

TWO POEMS



Tim Kendall

PUCCINI: GIANNI SCHICCHI

*Per questa bizzarria
m'han cacciato all'inferno...*

Hateful to a fault, Dante
damned our hero deeper
than blasphemy or bloodshed
just for swindling a Donati.
A dozen lines portray
Schicchi scampering
demented through his sphere—
all mouth, the bite to match—
as Dante passes by,
content with cold revenge.

Five, six hundred years
leave Schicchi shrunk
to a scholarly note of
dates and misdemeanours
(forging wills, stealing mares,
mimicking the living dead)
until—redeemed, reborn—
he serenades a world
of easy sentiment where
laughter and disdain,

and nothing else, ring true.
His the ethical deceit,
ungarnished with
love, or pity, or grief.
His the voice which grants
the courage to reject
most diligent Virgil,
impeccable Beatrice.
His the guiltless life.
Gianni, be our guide.

TOMATOES

Our landlady Mrs Furze occupied the upper half of the house. Her husband had been killed in the war by a direct hit on an air-raid shelter. "He survived the trenches, and got blown to bits down the Barbican". And she'd give a little laugh. "You know, they were wonderful times, the war years. We'd go dancing on the Hoe every week. Open air, hundreds of couples. And not just dancing". Mrs Furze had a pink rinse faded almost to imperceptibility. She was a kindly woman. Each Sunday I'd bring up her newspaper and sit in the kitchen while she read me the more salacious stories.

My mother got on well with Mrs Furze until they fell out over the tomatoes. I took special pride in the tomato plants we grew in the yard, since I'd been allowed to dig the holes and pack the earth over the roots. Setting off for school on a particularly sunny morning I would single out an almost-ripe tomato, and spend the day anticipating the glories awaiting me at home. Several times the tomato had gone when I got back. My mother finally asked Mrs Furze outright if she knew anything about it. Mrs Furze blazed: "Nothing to do with me". And she disappeared upstairs.

A few days later my mother spotted her in the yard popping one of our tomatoes whole into her mouth. After that we picked them green, and left them to ripen on the window-sill. It was my job to turn them, twice a day, towards the sun.