

The Tough Love Basin

Suddenly the tunnel widened, and the darkness became a dull gloom.

"Look," said my guide.

Before us stretched a massive crater, three leagues across at least. Its sides sloped gently downwards, culminating in a gaping black pit.

"We have arrived at the font."

"The font, Abraham?"

"It is a place for cleansing. Come."

The shade stepped down onto the slope, and I followed, slipping slightly; the ground was loose sand.

We walked for a time, descending into the depths. I began to notice a faint breeze, blowing towards us seemingly from the crater's center. It made a low, almost moaning hiss, and it smelled of salt. As we walked it grew louder.

Ahead of us now there came into view a figure. Ragged, gaunt, panting, it stumbled up the slope on all fours with its head down, paying us no attention.

Out of the gloom came more such figures. Keeled over, struggling not to sink in the sand, their bodies seemed heavy. The faces of those whom I could make out were worn and dirty, contorted into agonized expressions of fear and fatigue.

They made no sound, except for that of claws scratching feverishly at sand, and of sick lungs rattling out breaths to drive their doomed bodies upward.

No soul looked up at us even once as the horde passed; the bodies were absorbed completely in clambering forward.

I asked my guide, "Where do all these shades go?"

"Nowhere," said he.

"And where are we going?" I replied.

"To where those you see struggling will soon return."

I noticed then that the salty breeze had become fully a wind. The shades seemed to be struggling faster.

Suddenly, a shout punctured the blowing of the gust.

"¡Usted ahí, señor!"

A soul, an older man, by the looks of his greying hair, had broken from his scrambling some twenty feet off to look up at me.

"¡No está muerto, no hay maldición sobre usted para estar aquí! ¿Por qué camina de buen grado en el pozo de los condenados?"

He spoke in a tongue foreign to my ears, one that I could not understand.

I said to my guide, "Who is this man, Abraham? What says he?"

"Nothing of import," was my guide's reply. "His name is Alonso. He squandered his life a fool, deluded by knowledge. And now he claws to get back what he wasted."

"Bien, pues, no necesito yo saber tu locura, no me importa," shouted the man.

"Pero, por favor, usted debe decirme, usted que todavía camina arriba, bajo las estrellas, bajo el sol, ¿sabe?"

He stared longingly, desperately into my eyes.

"¿Sabe usted el destino de Dulcinea, la mujer más hermosa de todo de la creación?"

I stared back, blankly and confused. He started crawling towards me.

"¿Dulcinea?" he asked again. "¿Dulcinea? ¿Dulcinea?" he begged, over and over, crawling faster and faster.

"¿DULCINEA?"

He was shouting now. I stepped towards the guide, fearing for myself.

Said Abraham, "Even now, here in Hell, the fool chases the fantasy at the center of his folly. You cannot help him."

Realizing I could give no answer, the man of foreign tongue was still, and became silent. Casting his eyes downward, he began to sob.

"Come," said the guide. "We have yet a ways to go, and here especially, time stops for no one."

We walked onward down the slope, leaving behind the man, whose tears, still falling, stained softly the dark sand.

We moved for a long time, parting the waves of souls around us as we walked towards the center. The flow never ebbed; always, there clambered more people, washing upwards over the sand.

The stench of salt grew more pungent, and the wind louder. Soon it was a howl. The shades ahead of us were now in a frenzied panic, shrieking in terror as they quickened their scramble.

I was growing increasingly unsettled with the situation myself; we were about come to the bottom of the crater.

"My guide, what is it they run from?" I asked.

"Listen," he replied.

From the center of the pit there came a rumbling gurgle.

"The tide returns, and the font must be filled."

I tried to shout a response, but the howling was now so strong it killed my words. Plumes of sand kicked up all around us, obscuring the hordes of sinners from view.

With visibility rapidly dropping, the guide took hold of my arm, and led me by his hand. He dragged me forward, into the wind.

So overpowering were the gust and sand that I was both deaf and blind. All I could sense was the grasp of Abraham, and the ground beneath me.

But then then there was another grasp, hard, vicious, at my leg, trying to tug me downward. I struggled to shake it off, screaming into the oblivion, choking on sand, succeeding not at all in prying the force from my leg, falling closer and closer to the ground.

Suddenly the wind stopped. The grasp slackened. There was silence.

And then, there thundered a gurgling crash, and the sand clouds were leveled by a geyser of brine that came torrenting out of the central pit. Saltwater flooded up the sides of the crater, and my feet went out from under me.

I was submerged. Looking down through the turbid deluge, I saw for the first time clearly what had grabbed me: A hideous, emaciated wretch of a creature, somewhere between a man and a child, blinded by tangles of overgrown hair, digging its gnarled talons into the side of my leg. It was grimacing, and afraid.

Just then my guide, pulling from the other direction, brought my head above the surf. To my disbelief, he treaded not within but knelt upon the water, as if it were solid.

"That thing on your leg," he shouted, "kick it off!"

"What?" The din of the flood was too loud.

"The sins of these shades weigh them down, and they cannot float—get rid of the wretch, or he'll drag you down with him!"

So I kicked. Over and over, first into the arm, then the face, then the torso, pummeling and pummeling 'til the brine started to turn a putrid red and both I and the shade were shrieking, he in pain, and I in terror.

Finally I connected with the throat. There was a crunch, the creature gasped a bubbling, bloody froth, and its claws went suddenly limp.

As it fell away into the deep, its mangled locks drifted upwards, and through the murky haze of humour and salt I saw its face, and was afraid.

Those eyes. They could have been my eyes.

And then the guide heaved one more time, and I was completely above the water, stable as if on ground. I couldn't stop coughing, and my leg was deeply gashed. But I was above the depths, and the demons were below.

The crater had become a lake. No souls could be seen. The air was still.

At last, I rose, shaken.

I asked, "Abraham, how is it that we stand on water?"

He said, "You are without the sin that weighed down the wretched, and with the faith that they never had. So, you may stand."

And after another moment, "Come, we are almost there."

So we walked across the water, ever towards the center, where once there had been a pit.

And as we walked, I noticed that the feet of my guide did not stay perfectly above the water.

"Abraham, why do your feet sink so?" I asked.

"For a time, when I was alive, I condoned the selling of people as chattel," he replied. "The weight of that error drags on me still."

We continued, in silence.