

On the 700th anniversary of Dante's death on 14th September 2021 'From here to there...a journey to the Antipodes - Down Under' – a video collage filmed in St Johann's, Kronberg im Taunus, in May 2021

Texts of the poems & songs:

I

Dante's 'heaven'

The following lines are a quotation from Canto 34 at the end of Dante's *Inferno* and entitled by me as Dante's 'heaven'.

Dante Alighieri, Inferno, Canto XXXIV, L.134-140 - transl. Jan Kemp

'My guide and I set out on the path,
leading back to the world of light.

Then, without caring to rest, we climbed.
We climbed and climbed, he first, then I,
until through a round opening

we saw Heaven's lovely things,
and once again beheld the stars.

II

Voicetracks

In sunlight
we look down
a rust-coloured shaft
our shadows half-reaching
the Ming-blue water.

The sea hurtles
up to us
echoing
the sounds

of a far-away hemisphere
here at the very edge.

III

Dante Down Under

We two fallen through earth's core,
beached here at Mt Purgatory,
blink back antipodean light
days on end.

There's sky enough to dive into,
islands in green-blue water
to swim to.

Heaven to be earthly,
looking up nightly
at the blackness
milky with stars.

IV

At the beginning of this poem I quote two lines from Dante Alighieri : “I turned to the right and considered the other pole, and saw four stars never seen except by the first people.” And please do note, the last word in the poem is the Māori word for love: *aroha*.

Crux Australis - Te Paki o Autahi – The Southern Cross*

He never saw this kite of four stars,
yet knew they existed — heart map of home,
our palm, hemisphere, where we know
where we are, upside down near the pole.

Somehow, he knew Eden is here,
and we hand on the sunrise
from Mt Hikurangi, a flaming canna.
And Dante, pilgrim, could have climbed up
out of the shaft, plumb opposite Jerusalem,
to stand ankle-deep in the Pacific,
on a shoal near the Kermadecs,

awestruck at seeing his cardinal virtues,
incarnate, white, on the milk near Centaurus —
Justice, Prudence, Temperance & Fortitude,

rocks the gods had flung out of the back yard,
making space to plant the herbs
of faith, hope and *aroha*.

(* “I mi volsi a man destra e puosi mente / a l’altro polo, e vidi Quattro stelle / non viste mai fuor ch’a la prima gente” — *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, Robert M. Durling (trans.); New York: Oxford U. Press 2003, 19, L 22-24.)

V

Swimming

Nothing reduces you to your skin like the sea —
cold plunge into reality,
a tongue already salty & all that power
self-propelling you through our other element —
body loving every pummelling second,
as your mind slips on the (no wonder)
Madonna-blue beach wrap of the sky.

The straightest line imaginable just over the breakers,
visibly separating the two, doesn't exist.
You do. Yet can you hold a handful of salt water
to prove it, for just one moment, before you go.

VI

Down to the ground

How everything suits when you think of it —
there's just the right phrasing,
or there's a pause — music, of course, or
a poem — that goes without saying.

As when the evening falls over the sea,
and on the blank, flat surface of quietened water
a fisherman ships his oars & you happen to notice,
walking the shore, jumping the rivulets
to the firm sand of Deep Creek run out to sea,
where the palest of blues this side of the city,
around the double-coned, bush-covered island
fades into pink, as your eye lifts from dinghy to sky.

Back home you walk, briskly — it's a quarter to six
& you're astonished, day has already fallen,
right down to the ground moving under your feet.

VII

In this poem, I speak as if in Beatrice's voice.

Someone kissed me

Someone kissed me —
Is it blood or lipstick
on my cheek?

Was it a thought
brushed past me

or a moth's wing

but there, those crimson stains
on my skin, my white dress.
I walk the Lungarno

near the Ponte Sante Trinità.
He's evaporated
into the crowd

How shall I ever know him again
beyond this touch
and he so pure?

VIII

Here, I look at Beatus, as my Muse.

Beatus

There you are Beatus—
grey star on a dusky scarf
the moon halved by a cloud,
& us sun-bathing in your palm
—airy, *toe-toe*, blond feathers
staked like javelins
thrown to mark a harbour —
you are the harbour & the yachts
in full light at full tilt—or

Orion, sword upside-down
spread-eagled on night blue —
you're the ninth step
of the ninth circle round
the tor, where a girl plaits &
waits for sight of your canoe,
paua eyes on the masthead gleaming
up from under as do those
of swordfish or marlin
or of a sea-god leaping.

Sources:

The poem 'Voicetracks' is from Jan Kemp's collection *Voicetracks*
published by Puriri Press, Auckland & Tranzlit, Kronberg im Taunus, 2012.
All other poems by Jan Kemp are from her collection *Dante Down Under*
published by Tranzlit, Kronberg im Taunus, 2012.

Note:

Francis Chandler's settings of the three poems in his *A Dante Triptych*
are sung in this order III 'Dante Down Under', VIII 'Beatus', I 'Dante's 'heaven'.