

FIREWALL

Tremate forse più voi nel pronunciar
la sentenza che io nel riceverla¹

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I shake my head slowly at the flatscreen in the booth:
So Dongfeng didn't get my e-mail and
Found the site I'd recommended
Blocked.

He is not proxy-wise, so that's the end of it
—For now.

I pick up my hat, drop a few euros on the counter,
And walk aimlessly into the night
Of a town once thought the center of the world.

Over glistening cobblestones I amble
Behind a tour group into a piazza.
On a high pedestal in the center
A hooded figure broods alone:
Monument to a freethinking friar
Who was burned here at the stake.
As tourists flow past, he does not budge,
Verdigris glimmering in the light from the taverns.
He grasps a closed book, resolute in reflection,
But one hooked finger keeps his page
In case he should need, after four hundred years,
To refresh his memory.
I linger beneath, but my thoughts are far away.

Craftsmen came from Old Gold Mountain
To build this barrier, a curtain of fire
Rippling across the space of knowledge.
For all under heaven they have forged
A new covenant: *Seek, and ye shall not find.*

What is it that their work conceals?
Stone walls once shielded
Inrealm from Outrealm, plainly.
Today a subtler purpose
Forms a weird topology.
To those inside, Outrealm glitters bright:
London bids for copper in real time,
Celebrities smile with perfect teeth.
Those outside study Inrealm at their leisure,
Tending the archives, freely comparing.
'Tis those within who can't see Inrealm now:
The man before the tank, sobs along Chang'An,
Are vacuumed out of history.
The honest journalist, expunged;
Poets move their lips unheard like goldfish behind glass.
Shouts of indignation in the stolen fields,
Muzzle-flashes at dusk, the strain of choice,
—All vanished without trace behind the golden shield.
A nation evicted from its own interiority:
Inside there's only outside,
Collective mind warped into a Klein bottle.

How can one pass this wall?
 Not over, for the heavens are brass;
 Nor under, for the earth is iron;
 The only way runs through,
 Threading the shadows between the flames.
 Be nimble, though, or brave, before you cross the fire:
 Those who would see, it dazzles,
 And those who would show, it burns.
 Once branded with four bytes,
 Their singed flesh draws the hounds:
 Then they who dared expose the Unseen
 Shall themselves vanish into it
 While the ancient warning tolls:
We know. Better for you not to.
You might get hurt.
Move back from the fire.

And the crowd shuffles back,
 Weighing rich Heaven against chaotic Hell.

It is the *same* fire, I murmur, running my hand
 Over the bas-relief on the pedestal and
 Finding it cool to the touch,
 And the crowd always makes the *same* calculation,
 Until . . .

Until one day it doesn't.

Over there the age will turn. In Changsha Shi Tao shall rise,
 Enduring pigeons and the sun and rain,
 Just when Wu Hao is seen again, at least in bronze,
 And Liu Binyan shall fix a granite eye
 On the forgetful.

But who will compose the inscriptions?

Meanwhile, a fearful mystery:

On the holy mountain,
 Watched closely by twelve hundred scarlet-robed disciples,
 The Exalted One reaches pudgy fingers into a Prada handbag.
 He draws out a strand of razor wire
 And wordlessly holds it aloft.

The disciples smile.
 Like Bruno's judges, they tremble not.

Montaione, May 2006

1. "You, perhaps, tremble more in pronouncing the sentence than I do in receiving it." Bruno's response to the Inquisition was (like the death sentence) uttered in Latin, but it is most widely remembered in its vivid Italian translation. In popular retelling, he spoke these words before ascending the pyre, but that would have been impossible. To protect the crowd from his eloquence, his executioners had silenced him with an iron gag.