

...title pages and Book I of THE WALLS OF HEAVEN, a poem in seven sections or “books”:

The Walls of Heaven

by

Michael Ventura

Copyright 2005 by Michael Ventura. All rights reserved. This poem may not be reproduced in any way without permission.

In honor of my mother's parents

Antonio Scandurra

1889-1937

Maria LaPalgia Scandurra

1890-1920

Recondita armoria di bellezze diverse

BOOK I

In the Bridge's Shadow

And so it was I entered the broken world

Hart Crane

Here in the city

our own bodies
are all the earth we have

In every body
is a gateway
to a farther city

...

I am a child
Who has watched his mother shed her flesh
I am a child
Who has seen pure bone
I tell you it is so white
That were the idea of White to encounter it
There would be no more ideas in this world

These are words of a woman shedding her flesh

*This is legend that they have forgotten
I bear a legend a forgotten legend
I have a legend it is here for the taking
I will give it to whomever it fits
Whoever can take this blouse for himself
I said **himself**
It is only a matter of exchanging blouses
And it must be done in public
in public
whoever is afraid
Is not fit
She wants venom the essence of venom the dirtiest shirt you can find
To him she will give this blouse
the cleanest blouse*

*The legend is only a legend We want it to become reality
It means one thing THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS WITHIN YOU*

*When you find essence what comes after essence
That is my question*

*He said we are transients I am no transient
I need my place I must find it
There is such a thing as Eternity*

I have tried to explain to you the necessity for insanity

those words in a kitchen in a tenement in the Bronx a five-story walk-up

amongst thousands just like it street after street tenement after tenement tenement kitchens
don't tell ME about *The New York Times* do NOT fucking talk to me about Lincoln
Center Carnegie Hall *The Review of Books* MOMA the Met if you speak of this city
speak first of kitchens

tenement kitchens a kitchen with a window on an air-shaft on an alley windows that face
brick walls in kitchens where at any moment, this moment, a woman with four children
in a narrow kitchen a one-bedroom apartment speaks as she spoke is speaking now

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN *the necessity for insanity* the oldest son is me
I'm 20 I'm supposed to take care of her but I'm confused frightened I blank out when I snap
back into Time she's run into the street and Aldo, 15, he's run after her, can't stop her, she's
at the corner, Jerome Avenue, the Bronx, she's on the platform of the El ripping off her blouse
it is only a matter of exchanging blouses *The Kingdom of Heaven is within you* anyone
too full of fear *is not fit* I am not fit oh God make me worthy New York City

to sit in that kitchen after they lock her up lock her in
to sit in the quiet of her absence

to feel that quiet expand into silence

outside: an ancient rain

the neighbors fighting again YOU ROTTEN BASTARD
engine-revs car-horns sirens
the city a noise in unbounded Silence
and my silence is of *the* Silence even my small frightened silence

Peggy walking with me across the Bridge because we are twenty and we've discovered
 Hart Crane we've lived in this city all our lives but it takes his poem to bring us here -- *O*
harp and altar, of the fury fused... and there was talk of my irresponsibility
 I made a theatrical gesture a futile grandiose sweep of my arms embracing it all
 Brooklyn docks Manhattan skyline cars swift below the walkway ships upon the river
 and the river and the bay Statue of Liberty Ellis Island, where Peggy's
 Irish and my Sicilians made landfall mere decades ago and the planes in the air
 and the train crossing the metal-webbed bridge to the north all that in my arms
 I bend to press my palms on the wood planks of the walkway
 saying to Peggy "I am *responsible*, for this city, for this Bridge,"
 for my brothers and sister for my mother in the mental ward for the legacy of Hart Crane --
 it's silly and important to be twenty sometimes --
 and so I doomed myself to art for there was no other way

There was no other way
 Roebling engineered the Bridge
 he'd learned chaos and nobility in the Civil War
 he chose for his towers
 Gothic
 altar-arches
 the road-span an American leap there was no other way
 to join Brooklyn with whatever lay West the future
 whatever it would cost --
 Crane resorted to classical language in his panic
Implicitly thy freedom staying thee! -- he meant the immense
 tension
 towers cables span pulling one against another, always, every instant
 holding fast by virtue of their will to separate, a kind of trick that must
 succeed every instant, instant to instant,
 no instant entirely predictable
 a kind of trick and a kind of miracle and on its wood-plank walkway
 this one daydreams that one snapshots those two kiss that one
 walks her dog and a skateboarder and a cyclist and those two speak
 Spanish those two are very English are these two speaking Swedish?
 and eight or ten Japanese strolling upon a tension that is never assured
 the miracle is never certain but the *form* of the Bridge endures its atoms
 constant
 moment to moment bear the same relation
 one to the other momentarily sure

There is no other way

The city so loud, the tension of its atoms so silent

It's all about to burst apart every instant that it doesn't
 is what *is* until it does for it will only not just now:

beauty of Brooklyn Bridge .

3 ...under the river

Freighters docked in the Bridge's shadow
Dishes stacked in a grease-rimmed sink
they are identical exactly the same
When you know this you know even the bricks are afraid
You have to withstand so much fear to know
anything real in this city and a guy on a subway lifts his hand to his face sniffs it
stares at nicotine stains on his fingers shows you he doesn't know you but he shows you
I smoke too much, man, look't my fingers, it looks like I stick'm up my ass.
The voice of the people
Whose dream can eat anything as a cockroach eats stains Cockroaches eat stains
That's why they swarm on the sink that's a fact
They eat stains they eat darkness that's why they swarm on the sink in the dark
and if a cockroach had a voice what would it sound like
If you're *really* a poet why couldn't you take his hand right there
in the subway in the tunnel under the river take his hand tell him
We're not just alive we're the bearers of life

I bear a legend it is here for the taking

If you're really a poet don't make excuses no excuses
That your life seems too short for a walk down the block
That you dream that your dream has been picked up on radar
That the cities are mounting each other like dogs

That even the bricks are afraid

Freighters docked in the Bridge's shadow
Dishes stacked in a grease-rimmed sink
There are truths you eat to live
There are truths that eat you alive

No excuses The voice of the people We are the bearers of life

Have you seen the white cockroaches?
No I don't mean a metaphor for affluent assholes
I mean *cockroaches* white cockroaches
White as porcelain
Shiny as spoons
Quick as shit
They're new
They're here
The odd deal is you don't feel revulsion when you waken
With a white cockroach crawling up your arm
 But you feel so cold
When they're on the catfood the cat won't go for them
When they zip across the floor no one tries to mash them
And when they don't zip that's the weird part
They sometimes do this new thing which is to proceed
At a stately steady pace processional
Not nervous like the old roaches
But they look exactly the same
Except they're white
So white
And so hard
And shiny
When you start feeling revulsion is when you catch yourself thinking they're kind of a little
Beautiful
The white roaches
Beautiful they kind of are and *that*
Is when you make a small gagging sound somewhere behind your eyes
And you pick up anything a plate the typewriter
The television even and you smash it on them
I mean you *smash* it on them
It works
They're not immortal
But then they didn't used to be white either
And you sit and you weep you weep and you make
That small gagging sound while you weep because yes you did for a moment
 and you may again
Think they are beautiful
The white roaches

They are all over the catfood
But you know what they want
They want your memory
If you can still call it a memory
They want your memory
Call it a memory
Crawling with roaches

Is my remembrance
a genre of hope?

Dig it you're not gonna believe this the fuckin people who run this city, man
un'fuckin'lievable they move *tombs* from Egypt or where the fuck ever *tombs* the fuckin
things weigh *tons* an' they put'm in this fuckin huge building with guards an' alarms an' shit.
Tombs. Graves. Corpses. They *congratulate* each other for this fucked behavior. They got
people living and dying in *shit* JUST A FEW BLOCKS AWAY an' they put guards around
tombs *protect the tombs* by any means necessary and it's all ok as long as you call it
a "museum." Can you get to *that*? Grave robbers. Grave robbers run this fuckin city. An' you
an' me are rotting on the sidewalk in a cardboard box like week-old Chinese take-out

to wake
with an open heart, a heart like a mouth
open in death

in the maw of the museum
the statues
are broken teeth

Wherever you turn here you're caught in the stare
Of a beauty that sees past you

They've posted guards in the halls of the statues to make certain
you never waver from this journey

There are sentences whose end we never reach
They're like the dreams we waken from too soon
Or sometimes we find in our mouths a completion
And finish a sentence begun in our sleep or begun
Long ago, before we were named, as our faces
Began long ago, the line of the lip of a woman of
Judea, the eyes of a man of the Sudan

The statues, their messengers, deliver their silence

In silence we are separate and joined

Look how this stone enacts the flesh

Silence alone reaches through Time

A connective quiet

but then it is midnight and then

*There is music! who would have expected it? exquisite,
 Really, joyous, the joy of great sorrow fulfilled.
 Where did mere street-players find such a music?
 But you go to the window and where are they?
 Another street, perhaps around the corner? No.
 You are an Antony, you know how gods will do.
 Your destiny's finished, you know it, and you know
 Its end reveals you. You've failed, and your schemes --
 Well, that's all they were, schemes.
 But don't mourn for yourself, no self-pity from you.
 As though you'd prepared all along --
 As you would have, were you truly courageous --
 Play out your farewell to Alexandria.
 No, you're not dreaming, don't stoop from one illusion
 To another, you hear music, you
 Hear that music, and as though you'd prepared all along,
 As though you really were
 The man you'd hoped to be,
 You who would be worthy of this city,
 Go to the window, don't hesitate, don't entreat,
 This will be the last of your blessings:
 To look upon an empty street
 And hear an enchantment of music.
 Real enough, yes.
 Listen with the full force of your fate.
 There. That is your farewell to Alexandria.*

Cavafy wrote that
 Two thousand years after Antony's escapades in his city.
 Cavafy could take a breath, share Antony's silence, hear the music of Antony's farewell.
 Silence as connective as gravity.
 A poem begins in one silence and ends in another.
 And outside this museum, an obelisk
 From the reign of Cleopatra. They say her stone is decomposing in our stinging air.

Wherever you turn in these halls you're caught in the stare
 Of a beauty that cares nothing for you

Statues meant for something and someone else --
 They have been forced into service as messengers
 They are only like us in that the messages they transmit
 are beyond their intention

...

I lived in a great city and the museums of that city
 Were set about the edges of an enormous park
 With many trees many children many walkers and cyclers
 And the old sat on benches feeding crumbs to pigeons
 There was a zoo with camels seals tigers

A merry-go-round such as Rilke would have loved
Baseball diamonds a skating rink a pond for model boats
Sprinklers where kids splashed fountains pools a reservoir
Statues of poets of generals of statesmen and of a ram
 battling eagles
And a statue of Alice that the children kept shiny
By playing all upon her
And that obelisk of Cleopatra's
And a pond with ducks and swans
And there were two black swans
 they had red eyes
Venders of beverages pretzels ices
Eating places for the rich and paths for their horses
A wooden bridge over the bridle path shaded by huge trees
Policemen on horseback on foot
A pond where the people rented rowboats a stone bridge
A stage for the performance of Shakespeare
A place built like a castle that kept records of winds
And a youthful woman on the grass in a green dress
 reclining in the shadow of a tree
The shadow darkened her body down to her knees but her feet
 were white in the bright sun
Beside her a shoe leaned upon a shoe
Looking something like a ruin

 an empty hall in the museum our sleeps are like this hall
where something waits, packed in straw, for the light
 its presence seeps through the crate like a smell

The ruin is inside us. We feel that. We are building new ruins. We feel that too.

 The Bridge the tallest statue in the city.
 In its shadow, on the piers, dark cargo.
 To return each piece where it was found
The museums even now inch toward the piers slide into the water
Christened as ships they go out with the tide
Their windows billow into sails of thinnest glass
The guards vow silence haul on the lines the pulleys squeal like lizards being stepped on
It had always seemed that the eyes in the portraits moved
Now it seems their foreheads sweat as well
The museums put to sea with no sound but creaking beams
With the wind of the breath of our sleeps
Buoyant with the skies of landscapes buoyant
 with a limitless space
That seeps from the cracks in the frescoes

suddenly someone will speak to you it's that kind of city a winter day
overcast slush underfoot slush ankle-deep off the curbs grayness an unutterable grayness
a forceful dullness of gray seepage more than emanation everything animate and inanimate
soaked in a grayness the source of which is as inescapable as it is unknown heaps of filthy snow
scrape of the park-guy's scoop upon the pavement shoveling gobs of slush toward the sidewalk-
grate I am a young man sitting freezing on a bench inexplicably gloveless scrawling on a pad
he looks up from pushing his long-handled scoop goulashes covered by slush old battered face
cold-reddened ears work gloves he smiles a little, speaks but only this:
"I came too late, with too little."

Everyone's hungry, even the pigeons,
Even the woman who feeds them

Wings flutter at her legs an impossible feathery gown
Live birds warm against her thighs and she is a bride
And this is a marriage
Made in Heaven
Hair dirty as pigeon wings and as gray and as white
She at last is old enough to marry
And like all brides she carries a sack full of pain of grain
While the park like all husbands has a monument stuck in its crotch
A monument with a shadow that moves all day but is fixed in one place by a streetlamp all night

Everyone's hungry even the pigeons
Even the woman who feeds them
Even the light of day

This woman is wedding the park and the park knows this
All its gates open for her
She may sleep on the mown grass
May pray aloud at any bench sitting where her thighs
Smother
Any carved initial of a lover
any gouged vow
knifed by the dangerous children who must be hers now

They are hungry everyone's hungry even the pigeons
Even the woman who feeds them

And prettily dressed people avoid her
A proper mother frightened when Our Lady of the Pigeons
lays a soiled hand upon
a proper tot's cheek
Even a blessing goes hungry

Even the light of day
That draws pigeons into air

Even the bridge over the duck pond
 a lovely archway
But it's been in too many movies too many shampoo ads
No one ever sees it for the first time anymore
The stone bridge dreams of sinking underwater
To become a ruin in order to become itself again

Everyone's getting hungrier all the time
Even the pigeons even the woman who feeds them
Even the park's bronze statues
Which in the beginning had no right to be hungry
Each statue began as the feeding of a hunger
But that's all over its name and dates mean nothing to anyone anymore
The memory of the statue is hungry
It wants to remember what others remember
Instead of remembering just one thing always in all weathers

Even the animals in the zoo are hungry
Elephant llama leopard bear seal
Not hungry for freedom "freedom" means nothing to a penguin
It doesn't want freedom but horizons of ice
And there is nothing of freedom in that ice
No the animals in the zoo
Don't think about being anywhere else
They want some fitting way
 to be where they are
The hungers they were born with don't matter anymore
Those hungers don't apply here
They are hungry for a hunger that could matter to them now

The way everyone's hungry
Even the pigeons
Even the woman who feeds them

Even the light of day

Even the dangerous children in the dark
Who walk just as fancy as they dance
And everyone fears them
Because sometimes they die for each other and sometimes they kill with and without reason
Because they are frightened of everything and they are not wrong
They are afraid of the light of day
They are so frightened of being afraid
 that they have become
 what there is to fear
They won't keep any secrets they'll taunt everyone's hunger
Vie murderously for powders pills potions injected in their veins
Potions they need because they *can* need them
Instead of needing what cannot be had
So hungry that in spray paint they tell everyone their magic names with magic writing
 graffiti that the city

is hungry to erase

Everyone is hungry even the pigeons even the woman
Even the woman who feeds them
And the heartbreaking delicate green of spring leaves lit by streetlamps
A green not seen in humid smudged sunlight
Like so much here it's only real at night that green

The dangerous children gather under canopies of lit leaves
She approaches offering birdseed with her begging blessing smile
They laugh and tenderly call her foul names and let her pass

Even the woman who feeds them

And the light of day the hungry light of day
Draws the pigeons toward it and you look up and some sky near a rooftop
is flecked for an instant with the flashing of wings

And everyone's hungry everyone's hungry
Even the pigeons even the woman who feeds them at dawn
Bolder in the lonely new light flinging handfuls of grain
With great swings of her arms
Isadora-like
pigeons fluttering all up and down her
Wings brushing her hair brushing her canvas shoes
Until her wedding dress of wings
Tears itself to pieces
Pigeons flying away like fluttering rags in the sky

7 ...high in a penthouse overlooking the park

The movie star who used to be a woman --
She is no longer startled to be this Other
This Beauty that can only be borne by a mirror

She:

Each night I place my pretty feet beside the bed
When I set my breasts like coverlets over the bed-posts
I wish for the children of my solitude
To spin them by their nipples have some fun
My buttocks I place one by one beside my toes
On this whitest rug in all the world
Lean my legs against the door
Drop my pussy a hairy glob onto the floor
I have such lovely hands
When I learn they are not mine I am so sad
But it's really alright now that this face is no longer mine
My face no longer a dilemma
My face adheres to the mirror
Half mirror itself have some fun
And all that remains is a haze of perfume
as my name disappears
In the reflux of dream where names mean something Other

*reflux: to heat
so that vapors formed condense and return
to be heated again*

They didn't believe she knew such words

She proved to them, at any rate, the contagion of her dreams

The *body* is what dreams

The city is what happens to a dream

...and then she is spoken to...

I am the spirit of suicide

I am the dream grown unbearable

I am the spirit of suicide

...she attempts to reply...

The Kingdom of Heaven
is no longer within you

The Kingdom of Heaven is within me

The Kingdom of Heaven is no longer within you

I am no transient
The Kingdom of Heaven is within me

You have been used

I cannot be used
The Kingdom of Heaven is within me

**The City is set foursquare
And its length is as much as its width
New Jerusalem a cube in the Bible
New Jerusalem is the angle ninety degrees
The angle ninety degrees is the rule of *this* kingdom
The city they have built here is proof of its dominance
Skyscrapers tenements conceived of ninety degrees
 ninety degrees the biblical angle *as specified*
Cubes maddened into rectangles
Old Jerusalem a bloodbath New Jerusalem rectangled There is no Heaven
You must be forgotten**

I cannot be forgotten

You can be consumed

I am the gate alive

The Kingdom of Heaven is no longer
 is in my little finger
And if you cut off my fingers it's in how once I polished my nails
I will live in the legend of my loss

I have a legend it is here for the taking

The Kingdom of Heaven is no longer

I will arise now
And go about the city in the streets
With my hair waving bright
To signify Heaven

**You cannot survive in the angle ninety degrees what we have made is not
Yours**

I can live anywhere

I can pass through my own gate
In every body is a gateway to a farther city
In every body is a gateway to another body
In every dream is a message for another's dream
If you build one city
You build another another in the same place with the same brick
It cannot be helped
That is the law of building
There is no use saying there is only one city here
The number of gateways can terrify even the strong

**We deadened ourselves that they would not kill us
The Kingdom of Heaven is no longer within**

Just because you're afraid to live
Don't call *me* a "romantic"

You wanted us to believe it lost but it was never lost

It's right here in my body your fascination proves that
Your need to kill me proves that

And something else can be found You'll see
Even I can be found You'll see

The Kingdom of Heaven is no longer within you

It is only that in my body
It is only that in your body
There are bones so white and gleaming
That if they were to find them
In a thousand thousand years
Scooping the filth from the sockets of my skull
They would see what you cannot
The purest color of my eyes
All air!

May they know what you cannot

The Kingdom of Heaven is within you

It is possible to start over as though none of this had happened

That is the necessity for insanity

(Have some fun)

Your silence your very own
Your silence connects you
With the future and the past
And with that *moment* which is neither and which is all you have though you cannot possess it
Silence the only constant

There are sentences whose end we never reach

We can be thankful for that

There is no use saying there is only one city here

There was a mapmaker in Brooklyn tried to track this (bad
things happened to him because of it) tried to map
how something said in a kitchen in the Bronx can be dreamed
in a boudoir in Manhattan and later
on a street in the South Bronx someone dies of it
but also
on a stoop in East Harlem
someone is freed
because of it
and -- it doesn't end there
it goes on
a ricochet in a labyrinth

something said in a kitchen in the Bronx
it goes on can't stop it
and it's slowed only a little by writing it down

Don't talk to *me* about the New York Times
or the New York Yankees either
speak if you must of the
mesmer of the dream
dripping viscous by the hour

And the ships of the world dock here

The Statue of Liberty a bric-a-brac

Never forget this is a conquered place

The conquerors were not of your blood
Yet you are a descendant of the conquerors
You, yourself, are their spoils
The mirror is the chalice that contains you
Yet you speak and the mirror is silent
You die and the mirror is patient
Awaiting another to fill it

It is not enough you are not enough and if you go on in this way
Your death will not be enough

Your city was never enough never what you thought it was
what you called your thought was nothing but your will

silence spans time
as the Bridge the river

the first ship of the conquerors
sailed beneath the Bridge

It would be three hundred years
before the Bridge appeared
but they felt it
in the quiet
some called that: wonder some: fear
a great thing arching over them
here from the beginning

and after it has fallen there will be still
a heaviness to the air
that is the Bridge
in the quiet of its eternal absence : a presence
that has no need of remembrance

They only are free who have no need of remembrance.
Or who remember without need.

10 ...city of flights for Leroy Washington

The door to my apartment is at best artificial
There can be no separation
My room and the hallway and the doors off the hallway
And the staircase
But I try not to think of the staircase
It is such an infinite form
So exact
How many staircases are there in this city? And if you saw
Only the flights of stairs nothing but flights of stairs
If it were possible to see this city with so little yielding
That there would be nothing not a wall nor a brick nor
Any pavement nothing but staircase after staircase after
Staircase flights of stairs flight after flight after flight
A staircase of the Empire State towering a thousand feet
Rising into cloud as though for angels to descend
And the trembling flights of tenement steel fire-escapes
And wide marble museum stairs and humble wooden flights with banisters
Brownstone stoops like tombs
And all the shadows of all the staircases
 jagged on the meadows
Where the stair-towers are growing growing, it would seem
Up out of grass out of rock to quiver in the air
High and high
Pigeons nesting there and gulls and hawks and sparrows
Nothing but stairs and stairs and stairs
 seeming to totter
To be about to fall
Nothing but staircases
 flight after flight
And grass, and birds -- bewildered -- and the voice of wind

...

The shadow of the Bridge
cast deep into the river
resting on the bottom
like a great gray wreck