

CARGO FOR THE UNDERWORLD

Everything here is slender, the skiff, the pole,
The one who punts, the passengers who tender
Gentle remarks to one another like toys—
And finally their stock of wit is slender.

Indeed, not wit but self-deception. These
Have so deceived themselves that there is no longer
Truth in them, as they plan their festivals.
Once there was truth there, but falsehood proved the stronger.

Perhaps they have loved a monster, half snake, half woman;
And suddenly at the thrumming of a lyre
One is aware that evil is subverting
The inmost reason with innermost desire.

The skiff is laden with flowers from relatives,
Slender white flowers, each a delicate wheel:
Propitiate Hermes, they said, persuade him to guide you,
With a gift of wine or an offering of meal.

How can they enter the world of Hermes' discourse?
Once his ironical eyes have proved and quizzed them
He will see he can only lead them where they will go.
They will not avail themselves of his alien wisdom.

They will accuse him of riddling or of distortion,
And he will conduct them till light fades from their eyes,
And leave them in everlasting shadow, facing
King Hades, the dark father, the prince of lies.

BENET WEATHERHEAD, O.P.