

## My Purgatorio

*And I have known the eyes already, known them all—  
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin  
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?  
And how should I presume?*

“They sing their songs while they still can,” says he,  
Imposing Cato, then he left from me,  
In the Valley of Poets, resonating with noises:  
A thousand songs, a thousand voices.  
But it did not sound so, to my ears 5  
It sounded as one sound, and eased my fears.  
So I descended and saw one in the moonlight  
Singing of a once gallant knight.  
I asked him, “Sir, if it does not offend you,  
Could you explain to me the nature of this venue, 10  
And why all of these souls sing so”  
He replied to me, voice wet with sorrow,

“Welcome to this ringing valley, where the artists meet and rally,  
Before they enter Purgatory proper, but after they reach the shore  
Now you are a-hearing as the poets do their clearing, 15  
For poems are interfering with our journey to Heaven’s door.  
I must sing Israfel, not Annabel, to arrive at Heaven’s door.  
She brought me here, but nowhere more.

In this land we sing our old songs of woe,  
Woe we harnessed and transmuted to gold. 20  
For our efforts to surpass ourselves,  
Lofty God above our sins forgives,  
But my tears, my mournings, and my raven  
Will not belong in jubilant Heaven.”  
With that the shade concluded speaking, 25  
And returned to song, Eldorado seeking.  
I could not believe my eyes,  
Could not trust my ears,  
When I realized who had conversed with me.

I realized the company I was in, 30  
And my spirit was shaken.  
I saw another soul in the distance,  
Sitting on a rock, higher,  
or lower, than all around.

“I long thought I was just a dreamer, 35  
Now I see I’m not the only one.  
You’re journeying from Darkness,  
You will climb and meet our God.

For I have made the same journey as you,  
But, being blind, ignored this holy preview, 40  
My exalted vision of salvation  
I had confused with hallucination,  
And Lady who led me on this Island  
Became a mere refrain: Lucy with Diamonds.”

Another soul, seeing our silent scene, 45  
Ran near and exclaimed,

“Gotta keep on rising! Rising! Rising!  
We purge our shadows with our vocalizing!”  
I withdrew, frightened,  
and sat next to another soul, 50  
Quietly, peacefully, reciting to himself.  
I sat next to him,  
hoping to discern his words.

He turned his head slightly to me,  
Smiled, and said, 55

“I was the author of threefold tome,  
In other minds, my mind had made its home.  
And though my body lies somewhere afar,  
I live, I climb, up to the lofty stars.

In this valley we are not alone, 60  
There are no caves for my reclusive Timon.  
Self-discovery’s rewards are at their end.

I must look to God if I wish to ascend.  
And look to the saints, all of them,  
Triumphantly interlinked within one stem. 65

We sing until we are ready to pray,  
And then we can ascend this mountain grey.

I must learn to look upward to join Heaven's parade;  
This shadow must learn to become its own Shade."  
With these words the author returned to himself, 70  
And I to me, even more disheartened.  
How could I ever find words so eloquent?  
Within myself, I mean, not cobbled together  
From the greats, not scrounged upon  
Like a dog eating the master's scraps. 75  
And in this state of sorrow,  
Where there should be jubilation,  
I stood an outcast, a fraud exposed,  
A weed among redwoods.  
And then I heard one voice pierce the sky from a distance: 80

*"Sit by my side,  
Come as close as the air.  
Share in a memory of grey,  
And wander in my words,  
Dream about the pictures that I play  
Of changes."* 85

I was immediately drawn,  
As an ill-fated wretch in the desert  
Dragging himself to yet another shimmering  
Oasis or fruitless mirage. 90  
My heart beating, throbbing, pounding  
As I walked to the voice.  
Could it be really be him?  
Could he have actually made it here?  
As I reached the soul I examined him, 95  
But could recognize no feature.  
Still, he sang his song  
And enraptured me.  
"Shade," said I. "Are you Phil Ochs?  
Are you the folk singer, the troubadour? 100  
Or are you the Train which ran him down?"  
"John Butler Train is not on this hill.  
He is Below. Be not afraid, I am now Phil.  
But your fears are deeper, your voice quivers.  
What then, my friend, compels you to shiver?" 105  
"I just don't belong here, sir," said I.

“Among you all, I have no place.  
I can not rhyme, nor keep time  
Like you masters.”  
“No one,” said Ochs, “demands perfect meter. 110  
It’s okay to pause. You won’t be a cheater.  
In fact, I will pause, too.  
You have walked through this valley,  
So you must have heard a thousand songs,  
Find your own, and make it your own. 115  
But do not rush, you still have life,  
Despite your presence here.  
Take all of the despair you face in life,  
And redeem it, glorify it,  
And you shall beat it down, 120  
And be brought here, for conquering sin.  
You dream the same dreams as all of us,  
Our songs resonate within each other,  
And our songs grow louder because of it,  
And we grow strong, 125  
Until we no longer need for them.  
Add your songs, add others’ songs into the world!  
Pluck them out in times of darkness,  
And they will protect you.  
But remember this most: 130  
Poems deliver you to Purgatory,  
But Prayer admits you to Heaven,  
As God’s songs are deliverance from our sorrows.  
So go forth, sing your song and God’s own song,  
You will not then be doing any wrong. 135  
Remember those whose tradition you share,  
A tradition always present in the night air.”  
I nodded thanks and left, to Purgatory’s entry,  
Soul strengthened, saved by consecrated poetry.

## Notes

*Line 0:* This canto begins with a passage from T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," which in turn began with a passage from the *Inferno*. The passage from "Prufrock" describes the speaker's feeling of anxiety and entrapment brought on by the watching eyes of others.

*Line 1:* This canto begins *in media res* with Cato, Purgatory's guardian, unceremoniously leaving the speaker in the Valley of Artists in Ante-Purgatory.

*Line 6:* The similarity of the sounds suggests the universality of the world's great poems.

*Line 7:* The soul encountered here is the American writer Edgar Allan Poe, who often wrote horror stories and laments for lost loves.

*Line 13:* This is the first instance of the author's technique of souls first speaking in the meter and style of one of their own works. Poe's work referenced here is "The Raven." This passage also introduces the rules of the Valley of Artists. Souls sing their songs devoted to worldly problems until they have conquered their insecurities and are ready to advance up the mountain. "Annabel" refers to "Annabel Lee," a poem by Poe mourning for a dead loved one. "Israfel" is another of Poe's poems, but one about an angel in heaven.

*Line 25:* After ending his speech with the speaker, Poe renews his recitation of "Eldorado," a poem about a knight who spends his life searching for the fabled city, eventually coming across a "pilgrim shadow" who offers spiritual guidance.

*Line 27:* The speaker's confidence is shattered by the presence of such great poets. This is reflected in the structure of the poem, as the narration regresses from couplets to free verse until the end of the canto.

*Line 33:* This soul is British musician John Lennon. The detail of "higher" and "lower" references this line from his "Strawberry Fields Forever:"

*No one, I think, is in my tree. I mean, it must be high or low.*

This line is a self-evaluation of Lennon as either genius or insane. Lennon's speech to the speaker begins in the style of his song "Imagine," departing from the original song in that it references God, instead of imagining "no religion." Lennon apparently went on a journey through the afterlife similar to Dante and this poem's speaker. However, he did not believe his vision was truly real, only using it as inspiration for his song "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds."

*Line 45:* This intense soul is American musician Jim Morrison, who quotes his song "L.A. Woman."

*Line 50:* The soul encountered here is Russian novelist Vladimir Nabokov. His “threefold tome” is *Pale Fire*, a poem by the fictional John Shade and a commentary by fictional scholar Charles Kinbote which intertwine to create one original work of metafiction. The beginning of Nabokov’s speech echoes the opening of the poem “Pale Fire.”

*Line 61:* Charles Kinbote struggles with isolation as he writes his commentary in a “Timonian cave” in *Pale Fire* (the title of which comes from *Timon of Athens*).

*Line 65:* In the poem “Pale Fire,” the speaker has a near death experience and vision of the afterlife:

*I can't tell you how  
I knew—but I did know that I had crossed  
The border. Everything I loved was lost  
But no aorta could report regret.  
A sun of rubber was convulsed and set;  
And blood-black nothingness began to spin  
A system of cells interlinked within  
Cells interlinked within cells interlinked  
Within one stem. And dreadfully distinct  
Against the dark, a tall white fountain played.*

In this canto’s adaptation of this passage, cells “interlinked within one stem” refers to the Communion of Saints.

*Line 69:* Nabokov (and all souls) must learn to become more like his own creation, the enlightened and hopeful John Shade.

*Line 81:* The soul of Phil Ochs is here singing his song “Changes,” so admired by the speaker that he decides to transcribe part of the lyrics verbatim.

*Line 101:* The speaker is surprised by Phil Ochs’s presence on the mountain, because Phil Ochs died of suicide due to bipolar disorder. Near the end of his life, Ochs took on the identity of John Butler Train, who claimed to have killed Ochs.

*Line 112:* Ochs transitions to free verse to relieve the speaker’s insecurity.

*Line 138:* The speaker, emboldened, returns to the heroic couplet, adapting and beatifying a passage from *Pale Fire*, in which Kinbote sews John Shade’s “Pale Fire” into his suit and feels its strength:

*Thus with cautious steps, among deceived enemies, I circulated, plated with poetry, armored with rhymes, stout with another man’s song, stiff with cardboard, bulletproof at last.*