

A Suite of Six Poems based on Works of Art

By M. Ali Lakhani



The Great Wave off Kanagawa
by Hokusai

A View of Mount Fuji

(After Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*,
from 'Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji')

"The summit itself not only occupies no space, although the whole mountain is virtually contained in it, but it is also outside time and all succession, and only the 'eternal present' reigns there."

— *Marco Pallis, The Way and the Mountain*

In Hokusai's woodblock of the Great Wave
Both transience and permanence are shown,
Man caught between them in the vast unknown,
Like rowers 'mid the elements they brave.

The majestic mountain stands in the background,
Mysterious, as in life. Only we,
Who ride the waters of this troubled sea,
Can fathom that peak where stillness is found

In the perfection of the crested wave
That gathers to a poise before it falls -
The sublime moment the summit recalls -
Before descending to its formless grave.



The Tower of Babel
by Pieter Brueghel the Younger

The Tower of Babel

(After a Painting by Pieter Brueghel the Younger)

“By this means human beings hoped to climb up to heaven, intending in their foolishness not to equal but to excel their creator.”

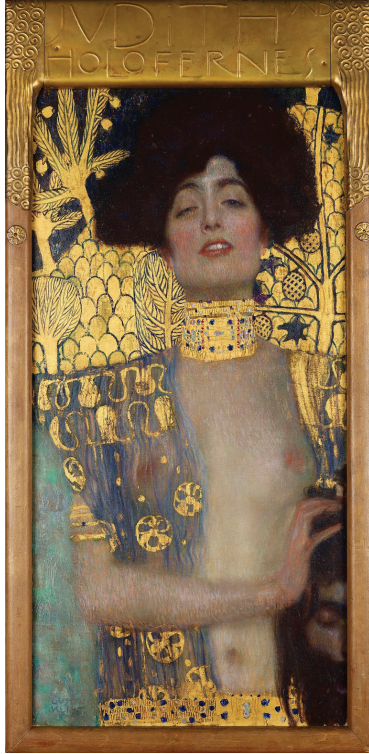
— *Dante Alighieri, De Vulgari Eloquentia*

Through the sulfurous dark one sees
The sheer and jutting scarp extend,
Megalithic. It groans to please
Mighty Nimrod, to serve his end:

Earth’s dominion over heaven.
The nervous architects complain:
Their foundations falter. Driven,
They pile the load to bear the strain.

But note how the skies are displeased,
How they roil, ready to swallow
The cratering building’s diseased
Bulk into the massing inferno.

Complacent for now, they ignore the signs.
In this hive, carpenters, masons,
Are occupied, debate designs.
Oblivious that the end hastens.



Judith I
by Gustav Klimt

Judith and Holofernes

(After the painting 'Judith I' by Gustav Klimt)

"The soul ... by reason of lust had become the principal accomplice in her own captivity."

— *Plato [Phaedo, 82E]*

There is the betrayal, of course,
And lust, and gruesome use of force -
But the vision that dominates
Is what desire incubates:
Not love, but the soul's seduction,
Her ensnarement and destruction.
Observe her carefully - her eyes,
And what her nakedness belies:
More passionate than Eve of old,
Her bejeweled neck braced in gold.
Mark how her delicate fingers
Stroke his hair while her gaze lingers.
Imagine how it drew him in
Beneath her sheer gown, her soft skin -
He, whose trophied head, in her folds,
Like our own, she potently holds.



The Betrayal of Christ aka 'The Kiss of Judas' fresco
by Giotto

Christ and His Betrayer

(After The Betrayal of Christ/'Kiss of Judas' fresco by Giotto)

"Judas, betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss?"

— *Luke, 22:48*

Those who mistake innocence for naïveté
Should consider the instance of Judas's kiss
When Christ's eyes gaze into those of his betrayer
With knowing acceptance, a love we cannot miss.

One can see it in Giotto's famous painting,
Amid the melee of clubs and daggers and flares,
Where one embraces to condemn, while the other
To forgive - the mystery behind their locked stares.

Those three qualities, of mind, of will, and of heart,
Which Christ embodies, evince a higher calling:
To sacrifice with love rather than seek to earn
The grubby silvered means of our soul's own falling.



The Incredulity of Saint Thomas
by Caravaggio

Chiaroscuro

(After Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*)

"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

— *John 20:29*

Between light and shadow we live.
In chiaroscuro. The Master
Beckons me, summons me to light.
I hesitate, and so misgive.
His image is alabaster.
Is it him? Am I sure? Not quite.

It's not lack of recognition,
This doubt. How can we trust what's real?
We must sense first, lift that curtain.
He guides me, this apparition,
Like a nail to flesh. Says, "*Faith! Feel!*"
I witness, kneel, and am certain.



Pietà
(a sculpture by Michelangelo)

Pietà

(After the Vatican sculpture by Michelangelo)

“...if thou wouldst see Me in My uncreated Divinity, thou shouldst learn to know Me in My suffering humanity, for that is the swiftest way to eternal bliss.”

— *Henry Suso*

His limbs limp in her ample lap
His wounds in her sorrowing face
His brokenness in her beauty
His pierced flesh in her unscarred womb

In her spirit she bears him yet
In her lightness that holds his weight
Golgotha's rock concealed beneath
Her robe's enfolding drapery

This is the heart we hide and bare
The nature of her upturned palm
The mystery of our inwardness
The humanity that binds us