

Paolo and Francesca

Dante, translated by William Baer

Inferno, from Canto V

“Could I speak to those two lovers who’ve sinned,
together, in betrayal and lust, and now appear
to whirl forever, endless, upon the wind?”

“Be ready,” Vergil advised, “when they come near,
and call to them as they come whirling through,
and maybe they’ll find a way to visit us here.”

So when the whirlwinds brought them back in view,
I called out loud, “Lovers, would it be all right,
within your torments, if I could speak with you?”

Immediately, they rose within the hellish night,
like two doves flying homeward towards their nest,
with wings raised up and spread and fixed for flight.

And so they came, abandoning the rest
of Dido’s group, to glide on the wind’s foul gust,
seduced by the sincerity of my request.

“Still-living creature,” she said, “so kind and just,
who’s traveled through the rank infernal air
to pity us, who’ve blackened the world with lust.

If we were still God’s friends, we’d offer a prayer
that the King of the Universe might mercifully bestow
His peace on you, who’ve pitied our despair.

And since the whirling winds now cease to blow,
I’ll do whatever you wish, and do my best,
and tell you everything you’d like to know.

I was born in a city on the shoreline’s eastern crest,
where the waters of the River Po finally depart
and disperse themselves into their ocean’s rest.

But Love had captured my Paolo, and right from the start
my sweet soft flesh was all he was thinking of,
and now that my body’s gone, it tears me apart.

Then Love, which exempts no one from the power of love,
offered me Paolo, and I fell under his spell,
and I still love him, as I did in the world above.

But Love led to murder, and deep in the depths of Hell,
my husband, who killed us, is, forever, confined.”
So I listened to every word she had to tell.

And when she was finished, I fell into a blind
and dark depression and lowered my face,
until Vergil said: “Tell me what’s on your mind.”

And I said: “What terrible desire to embrace
some sensate love, which seemed both sweet and true,
has led them both to this horrible and hellish place?”

I turned to Francesca: “The pain you’re suffering through
rips my sorrowful weeping heart apart,
and I have nothing but pity for the both of you.

But tell me: When did everything start?
When did Love set your passions free
and reveal the desires hidden within your heart?”

“There’s no greater sorrow,” she explained to me,
“than remembering happiness while here in pain.
I’m sure that your teacher, Vergil, will agree.

But since you have the desire to ascertain
how everything began, when our passions burned
so out of control, I’ll weep as I explain:

One day, for pleasure, we read a book and learned
about Lancelot, how love trapped him within its spell.
At the time, we were alone and unconcerned.

But often, we blushed, as our eyes furtively fell
into each other’s, as, slowly, we were led astray
toward that moment that brought us here to Hell:

When Lancelot kissed the lips he was longing for,
recklessly throwing his inhibitions away,
and Paolo, who’s trapped with me forevermore,

kissed me on the mouth, and I would have to say
that the book and its pandering author magnified
our lusts, and we read nothing more that day.”

And while Francesca was speaking, her lover cried,
wailing such a loud and pitiful sound,
I fainted away, as if I’d actually died,

and fell, as a dead body falls to the ground.