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Anchored to the Ground, Rising Above the Clouds

Virgil, my all-knowing guide,

The one who kept me from the painful path,

Grasped my hand and told me to hide.

“Master?” I croaked, trembling in fear,

“Why do you abandon me in this perilous place?

Where all it takes is one sound to activate a demon’s ear

And launch themselves towards such a person as I?”

“You shall remain here,” Virgil’s tone was fierce.

Hiding behind rocks, I only saw Virgil’s eye

Looking sternly towards the fire we had traversed,

The Master Virgil lowered his head and quivered,

“Dante, in Hell, no decision may be reversed,

But there are those who are in Hell for a purpose

So noble, you wouldn't dare touch them. Yet

These saints live in the opposite of their lifelong brightness.

God is just, and God is fair. These are sinners,

But do not confuse them for their erroneous decisions,

History has consistently been written by winners,

And they will not rest on such a prestigious stage.

Careless, unwilling to consider their actions, kind as they may have been

You will find their story in their own book takes but a mere page.

If I am to show you The True Way,

I must also show you what goodness entails

And the deep price you will thereupon pay.”

So, Virgil and I crossed the flowing river of gold

That started to brown and rot as we crossed

Until it came to be fragile, disgusting and frighteningly old.

“We retell the tale of those who were treacherous to masters,

But with a twist that it is not in your time,

For the future has accelerated, and we are moving faster.”

My master’s calm words were to no end, good or great.

I pressed my hands against those of a man, a man so pure

I knew his intentions were beyond his fate.

He repeated one story, a story of his own, “Mailed in a box¹.

That’s how I escaped. Mailed in a box. I wasn’t no dried goods,

I was an American. They tore us apart and hunted us like a fox.

The smell. Oh, it was just the smell! Intoxicating,

Literally suffocating. Couldn’t breathe under all that smoke, y’know?

Smith got me outta that factory. I tell you, it was liberating.

¹**Henry “Box” Brown:** An African-American slave working in a Virginia tobacco factory who escaped in a shipping box headed for Pennsylvania, where his first words as a free man were, “How do you do, gentlemen?”

He turned towards us. “How do you do, gentlemen?”

My master, the one who knew all, turned me away,

Hesitant to let me stay and hear the end.

“Box is a person who is brave, daring to defy.

But there are others too cowardly to raise their voices, who shun life.

Time will come and you see why.”

My leader’s voice guided me across heated rivers

Across winding roads, paths and paths of roads

Till I arrived at a scene that gives me shivers.

A demonstration like no other, thousands upon thousands of

Men and women had poured in the streets, screaming

To get attention, screaming to have their voices heard

By the policing force, there to keep this surge under control.

My pupils dilated past my eyes, for there was no way

I could take in this scene, their ambition, their goal.

“These people have sown the menacing seeds of discord all their lives,

So now they are meant to have no voice, no way to know,

No way to learn, no help to wait until it arrives.”

I stared in awe; the signs must have meant something!

Tears streaming down people cheeks, a name.

George Floyd². A time when government did nothing.

The vision paused. A silhouetted figure identical to that of the picture

Rose from behind, smiling warmly at me, knowing she was

Condemned to her sentence, it hung above her like a fixture.

“I am the one you don’t see, yet I am one you know.

I rose my voice to protect a person and was myself not protected.

Those who must enforce law have done away with it. No,

²**George Floyd Protests:** A series of protests, principally in the U.S. but also across the world, over the brutal murder of an African-American man named George Floyd at the hands of police.

I refuse to believe I am done. That our cause is lost.

My arrest without a reason, on that humid 31st of May³,

I will fight for justice, no matter what the cost.

Standing out amongst two white protestors, I wasn't like

A canary in a coal mine. I was more of a crow on a white-sand beach.

Of my adventures I have a souvenir, look at my strike.”

She extended her hand towards me. On it was a band,

Black as her skin, carved in the words, “Unlawful Assembly”

Jumped out at me, they were as carved into my soul as her hand.

She said nothing. All was written on a tablet for me to read,

Her final words to me, “Don't think Philly's so good after all.”

She took the tablet away, guilty of letting me see her deed.

³**Ruby Anderson:** A black woman arrested at a Philadelphia George Floyd protest on May 31st, 2020. Given a wristband that said, “Unlawful Assembly.” The only one arrested in a group with two other white protestors.

The vision faded, she along with it. I turned to find my master, who

Was already scouting for the next era to turn the time towards.

Soon he took my hand once more, it was time to move past site number two.

Upon our descent into the third, I could already feel

This location was familiar, yet not so much that I would be unable

To exactly pinpoint the emotions I will now reel.

“Master,” I was in a state of perplexing madness, “you stipulated

That there are those too cowardly to raise their voices who are in fact

Innocent. However, Anderson has not capitulated.

Who indeed rests below the threshold of words? Who knows not

How to speak, but how to do? Who is too afraid to

Do as they wish, roam as they please and use their lot?”

“Time,” my Master replied, not hesitating to quit looking in my direction.

“Time will reveal the heartbreaking truth. You must decide for yourself

If this next and final group are to be punished for taunting on their complexion.”

My voyage once more through the Wood of Suicides was brief,

Till I stopped by a group of smaller, younger trees. They were

Not so tall, not too brooding, but deepest of all was their grief.

“I wonder how the statistics are, d’you think they’ve gone down?⁴”

“Oh, I wouldn’t bet on it. Those scientists are just as surprised in 2020

As they are in 2012, when they believed their data was the clown.

They can’t see past their prejudice. Why are they so taken aback

By the fact that us children take our lives more often than the fair and beauty?

Yes, our grandmothers may have been shielded by culture that is black

But we are no longer segregated.

We live our lives in the shadows of our perfect friends,

Who see more of themselves every day, while our growing lost ones are separated.”

⁴**JAMA Pediatrics Study:** A study conducted showing that for the first time ever, black suicide rates had overtaken those of their white counterparts, especially those aged 15-24, to many of the researchers’ shock because of the historical protection African-Americans had from suicide.

I still lack words to describe my emotions. Their perpetrator
Was living in Hell with them, no doubt, yet these tired children
Had lived in the Wood of Suicides all this time, punished by their Creator.

My heart ached with agony for them, yet I knew they had committed a sin.
I turned to Virgil and spoke, “It is still unworthy to betray a given life.
These children knew that, and so their cases they shall not win.”

Virgil, my seer, my portal through the depths, smiled gently and asked,
“What is a life? Is it a medical conception, or is it the will to live?
Their time for hope and fixing has already passed.

They do not have a life, and they never resonated with one.
For their life was only to be tormented by others.
Come, our re-tour is now done.”

And my soul was split once more. I found myself
Rethinking the laws of Hell, the bounds I had once seen
Used to be elastics, bending but never breaking, controlling oneself

Now were as flimsy as a piece of thread. I was exhausted,

Collapsing to the floor,

Unwilling to relive what I had just seen once more.

For such harsh conditions caused such unloyalty,

For such brutality led to such instrumental protests,

For such tormenting led to all a childhood casualty.

August 21st. The day my master and I regained the strength

To make it out of the terrors we had seen.

As today was a turner⁵, it seemed only fair to make it through that length.

And these unjust punishments, while anchored to Earth's cold, hard ground

I have seen rising, glooming above our planet's clouds.

⁵**Nat Turner's Revolt:** A revolution that took place on August 21st, 1861, led by Nat Turner, wherein around 75 black people killed 60 white people over two days.

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