running

(as I want to think that I am also), like they're running
for the green cloth at Verona, and – one leaden foot lifted,
then the other – like they still think they could win.

4.

I always thought I'd end up in the whirlwind,
having spun there oblivious for so long, riding
the Loop-de-Loop, riding the Tilt-a-Whirl, riding

the Wild One, AOI! a leaf in the current, a love
on every wind. So many nights winding myself
around another body, holding on tight, drunk

on infatuation, the dipsy ditzy daisy, faster
than a roller coaster, riding the Lightning, riding
the Thunderhead, riding the Cyclone, a climber

groping for every hand- or toe-hold, clutching out,
gripping in, tightening my cling, and every kiss
a little longer, every swanky Valentino dip

a little stronger, such whirls, such sweetheart twirls –
air steps – and the whip-crack, the butterfly swoon,
shoulder slides, revolving doors. Even in dreams

I'm weightless on that wind, riding the Ring Racer,
riding the Boulder Dash, riding the Shivering Timbers,
open-mouthed and screaming wild, clutching, grasping.

Starlings in their seething murmurations.

All my partners long since spun away.

Love like yours will surely. A-hey, a-hey hey.

5.

When Vanni Fucci – better known as “the Beast” –
gloats in hell over the coming coup in Florence, where
every White will stagger, every White will fall

he doesn't mean what we might think he means.
These are White Guelphs, men of Dante's faction.
Whatever once defined them, it surely wasn't skin.

Yet how strange it is, and strangely apt, to hear
that Whites will get come-uppance, get what's coming
to us, get what even a beast like Fucci thinks we deserve.

★

When Vanni Fucci breaks this news to Dante
he intends his words to sting, and says so. May you
suffer. May it break your heart. May you die

of very grief. And we know Dante suffers: exiled
from all he loves, condemned if ever he returns, soured
on his own party, what can he do but write about it?

Who's in hell? Beasts who ignore the good
of intellect, beasts who abandon civic reason
for self-consumption. Fucci. Ah, the long revenge.

★

I know zilch about Guelphs, White or Black, but
of course I root for Dante. Turns out, his side
favored artists over banks, populace over pope –

my kind of folk, I think – so their expulsion seems
(at least from here) a catastrophic loss – a loss
of artistry, civility, of civic dialogue, of choice.

Abandoned intellect, abandoned reason: Dante,
I've been grieving too. How strange it is, and
strangely apt, to realize we've woken up in hell.

★

“Florence, rejoice! Your eagle wings have flown
so many straight to their perdition.” So Dante snarked
before he learned that many living men – Florentines

he took to be living – were being worn by demons
as demon-puppets, proxies in the living world,
while they themselves were steeping in hell’s frozen piss.

And did you hear he witnessed there among the damned
a yellow trumped-up top-knot tossed and snarled by Satan’s wind
and gleaming spurious within the ice like straw in glass?

6.

I always thought I’d end up in the dark
having lain there oblivious for so long.
I see myself baffled, addled, haggard, rambling

and this to me is hell: the shattering mind,
the flickering awareness. So why is it
I’m always courting darkness, always

dozing, always slug-a-bed come Monday morning?
Why so lax and lagging? Thus Virgil chivied Dante,
on his last legs and wheezing, having scaled hell’s walls:

“You lay-about! You lounge! You won’t get anywhere
lazing around like that. How do you think I got
where I am? Not from sleeping in! Would you leave

no more of yourself behind than froth at the shore-line,
ripples in the wind?” Dante hears, gets moving. Me? I
roll over, clench my eyes shut, pretend I haven’t heard a thing.

7.

In his dream, Dante wakes to find his heart
gone from his side. *EGO DOMINUS TUUS*
says the one who holds it, grips it, crushes it –

which is to say, “I’m your new master.”
“New master”: no need to specify the dread –
the terror – of that inexorable unknown hand.

★

Love comes to Dante in his dream, holding out
and cradling his lost heart, says “Now I’m your master.”
If Love’s the master, is the mastering still a threat,

or a consolation, or an education, or an ecstasy?
Dante Alighieri, slave to Love. By the time
he reaches Paradise, he sees Love differently –

the smile of all creation, the symphony,
the dance that moves the sun and other stars.
But was that Love always this Love, identically?

★

I’ve been so often mastered by love, it’s like a hymn
re-mastered, over-mastered, my harmonics shifting,
veering within an hour from him to hum to him.

★

When we first meet a crucial poem, TS Eliot says,
there’s “shock and surprise,” there’s “even terror –
Ego dominus tuus.” He might as well say this,

as he says Dante says when he sees his lost love again:
“Hardly a drop of blood in my body does not shudder:
I know the tokens of the ancient flame.”

★

When Yeats looks in the mirror, he sees
someone else's eyes. And that's a terror, too.
Ego dominus tuus. Who's speaking

when you think you're speaking? What demon, what
forebear lives on in your tongue? "All that a man most lacks,
and it may be dreads"; "our rhythm shudders," Yeats said.

★

Dominus: the Romans used this word
when they meant "Sir," when they meant schoolmaster
or guild-master, when they meant arbiter or arbitrator;

the master of a feast, the host, the entertainer,
a proprietor, a theater manager, employer
of actors or of gladiators. Grounded in the word

for "house" – the master of a residence –
or else "to dominate, domesticate, or tame" –
the master of its servants, or its slaves.

I'm ever an apprentice, sir, to poetry. I seek
to master craft, time, self, guilt, history, envy, love, chance, change.
Ego dominus tuus. What rends my heart? Who calls me out?

8. Translators

Leaving the Inferno, I hoped to add up what I learned among those Dorothy Sayers calls the “damnified,” those Ciaran Carson sees as “wastrels of themselves,” those

W.S. Merwin annotates thus: “Each one wraps himself in what burns him.” But I’m with Deborah Digges: “I’m afraid to move my mouth.” I’m with Sayers:

“Pity unhearts me so.” Yes, like Carson, I feel those “arrows – I mean sorrows, for their points were barbed with pity.” I understand Hell’s principle: Concentrated

all in self, wound up in self, self-knotted by the self that binds them, the damned cannot unwind, and the self they spun is thus the self they’re punished by: “Myself

am hell.” “My taste was me.” “We were men once,” says Charles Wright, “and now we are underbrush.” “A proper brooch,” says Sayers, “for such a brazen breast.”

There’s more: “Now *he* was a pot,” says Susan Mitchell, “boiling over with dirty schemes.” “A little reptile,” says Carson, “black as a peppercorn, sharp as a pair of shears.” But who

can shear themselves, or bite apart that binding thread? Who even sees the thread, so deep the damasking, so thickly, so distractingly embroidered? I know I keep

more self than I let go. Disappoint myself. Excuse myself. I’ll let Cynthia Macdonald have the last word here: “Why did you hoard it?” No, dear: “Why did you throw it away?”