

Peter Donnelly

Photographs from Hell

I

Snakes knotted sinners' hands behind
their backs and went to town between
arse cheeks, each linking tail to head

above them; just next to us, one
snake launched itself, and fanged a sufferer
right where neck is wedded to spine.

(Inferno, XXIV, 94–99)

II

fireflies lined the entrance of the eighth
bolgia, delineating with resplendence its
outer lip; I observed the glittering depth.

(Inferno, XXVI, 31–33)

III

If you, reading this now, are slow to grant me credence, "This literally happened" is my message to you.

A six-legged reptile at three men grouped together projected itself, vice-gripping one angrily;

its middle claws ripped the flesh of his stomach, and it seized each arm; fangs at his face stripped the skin off

his cheek bones; from each loin came a slithering leg, and between them an angry tail went up the ass, which strangled from

his kidneys all life (ivy never so tightly gripped a tree as this limb performing this monstrosity):

they seemed to grow into one another as clumps of heated wax might, mushing where one begins and the other ends.

(Inferno, XXV, 46–63)

IV

The belly of that metal bull from Sicily would resound, bellow when there occurred in it a screaming wail;

it was entirely uncognizant of those slain in its gut; and, though wrought of brass, seemed unmistakably transfixed with pain.

(Inferno, XXVII, 7–12)

V

An old holed, busted-up barrel is not
as opened-up as this man, his flesh
ripped from his head to where we fart;

between his legs the sack used to mash
food to excrement was, his innards hanging
and dangling in this sickening bunch.

(Inferno, Canto XXVIII, 22–27)

VI

Throat opened inwards by a sword,
his nose ripped out up to each eyebrow,
I observed him; he'd one ear sawed

off as well; and he began to withdraw,
revealing the inner tissue his trachea,
which was as brilliant red as haw.

(Inferno, Canto XXVIII, 64–69)

VII

Once-loquacious Curio's tongue,
sliced off, journeyed his oesophagus,
which from a flesh opening hung

outwards; and, because his
hands had been hacked off, blood spewed
thickly from the stumps out onto his face.

(Inferno, XXVIII, 100–105)

VIII

In my mind's eye I can still see
a figure walking among the other
souls in that bunch reeking of melancholy.

He carried his severed head by the hair,
which oscillated from his fist like a lantern.
"Fuck me!" it screamed to my horror!

(Inferno, XXVIII, 118–123)

A Suburban Village

A suburban village's opulence on the east
Coast of Ireland was sun-scorched in
Silicon Valley for a certain number of days in that
Post-exam period: polo shirts, reality television,
Americanisms blended into Hiberno-English; we thought
Also our thinking was Californian.
The sun-drenched occident's light shone
On a new identity, shedding its skin,

And indeed it is right that it was so,
Because only contrast gives identity:
Only a friend's conversation can show
You to yourself, that you may be
Your perceived reflection. Know
The exfoliation of your psyche
And detach yourself from it:
Study the presence, but be eternally distant

And separate in an absence. Discipline and dictata.
And the leaves of a Glenageary garden.
Here we both end and begin.
The *genius loci* is ours to inhabit: a
Duty this is, decreed by mouthpieces
Of God, amidst a modern quagmire
Of information. Psyche and place are
Melded entirely into one. Antecedents

Of mine, return please to my slow present;
My dialoguing mind awaits certain voices,
And it can drift from its focal point:
Must it endure this homesickness,
This displacement from the mind-mirror's
Reflection, the setting adrift from the pure?
The pure image is unsure
Of the matter from which it comes.