

The Gates of Heaven : Adrienne Greenblatt  
Weatherproof - The Hole

*At the Gate*

The gate hangs from a few hairs, suspended in the crevice of the wall. When the sun sets it'll blind you into thinking its shape is flat like some kind of hologram. Standing at the foot of it, you can barely decipher its slippery ornamental silhouette: a mesmerizing evocation of an otherworldly artifact or a 12 century pilgrim badge, a metal engraving of a scene of martyrdom (see image). It bends in sinuous curvatures like handwriting. If this is a doorway: it is left ajar. If this is a gateway it must lead to the skies.



*Pilgrim badge, found in the River Thames, depicting the martyrdom of St Thomas Becket by a knight. 1320-1400, British Museum.*

I have been looking for descriptions of heaven, gates to the skies, pearlescent or not, looking through images of awe inspiring pathways left over from antiquity and beyond. The maps of the underworld, the Elysian Fields. Of course, it has led me to mythologies of grandiose portals, gate doors through which we are awaited in judgment, paintings of nude bodies lining up to be dressed by angels at a gothic towering pathway into the sky.

But also, to wrought iron gates –how they gained popularity in Victorian times, that they were often painted in dark greens or brown so as to disappear with the foliage of gardens. And how, in England so many were melted during the war as an attempt to rally people together, even if there was no way to recycle their materials.

Out in Sartrouville, the house is heavily fenced in by a black iron gate. I am not sure if the homes out there were always surrounded by fences but this one has to have been there for a while. The iron extends upwards

from a stone base, reaching as high as the tallest trees around. Inside, the black and white home where my mother grew up seems to be as old as time. Every morning, my aunt opens the black iron shutters at 6 to let the cool breeze come in, and closes them again at noon. I am told the shutters haven't been changed since the war and still have holes from fragments of the bombings of 44. I have so many stories of people trying their way in: a kid with a shoe, a fake electrical inspection, burglars... My grandmother lays bed-ridden most days, listens to the mass as loud as it gets on the radio at lunch time. Under her bed, she keeps a box of black and white photographs with all the family memories. As a child, I remember asking her to tell them to me over and over –the ones from the war. The one of the man in a bathtub that got propelled out of his house because of the force of a bomb during the London blitz, or when her defiant brother would purposefully not make it down into the shelter on time when the sirens rang. She would tell the stories at the table after dinner, laughing at the absurdity of most of them. It never occurred to me to ask how she could recount these stories and find humor in them.

In 1945, while Italy had surrendered to German occupation, Vittorio de Sica was recruited by the Italian National Fascist Party to film and direct propaganda for Benito Mussolini. With the support of the Vatican and the Centro Catolico Cinematografico, De Sica managed to avoid the offer and started directing a production entitled *La Porta De Cielo*<sup>1</sup> – Heaven's Door. The neorealist film was shot in Rome in the extraterritorial Basilica di San Paolo fuori le Mura, where actors, technicians and extras camped out and lived for over a year safe from the Fascist regime. The story follows a group of ill, disabled and disfigured people as they embark on a train journey, to the city of Ancona in eastern Italy, on a pilgrimage to The Holy House of Loreto<sup>2</sup>, in search of a miracle that never occurs. The film is slow paced, presenting forms of vignettes on each passengers' lives, and the reasons they are there. We are confronted with each character's narratives of hope, joy and tragic loss, and their attempts to hold on to a sense of faith. In the first few scenes, a mother reassures her son in a wheelchair, she keeps repeating *We will go, we will be on our way, we will head out*. On the phone my mother tells me, all prayers are answered. You just can't dictate the way in which they will be.

In the morning, the cold humidity covers the glass in dew, some kind of residue of a midnight sweat. Its sinuous membranes are wet in the orange hue of the sunrise. At first you might even think it hovers, floating within the frame of the hole like a skirt over an air shaft. It's been said that there is nothing stable about glass' constitution. Simply by looking at the stained glass windows of an European Medieval Cathedral, you can see the way they pool at their base, dragging themselves down like tar, as if resisting the urge to melt. It isn't so much about melting. The particles, in constant adaptation, seem to be sustained between states — a little bit solid but a little bit liquid, too. The higher the window the most uneven the shape, as if made frail by its proximity to light.

Text by Marie Ségolène C Brault

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<sup>1</sup> Vittorio de Sica hired around 300 extras during the production of the movie. Each of them either belonged to the Jewish community or were facing persecution under the Nazi regime due to their distinctive physical traits and disabilities. In order to prevent their deportation, he intentionally extended the filming process, eagerly anticipating the arrival of the allied forces. The journey of the characters mirror the reality of the actors, all of which survived the war.

<sup>2</sup> The Holy House of Our Lady of Loreto, is a Basilica known for housing the original home of the Virgin Mary, brought by a flock of angels to Ancona, where it mysteriously sits to this day.

