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### **On Stairs, Sloths, and Motors**

I need to make sure the kitchen door is locked. That's the only thing I can think about: is the kitchen door locked. But the kitchen is seven more stairs down and four steps around the corner and the light bulb has burned out and what was that noise, was that my cat, was that someone stepping through the door? I could stand on this step for a half hour, paralyzed, but it's getting late and I have math homework to finish, so I grit my teeth, clench my stomach, and try to move quickly enough so that I will not have time to think. The door is already locked when I get to it, and I can breathe again.

In Canto 18 of *Purgatorio*, Dante is nearly run over by a stampede of souls working on their zeal. They cry “faster, faster, so that no time be lost / through little love” as they sprint in circles around the mountain (*Purgatorio*, XVIII. 103-14). I think about my sprints to the kitchen door, and I know they are not driven by a desire for more love, but rather by fear. I think these fear-sprints are not about taking advantage of time, they are about ignoring painful time, and I think the love that the recovering slothful souls are growing has something much different to say about time management.

I spend more time than I would like white-knuckled, stomach muscles clenched. This “white-knuckle time” is blind time. It is time spent closed off to questions, fired up entirely by fear or indignation. Walking my dog at night and hurrying between the safe circles of light from the street lamps, or staring at the calendar hoping that somehow my college application deadlines have been pushed back, I feel my body tense as if preparing for a collision. Even scrolling

through Facebook and reading the Fox News articles my grandma shares makes me actually shake.

These physical responses have gotten worse for me in the past year or so, since the night I looked up and saw a stranger standing in my bedroom, holding his shoes in his hands so he was silent when he entered our house. I didn't get hurt at all, he left when I yelled. No one got hurt, actually, he just took my mom's wallet out of her purse and looked through our cabinets downstairs. So the whole incident was incredibly minor compared to the other crime in the blocks around my house, and negligible in the bigger scheme of things. And I told myself that, and I went back to school, and I worked on being brave in my own house again. But that turned out to be hard, and my hands were still in tight fists, so I saw a therapist a few times. She told me that when doing something I am scared of, like going downstairs to lock the door, there is a difference between gritting my teeth and going on autopilot until it's over with, and "riding out the wave," as she put it, acknowledging my emotions instead of shutting them down. The second option is evidently the more healthy of the two.

As Dante continues to speak with the sloths-in-recovery, they tell him "we are so filled with desire to move/ that we cannot stay" (*Purgatorio*, XVIII. 115-116). This seems to have a lot to do with enjoying their journey, rather than traveling on autopilot. And again, I wonder if that is because these souls are learning to make love their motor. Sloth and fear actually have a lot to do with each other, I think. They arise from a fear to move, because they replace love as a person's motor. As a result, the motion that does come about from fear or sloth is mindless, entirely for the sake of stopping at the next destination as soon as possible. There is no joy in that kind of travel. And I wonder whether the entire aim of Purgatory is to find joy in travel, and in joy, love.

There's a psychologist named Abraham Maslow who developed what is known as Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The hierarchy can be represented as a pyramid, with the most basic needs at the bottom (what your body requires to survive), and then safety and social belonging and so on going up. And the top of the pyramid, what you can focus on once all the preceding needs have been met, is self-actualization and introspection. I feel sometimes like I am just boiling away at the top, questioning without purpose or payoff. So I have to look for a way to spend this energy practically, for a good bigger than myself. The takeaway Dante offers me in this effort is to enjoy (in-joy) the journey, as overused as the phrase is. The purpose and payoff of questions, he says, is to learn to move with "desire" rather than fear, off of real and imagined staircases, towards both the kitchen door and doubts that I am scared to explore.

### **Works Cited**

Dante Alighieri. *Purgatorio*. Trans. Stanley Lombardo. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2009. Print.