

ALL DRESSED UP AND NOWHERE TO GO

by Danny Fekete

I died, recently. This came as something of a disappointment to me, first, I think, because I'd always secretly expected better of myself, and second, because having the post-mortem cognition necessary to communicate these observations to you marked an uncomfortable departure from my lifelong expectations. Or rather, my lifelong lack of expectations. Frankly, I had anticipated something more restful—oblivion, really—and was greatly looking forward to it as I drifted toward an enormously bright light when I realized that I was thinking about looking forward to oblivion and drifting toward an enormously bright light. Oblivion, it occurred to me (and each *occurrence* by now was something of an insult in itself), probably precluded these things. Helpless to stop it and enjoy myself, my mind began racing over its layman repository of evanescent scientific impressions pertinent to the matter: near-death experiences are often described by the recently recovered as having features much like those I was now observing. As the theory went, because most Western folks were inculcated (or at least, familiar) with idea that upon our demise we would ascend to heaven and be judged, this sort of imagery was the first thing the brain would draw upon during times of severe system shock. Vaguely, I wondered if this was the case in cultures as yet unadulterated by the memes of the Book, and resolved to look into the matter as soon as convenience allowed.

Then I broke my resolution, on account of it was stupid.

Ravenous though I was to hunker down with a bit of curiosity-slaking academic folderol, I was unconvinced that I had, or would presently have, the tools with which to hunker in *any* direction, and detested the idea of disappointing a personal resolution to do so. Also, I was unconvinced that I had limbs.

So I drifted, and thought about things, and thought about the absurdity of thinking about things, and at length became impatient. Having no readily-apparent hair nor skin with which to gauge the friction of my progress, I was gripped abruptly with the *zitzfleysh* of the impotent, and asked the fellow next to me if he had any idea how long this ought to be taking.

I think we were both startled by the prospect of company, but I had been polite, so he was obliged to be civil.

“As long,” he replied with austerity, “as is necessary. God is eternal, and now, so are we. Did you repent, sinner?” Just my luck. I told him that I honestly couldn't remember, which was probably true, though I didn't care to consider the question very deeply. I felt myself the victim of inescapable bureaucracy.

“I think I'm in the wrong line,” I told him.

“What?”

“This is the wrong place. I'm not supposed to be here.”

“Everybody dies.” He commanded the unfounded stoicism of an armchair general. He might have been Field Marshall Haig.

“Yes, yes, of course—that’s fine. I mean, I think I’m not supposed to be going where you’re going.” I pointed toward the light, which is to say I focussed my attention on it in an incorporeal sort of way and hoped he got the gist of my meaning.

“That’s probably true,” he said with bit of a sneer. I began to think that he hadn’t.

“Alright.” If I’d had temples, I would have rubbed them demonstrably. “Where do the *other* people go, the ones who aren’t going to *your* afterlife?”

“To Hell.”

We wearied of each other’s company with the same simultaneity as with which we had discovered it, and my companion drifted ahead, propelled by his own aplomb. I watched him go without envy, and when I gauged that I was far enough out of thoughtshot so as not to embarrass myself, I indulged my curiosity and looked in the opposite direction of the bright light.

There wasn’t really anywhere to go: the opposite of the bright nothing above me was the dark nothing below me. Nevertheless, for lack of anything more interesting to do at the moment, I willed the darkness to engulf me. Success.

I stood on an unreflective, black surface and looked around unproductively. As if the universe contained only free-flying photons and myself, I was illuminated by a ubiquitous light source that seemed to evade my retinas directly, producing the curious effect that my body was visible to me, and yet absolutely nothing else was. Still, I was corporeal now, and felt that some progress had been made. I tapped my

foot on the black ground just to feel the recoil in my bones, like a starved man. I whistled, listening for an echo—there wasn’t one—and inhaled deeply, trying to discern odour or temperature—I failed. I examined my watch, and discovered that the time was entirely unremarkable. I got bored again.

One would have hoped (certainly, I did) that an establishment with as much prestige as the *afterlife* would employ a more alacritous public relations staff. This did not withstand simple business logic on deeper consideration, of course, since the outfit in question is running something of a monopoly, but presently, all such mental self-stimulation became redundant: from an impossible distance in the impossible darkness, an improbable figure had materialized and began, labouriously, to approach me.

The patience of a mind engaged in monitoring a minute but quantifiable progression is astounding. He came to a stop in front of me.

“Yeah?”

I blinked unnecessarily. “What?”

“Can I *help* you?”

“I hope so,” I said after another iteration of the dumfounded pause that was insidiously becoming my dialogical refrain. To be fair, though, I was being dumbfounded a lot lately, and am naturally wont to be thoughtful under such circumstances. “I’m lost.”

“Sure. D’you want a guide?”

“Yes, please.”

I followed him awkwardly back in the direction from which he

had come, finding it surprisingly difficult to place one foot in front of the other when, for all I could see, I was walking on nothing. Gradually, I found that the process was easier if I focussed my attention on the back of my associate's head, like a sea-sick traveller gazing at the horizon. He was dressed strangely (my guide), in a body-length red cloak and matching skullcap adorned with a radiant, though gaudy, laurel wreath. Occasionally, he would glance back to see if I was keeping pace, and I noticed deep creases descending from the periphery of his severe, hooked nose. I was reminded of a portrait I'd once affected interest in.

"You look familiar."

"I'm Dante Alighieri. Maybe you've seen me in *Cosmo*."

I couldn't help myself. "*The Dante Alighieri?*"

"No," he corrected me, "*thou*, Dante Alighieri?"

"I'm sorry, it's just that this is terribly exciting. Of all the people to be my guide, I've got the author of the *Inferno*, of the *Divina Commedia!*"

"Well, live it up if you want," he smirked, "but it's not so unusual for people to choose famous figures to lead them to the great beyond."

"Is it true, then, that Virgil was *your* guide to the underworld?"

He snickered. "Of course not. I was still alive when I wrote the *Divina Commedia*, and Virgil's name sold it like hotcakes. Wouldn't you want Tarantino guest-directing *your* oeuvre?" I found I had little to say, so he continued after a while, as if to himself, "that's the trouble with being famous—everybody wants a piece of you, and once you're

dead, just about everybody can get one. I say, don't get famous. Don't write. Don't even talk to people, if you can help it, or sooner or later, you'll end up with a bum job like this." I thanked him for the timeliness of his advice and cracked a grin.

Dante Alighieri told me to shut up.

We walked on in silence for some time, and then I hazarded to ask whether we'd be coming up to a river soon, or something.

"Sure," he said disinterestedly, and immediately in front of us I noticed a vast expanse of dark, foul-smelling water, the banks of which were teeming with jagged rocks, beach chairs, and shades. I knew they were shades as assuredly as I knew they were beach chairs, and peered with interest into one empty, piña colada-sipping visage after another. Dante tugged me onwards, grumbling that it was impolite to stare.

"Actually, I was just wondering if I couldn't maybe get one of those—"

"No. We're queuing up." I found myself facing the shore, standing behind a multitude of other awkward looking dead people and their bored, shifting hosts. Elvis was surprisingly popular.

"Alright," said Dante, all business now, "how much've you got?"

"Sorry?" I rooted in my pockets instinctively and produced my wallet.

"Yeah, good. Fork it over." Dante Alighieri was robbing me. "I'm not robbing you," he explained, "but you're gonna need some fare. What else d'you have?" I relinquished my credit cards, spare change, chequebook, wristwatch, a button, my glasses, some chewing gum, and my clothes. All of my clothes. "Good." Dante bundled my erstwhile

possessions tightly, held them over his head, and allowed them to evaporate in a whiff of peremption.

“I’m cold,” I told him.

“Don’t worry; they’ve got plenty of heating at our destination.”

A bellowing horn suddenly cut through the demure conversation of the shades like one might expect it to, and an enormous cruise ship that I had inexplicably failed to perceive before now extended its broad boarding plank to the shore. The line advanced and we embarked, each receiving a genial nod from the captain, who had no face to speak of and carried a long wooden pole that looked as if it hadn’t seen action in some time.

I turned to Dante as my shoulders were squished by the increasing press of my fellows. “Wasn’t this supposed to be a private affair?”

Dante shrugged, lifting his two adjacent neighbours briefly by a couple of inches. I noticed he was chewing my gum. “It was, back in the day. When this place was originally built, the *clientèle* was much more exclusive—only Pharaohs, shamans, the odd Golden-Age hero could get in, really, and that was it. And then what happens? The gods start opening this place up to the unwashed public. Enheduanna gets a direct line to Inanna and blabs about it all over Sumeria, Demeter founds the Cult of Eleusis, Jesus does that thing he did, and all of a sudden, we’ve got general admittance—democratic access to the afterlife. There goes the goddamn neighbourhood.” Dante tried to spit contemptuously overboard, but he missed and hit John Lennon. “Nowadays, if you’re ‘*spiritual*,’”—he lisped the sibilant—“or even just

a scholar, everybody expects the royal treatment. Why do you *think* service has declined?”

“Look, I *was* planning to tip you before you took all my money away.”

He seemed not to have heard me. “And of course, you moderns like your amenities and your creature comforts. A few years back they had to install a full plumbing system for the Elysian condos and some genius accidentally tapped into the Lethe, so now we’ve got a whole bunch of goody-goodies running amok who can’t remember why they deserve to be in paradise in the first place. Very discouraging to the others. Naturally, the rest of the watertable’s been adulterated with the excesses of their open bars, so the Styx stinks like the Thames in July and Tantalus has completely lost his appetite.”

The ship had reached the opposite bank and we were carried out on the current of the shady exodus. The others began to pair up with their guides again and abruptly the air was filled with the rustle of paper. I gazed around uncomprehending. Then, hesitantly, I realized that Dante was trying to hand me my own stack, the leaves sequestered into seven packages by paperclips.

“Forms? I have to fill out forms?”

“It’s faster than the alternative.” Dante gestured to a series of seven wrought-iron gates, each visible behind the last and towering up until they were lost in the gloom. A small sign that read “Beware of Dog(s)” was hung on the outermost. I hate dog(s).

Requisite tedium endured, my guide led me through an unobtrusive pair of metal sliding doors off to the side of the edifice

which opened and shut with a pleasing swish that terminated with a soft “ding.” Appropriately, we were now on a mobile sidewalk that extended ahead indefinitely with the awful splendours of the underworld unfolding in every direction. Dante narrated with the vapid gestures of an underpaid, overeducated European tour-guide to whom the attention spans of a bus full of overweight North Americans had been entrusted.

“On your left, you will see Hell. *Ooooooh.*”

I suppose that if you’ve seen one molten lake of sulphur and brimstone roiling with the scalded and flayed bodies of the eternally damned, you’ve seen them all, but I leaned over like common tourist and faintly nodded with what I hoped appeared to be academic appreciation. Names from the *Divina Commedia* flitted across my mind as I picked out the local attractions from my automated perch, of Dis, the city of Heresy that crowded along the inside of the wall that we’d just passed through, whose towers looked out across the Styx and inward to the concentric, terraced circles of scorched rock that tumbled ever downward into the abyss; of Phlegethon, the river of fire whose rapids nourished the Wood of Suicides that tumbled ever downward into the abyss; of the great, yawning barrier and its waterfall that tumbled ever downward into the abyss; of—I have found that artists are inconsistent in their attitude toward discussing their work, so instead of checking my observations with Dante, to make conversation I mumbled, “bit of a vertical theme they’ve got going there.”

He nodded. “Yeah, real gothic.” He pointed off to the right, where a number of enormous structures, some crystalline and ornate, some stocky and rectangular, and some hewn from impossible

stalagmites, emerged from the darkness and groped towards the distant ceiling (which, conveniently illuminated by the fires of Hell, resembled the knotted roots of a truly enormous tree). “This is the ritzy district. We’ve got Hades’ summer palace, Ereshkigal’s fortress, there’s Eljudnir, and Pandæmonium of course.”

My eyes wandered to a smaller region penned off with velvet barriers wherein heaps of theatrical paraphernalia were piled in the alleys between twisted bungalows and grotesquely gilded boulevards. Occasionally, someone would wander out from one of the buildings dressed in elaborate stage costume, check to make sure an audience was present, and then collapse into a fit of ostentatious *schmerz*. Dante followed my gaze and explained.

“Heck: the psychological underworld. It’s mostly temporary occupancy, though we’ve got a few long-term lessees.” As I watched, tiny luminous forms ascended from the city and vanished into the roots above even as others descended and took their places. Some, however, just hovered around in midair like ambivalent fireflies. “*Those* are floaters,” said Dante helpfully.

“The drowned?”

“Nah, these’re also with the ‘just visiting’ crowd. Shamans, vision-questers, druggies, New Age gurus, a few people who got lucky with Ouija boards—whether you want the knowledge of the ancestors or just a wicked trip, this is your one stop hotspot.” Both of us shuddered involuntarily.

“What’s over there?” We were approaching a needle-like mountain that resembled the Tower of Babel: a single, tapering spire

encircled by a spiralling, inclined ledge along which thousands of sweat-soaked and headbanded individuals were jogging. Occasionally, they would stream around one of many crawling, bedraggled forms that looked up at them with tremulous loathing and jealousy, and near the very apex, they were obliged to stop and turn around altogether, blocked by the sheer bulk of a gargantuan, naked man that was showering the lower cornices with sweat as he laboured behind a boulder. The joggers didn't seem to mind.

"Mount Purgatory, obviously," replied Dante, desperately bored. He leaned over the guardrail as we passed, and called out, "Oy, Sisyphus! How're you doing for reps?" Nearby joggers grinned and turned to begin their descent as the Titan wearily looked up and shouted something in ancient Greek that I was grateful not to understand. The motion unbalanced him, of course, with results that were predictable and do not brook description.

Dante turned to me as the echoes subsided. "Well, that's about it, then. Where're you getting off?"

I was surprised to have a choice, and told him so.

"Well, since you didn't go to Heaven, you're probably a pagan or something. I can take you to Elysium, but the rent's prohibitive and the company's abysmal. Your best bet is probably Dis—smelly, sure, but you can get a nice waterfront apartment for next to nothing, and—"

"But I can't! I don't believe in any of this!"

"What?" The panorama winked out of view.

"I'm an atheist." I was a bit ashamed to say it, inasmuch as I felt ungrateful after spending so much of Dante Alighieri's time. He was

of the same opinion, and cursed me beautifully.

"Fine," he said, when he'd finished, "*you* figure it out. I'm going to bed."

And he was gone. I stood and looked around awkwardly for a moment. "Bed" was actually a pretty good idea, it occurred to me, and there seemed to be one conveniently nearby. Getting under the covers, I thought of the remarkable effort that had gone into the construction of what I had seen, of the care and the ritual and the tradition that contributed across countless generations and cultures to the spectacle of it, to what would come to resemble a collective, unconscious recognition of the same mythical elements until they seemed to be our birthright, rather than merely our inheritance. *It is spectacular*, I thought as my head sank luxuriously into the pillows, *but at present I'm not inclined to spend the rest of eternity in the strands of human artifice*. I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply.

"To Hell with it."