

Extracts from CANTO VI

ULYSSES

I dreamt of him, my opponent on the battlefield

an infinite likeness from my side of the blade

our onliness shared and the same quest

to suspend time, invite the other to sit and learn his name, the name of his village, to know whether he loves a woman, to remember his voice, his likely accent, perhaps even to mock it, offer him a date to eat and take his life as you kiss him on the forehead

SHE

You're dreaming again...

what will you dream of out there, on the battlefield?

there will be day and there will be night
in each of the two camps, the same gestures, almost routine
well before dawn, ablutions in a basin of water
a few prayers to statues austere
strength, courage, victory

till the cock crows

and the battle is held, surge and counter-surge,
cries, far more than necessary, as in a game that's lasted too long
odors, matted hair under the sweltering helmet
a trickle of urine against the thigh at the moment of death

crickets eulogize and then as darkness falls
it's time to take stock, swallow teeth, lick one's wounds

but you remain blind to this charade
convinced there's courage and even sense in it all

ULYSSES

I will return and give you a son

once I've known war and how to give death
with the untamed rage of the howling newborn
human, headbutting his mother till she bleeds

I'll know how to give death, far removed from the gods and from memory itself
until our very names have deserted our mouths
and the wars seem so alike there are no sides left
only an ache from clenching our jaws too tight
a phallus stiff-pressed against the belly
and the fear of growing numb from the chill of the bite

SHE

Give me a name, Ulysses

give me a name so that i can wait for you
i'll be here, the mirror, there
and we'll speak of you, me and the other in the mirror
i'll join her there, always a little slant, on the edge of a chair, the way birds do
the ache in my thigh keeps me from losing myself to that side of the mirror

in the morning i'll put on my earrings
i may even wear them to bed in case you surprise me in the night

but if i have no name how will I know which one, her or me, is waiting?

ULYSSES

Give you a name?

Give you a name when you dance in the dark with great hounds in empty streets?

Give you a name when you stroll to the river in your nightdress in broad daylight, spurning the men who were damned the moment they thought they possessed you?

I'll give you oranges

and to peel them a knife, no bigger than a thumb

an ivory knife I'll steal after battle

a dead man's gift to another woman

and you'll have to think of her, her cold sheets, the hole in her pocket traded for the knife

I'll give you blades of grass long embedded in the soles of my feet

from shoots that grow there, where the bodies lie

standing tall like sentinels at the precise point their retreat ended