

INFERNO

CANTO XIV

Urged by the love I bore my place of birth,
I gathered up the scattered leaves and gave them back
to him, who had by this time spent his breath. 3

Then we came to the boundary that divides
the second circling from the third.
And here the dreadful work of justice is revealed. 6

To tell how strange the new place was,
I say we reached a barren plain
that lets no plant set root into its soil. 9

The gloomy forest rings it like a garland
and is in turn encircled by the moat.
Here, at the very edge, we stayed our steps 12

at an expanse of deep and arid sand,
much like the sand pressed long ago
beneath the feet of Cato. 15

O vengeance of God, how much
should you be feared by all who read
what now I saw revealed before my eyes! 18

I saw many a herd of naked souls,
all crying out in equal misery,
though each seemed subject to a different law: 21

some lay face up upon the ground,
some sat, their bodies hunched,
and others roamed about in constant motion. 24

Most numerous were those who roamed about,
those lying there in torment fewer,
though theirs the tongues crying out the most. 27

Above the stretching sand, in slow descent,
broad flakes of fire showered down
as snow falls in the hills on windless days. 30

If Alexander, on India's torrid plains,
seeing undiminished flakes of fire fall
upon the ground and on his troops, 33

ordered his men to trample down the soil
 so that the flaming shower was put out
 before the fire caught and spread, 36
 here untrammelled the eternal flames
 came down, and the sand took fire
 like tinder under flint, doubling the torment. 39
 Ever without repose was the rude dance
 of wretched hands, now here, now there,
 slapping at each new scorching cinder. 42
 I began: 'Master, you who overcome all things --
 all but the obstinate fiends who sallied forth
 against us at the threshold of the gate, 45
 'who is that hero who seems to scorn the fire
 and lies there grim and scowling
 so that the rain seems not to torture him?' 48
 And he himself, who had discerned
 that I had asked my guide about him,
 cried: 'What I was alive, I am in death. 51
 'Let Jove wear out his blacksmith
 from whom in rage he seized the shining bolt
 he struck me with on that my final day. 54
 'And though he weary all the others, one by one,
 at their black forge in Mongibello,
 shouting "Help, good Vulcan, help!" 57
 'as once he did on the battlefield of Phlegra,
 and though he hurl his shafts at me with all his might,
 he still would have no joy in his revenge.' 60
 Then my leader spoke with a vehemence
 I had not heard him use before: 'O, Capaneus,
 because your pride remains unquenched 63
 'you suffer greater punishment.
 In your own anger lies your agony,
 a fitting torment for your rage.' 66
 Then, with a calmer look, he said to me:
 'He was among the seven kings who once laid siege
 to Thebes and held -- and he still seems to hold -- 69
 'God in disdain and to esteem Him lightly.
 But his own spiteful ranting, as I made clear,
 most fittingly adorns his breast. 72

'Now come along behind me, and be sure
 you do not set your feet upon the burning sand
 but keep your steps close to the forest's edge.' 75

In silence we went on until we came
 to where a little stream spurts from the wood.
 The redness of it makes me shudder still. 78

As from the Bulicame flows out a rivulet
 the sinful women then divide among them,
 so this ran down across the sand. 81

Its bed and both its banks were made of stone,
 as was the boundary on either side:
 I saw our passage lay that way. 84

'In all else I have shown you
 since we entered through the gate
 whose threshold is denied to none, 87

'your eyes have yet seen nothing of such note
 as is this stream before us:
 its vapor quenches every flame above it.' 90

These were my leader's words. Hearing them,
 I asked him to supply the food
 for which he had provoked the appetite. 93

'In the middle of the sea there lies a land,'
 he said, 'a wasteland known as Crete.
 Under its king the world was innocent. 96

'A mountain rises there, once glad
 with leaves and streams, called Ida.
 Now it is barren like a thing outworn. 99

'Once Rhea chose it as the trusted cradle
 for her child, and there, the better to conceal him
 when he cried, she had her people raise an uproar. 102

'Within the mountain stands a huge old man.
 He keeps his back turned on Damietta,
 gazing on Rome as in his mirror. 105

'His head is fashioned of fine gold,
 his breast and arms of purest silver,
 then to the fork he's made of brass, 108

'and from there down he is all iron,
 but for his right foot of baked clay,
 and he rests more on this than on the other. 111

'Every part except the gold is rent
 by a crack that drips with tears, which, running down,
 collect to force a passage through that cavern, 114
 'taking their course from rock to rock into this depth,
 where they form Acheron, Styx, and Phlegethon,
 then, going down this narrow channel, 117
 'down to where there is no more descent,
 they form Cocytus: what kind of pond that is
 you shall see in time -- here I say no more.' 120
 And I asked: 'If that stream flows
 down from our world, why do we see it
 only at this boundary?' 123
 And he answered: 'You know this place is round,
 and though you have come far,
 descending toward the bottom on the left, 126
 'you have not come full circle.
 Should some new thing confront us,
 it need not bring such wonder to your face.' 129
 And I again: 'Master, where are Phlegethon and Lethe?
 About the one you're silent, and you say the other
 is made into a river by this rain.' 132
 'In all your questions you do please me,'
 he replied, 'but the red and seething water
 might well have answered one of those you ask. 135
 'Lethe you shall see: not in this abyss
 but where the spirits go to cleanse themselves
 once their repented guilt has been removed.' 138
 And then: 'Now it is time to leave this forest.
 See you stay close behind me.
 The borders, which are not on fire, form a path 141
 and over both of them all flames are quenched.' 142