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MAN-SIK LEE

The Torture of Mezentius

The Greek tyrant Mezentius “would even couple carcasses / with living bodies as a form of torture, / hand to hand, face to face, he made them / suffer corruption oozing gore and slime. / In that wretched embrace, and a slow death.” This is Virgil’s explanation.

The torture of Mezentius is the mother of poetry.

Without alcohol, I cannot sleep at night. I cannot close my eyes. I read books all night long, for I cannot close my eyes. I close my eyes and encounter the torture of Mezentius. I close my eyes, I kiss my death. My hands are cupped in the hands of death, my face is cramped to the face of death. I close my eyes, I close my eyes to sleep, and death begins asking questions, it stinks, it is oozing gore and slime. I cannot draw a line clearly between the dead and the living. Dirty sticky matter is oozing out muddily. I am slowly dying.

I begin to think of poetry, for it is a form of hanging tough under the torture of Mezentius.

Lines in the first paragraph are from Robert Fitzgerald’s translation of The Aeneid (New York: Random House, 1983, pp. 247).