
Three Horatian Epistles

JOSEPH HARRISON

TO RICCARDO DURANTI

Vides ut alta stet nive candida Soracte...

My friend Riccardo, you are a lucky fellow
To have a hilltop farm in the Sabine hills
Where you raise olives and figs and lettuces
And live with your eager dog and a couple of cats.
A wise man, too, to leave the city behind
And give up teaching down there and work from home,
Translating poems and novels and whatever you like.

You've built an airy new house out of old stone
On the old spot. It's modest, but ample, too,
Fit for your purpose and friendly to visitors.
Even quite ancient things can be put to new use,
Becoming timeless and contemporary.
Conglomerate, limestone, and *sponga* have served you well,
As well as they served your ancestors way back when.

On days when a cool wind combs the leaves of your elms
And ripples your split-by-lightning mulberry,
And the jasmine your mother planted as a girl
Billows and luffs like the hopes of the very young
For whom every season is fresh and the hours move slowly,
As a caravan of clouds casts Salisano
Continually in and out of light and shadow
You can still see, in the distance, Mount Soratte,
Just as the poet did from another angle
When it was inches taller and covered in snow.

Who needs an apartment in Rome when you have all this?
Who needs to be sipping Giacchè or Amarone
When the *rosso* your cousin Spartaco provides
Comes in huge jugs and gets better the more you drink it?

Although I believe this poem should tell you something,
Any advice I might give you would be superfluous;
You're already living the way I would urge you to.
I can only think of a single, trivial warning:
Beware of your nasty old neighbor down the road.
He cheats at pool like a little Berlusconi.

TO BARACK OBAMA

You've written me, once again, to ask for money.
I thought I would send you, as well, a little advice,
In nearly perfect confidence it won't reach you.

My father used to exclaim, when one of his children
Was frustrated by human stupidity,
By prejudice, or envy, or petty meanness,
"Don't let the dungheads get you down!" It helped
A bit, perhaps since when he said it, he always
Let loose a hearty belly laugh, in pure
Pleasure at his own sanguine witticism,
Which never left him, however often he found
Occasion to trot it out with his great guffaw,
Even in rather embarrassing circumstances,
As one of my sisters, for instance, was nervously lurching
Off to some tittering rendezvous with her friends
Who were standing there, bewildered, just within hearing.

I imagine you don't. How could you? You wouldn't have time.
For some of us, though, watching all this can be tough,
As much of the country believes you're trouble incarnate,
Mao and Malcolm and Gogmagog rolled into one,
And others are deeply, miserably disappointed
Your presidency has been, of course, imperfect,
And you haven't solved most of our problems the way they'd hoped.
But given the metacrises you were given
—An economy in the tank and two wars on,
With shameless opposition whose loyalties
Attend on their donors and party before their country—
It seems to me so far you've done rather well,
And I think it will look that way in the long perspective
(Poets do take the long view: it's all we've got).

And while I have your metaphorical ear,
I thought I would include these rough translations

Of Florentine proverbs from the Renaissance:

*Too much reliance on a comfort circle
Of loyal friends has scuppered many a prince.*

*Your enemies are as ruthless as they are foolish
Concerning all the issues that matter most.*

The cautious man may miss the safest path.

*When you inherit a hopeless enterprise,
Doing the things that might have made a difference
Back when a difference was still there to be made
Doesn't make any difference.*

To escape the Cyclops' cave you have to blind him.

This comes to you with only admiration.
You carry an epic burden, and carry it nobly.
Please give my best to Michelle, a wonderful lady.
I'm enclosing, along with this poem, a modest check.

TO VIRGINIA FAIRFAX

My dear Virginia, thank you for your letter.
I'm doing fine, the weather is pleasant here,
I'm actually getting more than a little written
Despite the distractions of fun and fellowship,
My injury's more a nuisance than a trouble.

I don't know quite what to say about your daughter.
Is poetry, as you put it, "a good career,"
And would it be a good career for her?
Short answer: no. A slightly longer answer:
Poetry really is not a career at all,
Or not in the sense we usually use that term,
So if your daughter wants to have a career
She would be well advised to seek one elsewhere.
Trying to be a careerist and a poet
Is like trying to be responsible and a pothead:
If you want to be responsible, don't be a pothead.

There's a longer answer, which I'll get to shortly.
But first, a story: an older friend of mine,
As a young man back from university,
Revealed to his parents he wanted to be a poet.
They were practical-minded people, and alarmed,
As this course seemed neither prudent nor lucrative.
They invited a family friend over for dinner
On some clumsy pretext: the friend was Dr. Seuss,
Who advised him the pursuit of poetry
Was fine if one undertook it in one's spare time,
But that a man needed a serious profession
To make some money and his mark in the world.
My friend saw through this transparent intervention
And resolved to completely ignore such admonition.
He went on to become a great poet. As if the gods
Had decided to punish his parents for their meddling,
His younger brother became a poet too.

So beware what you tell your children not to do,
 Since they will probably go and do it. And
 It could be they actually know what's best for them.
 The heart may know what it wants, if not how to get it,
 And the perverse persistence of the will
 Counts for more in the long run than subtle calculation.
 I've met your daughter only three or four times:
 She seems very bright, with a quick intelligence
 Attuned to nuance and reverberation.
 That evening she asked me questions about my poems
 Her curiosity seemed quite spot on,
 As if this child understood what I was doing
 Along her own imaginary track.
 I wouldn't discourage her. If anyone
 Could be happy being a poet, it might be her.

But back to careers: I'd offer a distinction
 Between two sorts. The way most people figure,
 Your career is what shows up on your résumé,
 Degrees and jobs, awards and publications,
 And quantity's very much the name of the game.
 But poetry's been around longer than writing
 Departments, longer than publishers, longer than schools,
 And many a man or woman has set off across
 The blank wastes of its haunted interior world
 With no GPS or guiding patronage system,
 Just an eye and an ear and a flair for metaphor.
 For them a career is precisely a body of work,
 The poems and books that form a trajectory,
 Whether it's sweeping or modest, staccato or steady,
 Ascending to culmination or cut short.

If your daughter cares for the latter more than the former
 She'll avoid the purgatory of always waiting,
 Of wondering who'll get what and where and why,
 And go her own way, and, if true to the art,
 Suffer a knowledge that is both hell and heaven.