

The Return to Fresh Hell

Containing much grave matter about individuals of great repute, and in which the Reader must exercise his Judgment and Reflection.



Dante and Virgil in the Ninth Circle of Hell by Gustave Doré,
1861

by [Robert Gear](#) (March 2022)

Virgil rang the doorbell at precisely 6:00 am. I was about to tell him to go away and come back in an hour or so, but he shoved his sandaled foot through the gap and hurried in.

“Dan T.” He announced breathlessly. “We gotta get down there quick. Get your medieval tunic on faster than Jack Robinson! Hurry now.”

You may surmise that Virgil's knowledge of English expressions was not altogether current, but I understood well enough.

I dressed in my most acceptable costume and hurried out to his waiting vehicle. It looked something like ancient depictions of hand baskets in which we were and will be expected to travel.

A tiny, smartly-dressed puppet creature climbed out bowing and grinning through sinister teeth. It held open the door.

"My dear friend," I asked Virgil, "Who is this strange puppet-like creature?"

"Oh, it is a fauci doll, made by the finest artisans on an island somewhere near the toe of Italy."

"And why on earth, did you let him off his strings? Surely there is local ordinance to the effect that such creatures must be restrained at all times."

"Don't worry, Dan T. Every so often I inject him with the latest potion. That keeps it under control. I truly enjoy sticking needles in it. I can work its jaws and put words in his mouth in the fashion of future ventriloquists. I enjoy making it say things that it disagrees with. But we must be off. Time and Tide wait for no uhhh . . ."

"Man," I said finishing his sentence, knowing that he was trying not to vocalize the forbidden and antiquated term for one of the many genders. Then, perhaps as a precaution, he reattached the fauci doll to its trailing strings.

We arrived at the gates of hell within an eon or a split second. The canine which I described in my previous journey was still lolling, still without two of its heads and still oozing a dark liquid from the stumps. The bumper sticker which boasted his membership of a once and future well-known political party had started to peel off in tatters.

“I thought the heads would have grown back by now,” I ventured.

“Well yes, they have and they haven’t. Every time they pop back into place, Mo arrives and pecks them off again. It’s like eternal rap music: painful to listen to and difficult to get out of your head once you have been subjected to it. And I must warn you that true earworms inhabit this time and place, just as they do in the broken world. But I think you are aware of that from our last visit together.

We descended with care. Virgil took my arm and handed me the strings to the fauci doll, which tugged me onward as though it were a large unruly canine from the upper world.

A strangled voice came out of nowhere. “Why do you dare to come here?” it screeched. A head materialized, and braided ponytails whizzed around in a blur of sputum. It was the famous Swedish actress. In case we hadn’t heard, it repeated “How DARE you?” with the emphasis on the middle word. Her eyes narrowed so much in apparent disgust that I almost mistook her for an unfriendly Mongolian yurt-builder.

“I’m just showing my friend, Dan T. around the cosier bits of Fresh Hell,” explained my friend. “This is his second trip, so”

“How DARE you!” shouted the actress, this time the voice reaching a crescendo. Then she jumped into the passenger seat of a 1966 Chevrolet Camaro and disappeared with a resounding whoosh onto an ice floe and cast herself among a colony of virtual polar bears.

The fauci doll tugged me further on. Virgil saw that the puppet was getting over-active and whipped out of his toga pocket a huge syringe, plunging the needle into the fauci doll’s abdomen.

“That should take care of it for a bit,” he said looking

anxiously at his wristwatch. "It contains the ingredients from vaccinations of the last 43 variants of WuFlu."

Then Brandon arose in a froth of lies and corn-pop mumblings. He clutched a broken laptop from another century and stared vacantly, but we soon got bored. "No, we're not interested, Brandon," announced my friend, sternly.

I asked Brandon, "And why are you wearing flowers in your hair?"

He babbled an incomprehensible reply. Virgil said, "He imagines he's going to Harvey Fransisco."

"And where is the white woman who almost became a president in a future century?" I asked Virgil.

"You mean Blinton Fiddle's spouse? She is in a deeper level since there were some unresolved legal issues of a serious nature which are still being decided upon. I can't be more specific than that. When I return up to the broken world she may still exist. And I have a wife and children to care for." He said that with a slight tremble in his voice, as though he, the great poet, had certain qualms about events that might occur two thousand years in the future in a far country.

"Exile will be the easiest part to bear, Dan T."

Then as though to make that thought perish he quickly added, "Now I will bring you to something that you may find amusing."

We slid sideways as though skating on thin chicken droppings. There again we encountered Mo, the cockerel. Yes, this was the same bird which has appeared in many stories. These range from his [debut in a 20th Century Des Moines, Iowa suburb](#) to a miraculous yet fictional [event at 27b Frith Street in 19th Century London](#). And there were many other manifestations in many other scheduled time slots both before and after these appearances.

In our present time slot, he was engaged in slashing with beak and claws at a crowd of onlookers. They all wore red arm bands featuring a hammer and sickle. Some of them were very young, perhaps having been terminated before their time. Most wore T-shirts adorned with the image of a bearded coward peering out from under a black beret.

Mo lunged pridefully, and one by one chopped off the heads of the onlookers. They fell over like ninepins, blood spurting out socialistically and even dialectically. And Mo intoned some words I did not catch. Then all at once the entire crowd of headless youth stood up again and banged on the little red books they were holding, grinning like gulag guards. Once more the rooster went at them hammer and sickle and tongs, and the scene was repeated again and again like 21st century media propaganda. It reminded me somehow of the skeleton fight scene from the yet-to-be-produced 1963 motion picture, *Jason and the Argonauts*.

I said to my guide, "I thought Mo was supposed to freeze every time he tried the decapitation routine."

Virgil replied, "That's what I thought too. Maybe it's because his victims here deserve some of their own medicine. Remember too that when we encountered Mo on our last trip, he couldn't kill us since we are still alive up in the broken world. If we are sent down here more permanently then we'll have to watch our backs.

I shuddered involuntarily and moved on ever downwards.

A boiling cauldron of lizards swimming and scuttling around in a ring caught my attention. "And are there such in Fresh Hell?" I enquired of my guide, who appeared distracted still thinking on the danger posed by the spouse of Blinton Fiddle.

"Ah, these are the famous Lizard Men of a later century. Their time-slot became invidious to all except their own kind. They hid near farmyard troughs and were rarely seen.

But here they are. Voila!"

I looked on, fascinated by the scene. The lizards gazed up with beady eyes and tried to leap and climb their way out of the slippery sides of the cauldron, their stout claws scratching the coppered sides.

"Don't worry, Dan T," said my guide. "They cannot hurt you, although they did do and indeed will do immense harm in a far century. The one who almost got out is sometimes called 'Bill The Gateman.'

"And why that moniker?"

"In his later years he used his wealth and power to control who could pass through the gate. His private earworm told him to create a great 'die off' as he liked to call it."

"And observe that one over there. I mean the tiny lizard with the fake dorsey beard. He was once a powerful controller of thoughts. And that one . . .," he pointed at a lizard trying to wipe a white substance from its head, ". . . that one with the pile of sugar on its head was also implicated in an attempt to further weaken the broken world."

I gulped in astonishment. "And did it work?"

"No, as you can see, he was taken care of eventually. All of them were." Virgil had a twinkle in his eye. I must have distracted him momentarily from his trepidation about Mrs. Fiddle's extensive sphere of influence.

"And why a cauldron, sir?"

"They searched and still search for the eye of newt and toe of frog. That is my understanding."

Virgil again looked at his wristwatch and tapped his fingers on the dial. "Our time-slot's chariot is winging its way, Dan T. Have you seen enough for one day?"

“But you haven’t shown me the toadstools yet!” As I expostulated thus, I glimpsed a tiny regiment of a thousand creatures holding umbrellas above their heads, twittering out sounds like intellectuals from future Departments of Resentment Studies. They were blown so fast by a raging storm that I had time only to recognize the faces of a few.

“The umbrellas make them look like toadstools of the poisonous *fly agaric* kind. They reproduce sporifically. These ones are not rooted to the ground and so are blown about every which way. And beware, they are both sporific and pathogenic.”

I stood back, mesmerized. Then Virgil offered his most worrying bit of crystal gazing yet.

“Dan T. You must behave yourself up in the broken world, or you might end up like a toadstool, just as these myriad creatures have.”

As if on cue, the fauci doll tugged at his strings and pulled us upward. The giant hand basket waited for us as we hurried past the multicephalic canine which had started to regain its faculties. It managed to bite chunks out of the puppet, but eventually we extracted it from the salivating jaws. Fauci doll was damaged but not unfixable. It snapped its jaws shut sullenly, and sulked the entire homeward journey which lasted either seconds or millennia.

And there beneath us I saw a huge crowd flowing downward and waiting their turn to enter. They grasped huge wriggling earworms reminiscent of therapy pets from a yet undiscovered country.

Virgil had to have the last say, “Fauci Doll, if you don’t behave yourself I will not include you in a long poem I plan to write!”

And as you may well know, reader, he was indeed overlooked by Virgil’s muse, although he and many of those featured here did

pop up in a future time frame, greatly to our annoyance.

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

Robert Gear is a Contributing Editor to *New English Review* who now lives in the American Southwest. He is a retired English teacher and has co-authored with his wife several texts in the field of ESL.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)