Ascend: An Epic Poem in Forty Days

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ASCEND

AN EPIC POEM IN FORTY DAYS

BY

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ENGL 498 DEPARTMENTAL HONORS: ASCEND

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Introduction

Since I started writing Ascend, I have heard the same question over and over: "Why?" Why write a story about one of the most hated and vilified characters in history? Why write about it as an epic, of all things? After all, the epic is dead, or at least "normative[ly] childlike" when compared to the more modern novel.¹ So why write in this "childlike" manner, why shun the accepted form of the novel and decide to write an epic? Well, two reasons really. One, I thought it would be fun. Two, I wanted to find out if I could write something bigger than myself.

I've always been a very small writer. By that, I mean that I write about small things, things we can pick up or grasp easily. Coffee. Books. A bicycle. A house. I held to a theory to write about concrete things so the reader could see and hold them all. Since first reading them, I loved the Modernists and their "No ideas but in things" motto, their bold experimentation, their sense of failure and brokenness in a world torn by war and global depression. So it's no surprise when my writing turns out much the same--imagist verse of a shattered world. But the problem with imagist verse is that it is exceptionally hard to turn into anything other that straight description. To reach that level of sublime, where the poem touches on something infinite, something beyond the constraints of language, takes skill no matter what approach one uses, least of all an approach grounded in the grubby items of our life. That's what I mean when I say I was a small writer. I was landlocked, unable to reach higher than the finiteness of my own language. So Ascend was a chance to break through that ceiling, to see if I could reach into the heavens (both figuratively and literally).

However, that's only part of what I meant when I said that I wanted to write something bigger than myself. The other part has to do with my disdain for contemporary literature. As it grows harder and harder to separate the art of writing from the business of writing, I wanted to produce something that had a chance to outlive me. I remember sitting in one of my literature survey courses, turning a famed Norton Anthology over in my hands and wondering what the anthology of our time will look like. Will it be hailed as the age of consumerist literature, a time when the author lost their voice in movie deals, sequels, and spin-offs? The age of the harlequin romance, the beach novel, and the mass-market pulp paperback? I hope not.

This is what Ascend was born from. A longing to create something timeless, something immense and infinite. Something epic. In the introduction to her survey of epics and epic theory, The History of the Epic, Adeline Johns-Putra grapples with the definition of epic, as "the simple definition of the epic as a long heroic and nationalistic poem would include Virgil's Aeneid but exclude Dante's Divina Commedia, while the reference to heroism would subsume the Homeric epics but might create problems for Paradise Lost". The question of what defines an epic (my work included) was one that would plague me at every step while I wrote. Was it still an epic if the hero hated himself? Was there a heroic journey to go on if at every turn he wished to turn around? Is it considered a descent to the underworld if he constantly climbs upwards out of it? It was almost as if I had deliberately attempted to sabotage my sanity by setting this paradox out for myself. Fortunately, there was light at the end of the tunnel, which Johns-Putra expresses most eloquently: "The epic, as far as there is such a thing, is the

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accumulation of texts and of ideas over time, with some ideas maintained and others shed". The very fact that I was attempting to combine these conflicting views, the will of the contemporary who wished for self-deprecating non-heroes and the will of the ancient who wished for a brave, cunning hero made it an epic. It is heroic because it builds upon other poet's heroes. It is nationalistic because it contains other poet's nations. By recognizing and incorporating those who have come before, I too can claim this accumulation of past material and reshape it for my time. It is the struggle that defines the epic in modern times; Franco Moretti describes it as "a discrepancy between the totalizing will of the epic and the subdivided reality of the modern world".  

I tried to pay particular attention to this contemporary/ancient divide while writing, as I wanted this work to be relevant and readable to a modern audience yet ancient in style, thought, and feel. When I sent out my rough draft to my friends, I asked them to just comment on their reactions--which parts worked, didn't work, what they thought of the piece as a whole, etc. I remember stating not to worry if they didn't study English or know anything about literature and epics, I wanted their thoughts too. Yes, I included allusions to many different ancient texts and have a hefty Works Consulted page, but I didn't want this to become a parade of intellectualism. My affinity for easy-to-read literature is obvious here, as I tried to incorporate any allusions and references as inconspicuously as possible, so that it would be possible to read deeper into the language and gain a second understanding, but at the same time someone could simply read it at the surface and enjoy it that way as well. For instance, the chains that Judas and the Poet
encounter at the first cliff parallel Kampe, the chthonic she-dragon who guarded the
Hekatonkheires and was killed by Zeus before the War of the Titans in Greek Mythology.
Her description takes a few lines from Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*: "mass of misshapen coils"
and "rose writhing". However, it is possible to read and comprehend the scene as the
chain-monster seeking an honorable death, a final act of goodness that might "heal a
god's wound". For a broader example, the city of Dis borrows heavily from Eliot's
But these allusions are secondary to the action Judas takes as he moves through them.
They don't tell the story--Judas does.

I went through several different styles of writing before settling on one that would
suit my needs. The first incarnation, a 50 page something I wrote during the fall of junior
year, consisted of long multiple-page stanzas with back-and-forth dialogue. I realized
from the beginning that telling the story from first person was a necessity, but this
brought its own collection of problems. If this is a story told though Judas' eyes, how
would he speak? What sort of language might he use? And how could I use his language
in my poem without boring the reader to death? Luckily, I read *War Music* by
Christopher Logue over the summer, which I used as a sort of "writing model"
throughout the project. For those who haven't read it, *War Music* is the first part of
Logue's project to translate Homer into a more contemporary voice--even though he
doesn't read a single word of Ancient Greek. The result is a hard-hitting, distinctly
contemporary piece that retains the antiquity of Homer but mixes it with all the new
creations in literature since then. Reading it, I realized that this was the answer to my

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5 Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 18. 237 ff (trans. Rouse) (Greek epic C5th A.D.)
question on how to write *Ascend*. I took my original 50-page manuscript and pretended I was loosely translating it, scanning it to capture the swings in movement. I rewrote the quick dialogue exchanges into long monologues. When I ran out of previously written work to "translate" I had a good enough idea of the piece's voice that I was able to continue on my own.

What surprised me the most while writing *Ascend* was how this contemporary-ancient struggle repeatedly surfaced, sometimes without my knowing. I realized it in the language and some of the allusions, but it wasn't until near the end that I saw it mirrored in other conflicts. The struggle of Judas against Hell. The Doctor and the Poet. The Poet's affliction. These were conflicts that I had seen as other things, as representative as other struggles, but at their core is the same question of how the contemporary competes with the ancient and tries to find a balance. How do we incorporate a tradition that may have fallen by the wayside, but was nonetheless instrumental in creating our world today? How do we approach these morals and values we might see as outdated but are unable to fully escape?

I'd like to thank my advisor Dr. Matthew Roth for his help and insight while writing and editing, my parents for their encouragement and excitement, and all my friends for listening to me prattle on about this for a whole year, with a special thanks to those I made read and comment on the draft. I'd also like to thank the entire Messiah College English Faculty for letting me embark on this crazy project in the first place, Christopher Logue for *War Music*, Wikipedia for saving me countless hours of research, and the coders of FreeCell and Minesweeper for keeping my mind intact.
Ascend

Day 1: Creation

i am newborn in a phoenix egg.

rise from the ashes
to ashes,
i kick out into humidity.
air like a wool blanket
soaked in hot lamb blood.

sootsmoke visceral in my lungs.

my eyes hide behind a layer of scales.
i scratch them from my face--
such is the pain of seeing.

wet cave. sticky air.
ground coiled like a snake.
fangs chewing deep in my lungs;
a thousand backstabbing daggers.

and all i can hear is guttural.
and all i can hear is primitive.

and i know.

i am judas iscariot.

hands tying thick rope in the dark of midday.
fumbling, for the sky has been out
three hours now and my knots are slick
with tears and the blood of others.
this tree will be my witness, you,
deep-rooted ash tree, will you hold me?
lend me a branch. i know you have already given two--
but i only ask for one more.
rope slithering through the leaves.
go, wrap around the sturdiest branch nine times.
now the sky is rent, torn from the mountains,
and i climb into the limbs of the great tree.
all else black as the lethe,
and the only light comes from the dull shimmer
that is the dagger in my hand.
crown myself with a noose, slide it down tight.
my blade hot, my aim perfect
as i hear him echo from the hilltop.

"my god, my god,
why hast thou forsaken me?"

i cut open my stomach,
spill my intestines.
and howling, i fall.

wait...

hack&cough.

wait...

the teeth gnash me pulpy.

...wait.

the mouth spits
and i am

free?

flying,
grasping icy winds,
feeling the ground at my back.
and my intestines jump again.

the mouth rumbles out of the fog.

«it's shameful that
these are the first words
that i speak: iscariot,
i release you. leave;
go do what you must.»

my flesh stitching itself together.

"impossible! impossible!
i am judas iscariot.
i am the crown of thorns,
the nails in heaven's hands.
each drop i bleed has already been shed
seventy times seven times over.
i am the cross itself.
so when you say i am free;
impossible! impossible!
let me back in,
let me back in!"
hell-silence.

"your debt is paid, iscariot,
your release already ransomed.
but you are not free,
not yet.
    blood is not the only way
to repay heaven."

and the mouth closes,
obscured in the fog.

alone,
    no longer newborn.
thin muscles and woodsplinter bones;
i can barely stand.

but i take a step
    away from the mouth.
    a step towards the sun.

black ice--
    the ground slips away
and beneath my foot
a human face screams.

farther, some of the faces
break through, hiss
aramaic greek latin english:

    "behold! the bloodtraitor walks!
i would spit
    (i would spit)
i would spit
were it not
frozen in my throat."

now the ice turns slick,
    the air ash and oil.
but i can see the shore.
the ice goes,
    melting into a cold red lake.
i stand at the edge, gazing,
whispering to my dark reflection.

madness.

gather and jump.

knifeblade vocal chords shriek,
my body clutches itself.
   i hold my spilt entrails with one hand,
   and pull for shore with the other.

rocks and scattered embers.
black blood pockmarks.

and every tongue of fire screams its own language.

i can hear all the sinners,
hear the words they splutterscream.
   and it sounds like

"the iscariot.
   the iscariot.
   the iscariot is free."

Day 2: Exile

rock
   and no water.
no water
   and rock.
   and no shade underneath
for the fire is everywhere.

   i turn the corner.

a poet, leaning
on a pillar of salt.
dressed in frills, his skin
bonewhite unbroken.
calling out:

"a guide! a guide!"

then we catch eyes
and he sinks to his knees.
hands knit:
"mercy, mercy!
see, see the stigmata burned by minos.
(he thrusts out his bloody wrists)
i was no sinner and hell let me wander
but i went too deep and hell
stole my knowledge. now these rocks
are no longer familiar.
but what are you?
you dress like a sinner
(and i know that i am naked)
but you wander like i do.
have you escaped?"

does he not know me?

"not escaped--
i have been released.
hell has spewed me from its mouth
like so much lukewarm water. it said
«go do what you must.»
so here i stand, lost."

"wait.
i know you."

the poet reaches for me,
stigmata draining.

"i have seen hell itself,
seen you (yes) kick and scream
in its teeth. foolish to forget.
but it is impossible! for hell
to have released
the iscariot."

"truly,
i cannot tell you why i stand here.
nobody knows more than i
that i belong between hell's teeth.
it is impossible
that i am forgiven
for i am unforgivable.
hell has taught me this.
yet here i stand, outside
and i find myself drifting.
i am truly lost
and cannot even guide myself,
let alone another."

the poet says nothing, but reaches
into one of his stigmata
and pulls out a length of red thread.

he kneels.

"perhaps you cannot guide me,
but we can travel together.
i remember minos.

(he shows his slashed wrists)
he is wise. he might help you.
and besides,
these rocks are beginning
to look familiar again."

as he talks, he sews a few
jagged stitches around my burst belly
until it is whole.
then, taking off his outer shirt,
he wraps it around my waist.

"come now. i fear
we walk on incognita
and here be demons."

we crunch ashes underfoot.

Day 3: Outsiders

the hekatonkheires are gone.
i know this because the poet
is pointing at empty crosses.
saying:

"the hundred-handed have arisen.
see the crooked chains hanging lifeless?
see the crucifixes standing blank
against the bloodslick obsidian cliff?
we are trapped then,
as the cliff is too high to climb.
and there are no giants to lift us."

(there is one)
i sit on a red rock.
"I should have realized
I was foolish. Ha!
Hell would never release me.
Who am I?
    Hell called me Iscariot.
    Bloodtraitor.
My place is in the mouth,
Not here. It is a hellish trick:
    Release me, say I am free,
    Then hem me with these cliffs
    So I have nowhere to go
    But back.
Good luck to you, poet.
I can go no further."

Her voice stops me.

(There is one)

The chains rustle,
Hiss like scorpionsting,
Mass of misshapen coils.
And the voice comes back--
    Feminine--
    Dying--

(I am almost gone)
    (But before I go)
    (Let me help)
    (Let me regain the pride)
    (That was cut from me)
    (By a single thunderbolt)

The chains slither,
Catch around my waist and
We rise writhing.

Above the crosses
Above the lake
Above the mouth
And the chains set us on top.

(Remember me, Judas)

She falls away.
"as if such a pithy act
could heal a god's wound."
the poet spits.
i can not tell him how

(remember me, judas)
echoes louder than all the sinnerscreams.
instead i peer over the edge,
hoping to see her again.

just a cacophonic red blizzard
swirling out of a lake.

Day 4: Law

siners swarming like flies on a rotten wound.
we pick our way around.

and enter a long
butcher-shop.

bloodgrooves cut in the floor.
and it whispers.

"all blood flows downhill:
acheron to
styx to
thames to
phlegethon to
jordan to
lethe.
so tell us, iscariot:
why struggle against us?
why struggle
against bloodgravity?"

"pandemonium."
the poet keeps walking,
"pay no mind. it can do nothing
but whisper."

i nod, follow the poet,
but pandemonium whispers softer
or my thoughts whisper louder.
"heaven despises you, iscariot. 
heaven will never take you back. 
bloodtraitor! 
betrayer-god! 
cease your folly; 
turn around! go back!"

and then
«dissenter!»
came shrieking like
this sword through my neck. 
a guillotine wind 
and i am staring at 
my headless body 
toppling.

a bearded shadow crouches over me, 
a stolen roman lance in its hands. 
robbed in dusty brown, 
its voice laughs hollow.

«as if your schismatic self 
would escape without scars! 
do not talk, 
i hate your voice, god. 
look! you do not bleed 
but gush black bile. truly 
you are no man.»

my ear so close to pandemonium 
rushing downhill. 
the whispers held me in place.

"back, sinner! 
back to pain, 
back to hell. 
turn back, iscariot!"

banshee wail of the shadow.

«taste your dissention, iscariot. 
taste the heavenly blood on your hands, 
taste it. 
and tell me i was wrong.»

the poet at one ear. 
pandemonium at the other.
the shadow laughs
and i can only--

black bile boiling.
"it's all true."
headless body standing.
"it's all true."
a fist of fingers in my hair.
"all true."
raise my head to speak.

"listen.
you think i don't know what you whisper?
i did not ask for this.
i did not ask to be free.
i know better than anyone
what i have done.

i am ashamed that i walk now
and all of hell crawls.
i did not ask for this."

the shadow nods,
points the lance.

«but will you continue?»

and i nod yes.

Day 5: Covenant

a smile?
the shadow bows, steps back,
and vanishes.
my neckflesh knits together
and i breathe properly.

"iscariot..."

the poet exhales.
but i am done talking
and we move on.

the cavern walls expand
until i forget i am underground.
course sand and pitch under my feet.
dirty. clinging.
like hell clutched at me.

a seaside with no sea
and along this beach,
sinner wearing tongues of fire
walk like funeral lamplighters.

perpetual sand...
and the poet leads

blindly.

"we are not lost.
no, i have been here before.
this way, this way,
i am sure of it.
i know where i am."

we are lost.

but there is nothing i can do--
sinners with burned faces
curling into their personal flames.
i sit down.

a fiery hand on my shoulder,
a sinner talks with an ashy mouth.

"i can help you, iscariot.
i was a navigator,
i know this terrain better than you
or your guide and can help you.
i know what you try to do:
pandemonium gossips loudly."

harrumph of the poet,
a hacking laugh.

"help from a sinner!
my memory is not so gone that i
forget the crimes you have done.
your cunning will not fool us.
come. i know the way."

but i do not follow the poet,
and instead crouch low
where the navigator
scratches a burning finger in the sand.
and where he touches flares quickly, then freezes to glass.

"memorize swiftly, as the sand will soon take my patterns. this will lead you to the cathedral--that is as far as i have traveled. i dare not go farther. i have not suffered enough. you continue, iscariot. my hope lies with you. and remember me."

the oiltorch sinners crowd around us now and the navigator is lost among orange eyelids and flickering torches.

Day 6: Conqueror

dashing from the temple, the air is suddenly full of mob shouts and i can feel the heat of execution arising.

"barabbas! barrabas! barrabas! give us barrabas!"

they spill from the alleyways, dance jeeringly along the streetside. fists out second-story windows, children cursing from shoulders, and already the cobblestones are coated in rabid foam and blood. i edge in, putting my robe up over my head. but the crowd is too thick, too tall, the fists pushed at the sky blot it out and the screams of

"barrabus! kill him! barrabus! save yourself, king of the jews!"

are solid in the air.
i turn away, for there is nothing to be done now. feeling the grip of my dagger that lies waiting, i set off in search of rope.

"there!"
blocky obsidian rises monolithic.
we push open black doors.

inside is early morning stillness,
crisp nipping frost.
blue shadows
thrown through stained glass.

aisles heavy with gold cloaks,
mouths moving in the dark.

poet pushing me:

    "let us go quickly,
or we shall freeze in place.
see? they struggle to move,
struggle to escape the ice.
    we must keep moving."

an empty crucifix watches us pass.

up a corridor,
to a door that hisses.

    "stop.
(poet with his hand out)
i remember this room.
there are snakes who bite
and curse you to endlessly transform.
to lose yourself again and again.
we must run.
one.
two.
three. go now."

door thrown open
and beyond is a rocky field.
trees jut from stony soil,
limbs dangling with snakes.

green grass undulates with a thousand rustling snakes
and as soon as we open the door
i feel all the blades of grass turn,
    all the tree limbs reach out.
but we are already halfway across,
and the grass spits venom.

a single misplaced rock.

    and the poet goes.

"forget me! go on!"

impossible.

we clasp hands, 
on our feet again and
the snakes behind, 
slick fangs hungering and 
    there is the doorway!
the snakes stretch--

no. 
safe. 
the snakes cannot go further, 
and turn back.

i let out my breath, 
    but the poet keeps his. i look.

there, his shirt is torn 
and a lean scratch glistens on white skin.

Day 7: Change

"judas..."

the poet collapses, his muscles dancing 
and his face boils clean. 
eyes shot whiteblind.

"judas, give me your hand, 
where are you judas? 
oh, we shall never make it now, 
judas, where are you? give me your hand!"

we touch, grab hands. 
i pull him to his feet.

"i am here, 
i am here. 
don't worry, we will find a cure."
(if only i had run faster!)
i guess i shall lead now
though i do not know the way."

obsidian staircase, tight.
the poet walks, one hand
against the rockface, the other
in mine.

he cries,
   eyes bloodshot open,
   flickers through faces.

linden leaf warrior.
suckling cherub child.
wandering bearded jew.

convulse\&collapse,
weeping white tears, blind again.

laurel bark skin.
splits up beast kidneys.
coughs out fake teeth.

dragging him slowly up the stairs,
   for he leans heavily.
rich pinepitch in the air.

we spiral up and out to
   plains of solid lava flow.
veins of pandemonium cutting
through the rock.
black scratchsmoke rising
from a lake of bubbling pitch.

   baptism.
in the lake,
sinners waist-deep
immerse again and again.
   rebirth and death.

we step onto the plain
   and the spiderweb of pandemonium
leaps in five hundred voices.

"you think you can guide him, iscariot?
bloodtraitor."
you only bring misfortune.
this is your blindness, your sin.
it should be your eyes
sewn shut."

demons standing behind the sinners
repeating dogma.
«in the name of the father
in the name of the father
in the name of the father»
i drop to a knee.

"pandemonium, i beg you.
you are the knowledge of the sinners.
which one of your voices can tell me
where he may be cured? i beg,
for his sake, not mine.
i am not innocent,
but he is.
tell me where to go."

"betrayer-god!
your sin taints him!"

a hiss of insults follow me as i stand.
i will get no blood from this rock.

Day 8: Redemption

past the lake a curve of steps
cuts in the rock. flinty,
a slip and we would be baptized in pitch.
slow. careful.

top.
we rest on empty baptismal fonts. ahead,
a slope of loose gravel and scree
undercut with sinner blood.

the poet feeling the warmth of his stigmata.
raises his voice:

"judas, do not worry
about me. i was never destined
for heaven. i will never be able
to cross the threshold
of hell's gates. you however must cross.
of that i am sure."

"nonsense.
we said we would travel together.
please,
i cannot betray again."

i pull the poet to his feet,
and from the top of the rockslide,
a voice cries

"iscariot!"

hand grasping slashed wrist,
i dig heels in the scree,
run to the top.

a doctor,
face wrenched too far over the shoulder,
eyes staring upwards.
he turns.

"i know thee, yet
how comes it that you are out,
iscariot? even mine magicks
do not know. but lo!
thy friend stands envenom'd,
cursed to transform. i would lend my aid,
but this dagger in mine arm
drains blood.
and i lack the strength to pull it out,
as hell hath stabbed it in."

he shows me his pierced wrist,
his wicked dagger.

what, this?

and i pull it out.

gasp from the doctor.
"could it be hell
that drove thy wicked blade?
fix my head then,
i despise never looking straight."
the poet nods to me, and
   i twist his backwards head
   with a pop of vertebrae.

the doctor stretches,
   feels his frontways face.
he dips his finger in the knife-wound,
draws a crude circle on the poet--
   blood on bone white.

"this shall hold the poison,
lock thee into one transformation.
i have not the power to restore thee.
that magick runs deep and hellish.
yet there is one who knows hell's tricks,
   but long is the way, and hard.
   come, iscariot, poet:
i can lead thee."

wait.

"doctor,
you know who i am,
but still wish to travel together.
i offer nothing,
   no shelter,
   no peace.
i cannot. i am the iscariot, after all.
so again:
   why do you wish to travel with me?"

the doctor exhales a dark lung of smoke.

"this dagger in me.
i lied.
it is no mark of hell;
i drove it in myself.
   it marks for how much
   i was willing to sell my blood.
you ask why i wish to travel together.
   in life, i was a scholar,
   and no sphere escaped my study.
yea, i knew of heaven and hell,
studied them for many happy hours.
but because of mine foolishness,
   i was not judged by minos,
   but thrown directly here.
i know thee, iscariot.
i know what thou does.
and while i cannot believe
hell will let me go,
    i can try.
you are going to minos,
because you wish to know why you were released.
good. i too, wish to see minos.
with this dagger out,
    i stand anew.
i will go
and ask for a fair trial.
    that is mine answer to you."
sinners staring, breath caught
    in their backward throats.
i nod,
    the doctor points.
as the sinners watch
with twisted eyes.

Day 9: Kings

the rockslide goes slow, the doctor leading
and i follow with the poet.

three souls stumbling.
but slowly i believe
    there is a fourth
    who walks beside us.
    a scrabbling shadow.

top of the rockslide
and a wet green stench rises
like the bottom of golgotha.
a river of excrement
and faces shouting praise from within.

"blessed be!
    praise be the iscariot!"
i turn away, retch.

"they mock, they jest.
surely they do not know
what they speak. doctor, i cannot cross.
they do not know what they worship.
and i do not wish to taint them
with the color of my sin.
i must turn away;
surely there is another crossing.
not here, not among
this sick praise."

the doctor shakes his head.

"there is nowhere else."

and we step into the river.

shit-smeared hosannas
"the king!"
stab deeper than hell's fangs ever did.

the poet clasps my hand.

"believe, judas.
you are not alone anymore.
close your ears to their voices;
listen to us.
we shall get through this."

will we?

but we are already across the river.

i shake but the poet steadies me,
the doctor continuing.

"almost..."

dodge a fleshy parade,
driven by whiplash on whiplash.
and hell opens,
stretches obsidian walls to heaven,
and pours down blood to wear them smooth.
but the waterfall is too tall,
too wide.
and i see no path.

"doctor, is this the only way?
perhaps you have lead us astray?
there are no stairs,
no ladders,
no giants.
there is nothing here
but futility."

does he smile at me?

"too quick to give up,
that is your sin, iscariot.
now allow me
to show you mine.
come out now:
and cease your scrabblings."

a friar, poor and honest-looking
steps from the shadows.
throws off the cowl to show
drowned stringy hair.
white female lips.

"thorns are thorns, iscariot.
be they nailed in hands,
stabbed in forearms,
or bent into crowns--
all draw blood.
i introduce mine:
the thorn, the dagger.
damnation squeezed into flesh."

the devil nods with her honest face
and my bones shiver.
now she is changing,
evolving.
four arms, coiled wings,
six legs, and a scorpion tail.

how i envy your blindness, poet!

she lowers her body
and the doctor climbs on,
gestures to us.

the poet feels me cling to him.

"doctor, i cannot see,
but i can taste the stench of devil.
and if you are suggesting
we trust your demon
in flying up this cliff--"
"take them."
banshee cry,
two clawed hands locking around the poet and i,
and we jump into the clouds.

Day 10: Endings

there is nothing around me now
save the poet,
the beating of devil wings,
and an endless waterfall.

i lost the ground long ago
in the mist and smoke.
beside me, the poet vomits yellow,
and i watch it fall away.

is that pandemonium?
vomit. blood. tears. shit.
a million souls emptying themselves
until it whispers back.

like the whispers of temple candleflames,
hushed priestly prayers late in the morning,
they greet me:

"ah, judas! faithful judas,
loyal judas, you return to us!
we are at your service, benefactor!
ask us what you wish and it straight
shall be done."

thirty speckles dancing in candlelit air.
thirty stars falling to earth.

"ha! swine, do not lay your stained hands on me!
you may wipe them on your frocks
as much as you wish, but the blood is set,
sinking deep to taint your bones.
you stink of sulfur
and those robes cannot hide it.
you shall not reach me with flatteries
as you once did. oh, i was quick to catch
your flutter of silver before, but no more!
take your worthless coin,
it is sticky with hot blood."

the heavy chiming of coin on stone.
pouch split open and it glints meanly.
i turn away and burst out into the street.
suddenly the waterfall
   disappears
and we are looking over a plain of blood
that rushes over the edge.
   the devil circles,
drops us carefully.

our feet on worn rock.
ankle-deep black blood.

"you!
(the poet has found his voice)
how dare you! how dare you!"

the doctor laughs,
   and strikes off upriver with his devil.

i take the poet's hand,
but he pulls it away.
   we follow at a distance.

a few feet and the ground goes soft,
   knee deep sand.
but soon the river narrows,
   and we climb up to dry land.

air blistered with the breath of sinners.
the river is gone and i see red-hot.

desert of burnt sand.
   shredded flesh sinners.

the poet feels my trembling.
"i do not want to cross it either,
but there is no choice, judas.
come.
   i am here.
   we are together.
you do not walk alone.
let us all take hands."

the doctor nods,
and we clasp together,
     myself, the poet, the doctor,
and step into the storm.

Day 11: Stories

i know i can not die again.
but i step in and

feel the roar of wind pass
   clean through me,

shards
  of sand
legs unstable,
   flesh torn,
     healed, torn,
       healed
      torn, healed.
  half-
skeleton,
        a glimpse of
   swirling sands
before my eyes are ripped
     and regrown.
  gaunt sinner shells
     shuffling.

then i am out.

clear eyesight,
 whole flesh.

the poet beside me hacking flesh&sand.
and no doctor.

(the poet malicious)

"i swear,
he was right beside me. his fingers slipped!
but surely, he
would not, could not be lost! not him!
most likely,
he is ahead, for we are slow.
let us continue then,
for there is nothing here anymore.
let us continue,
the two of us, judas,
let us. let us."

"no."
standing now.
"no."
legs firm.
"no."
sanguine.

"did you not say
we are together? i cannot leave him,
like i cannot leave you. i am going back.
you are going back. together we shall find him."

and we step back in.

blasphemer! blasphemer! "doctor!"
blasphemer! blasphemer! blasphemer!
"where are you?"
"here!" blasphemer! blasphemer!
"my hand!" blasphemer! blasphemer!
blasphemer! "where?"
blasphemer! blasphemer!
"here!" blasphemer!
"got it!" blasphemer!
blasphemer! blasphemer!

out.

"accursed devilspawn!"
they grabbed me rudely
soon as i stepp'd in.
held me fast, bare to that damned wind.
forever they might have clutch'd,
speaking base lies,
    if thou hadn't saved me, judas."
no words.
    for nobody.
we follow the blood
burbling out of a dark wood.

Day 12: Allegory

mutilated
    moan
echoes between trees and thorns.
the woods rustling
    like they tore at themselves.
the blood swift along the ground,
warm too. and the trees
drip blood like dewdrops,
    black fruit on wet boughs.

a sinner runs wailing,
    chased by dogs stripped of skin
    and fitted with demon fangs.
he passes.

and the moan becomes words,
jumbles of speech pouring
from broken branches.

glossolalia.

    "is that iscariot?
betrayer-god,
you walk, he (away, before you are cursed!)
    who spilled
his own intestines! too short
    (before you take root) on rope,
    find plenty in your bowels! ha!
god, (run, iscariot)
    our father who art in hell,
    i have heard your betrayal money
bought a plain of blood. (akeldama)
tell me: is that true?
that hell only cost thirty silver to build?"

"pandemonium...?"

there are no more words.
the trees have healed and only.
moan.

"pandemonium!"

the blood at my feet laughs.

"tell me.
why do you call me god?"

moan.

the doctor shakes his head.

"taunts, judas.
sinners quick on their knife-edge.
unable to speak
except through spilt blood.
twisted beings
waiting for the next wounding.
they can do nothing.
let us continue."

but already my entrails are turning brown,
bursting out the poet's stitches.

thorns piercing intestines
and suddenly

(away, before you are cursed!)
strikes a horrible revelation.

feet taking root in bloody loam,
i see the doctor turn,
the poet reaching out,

and i reach for them with a hand of briars,
feel my innards surge like vomit--
a gag of thorns.
until i am simply another shrub,
screaming into darkness.
Day 13: Sorrow

mouthful of branches,
    i cannot speak.
the poet and doctor stand stunned, unsure.
for i look like every other shrub.

"judas...
forget me.
"judas...
forget me.
"judas...
"forget me!"

mouth suddenly empty, free of briars.
the poet stands with a plucked thorn.

"too late, too slow.
they tried to warn me with       (run iscariot)
but now i see their wisdom.
    too late, too slow.
i fear i am beyond your magicks, doctor.
you showed your sin:
    well this is mine.
        my slashed stomach,
        my hanged neck.
    go on;
i slow us down. i am weak,
tired. let me stay here.
    it suits me."

pandemonium burbles
    "yes, yes."

the poet crushes finger-twigs.
    "fool, how much blood will you leak?
how much life will you lose to pandemonium?
    until it speaks your voice?
    until it speaks your thoughts?
already you have bled more
than all these sinners. do you not remember
it was you that found me?
it was you that found him?
    we go nowhere without you, judas.
    i believe.
you shall find a way."
no, impossible.
trees cannot move.

but i remember
the way an ash tree once reached out
and offered me a simple branch
when i needed it most.

trees cannot move.
but i am not a tree.

eyes full of tears,
i struggle to make a fist.
my hand is brown needles,
ten thousand nailpoints.

and now stretch--
growling into my gag
pushing against wood grain,
creak of encasing bark,
splinter of bone.
like a locust
emerging from its skin.

more!

the soil gives way,
every movement sinking thorns deeper.

more!

demons clutching my roots,
dragging me back,
wood snaps
breaks
tears
scream now!
more! more!

  crack!
like a thunderbolt
  and i collapse in shallow pandemonium.
  shaking off sawdust & dirt.
the poet and the doctor help me up,
throw my arms over their shoulders.
say nothing.
continue on.

Day 14: Songs

we break clear of the forest.
    midsummer bright
    and we all blink.
even the poet covers his white eyes.

a vast ocean.
    phlegethon, the doctor calls it.
and he says it is but a river
but i see no opposite bank.
just boiling blood
and sinners standing like black rocks,
    their tears evaporating to steam.

standing agape.
    impossible.
    trapped again.
    but i say nothing.

the poet points downriver.
    "there was a ford somewhere,
but it has been a long time,
and the river was smaller then.
too many sinners,
too much violence."

the river rocks begin to turn,
point bloodstained hands.
    laugh now.

    "wade! wade in,
you who are not clean of blood.
surely,
    those pure hands felt a pulse once,
    those knuckles knew a crack of bone,
    a squish of innards.

wade in then!
or perhaps you deny your own nature,
deny your given fangs.
    violence. power. death.
this is you, this is you, this is you.
so come join us,
brothers!"
their words and
    i remember zealot cries,
screams of new judea.
new ink, fresh metal,
sweat of rebellion.
    and he spoke of our new way...
    our new kingdom...

the poet pulls me back,
for my foot is just above the river.

"no, judas,
their words are fraught with deceit.
yes, we are human.
but they are animals.
    they rage like wounded dogs,
    their violence is nonsense.
do not group yourself with them, judas."

"ahem."

a shaky little sinner,
pale as winter.
axehead cleaving his crown.

"i am sick. i am mean.
i stand here because they were right:
    i am unclean,
    incarnadine.
but when you say that i revel in my cruelty,
that my rage is that of a mongrel,
oh i would spit. yes there are those here
who claw their skin
    and pluck out their eyes.
but, there are more sick with guilt
who stand quiet. that is me,
and that is you, iscariot.
    but this river is not for you anymore.
you must not wade in.
perhaps this is redemption, (ha)
or simply foolishness,
but i shall help you.
    for i believe you, iscariot.
pandemonium lies viciously,
says that you shall never make it out.
    i cannot believe it.
this is what i can do.
i can carry you,
(you are like a feather)
i can carry you across.
    please."

"no! absolutely not!"
the poet furious,
"as if we would fall to your tricks?
carry us out halfway--to the deepest
and then drop us? i'd rather
take my chances with the doctor's devil again
    than with you, sinner."

step closer.
small voice.

"i believe you."

_is that a smile on the doctor's devil?_

"judas! he stands in his very sin,
the blood he spilled from fellow man,
and still you trust him? what makes you think
that he will not betray you?
one drop of that blood,
    and nessus will never let you go--"

"yes, but do you not see?
in those eyes, i see--
    i see-- (me)
give me your hand. you shall carry me across."

i step into those spindly fingers,
and he holds me aloft.
the poet shakes his head,
steps back by the doctor,
    who is already climbing on his devil.

"i cannot,
    i cannot,
    i cannot, judas.
do as you want. we shall be overhead.
until the other side, then."

the devil shoots into the air.
we stand for a moment, watching the devil shrink, then turn across the river.

Day 15: Empty

the river grows deep quickly.
a few steps,
and it is waist level, then chin, then eye, then overhead, until he is just a pair of arms sticking out that i sit on.

no sinners here, only the jabber of boiling phlegethon.
and for the first time since the mouth spat me out,
i am alone.

hush:
quiet gasp of an underground stream
and the grass outside the cave amber-green and thick.
no sound of sandals on cracked earth as mary enters crying:

"judas! judas!
they have taken him,
sentenced him to death!
i saw it, saw it all--
the others are hiding as well.
judas, talk to me, hold me, i am afraid!"

the morning aramaic sun peeking curiously in the cave.

"why, judas, why won't you hold me anymore?
please, hold me, hold me close.
i am afraid, there is nowhere else to go,
please, judas!"

and her arms come soft around my neck, tearful face pressed to my chest and i have nothing to give but my arms around her waist.
she feels me and turns her face up, and then i am wet against her lips as if that
would cleanse her memory, push him from her thoughts for even one minute but

i know it is impossible. even before i taste salty tears, feel them hot on my face, i know it is impossible. so i break, step back.

"judas..."

"no, do not cling to me. now, answer me truthfully. would you cry like that, if it was reversed? if i was there, standing stripped before pilate, and he was hiding in the leper caves? would these tears flowing free be mine? i doubt it. mary, sweet mary, do not delude yourself. i am not hiding here for fear of the romans, but from the others. it was i that betrayed your beloved. it was i that kissed him in gethsemane. i am telling you this because you do not love me. i know this, no, listen to me. it is not me you love, but him. hate me, mary, despise me for selling him to the romans-- it will be easier. now go; hurry to him. go, mary, and goodbye."

i am stepping farther back, my eyes fixed on mary. she turns away into the sunlight, and disappears across the grassy plain.

"we are here."

back-- sinners crowd around us cursing.

"drop him! drop the iscariot! this blood is his!"

but they do nothing, only scream. my sinner wades in,
lowers me to dry land.

"remember me, judas"
is all he says. i stand on the shore,and he fades back, hidden nowbehind pointing sinner hands.

i walk away,footprints uphill.

overhead the devil cries,drops down next to me.the poet cannot believe i survived.

little faith.

we continue onwardas the ground turns gray.raven grass, sedge,and a city rises on the hill.

"dis..."

Day 16: Prophet

unreal
buildings jutting out a brown fog,glowing cherry like swords in the furnace.

"dis..."

city of heretics,bleak walls crowding out the air.we stand at the edge of a tarn,black and lurid below.and a thin bridge above the wasted watersover which a crowd flows,so many,their sighs like nightingales after a massacre.

crossing,we jostle sinners away.the doctor mutters

"all rudely forc'd,"

the poet stepping over trampled white bodies
and we enter the city.

  pandemonium stretched into bloodstream,
  running in the gutter veins,
  flowing overhead in pipework arteries.

the lamplighters are at work,
demons with burning roman lances
reaching up to streetlamps
where sinners scream and press against the glass.
  devilish street-sweepers grinning,
  sludge vomited from the sewers,
  mad chatter of the heart-pound industrial,
  squeal of torn pig iron,
  poor demonic pickpockets running in gangs,
  steel and oil and smoke and coal and grease and
  rusty buildings like funeral pyres,
  a great tower tolling the thirteenth hour,
  massive wheels sweating out the bloodiron,
  levers and gears and switch-buttons and cogs all mesh
so the entire city cries as one.

  "dis..."

sinners faceless in grimy high street windows,
turning against a black winter dawn.
a slow descending ashen snow.

we stay close,
  but the crowd on the street does not notice us.

then the air turns glassy,
wavering like a desert mirage.
i lose the doctor and poet
for the air is solid,
the walls formed.
  and a voice speaks
  like leaves in the wind.

  "'behold" "the god!" "black&blistered--"
"in my jar" "gaping at spectacles."
"and he brings" "no sacrifice" "save"
"himself?" "but he does not" "speak,"
"pray now--" "iscariot.'"

and i watch the air change,
swirl in whirlwinds, take feminine form.
pale twisted legs stepping out,
sinner-sibyl wrinkled and dry.

"a thousand voices i" "speak all"
"at once." "now, iscariot." "give" "me your hand."
"i shall draw" "the smallest" "drop"
"of blood and read" "your future."
(pinprick) "ah!" "more than enough."
"more" "than seventy bulls" "& seventy ewes."
"i see that" "question bubbling." "but no--"
"i cannot tell you" "why" "you have been"
"released." "i am not" "wise."
(she heaves furious)
"your blood speaks--" "says"
"you shall find" "your" "answers."
"but" "there is more."
"you do not know" "yet"
"what you are doing." "you"
"travel blindly," "and therefore"
"you" "do not travel" "at all."
"but there is nothing" "i can say,"
"for your blood" "is strong" "like ichor."
"and there is" "only so much"
"my words" "can do."
"i see" "a golden tree," "boughs weighed"
"with fat" "apples." "you must find" "this tree"
"in the dark wood before" "you climb."
"it" "holds all sin."
"it holds" "your" "sin."
"but remember" "it is not" "what you can destroy"
"it is" "what you can create"
"and what" "you" "can mend."

"but what of this? how do i
escape from this jar? or do you
see nothing but distant futures?
a life thirty years away,
fumbling in the dark
with your eyes fixed on the stars?"

"why iscariot," "this jar does not" "exist"
"save what you" "construct." "we are those"
"with no vision," "no path." "we say better"
"to be trapped inside" "than wander"
"with no direction."
"once" "you" "decide to move"
"the jar" "melts away. "try--"
"that wall" "but"
"do not press your hand" "on" "the wall"
"press" "through it."

wall flushed with orange coals,
like a new sword on the anvil.
i pull my hand back, afraid.

but below,
the doctor has spotted me,
is pointing to the poet,
to me.

breathe,
my lungs full of the sibyl's voices,
hand flat, palm tender,
and
    like cool water

i fall to the street.

the doctor offers a hand,
helps me to my feet again.

"i spoke with a sibyl.
she says we shall escape.
she says we shall find heaven.
let us go: it is not far.
already the way is becoming straight
and smooth. soon, soon.
    we shall leave this place behind."

bare feet on rocky roadways,
    we walk out the ruined gate.

Day 17: Lament

empty bottles,
silk handkerchiefs,
sandwich papers.

river runs softly,
and beneath the dark glass surface
folded hands,
sleeping faces,
    drift away.
"be aware,"
the poet smells the brine,
"the river may never break foam,
but it is swift. too swift
for us to swim.
    lend us your devil, doctor.
she can fly us."

"she hast fallen ill,
dear poet. curious indeed--
i've never seen her so weak.
lo! she curls up, dries out.
no, poet,
she cannot fly us."

but as he speaks,
i see it downriver.
    a wide ship
    and a man beckoning.

he wears charcoal,
and smells of burnt feathers.
his back full of gold arrows.

"no bridge, no bridge,"
the ferryman riddles,
"fallen, crushed, discarded.
my boat, my ship, my barge,
i can pole you across
this river. climb, climb,
give me your hand now!"

"judas..."
for i am already climbing in.

"you doubters!"
("remember me, judas")
"you did not trust me at the phlegethon,
will you trust me now?
here, see my hands,
take my hands,
both of you.
stop your doubting
    and believe."

they give me their hands
and climb aboard.
the ferryman grins at the devil 
and pushes away from the shore.

cold clearness of the oil-press 
and the night dark like wandering stars, 
punctured with brilliant torches.
a hundred pharisee-frocks trailing dust, 
a hundred more roman lances. 
me with my money-purse, 
feeling the weight inside. 
to the garden then. 

the ferryman turns, smiling. 

through the screen of olive trees we move. 
shuffle of sandals on quiet dirt 
and the mutter of a prayer. 

"remove this cup.
remove this cup.
not my will but thine.
not my will but thine."

boatpole raised. 

my feet sleepwalk through the grove, 
finger pointing as if on a string, 
and my voice is so far away:

"he is that one."

"akedia!"

but the olives are ripe and plump, 
the rain good to the thirsty trees 
and caiaphas cannot see. 

"show us, judas iscariot. 
the trees and branches are thick. 
already you have done so much for us, 
may we not request one more favor? 
show us judas iscariot, 
which one is he?"

and strikes me in the ear.
stop, feet.
stop, hands.
stop, lips.
he looks up from the rock he kneels at,
unknits his fingers.
great drops of blood fall in the dirt
for i am clenching a fist,
as if i could hold myself back.
but i cannot stop, cannot stop,
and he stands.
to me:

"your will be done."

i collapse into the dead river.

and i kiss him.

Day 18: Strength

no splash,
no ripple.

just a body slipping away
underneath perfect glass.
i turn bellyup.
the boat is distant,
the surface ice, crystal,

and i drift...

"yes, iscariot,
lay back in my arms.
let them worry,
but you rest now.
you rest."

and hundreds of pale hands hold me,
as the river carries me away.

yes.
(remember me, judas)
wait.
"remember me, judas."
no.
pandemonium flooding my ear.
"rest, iscariot,
lay back now. stay here,
here where it is safe and calm.
let us embrace you,
    let us carry you away
from your memories."

shake, lash out,
    i try to shout,
but the river fills my mouth,
and my protest
    bubbles away.

"judas! what is the meaning
of bringing these ones
to our doorstep? no--
are you the betrayer he spoke of?"

there is a sword flashing out between leaves,
and the romans ready their lances.

"no, simon peter,
put that sword away.
i will go with them now.
go quickly, take my disciples,
hide yourselves so they cannot find you.
i will need you to survive."

he steps forward into a halo of roman lances,
face slick with sweat, but he is calm.
eyes still, hands clasped behind.
they bind him with rope, lead him out.
past me, he whispers,

"thank you, iscariot."

disappearing among the olive trees,
the roman lances scatter the remaining disciples.
robes flapping into early morning
as the priests turn back to the temple,
the romans to their barracks,
and in the distance a cock crows.

i shout into the river

"it was not me!"
"you did nothing,"
pandemonium whispers with white rag voices.

"no. i tried.
i tried, and i loved,
loved, loved him.
and i failed.
but i tried."
pandemonium shrieks
as a boatpole pierces the river,
not a foot in front of me.
i grab it,
and the doctor pulls me up.
the poet and devil stand at the edge,
holding the ferryman above the water
as the doctor helps me back on board.

"i heard pandemonium in there.
it grows desperate. the voices
are strained, rushed,
full of violent speech."

we are doing something right.
the doctor dips the boatpole,
and we glide across the river
to the shore.

"not far now!"
the doctor leaps off the boat,
"i can see minos on his throne.
there! i shall get mine answer."

up the slope,
walking to the rumblecrack sound
in the distance.

Day 19: Judge
higher,
i see sinners scurrying
in the ravine below us.
they are throwing stones,
and now run at each other,
pushing boulders.
rumblecrack.

higher,
the air splits,
arc's out lightning
over a shallow marsh.
faces pulled from stygian mud.
sinners spitting out
burst stomachs.

higher,
lilith fills the sky,
holding sinners in her hair.
the winds of a million lover cries
send rocks scattering
and we bend to the ground.

higher,
plateau.

a crowd of urns,
a crowd of sinners,
and minos.

minos.
he sits on a glowing marble throne,
etched with letters.
a snake whips from behind him,
cracks the air,
and we shy back.
he is half-bull,
head nothing but hair and horns,
eyes black with wisdom.

grunt of hot breath.

"so you have come.
ask your question,
one called iscariot, and i will answer
as best this judge can.
you are at least allowed that,
having traveled the full wrath of hell."

the sinners crawl away as we walk forward,
doctor and poet and myself.

"sir,
you who is wise and just,
answer me:
why was i released?"

minos snorts.

"can you not tell already, iscariot?
your sin tore open the earth,
just as his sacrifice tore open the sky.
the ultimate betrayal,
sin against newborn heaven,
split open this chasm you call hell.
did you not wonder
why sinners curse you god?
you are a maker, iscariot,
you grabbed the dirt and formed it,
built this place to curse yourself,
to remind you of your betrayal
day after day after day.
hell is yours, iscariot.
sinners curse you
because you have trapped them here,
dragged them down in your
self-pity, in your depravity.
your sin taints them.
but now you are out,
now you see what you have done.
your guilt was too heavy,
and bore you to the deepest levels.
now you stand before me.
you have traversed all hell.
you have seen the suffering.
therefore, iscariot,
allow me to advise you,
conceited as it may be.
creation to creator:
do not waste this.
you have weathered hell, yes.
but your atonement is not over.
i know you have spoken with the sibyl.
heed her words.
find your sin and take it to heaven.
if you truly wish to remember those,
do as i say.
climb to heaven,
and cleanse yourself of your guilt.
    now.
    you, doctor.
you have come asking for a trial.
but you do not need one.
go,
    fly.
leave your devil behind."

the doctor turns to us,
and bursts into white light.
    wings shining in hell's grimy air,
face full of holy fire.

"wait!"
the poet cries out,
"my cure! who can cure me?"

"hippocrates."
the doctor speaks fearfully,
his voice magnificent.

then,
slicing the air,
his devil wails.
    tottering female frame,
    all but gone she leaps
    with the last of her strength,
    the doctor's dagger in her hand.

«he is mine!»

almost upon him,
closing with the dagger point sharp and

i
    step
    between
    them.

the dagger sinks deep,
    up to the twisted hilt.

over my shoulder,
    the doctor stands agape
and all i can say to him is
"fly, my friend."

Day 20: Thirteen

the doctor's illuminated face,
his perfect lips moving.

"truly..."

a blaze crackling upwards,
and he disappears.

"come,"
i take the poet's hand.
"we must continue."

pain shoots from my chest,
and i topple.

"look at us,"
i speak in blood bubbling from my lungs.
the poet smiles
"i cannot."

past the crowds of sinners
there are houses and citadels
made like minos' throne.
souls in robes chatter,
but they draw back as we approach,
faces soaked in fear.

"hippocrates!"
the poet speaks frantic.
"where is he? tell us?"

"poet?
could that be? ha!
look at you! you, who wished to see hell!
you, who could not believe.
now look!
your explorations have only
destroyed you.
we have no pity. taste your own pride.
this is justice."

"fools!"
an old man with a staff breaks through them,
"and you call yourselves philosophers, when you are afraid to truly explore?
while he has probed the very depths?
yes, he has suffered at the hands of hell, but he is infinitely better than your cozy circles here! you speak of justice, but you are afraid to truly understand it! come poet, i shall heal you."

he bends, scratches at the ground,
shows me a handful of dust.

"spit in this, iscariot, and rub it on his eyes.
wash him in the sweet creek by the citadel.
this shall restore his sight. then begone:
there is still much left for you to explore."

we do as he says,
and the poet stands blinking,
metamorphosis in reverse.
marvel of eyesight,
familiar skin.

"the gates await."

higher.
and a snarling chorus fills my ears.
the last staircase,
and hell's gates stand there.

they swallow us.
an ebony night sky cut down the middle,
locked with a dangling gold padlock.

the snarling begins anew,
and a woman emerges.

her stomach is burst like mine,
and a three-headed dog struggles from the gash.
it barks in a trinity chorus,
swipes the air with a single free paw.
she twirls a gold key on her finger,
her face honest.

"iscariot,
god of hell.
i know what you seek,
why you stand at my threshold.
but i riddle:
do you know?
why you stand here?"

"let me stand..."
(for the dagger pains me greatly)
"let me stand myself..."

i shake off the poet,
untwist my spine.
the dagger cuts new blood.
and i stagger,
tense,
writhes,
barely but
stay standing.

"judas..."

no, no, i can do this.
body shaking,
look at me!
broken old flesh,
tired blood.
feet unstable and

breathe...
calm...

(rattle of bones)
moves from behind her,
incestuous spawn with gouged eyesockets.
readying a grey flint scythe.
she waits as i find my words.

"no, i don't.
i don't know why.
but i think
neither do you.
who do you see standing here?
the iscariot?
the bloodtraitor?
the betrayer-god?
minos calls me god of hell,
though i can hardly believe it.
and while i may be these,
i am still judas.
that is my answer to you.
why do i stand here?
    because i am judas.
    because i must go on.
if hell cannot tell me why i was released,
then i will ask heaven.
minos believes. the poet believes.
    that is enough for me.
i will make it to heaven,
    so move aside.
    you shall not block my way."

three snarls of wounded pride,
and her nether dogs consume themselves.
her last caterwaul--
    the (rattle of bones) jumps out,
fatal blade flashing.

i see him coming,
    and step towards him.

one step,
    one step,
    one step,

and he draws closer,
    screaming skeletal lungs.

    ten paces between us.
so i close my eyes
    and hell--
    (my hell--)
disappears
    and all i see before me is

mary.

then the ground
    snaps!

and the gates roll back.

eyes open and
it is just the poet and i
standing in a sweet grass meadow
with the gold padlock broken at our feet.
then, screaming from the sky,
an inscribed rock crashes down,
reading,
"abandon all hope,
ye who enter here"

we laugh,
and it echoes off the distant mountains.

Day 21: Gospel

how sweet is the sky!
how blue is the wind!

the poet runs his hand through tall grass,
watches them bend to the breeze.

inhale pure.

"i cannot believe it, judas.
we are out!--out!
feel the air, judas,
taste the coldness of earth!
out!--out!
i repeat it but cannot believe.
now, where shall we go?
to heaven?"

"i do not know the way,"
i confess,
"i thought you might.
you are my guide."

"in hell,
but this is new, judas.
i do not know anything here.
come.
we shall explore then,
and make our way together."

slithering from behind us,
and the devil is at my back.
skin plumped out again,
smooth and lusty,
she breathes heavily.
the dagger twitches,
and i clutch it,
grab the poet for support.

we leave the meadow,
wandering amazed at the trees.
the loam breathes content under our feet.
but step
    by step,
    it grows dark.
this tangle of branches
blots out the sun.
    ancient trees
    who have seen too much.
and our footsteps are swallowed
by their silence.

all the green
    and brown
    and gold
dies in the shadows of the forest,
like withered leaves
clutching the grapevine
    about to be cast into the fire.
the wind turns wicked,
moaning a mouth of artic air.
rustles the bony leaves
    and pushes us deeper.

then we hear the harp.
high-pitched,
    resonating through the wood,
shuddering the trees.

ululation. banshee.
    chills me like no wind could.

and we draw closer...
    daylight breaks through the canopy,
for here the trees have been chopped,
piled in a high pyre
    and lit with a mighty thunderbolt.
but that was long ago
and all that remains now is a mound of ash
    with a harpist at the top.

his eyes are closed in finality,
fingers finding familiar chords,
singing with no breath.

but he stops as we draw near.
speaks lyrical.

"color is fading, fallen silent,
the rust-red rooster runs headless and
a hush of snow suffocates our cities.
break what binds,
burst your own fetters,
god of hell. go forth.
beware the wolves. walk to babel.
and find heaven."

he returns to the harp,
singing
"age of axe,
age of sword,
time of wind,
time of wolf,
er the world falls."

i look up,
and see the sky has been swallowed.
sun gone.
moon gone.
nothing but

a
cold
snow

fall

Day 22: Truth

"quickly,"
speaks the poet,
"we must hurry on.
i believe
there is much left to do."

the dagger spills blood
on fresh fallen snow.
soft crunch under our feet.
the snow is thick, fat.
    it piles quickly.

with no sun
    and no moon,
the wood grows darker.
sky blank grey
for the overripe stars have fallen.
    but soon i cannot even see that,
    for the snow blots all.

we walk, but
    there is no direction.
    knee-deep snow
that stings my legs and
freezes the blood in my veins.
but i cannot die again.
    so we keep walking.

and then i hear singing.
    "age of axe,
        age of sword,"
we have circled back.
    "time of wind,
        time of wolf,"
lost our way.
    "ere the world falls."

the poet collapses at the foot of the ash mound,
listens to the harpist repeat like dogma.
i brush off a seat,
    sit next to him.

    "this wood is too dense, judas.
it is intent
on keeping us here.
    there is no true way,
only a spiraling lie.
we can follow nothing
    save our own footprints."

he turns over,
    speaks his complaints into the snow.

i silently agree
for i was lost the moment i entered.
and with the snow
all these trees are the same.

is this my new curse?
to wander? to escape hell
only to walk endlessly here?
or is this still hell
and the gates a lie?

but there,
something moved
through the graying snow.
on my feet.

what hangs from that tree?

Day 23: Deeds

"judas?"

i am standing,
wading through the snow,
for this is quite familiar.
because i have done this before.

my fingers touch the ash tree,
find those handholds i used long ago
and i am up,
up in the branches.
my gut remembers this place.
but i must, must reach out,
out on the branch,
and touch the rope i trusted.
knotted nine times,
it is still firm.

"my god, my god,
why hast thou forsaken me?"

"i know where we are."

warm gold glow catches my eye.
a fat apple springs to life
from the broken end of my branch.

"it" "holds all sin."
"it holds" "your" "sin."
this is no ash tree.
i climb out to the apple,
pick it from its unlikely budding.
heavy!
suddenly offbalance,
i totter and fall to the packed snow below.
"judas!"
"it's nothing, it's nothing"

my bones splice together quickly
and i stand up, stretch,
the apple frozen in my hand.
i tuck it deep in my pocket.

finger stabbing at the wooden darkness.
that way.
we leave the gallows-wood behind.

through these trees,
past my field,
there we find golgotha.

even in the snow,
it has sunk deep eye sockets,
a yawning toothy mouth.
and on top of the hill,
a lantern shines.
i beckon, the poet sees.
we scramble upwards.

the figure is hunched,
age-worn and the lantern
is dying slowly.
we reach the top and the poet calls out.

"you there! wanderer,
do you know this land?
we are looking for babel,
and the way to heaven.
can you help us?"

the figure turns, and i recoil.
for it is an old man
with the breasts of a woman.
it holds the lantern higher,
and i thought for sure the flame would gut out.
but it holds,
and the figure speaks.

"god,
how i have waited.
seventy times
    i have circled this world,
    knowing not the hour.
ever vigilant,
    watching for you.
this snow tastes of death,
soft and cold.
you have brought the snows,
    and for that i would do anything.
i shall curse you no more,
i have learned the error of my ways.
    i will do as you ask.
i shall guide you to babel."

he turns and thrusts the lantern into snowy darkness.

Day 24: City

"i have walked through it all,
my shoes leaking blood and vinegar.
after i cursed he said time will tell
and you will tell time.
years spent searching amongst the cities built in a day.
babylon. jerusalem. athens. alexandria. london.
freeze flash with my blinking eye.
mud begat clay begat stone begat
wood begat iron begat steel begat
dust on the heads of all the naked merchants
who starve & die hysterical!
    but babel!
    red dragon of babel!
reverse the horrors of the tartarus pit and
jab out the personal god's eye like a roman lance.
heavenly cries clear wine so
hipster & whores & phoenicians &
mad young intellectuals all stand,
copper pots and broad silver sacrifice dishes
brimful of sweet sweet nectar.
lean from windows emptying ashcans,
a rooftop drunken jump for the last drop.
bathe reborn in the aqueducts.
plates of lead paint and asbestos,
gold holy pitchers pour cool cigarette smoke.
and watch! they all turn angelheaded,
legion robed in sweet hyssop white.
babel the eternal, yes,
i too wandered the free streets,
shouted prophecy from below the wall,
drank the ambrosia running in the gutters.

then we bought the apocalypse,
bought it like slabs of meat
in the slave hot sweat market.
the hail came like blue bottleflies,
hissing out a third of the sea.
heaven bared its teeth,
turned our blood bitter
and suddenly all public works
opened their brains to heaven and
shredded red velvet for sackcloth.
ha! personal god who loves us dearly
spits wormwood sulfur amphetamines
and the hearts of the alleyspawn junkies burst
blood out into my alcohol fly,
sleet of syringes needle prick until
that cat's cradle circulatory system
knots gordian monkey-fist hangman noose.
raw boiled wolves hungry for poetry,
torn turtleneck sweaters and we cried--
saltwater tsunami with whitecap poison
knocks the city gate like ten thousand finger cymbals,
ocean saliva uncoiling our streets,
pale green sargasso filing bottomless coffee mugs.
and the wolf of words leapt from the citadel,
teeth like ink and sharp as new quills
as the slavering aftershock rose to meet,
howling against a blood salt moon.
horsehooves sounding like great gunshots,
riders whinnying pestilence war famine death.
mountain ranges ripped roots first,
lakes crying brackish rivers
and all the new angels wail sad little horns
in diner-house blues, shabhotels full
chanting shantih shantih shantih
around tangled stained bedsheets.
and those too biomechanical to die
stood at the windows and watched because
we knew nothing else.
sky pried off the horizon like a lid,
personal god with white beard pointing
javelins down carcinogen throats,
smokestack children kissing last
and the sky went firework bang white
and
a half hour
of silence
fell.
i was lucky.
i was immortal.
i saw the sky die.
i saw you.
    come then.
the world is done.
    look,
    there is babel."

Day 25: Maturity

like a spiral staircase
that grew walls and windows,
grew little tea-shops and red light dens,
    grew chimneys and hot&cold running water
    grew rooftop gardens and electric lights,
babel stands before us.

my eyes track it up
until it slips through perspective.

    climb to the vanishing point.

i look to the poet,
    he nods.

our guide pushes open the adamantine gates.

for a moment i wonder
    if we have wandered a circle.
    if our guide led us backwards
    and has thrown open the gates of hell.

for fire licks at all the bohemian flophouses,
the cigar shops, the symposium lecture halls,
the grubby soup kitchens, the open air cafés.
    an architectural wonder caught up in the
burning burning burning.

"is this not hell itself, 
reborn from humanity?"
the poet does not dare to take a step. 
"we shall never make it through--
no! the fire is too hot, 
see how even the air writhes in pain. 
how shall we fare?
not even nine steps before 
we fall in ash outlines."

"no," our guide says, 
"you have already died. 
these flames do not feast on the dead. 
they will not burn you."

"then you!--"

"i have wandered far, 
much too far. this small flesh 
aches for the comforting fire now. 
let us go together, 
for there is no other way to heaven."

the poet nods, 
and we step through the gates. 
into babel.

wood oven blast of dry air 
almost knocks us back. 
we walk slowly, 
for the fire fans wildly, 
dancing across the streets.

i can feel the poet's nails 
drawing blood from my wrist. 
i look at my hand.

the skin is unbroken, 
smooth and perfect. 
but underneath i feel jangles of nerves, 
lumps of blood kicking mad, boiling over, 
veins struggling to hold it in, 
and i know the poet feels the same.

but we continue.
through mazes of burnt out jazz clubs,
plush gentleman's societies raging orange,
libraries of roasted birds.

all the time we cling lower,
the poet curling in pain,
thrashing at himself like
insects scrabbled through his veins.
and i am prostrate,
walking on elbows.
obbing with weakness,
the dagger-handle scrapes.

i cannot go farther...

hide fetal sobbing.

mary--
cought in the evening sunset.

"why are you not at dinner with the others?
have they already finished, or
did you leave early? judas--"

silence, my mary. silence.
i do not answer her questions,
but grab her hand in the failing light.
she gasps softly and lets me pull her close.
her hair smells of lavender and myrrh,
washed anew for the passover,
her skin a white lily flowering from her robes.
i feel how she presses into me,
knits her fingers tight around my waist.
as if i had told everything to her
in that single gesture. she knew it all,
and said nothing. just buried her head
into my chest with no tears.
we stand there, let the sun die,
and when it is dark we break.

"mary, i will soon be going.
don't try to follow me. just forget,
forget everything you knew.
go somewhere, far away from this.
and don't try to find me.
don't delude yourself, sweet mary--
i'm not who you think. i'm broken,
despicable. i am a stain
on your perfection.
and i shall prove it,
very shortly."

the sun has long past vanished and mary shivers.
but i am already walking down the road.

then it is still.
the pain gone, the fire cold.
my strength back, i stand up
and help the poet to his feet.

Day 26: Mortification

i barely feel the fire now,
a small warmth like
hands cupping a bowl of hot water.

walking easy,
we turn the corner
and the fire dies.

air still and white,
and we open the next gate
to ambrosia and nectar,
cinnamon and cloves.
my stomach cries hunger.

it shall be sweet in your mouth.

we run to the tables,
feel the plump grapes and olives,
smell bread crisp and golden.
strips of savory meat,
swimming in juice and gravy,
whole casks of pure crimson purple wine.
we eat.
no forks, no knives,
i pile pomegranates and apples,
walnuts glazed with honey high,
and eat with my hands.

but bitter in your stomach.

stab of acid up my throat,
i drop my plate.
lose the clatter in the noise of my ache.
one knee, both knees,
doubled over and the stab is too much--

and all the apples and olives,
meat and bread and wine and grapes,
honey and sugar and cream
    come screaming.

i paint the floor,
brown and yellow and green and red.
again, heave and hide myself ashamed.

    is this truly the way to heaven?
    look at me wretching,
    crumpled beaten.

the poet writhes beside me,
claws at his entrails.

    like i could die here,
eaten by my own shrieking stomach,
and then what?
    what will i lose?

    (remember me, judas)
"remember me, judas"

no, i cannot, cannot,
    my own foolishness wails too loudly,
    my own sin stabs too brightly.
am i not the iscariot?
god of hell?
    betrayer-god?
    bloodtraitor?

    (no)
"no"

my stomach is empty,
legs full of strength again.
at my feet the poet reels,
curses through vomit.
i throw his arm over my shoulder.

    we shall make it.
Day 27: Tears

death does not draw me anymore,
not with the poet vomiting at my feet,
and the gate is ahead.

when the devil steps from the shadows.
she has traded her monk robe
    for babylonian silk.

the dagger slips and i almost lose my grip,
but manage to hold the poet.
she glides though the tables,
    footfalls like bells.

and a pure white hand reaching...

"move."

even i am surprised at my voice.

"devil, she-wolf,
move aside. i know how you
tricked the good doctor, held him
close in hell. by this dagger,
you tied him to hellish ground.
    no more. you shall not
    keep me from heaven.
now move aside."

she says nothing,
bows milky doe eyes
and slinks back.

the poet's stomach is calm,
but he cannot talk yet--
    throat scratched silent.

we walk through the gate.

i catch a glimpse of the road ahead--
cobblestone dust street,
    buildings like burlap.

and sudden stitches burst from my eyes,
tie them fast shut
    and the world disappears.
"poet!"

warmth of a hand on mine.

"here, judas," his voice still scratchy.
"i am used to blindness, used to this black. don't let go now."

and i feel my feet walking.

dark as the night i walked out holding a sop of bread and juice-- rough stonework, shuffle of dust between my toes.

fingers stretching, clutching the poet's sweaty palm.

he is breathing heavy like

i stand panting there in the aramaic alleyway listening to upper room accusations.

"poet?"

"i'm here judas, don't let go."

but his hand is so sweaty like

mine wringing thirty pieces

and the tighter i grasp it, the quicker it slips free. and i fall into my blindness.

"judas!"

i remember mary's laughter, the way she leaned into him, slyly took his hand.

"judas!"
stop your cries, poet.
i know how you pretend. why,
if it wasn't for me, you would be
in heaven already.

i curl in the darkness.

"judas!"

no farther,
no farther,
not with her laughter echoing.
and he wanted me to help him?
wanted me to destroy myself?

well, i did.

"judas?"

but i was already destroyed.

i lash out in the dark,
clamp around the poet's searching hand.

"i am here. i know now what to do.
i had lost the determination i had in hell,
but i have remembered now.
we shall reach heaven,
and i shall have my question answered.
i swear to you, poet.
we shall make it."

the poet's hand squeezes mine
and i reach for my eyes.

lace my fingers under those damned stitches and

rip!

gouge out my own eyes,
tear burning nerves from the socket
and i scream scream scream

but i can see again.

Day 28: Prison
"judas, judas!
my wrist, it's breaking!"

my eyes free of falconer sewing,
feet light and hard packed
we go running through the next gate.

"slow down!"

the stitches fall from the poet's eyes
but i do not see--
faster.
faster.

tell me.
tell me.
why your promise rang empty.
why i believed peddling lies.
why i sold my honor for you.
tell me.
why was i released?

then like a solid wall on my back
i fall flat,
slam the poet to the ground as well.

shine of thirty pieces above,
so heavy i can barely move a finger.

i have caught you in my sin again, poet.

fingers & hands & arms shaking
as i try to push up.
the silver twinkles against the apocalyptic sky,

so heavy

but it will not stop me.

i push myself up again
as the silver sounds like temple bells.

to heaven.
to heaven.
to heaven.
and my feet are under me, 
every muscle chanting.

to heaven.
to heaven.
to heaven.

on my feet 
hauling the poet out.

to heaven!
to heaven!
to heaven!

running again.

and the next gate looms like ice, 
blue death.

but there is nothing holding me back, 
no demons murmuring, 
no swarms of sinners whispering, 
no call of pandemonium.

i see the way ahead of me, 
for all other roads are burnt out. 
it is straight and smooth.

through the gate, 
the air clings dark blue 
like it was full of spiderwebs. 
i feel them clutching, 
laying hands, 
holding my legs in place.

"don't let go now," 
i strain my body forward, 
"we are going faster than ever."

and the spiderwebs tear from my skin, 
legs that move faster, 
beating footprints deep. 
i go 
and the spiderwebs have no chance.

"judas, judas, 
my feet, they bleed!"
my legs are sour wine,
    my heart bursting blood.
please, please--"
"farther!"
"i cannot, 
judas!"
before the spidersilk hands catch,
i turn
pull
scoop him up
like a baby.
and run.
    to heaven.

Day 29: Generosity

forever i have run
with the poet curled in my arms.

but i have found no gate,
only spiral after spiral
    full of that clammy air.

the poet weighs nothing,
white air puffing out clothes
huddles close and small.

    the gate!

no pause.
i run through it with hand outstretched
right into bitter smoke.

i stumble, cough,
drop to a knee.
the poet is awake and spluttering,
i am spitting out lungfuls of poison
and together we collapse.

    this is heaven's doing.
keeping me back,
back to hell, bloodtraitor.
smoke puffing me up,
  bloats like a rotten animal on the roadside.
lungs & stomach & nose
torn from the inside.
and the smoke
creeps
creeps
creeps in more
until when i cover my mouth with my hand
  i sweat smoke,
cry it into my rags.

  and i feel the whimper of the poet.

"no."

eyes open in the knifing haze

"heaven,
you shall not keep me away.
give me your plagues,
  i bear all.
  i walk forever.
judas iscariot, the mistake of heaven.
lash me, heaven, come!
your smoke is weak.
ha! look, i can scrape to my elbows,
and still drag the poet behind me.
i am coming.
  the iscariot.
  the bloodtraitor.
  the betrayer-god.
the words that hell taught me.
i speak and all hell speaks with me
  iscariot.
  bloodtraitor.
  betrayer-god.
sinners shouting blue fire,
screens of smoke,
gargles of blood,
raw vocal chords.
  we have nothing better to do, heaven,
then shout.
  iscariot!
  bloodtraitor!
  betrayer-god!
higher & higher,
       (even now)
because
if i cannot run i will walk
if i cannot walk i will crawl
if i cannot crawl i will drag myself.
but somehow i will.
       the gate?
somehow i will make it.
       the gate!
somehow i will make it to heaven!"

poet hemorrhages coughs, awake.
writhes spastic as the smoke still bites,
and the dagger shoots new fire in my body
       but i hardly notice.

       i am almost there.

       i can see heaven
frowning sternly.

Day 30: Body

retching raw red throat,
we lay on the other side of the gate
coughing into the sky.
i am on my back,
       heavy dagger pointing to heaven,
poet speaks in dribbling blood.

       "delusional, judas,
why were we so foolish
to challenge heaven?
       look.
i am no god;
i am a simple man.
       flesh and dust.
everything that decomposes,
everything that rots in the grave,
fades and disappears.
that is me.
       muck on the gravedigger's shovel,
       mass of worms and maggots.
skin like burial wrappings,
pale as linen.
leave me here, judas.
my body is so heavy.
    you cannot save
    this lazarus."

i try to sit up,
    but the dagger pins me to the ground.
    and in my pocket,
    i feel the golden apple i plucked shift weight.
breathe steady,
eyes on the top of babel.

    it is so close,
    an arm's reach maybe.
i can see the garden at the top,
lush palms and dark green trees,
    but i cannot move.
this dagger, this apple,
    they are too heavy.
if only i had somebody's hand,
a wrist to grasp and pull myself up.
    but our guide is gone,
and the poet is no use,
as he lays beside me spitting blood.

wait.

arm moving slowly
    for my flesh is leaden,
and i grasp the dagger.
it sparks sulfur in my veins,
    but i am long past.
    handle in hand,
i call out.

"she-devil!
as this dagger binds you to me,
so i call on you now.
    come and lend me a hand,
help me to my feet."

tinkle of temple bells,
    she appears silent.
feet soft as incense smoke,
eyes dark like charcoal and indigo.

and opens those rouge lips.
speaks like madder rose.

«i always knew
there was something different about you,
iscariot.

only you
would take the dagger
meant for someone else.
only you
would damn yourself
and still run upward.
only you
would call on a devil
to help you to heaven.
iscariot,
i am a twisted succubus,
a phantom of the doctor's sin.
my power came from his sorrow,
his depravity. i am fading.
and even though you call me
i lack the strength to help.»

she is faint,
translucent like rings of smoke,
and she holds out a wispy hand.

«i'm so sorry.»

and i reach for her hand
even as the wind gusts,
scatters her traces like ash.

but
she bursts in clear light,
all her smoke now
fine dancing fires.
smiling serene
as my hand clasps hers.

"judas, i..."

"that's fine.
that's fine.
go now.
go home."

i pull the poet up
(how heavy he is now!)
and we watch
   as she goes burning in the sky.

a few more steps
with the poet dead on my shoulder.
with the dagger deep in my heart.
with the apple heavy in my hand.

and there is the last gate.

too high, too thick,
it is solid wood and everburning
but never consumed.
but i know all i have to do

is reach through
   that orangeblack fire
up to my elbows
   skin blistering
and scream
   that this gate
   will open to me.

for i have climbed
   toiled and tested
   all this way,
   (glimpse of arm bones)
   that i am judas,
he who was released
   and broke hell's gates
and these doors
   are nothing to me.

as bones char dry,
the door creaks unused hinges
   and i throw them open with a shriek of rust.

Day 31: Reassurance

hanging garden.
babylonian palms.
ripe fig trees.
sweet clear brooks.
orchard of pomegranates.

   i jump with lightness,
lay the unconscious poet on the ground
and go running to feel the grass under my feet.
splashes of persimmons, plums,
lemons and limes alike, hiding together.
low bushes clustered with bright mulberries.
i run and run and throw myself into the grass,
let it catch me with a million tiny hands
and from here the sky looks
like the highest branches of a tree.
like i could climb right up there
never looking down.

"to heaven" i whisper

to myself and the trees
to the brook and the bushes.
"to heaven."

table of unleavened bread,
bitter herbs and wine,
mary comes out carrying a roast lamb
and sets it in front of him.
thirteen of us in this tiny room,
barely the space to sit.
but we are laughing, laughing,
glad to have made it for the passover.
except for him. he sits listless,
rolls an olive between his fingers,
and when we pass the matzo
he pauses and turns it over in his hands
but does not eat. we ask what is the matter,
what troubles him. but i know.
it is me. it is the money i clutch
beneath the table, the dagger i sheath.

"judas..." wakes the poet
and i go to him.
quite pale,
like a sickly child.
skinny as a leper.

"did we make it?
to heaven?"

"hush, poet,
save your strength.
waste it not on delusions.
no, not yet."
this is but a garden
at the top of babel.
    there is no way up.
not that i can see.
but don't worry;
    we shall find a way.
    you rest now.
i shall be but a stone's throw away."

the poet nods,
and lapses unconscious again.

"what is wrong, teacher?
you do not eat! come, come,
    mary has prepared this for us.
    why do you not partake?"

because i sit beside him,
smudge of sin here, so close.
he knows, he knows, he knows,
but says nothing. lets me sit close.
why? to change me, to sway me
like the other disciples.
blind fools, i watch them eat greedily,
suck the lambmeat from the bones,
slurp the wine and laugh.
and it is then that he stands.

"verily i say unto you
    that one of you shall betray me."

and we erupt in pointing fingers
accusations shoved in other's faces.

"you! no, you! not i,
is it i, teacher? surely,
it's him, not i, or him! or him!
i would never betray, never betray,
ever even deny you, teacher!"

he puts his hands on the table
and we fall silent,
frozen in our poses.
he takes bread and breaks it,
sops it with wine
so it runs down his hand as
he holds it aloft.
"he that i give this sop to,  
is the one that shall betray me."

and we watch him lower it,  
watch the wine drip from the damning sop.  
around the table he walks,  
disciples cowering in fear.  
arm straight out, sop leading him  
to the opposite end  
where i sat. there he stops  
and i look up at him. he knows,  
even though i am whispering small  

"no, not like this, don't do this, please."

he watches me for a moment and says  

"go, judas called iscariot,  
go do what you must, and quickly."

and he drops the sop into my hands.

eyes now open in the garden.  
he will be there, in heaven.  
he with the hands that passed down that sop,  
he with the mouth that told me to do what i must.

what will i say?  
what will i tell him?

and i kneel in agony.

Day 32: Coming

cold faces of my friends  
and simon peter reaches for the knife--  
i am unwanted. i knew i would be,  
that my path is that of a maggot.  
but even maggots are surprised  
with the vileness they inspire.  
mouths laughing moments ago now bent in sneers,  
bared teeth still sticky with lamb blood.  
hands tight fists, readied with cutlery.  
i take the sop and run.

i look up in the treetop sky,
and sunbeams are breaking through
the black leaf clouds of apocalypse.

what will i say?
if he stands before me,
    should i apologize?
will he be mad?
no, he couldn't be mad
not him.
    i'll apologize,
over and over and over.

the poet groans--
    he must be awake now.

the sun grows brighter,
and i have to sit up
    and not stare at the sky.
golden light covers the garden
like dusty snow,
    and where it is brightest,
it starts building.

i watch specks of light pulled from the air
    rush together in solid lines.
compacting and stretching--
    until a ladder of light stands
suspended in the garden.

"poet! poet!
it is heaven, they have opened to us!
    come, the ladder is just over there--
it is high in the air
but we can climb that tree to reach it.
    come, poet!"

he is lethargic,
    a sputtering life.
i throw him over my shoulder
and head towards the tree
    and the ladder.

these limbs are familiar,
    cluttered with fine olives
and soon my hands are stained with climbing.
the tree bleeds sap
and it clings to me,
makes my hands sticky and rough.
now the branches are thinning,
    no thicker than a finger
    but they hold
and i reach the top.

there,
    the bottom rung awaits.
i adjust the poet on my shoulder
and grasp it.

the ladder is cool,
    smooth and slight.
and if my hands were not
covered in sap, i would slide off.
but i catch the rung
    and pull us up.
hand over hand,
rung over rung,
    we climb into the sky.

    we walk through jerusalem,
    feet soft with palm branches.
    the crowd cries unending holies
    and i do my best to smile like i am perfect.
    then we stop, and he enters
    a small cramped house on the side.
    we follow, and inside mary is cooking.
my chest leaps, but she rushes to him instead,
embraces him tight. takes out an alabaster jar:

    "i have saved this
    for you, for the times ahead.
    i have had visions of your struggle,
    the danger you will face.
    here. i anoint you now--"

    and the aroma of spikenard fills the house.

we pause on the ladder.

babel stands below like an angry welt
    on the white-skinned earth.
a gash of red bleeding out,
and the snow trying to hide the scars of armageddon.
    jagged black sea rocks stabbing like teeth,
    craters of fallen stars burning bitter.
i see mountain ranges charred black,
twisted forests uprooted and broken.
plains stamped with giant pestilent hoofprints
and the scuffling feet of a million soldiers.
i turn away,
keep climbing.

john jumps as mary pours--

"mary! that's a year's wages,
what are you doing? sell it,
give the money to the poor!"

but he speaks for her.

"she did this of her own will,
for me. for i shall not be with you
much longer. her visions see true;
there are dangers ahead, my friends
and our road shall not always be so straight.
i shall not forget this, mary."

he kisses her on the forehead
and my hands involuntarily curl into fists.

above the snow clouds now,
nothing but the glow
from the fires of babel
vainly piercing the darkness.

and he turns to look at me,
hair drenched with perfume.
reaching those hands dripping anointment oil
and kissing me on the forehead as well.
whispers so no-one hears

"for both of us, judas called iscariot."

and the ladder ends.

it is on the edge of a cliff
with chalk white soil.
i climb over it,
drop the poet beside me.
the sky is close.
i can reach out, grab handfuls,
and blow it gently away.
i stand,
hoist the poet on my back.

    heaven.

Day 33: Pastoral

field stretches white before me--
pale river reeds
    in paler soil.
and a low fog clinging...

comes laughter
    winding like cold clear water.

i keep walking.
i am not tired,
    my feet are light like feathers,
    the poet weightless on my back.

but there is nobody here.
    just that bodiless laughter
    echoing down...
    echoing down...

"hello?"

laughter...
    from nobody.

    "where to then?"
i ask the poet. but he is out,
fast asleep on my shoulder.

so i start uphill
    into the clouds
    and the white sky.
towards that haunting laughter.

    wait.
    have we wandered a circle?
doubled back, jumped down the sky--
where is the new jerusalem he spoke of?
the foursquare walls of jasper,
temple of unending holy of holies?
    there is nothing here
but a field
and that laughter.

but how?
    i am sure i climbed up babel,
certainly i climbed up the ladder.
i could not have gotten turned around,
could not have walked a circle.
    this must be heaven.

then emerging from the claustrophobic sky
    a figure i knew, shining inwardly
        like someone had kindled a fire in his stomach.
it fills his veins with light and shines
through his skin.

the doctor, clutching his gut.
laughing,
    and suddenly it is no longer horrifying.
        suddenly i feel at ease
because i know this must be heaven.
impossible to still be hell.

    "judas! dost mine eyes deceive?
no, i knowest that damn'd dagger anywhere,
remember well when thee took it
    for mine broken soul.
here."

his hand reaches, grasps the handle,
    but it no longer burns.
a single small grunt,
    and he pulls it out,
lets it fade in his hands.

    "come, come!
i am for want of company;
    there are precious few hereabout."

and he starts up the hill,
his steps full of laughter.

    "but doctor,
what do you mean
you are for want of company?
    this is heaven, right?
or have we been misled?"

    "yea, tis heaven,
all thy sees is beautiful and beatific,
but tis only the field.
    come, come!
see the city,
thine eyes shall be amazed!
    be joyful, judas!
    heaven! heaven!"

but i could not shake
    the coldness of the field.
    the icy brook hushed in the distance.
    the quiet rustle of reeds.
a whispering wind
    that sounds like pandemonium.

Day 34: Slave

the doctor leads upwards
and the fog that once laid around our ankles
rises,
    growing tall and thick like late summer wheat.
soon the reeds are swallowed,
    and my sight grows useless.
    had not the doctor told me
to grab the hem of his robe,
    i might have wandered wrong.

then, from the fog
    come solid shapes.
    crisp, sharp edges
cutting through the soft mists.

limestone broken columns,
    gravemarkers of the newly buried.
we draw closer
and i see the freshly upturned chalky earth,
the mound of soil slowly settling,
    and as it sinks, reeds rise up.
until it stands the same,
    only a broken column.
    one of many.

i reach out,
    feel the limestone brush under my fingers.

    "what are these?"
i ask the doctor.
he stops a moment,
   almost as if he had not noticed them before.
   "graves."

and we continue.

the fog becomes thicker
but cannot hide the graves,
   for they shine out like signal-lanterns,
   fight against the cloaking fog.

and something is lurking
just outside of my vision.
we draw closer
by the light of gravestones
   until the doctor stops
   and i can feel it upon us now.
like a cold breath down my back.

   "the gates!"

and from the fog comes
   alabaster gates
   as massive as hell's.
but there is no padlock,
no keyhole or deadbolt holding them closed.

the doctor walks up
   and with a single finger
   moves the sky.

   "come, come!"

and i cannot resist him,
his gut laughter,
   and i step through the gates.

stucco,
   climbing from the gossamer streets,
   up the spires of stenciled plaster,
   to the wax and porcelain steeples
   that scratch into the sky.
the vendor stalls flap wild silk flags,
hawking their wares themselves
   for there is nobody else to.
"come, come!"

the buildings glow like the doctor,
a white fire kindled behind their walls
so there are no shadows,
just soft lines on pure parchment
that i move between.

"the city! is it not wonderful?"

it would be
if i could shake this chill.

i thought it was the buildings,
their impassive carved faces
that stand blameless.
buts soon i knew.

we turn the corner
up a small staircase,
and there he stands
dressed in perfect linen.

arms open,
he smiles my name.

"judas..."

and i cannot move.

Day 35: Apostasy

dust of the road to jerusalem.
we have been walking forever
and my sandals are but bits of leather and cloth,
my robe hemmed with traveling dirt.
this is my routine now,
waking with the rooster call,
walking the long choked road,
listening and watching him.
he says he is making a new way for us,
that it shall be very soon.
we are but a day's walk from the city
and all the disciples are anxious for passover
for it shall be very soon.

we sleep restless,
curled on sackcloth bedrolls
spread over tough grass.
the night like quicksilver
with the peeping of east stars
when he wakes me from my bedroll.

"what is it?"

i yawn, rubbing my eyes.
he says nothing,
but beckons me away from the sleepers.
i follow him through the wilderness
to a pinnacle of rock
where we look down upon jerusalem.
there he speaks.

"judas,
one that i love,
i ask more from you now
than anyone else i shall ever know.
in the coming days i shall make our new way,
but i cannot do it alone.
i need you judas,
only you i trust to help me.
it pains me to ask you
but it must be done.
in jerusalem
you must betray me.
no, hush, listen,
you must betray me to the temple.
only then can i make our new way.
you will be hated, outcast,
you will get no fame, no glory from this.
your name itself shall become a curse,
the lowest of the low.
but i shall love you no matter what."

night winds from slumbering jerusalem
and my heart is beating too loudly.

"but i don't understand--
why me? why must i betray you?
ask me to face down a legion of roman lances,
ask me to walk amongst the lepers with you,
i shall do it without hesitation.
but betray you? no, never, never, never,
i cannot do it."
"judas."

his voice fills my ears
and the night listens.

"you are the only one.
nobody else will be able to do this
if you cannot. not peter,
not john, not any one of them.
only you, judas.
i need you, judas,
i trust only you, judas.
do you not want this as well?
the new world, the new covenant
our vision, judas, our kingdom!
come.
fear not for me, nor yourself,
for i shall be with you always.
now show me the depth of your faith,
judas called iscariot!"

and i nod yes in the jerusalem night.

Day 36: Brother

"judas..."

feet!
hands!

do something!

"so you have made it.
you have braved all the perils
and proven yourself worthy of heaven.
come. embrace me, judas."

and those two arms
i nailed to a cross
  sweep around me
  and hold me close.
i struggle to put up my arms,
to hold him,
but his skin is cold,
  and i pull away.

like embracing thirty pieces of silver.
"why didn't you tell me?"

my feet are working
    and taking me backwards.

    "why didn't you tell me
what was going to happen?
that afterwards
    you were to be beaten
    and humiliated
    and left to die worthless?
that my betrayal meant
    your death?
i would have never done it.
i would have never done it.
even now
    with you in front of me
    i feel your blood on my hands.
why didn't you tell me?
i would have never done it."

the gold apple i tucked away
bobs with sudden weight
    and i sink to the street,
    let my tears run down the porcelain hill.

he crouches,
    eyes level with mine.

"judas,
there was no other way.
please understand,
    it was part of the plan
    and how i tried to change it!
there was no other way.
and if i had told you
the full consequences of your betrayal
    you would have never done it
    and we never could have made our new world.
if i had said that your betrayal
would leave me bleeding in the streets
taunted and mocked and nailed to a cross,
and you hanging from a tree,
called bloodtraitor and betrayer-god,
chewed and gnashed eternal in hell's teeth,
    you would have never done it.
there was no other way."

do you have any idea
what i have done for you, for this
hollow city of brittle white seashell?
how long i laid in hell's mouth
cursing myself,
cursing that nod i made?
for you! for you! do you know?
   i doubt it.

   i was a pawn,
a worthless trinket you moved
with sweet words and smiles.
until i would do anything,
even spill my intestines in the darkest hour
and damn myself eternally.

"judas?"

for i am standing,
   feeling lighter.
and before i could stop--

"i realize now
that when i cursed myself
for laying in hell's mouth,
   i should have cursed you.
i may have created hell,
but you have created this
(apple in my outstretched hand)
   and this city of salt,
with its lifeless towers.
is this our new world you spoke of?
our kingdom? it is dead!

no life stirs here
except the doctor,
   and he is mine.
i have traveled far, seen many things
that nobody, god or human, should see.
so tell me then
   what was it all for?
my betrayal. your betrayal.
your death. my death.
what have we done?"

   and he looks hard at me,
then turns.

"for that,
we must go further."

Day 37: Rock

through the city
feeling the familiar incline under my feet.
    he does not look back,
    but my feet are well worn from travel
    and i feel lighter by the moment.
the doctor follows behind,
but says nothing.
and we proceed through the silent city.

    until he stops.

    "you must leave him here,
(he points at the dead poet over my shoulder)
    for beyond this wall
there is no air. we are above the sky
and he will not last,
    weak as he is.
he is still of hell
and any greater strain
    will cause his destruction."

i look at the poet laying on my shoulder.
    soundly asleep,
    face full of peace.
but i can hear his shallow breathing,
his failing heartbeat.
the doctor approaches
    and lays a hand on the poet.

    "i shall watch o' er him.
he shall come to no harm,
of that i give thee my promise, judas."

i nod,
    for there is no worth in this journey
if he is destroyed,
and give the sleeping poet to the doctor.

    "now."
i take a lungful of air,
    and we step forward.
squeeze!
    i feel my lungs crush inward,
    the air inside straining to escape
    eyes bulging,
and he is walking faster,
    perfectly at ease,
and the way
    is so steep!
rocky,
    slippery.
    i stumble and
    almost
    lose my breath.
but catch it,
    myself,
    and the pressure is too much
and i know
    my eyes bleed,
my veins
    bursting free
    ears leaking
and my lips tremble
    hands shaking
    skin deep purple
    stomach twisting
inside out
    cannot
    cannot!
and i let go
    into the vacuum.
    but nothing happens.
i can still breathe,
    still inhale, exhale,
    and i no longer feel the crushing.
he looks back,
    takes a deep breath,
    and smiles.
"there."
he points ahead a little ways
where our path runs to a black sky.
"that is the firmament.
and there is no doorway through it.
you must cut your own.
but beyond that,
you shall find your answers,
for i do not know them
but the voice does.
go, judas.
find what you seek."

Day 38: Beloved

and with that i am alone again.
a single line of footprints,
step after step after step
always up
to that rocky ceiling.

i reach out,
feel the warmth of the firmament.
and with my weak eyes
i can barely see how it curves
spherical in the distance--
a shell
for our egg yolk world.

i start digging.
tearing out clumps of divine mud,
rocks and clay and loam
all crumbling out.
i dig with my hands,
until my fingers bleed
and my nails tear away.
it grows hot,
the dirt baked hard and dry
and still i scratch my way upward,
clawing through rock and earth
until i breathe dust
and spit mud.

then my hand breaks through.

i pull myself up
so i can stand fully
and see everything.

from my peak,
the shell curves to faraway black,
the air is hot
with empyrean fire.

and the voice rumbles out.

"you who shatter my firmament,
who break through primum mobile,
who do you think you are?"

and i answer.

"i am judas called iscariot
betrayer-god of hell,
now released from his torment.
and i have traveled here,
endured all your tests and trials
to ask.
for you are the same as him,
one in the same,
so when i betrayed him
i betrayed you as well.
it was you dying in the gutters,
you at the end of the mob's fingers,
you impaled on the roman lances.
it was for you i spilt my entrails,
for you i damned myself to deepest hell.
so tell me.
what have we accomplished?
why damn me eternally
only to release me?
why build heaven
when we all live in hell?
i have seen your city of light.
it is barren.
i have seen your creation.
it is broken.
and so i have traveled here.
i have shattered hell's gates,
run through babel,
and braved your forgotten city.
because i must know.
why have i been released?"
the fire shakes with laughter.

"released?
you think you were released?
no, iscariot,
you were not released.
  to be released means
  that hell gave you up,
but it was not so.
  ha! released!
no, you escaped.
  there is no meaning.
  you have set yourself free."

Day 39: Hymn

feet cold on the warm firmament.
  echoing the words of the voice
  again and again in my ears.

  you have set yourself free.

  "but the mouth said--"

  "the mouth knows nothing.
  it speaks as you speak.
you wanted to be released.
  so it knew nothing else.
and so,
you have come all this way under your delusion.
  ha!
  i see that even now you cannot accept it.
the truth of you.
  you ask me for answers
  but offer no questions.
so if you have nothing more to say,
return to your pit, god of hell.
  to your guilt.
  to your despair."

for a moment,
i thought of turning around there,
crawling backwards in the hole i made,
throwing myself down to earth
and hoping i crashed back to deepest hell.
but instead
  i knot my fists
  and shout into the fire.

"no!

i will not return.
for i have seen my guilt,
i have wrestled it every step of my journey.
  you up here, safe behind your white walls
  have never seen hell.
the faces of the sinners cursing themselves.
the bloodcries of separation.
the guilt hotter than any fire.
the despair sharper than any sword.
  i have seen this all.
  i have walked amongst it.
so when you tell me to return,
  i cannot.
    i cannot.
    i cannot!
  for i am no longer the iscariot
that crawled broken from the mouth.
i am judas,
  nothing more.
and i will be your bloodtraitor no longer.
you wait here for your fawning creation
to come on hands and knees.
  oh, i have seen the shops in the city,
  the delicate spires for those
  with gossamer hands,
  the robes of fine silk
  laid out for the perfect ones.
but how sad you were
  when nobody came.
that even when you tore the world apart
  you found nobody.
and now,
  it is judas called iscariot
who defiles your holy streets.
  the god of hell himself
who has climbed all this way
  to declare himself worthy.
laughable, even
that the bloodtraitor
  could think he might ever clean his hands.
but here he stands now.
  here his voice cries out.
i am perfect.
i am good.
and i will be in hell
no longer."

Day 40: Revelation

only the crackling of empyrean fire in the void.

then
the
voice
speaks:

"it is good.
be forsaken
no longer."

and the firmament beneath me
quakes mightily
    and i see splinter cracks,
    light lancing through.
    like a mighty rip
tearing through the ground.

and crumbling...
falling away,
broken and swallowed by the light
shining up from earth.
    and where i stand
    becomes a mountain peak.
    no longer a shell
    stretching to that black horizon.

from this peak,
i look down at the scorched earth
and see multitudes
crawling from the ground.
    bodies black with ash,
    blinking in the sunlight
and they crackle like candle wicks,
burning away the cinders of hell.

then i see a figure approaching,
    his face flickering like a paper lantern.
it is the poet,
    with the doctor behind him.
"they remember, judas.
all the sinners,
they heard pandemonium tell the story.
  the iscariot is no longer.
  he has shattered the gate;
    he is free.
    we are free.
they have cast off their shackles,
and made their own way
  back to the earth.
but not without you,
  judas.
  you showed them how."

and i stand on that peak
and watch sinners burst into light.
  watch the streets of heaven fill up
  with souls like clear water.
then fatigue comes in a rush...
  once-strong legs now buckling,
  breath running ragged.
and i step
  down
off that mountain height.
the poet grabs me,
  throws my arm over his shoulder.

"come, judas.
there is nothing up here for you
  anymore."

"yes, yes,"
i crack my lips,
for i feel the sizzle of skyfire in my pocket,
  and know the apple is finally gone.

"there is nothing now.
it is finished."