

PURGATORIO

CANTO XXIII

While I was peering through green boughs,
even as do men who waste their lives
in hunting after birds, 3
my more than father said to me: 'My son,
come along, for the time we are allowed
should be apportioned to a better use.' 6
I turned my face, and my steps as quickly,
to follow my two sages, whose discourse
made my going on seem easy, 9
when with weeping we heard voices sing
'*Labïa mēa, Domine*' in tones
that brought at once delight and grief. 12
'O sweet father, what is that I hear?' I asked,
and he: 'Shades, perhaps, who go their way
loosening the knot of what they owe.' 15
Just as pilgrims, absorbed in thought,
overtaking strangers on the road,
turn toward them without coming to a halt, 18
so, coming up behind us at a quicker pace than ours
and passing on, a group of souls,
silent and devout, gazed at us with wonder. 21
Their eyes were dark and sunken,
their faces pale, their flesh so wasted
that the skin took all its shape from bones. 24
I do not believe that Erysichthon had become
so consumed, to the very skin, by hunger
when he was most in terror of it. 27
I said to myself in thought:
'Behold the people who lost Jerusalem
when Mary set her beak into her son!' 30
The sockets of their eyes resembled rings
without their gems. He who reads 'omo'
in men's faces would have easily made out the 'm.' 33

Who, if he did not know the reason, would believe the scent of fruit and smell of water could cause such craving, reducing shades to this?	36
I was wondering what makes them so famished, since what had made them gaunt, with wretched, scaling skin, was still unknown to me,	39
when out of the deep-set sockets in his head a shade fixed me with his eyes and cried aloud: 'What grace is granted to me now!'	42
I never would have known him by his features, but the sound of his voice made plain to me what from his looks had been erased.	45
That spark relit the memory of his changed features and I knew Forese's face.	48
'Ah,' he begged, 'pay no attention to the withered scab discoloring my skin nor to this lack of flesh on me,	51
'but give me news about yourself and tell me of the two souls over there, escorting you. Do not hold back your answer.'	54
'Your face, over which I wept when you were dead, now gives me no less cause for tears, seeing it so disfigured,' I responded.	57
'In God's name, tell me what so withers you away. Don't make me speak while I am so astounded, for a man intent on other things speaks ill.'	60
And he to me: 'From the eternal counsel a power falls onto the tree and on the water there behind us. By it am I made so thin.	63
'All these people who weep while they are singing followed their appetites beyond all measure, and here regain, in thirst and hunger, holiness.	66
'The fragrance coming from the fruit and from the water sprinkled on green boughs kindles our craving to eat and drink,	69
'and not once only, circling in this space, is our pain renewed. I speak of pain but should say solace,	72

'for the same desire leads us to the trees
 that led Christ to utter *Eli* with such bliss
 when with the blood from His own veins He made us free.' 75

And I to him: 'Forese, from that day
 when you exchanged the world for better life,
 not five years have wheeled by until this moment. 78

'If your power to keep on sinning ended
 just before the hour of blessed sorrow
 that marries us once more to God, 81

'how did you come so far so fast?
 I thought that I might find you down below,
 where time must be repaid with equal time.' 84

And he replied: 'It is my Nella
 whose flooding tears so quickly brought me
 to drink sweet wormwood in the torments. 87

'With her devoted prayers and with her sighs,
 she plucked me from the slope where one must wait
 and freed me from the other circles. 90

'So much more precious and beloved of God
 is my dear widow, whom I greatly loved,
 the more she is alone in her good works. 93

'For the Barbagia of Sardegna
 shelters many more modest women
 than does that Barbagia where I left her. 96

'O sweet brother, what would you have me say?
 In my vision even now I see a time,
 before this hour shall be very old, 99

'when from the pulpit it shall be forbidden
 for the brazen ladies of Florence
 to flaunt their nipples with their breasts. 102

'What barbarous women, what Saracens,
 have ever needed spiritual instruction
 or other rules, to walk about in proper dress? 105

'But if these shameless creatures knew
 what the swift heavens are preparing, even now
 their mouths would be spread open in a howl. 108

'For if our foresight here does not deceive me
 they shall be sorrowing before hair grows
 on cheeks of babes still soothed by lullabies. 111

'Pray, brother, conceal your tale no longer. Look, not only I but all these people gaze in wonder where you veil the sun.'	114
At that I said to him: 'If you recall what you were with me and I was with you, that memory now would still be painful.'	117
'He who precedes me made me renounce that life but several days ago, when the sister of him'--and I pointed to the sun--	120
'appeared round back there. It is he who led me through the deep night of the forever dead in this my very flesh that follows him.'	123
'With his support I have left all that behind, climbing and circling each terrace of the mountain that straightens those made crooked by the world.'	126
'He promises to keep me company until I shall encounter Beatrice. Then must I be left without him.'	129
It is Virgil who tells me this'--I pointed to him-- 'and the other is the shade for whom just now your kingdom quaked in all its slopes,	132
shaking him from itself to set him free.'	133