

INFERNO

CANTO XIII

Nessus had not yet reached the other side
when we made our way into a forest
not marked by any path. 3

No green leaves, but those of dusky hue --
not a straight branch, but knotted and contorted --
no fruit of any kind, but poisonous thorns. 6

No rougher, denser thickets make a refuge
for the wild beasts that hate tilled lands
between the Cècina and Corneto. 9

Here the filthy Harpies nest,
who drove the Trojans from the Strophades
with doleful prophecies of woe to come. 12

They have broad wings, human necks and faces,
taloned feet, and feathers on their bulging bellies.
Their wailing fills the eerie trees. 15

And my good master then began to speak:
'Before you go in deeper you should know,
you are, and will be, in the second ring 18

'until you reach the dreadful sand. Look well --
you will see things that, in my telling,
would seem to strip my words of truth.' 21

Lamentations I heard on every side
but I saw no one who might be crying out
so that, confused, I stopped. 24

I think he thought that I thought
all these voices in among the branches
came from people hiding there. 27

And so the master said: 'If you break off
a twig among these brambles,
your present thoughts will be cut short.' 30

Then I stretched out my hand
 and plucked a twig from a tall thorn-bush,
 and its stem cried out: 'Why do you break me?' 33
 When it ran dark with blood
 it cried again: 'Why do you tear me?
 Have you no pity in you?' 36
 'We once were men that now are turned to thorns.
 Your hand might well have been more merciful
 had we been souls of snakes.' 39
 As from a green log, burning at one end,
 that blisters and hisses at the other
 with the rush of sap and air, 42
 so from the broken splinter oozed
 blood and words together, and I let drop
 the twig and stood like one afraid. 45
 'Could he have believed it otherwise,
 O wounded soul,' my sage spoke up,
 'what he had seen only in my verses, 48
 'he would not have raised his hand against you.
 But your plight, being incredible, made me
 goad him to this deed that weighs on me. 51
 'Now tell him who you were, so that, by way
 of recompense, he may revive your fame
 up in the world, where he's permitted to return.' 54
 And the stem said: 'With your pleasing words
 you so allure me I cannot keep silent.
 May it not offend if I am now enticed to speak. 57
 'I am the one who held both keys
 to Frederick's heart, and I could turn them,
 locking and unlocking, so discreetly 60
 'I kept his secrets safe from almost everyone.
 So faithful was I to that glorious office
 that first I lost my sleep and then my life. 63
 'The slut who never took her whoring eyes
 from Caesar's household, the common bane
 and special vice of courts, 66
 'inflamed all minds against me.
 And they, inflamed, did so inflame Augustus
 that welcome honors turned to dismal woe. 69

'My mind, in scornful temper,
 hoping by dying to escape from scorn,
 made me, though just, against myself unjust. 72

'By this tree's new-sprung roots I give my oath:
 not once did I break faith
 with my true lord, a man so worthy of honor. 75

'If one of you goes back into the world,
 let him restore my memory, which still lies helpless
 beneath the blow that envy dealt it.' 78

The poet waited, then he said to me:
 'Since he is silent now do not waste time
 but speak if you would ask him more.' 81

And I replied: 'Please question him
 about the things you think I need to know.
 For I cannot, such pity fills my heart.' 84

Thus he began again: 'So that this man may,
 with ready will, do as your words entreat,
 may it please you, imprisoned spirit, 87

'to tell us further how the souls are bound
 inside such gnarled wood, and tell us, if you can,
 if from such limbs one ever is set free.' 90

Then the tree forced out harsh breath, and soon
 that wind was turned into a voice:
 'My answer shall be brief. 93

'When the ferocious soul deserts the body
 after it has wrenched up its own roots,
 Minos condemns it to the seventh gulch. 96

'It falls into the forest, in a spot not chosen,
 but flung by fortune, helter-skelter,
 it fastens like a seed. 99

'It spreads into a shoot, then a wild thicket.
 The Harpies, feeding on its leaves,
 give pain and to that pain a mouth. 102

'We will come to claim our cast-off bodies
 like the others. But it would not be just if we again
 put on the flesh we robbed from our own souls. 105

'Here shall we drag it, and in this dismal wood
 our bodies will be hung, each one
 upon the thorn-bush of its painful shade.' 108

Our attention was still fixed upon the tree,
 thinking it had more to tell us,
 when we were startled by a noise, 111
 as a man, when he hears
 the dogs, and branches snapping,
 knows the boar and hunters near. 114
 Now, from the left, two souls came running,
 naked and torn, and so intent on flight
 they broke straight through the tangled thicket. 117
 The one in front cried: 'Come, come quickly, death!'
 And the other, who thought his own pace slow:
 'Lano, your legs were not so nimble 120
 'at the tournament near the Toppo.'
 Then, almost out of breath, he pressed himself
 into a single tangle with a bush. 123
 Behind them now the woods were thick
 with bitches, black and ravenous and swift
 as hounds loosed from the leash. 126
 On him who had hidden in the tangle
 they set their teeth, tore him to pieces,
 and carried off those miserable limbs. 129
 And then my leader took me by the hand.
 He led me to the bush,
 which wept in vain lament from bleeding wounds. 132
 'O Jacopo da Sant' Andrea,' it said,
 'what use was it to make a screen of me?
 Why must I suffer for your guilty life?' 135
 When the master stopped beside it, he said:
 'Who were you, that through so many wounds
 pour out with blood your doleful words?' 138
 And he to us: 'O souls who have arrived
 to see the shameless carnage
 that has torn from me my leaves, 141
 'gather them here at the foot of this wretched bush.
 I was of the city that traded patrons --
 Mars for John the Baptist. On that account 144
 'Mars with his craft will make her grieve forever.
 And were it not that at the crossing of the Arno
 some vestige of him still remains, 147

'those citizens who afterwards rebuilt it
upon the ashes that Attila left behind
would have done their work in vain. 150
I made my house into my gallows.' 151