

Inferno: Canto XIII

Not yet had Nessus reached the other side,  
When we had put ourselves within a wood,  
That was not marked by any path whatever.

Not foliage green, but of a dusky colour,  
Not branches smooth, but gnarled and intertangled,  
Not apple-trees were there, but thorns with poison.

Such tangled thickets have not, nor so dense,  
Those savage wild beasts, that in hatred hold  
'Twixt Cecina and Corneto the tilled places.

There do the hideous Harpies make their nests,  
Who chased the Trojans from the Strophades,  
With sad announcement of impending doom;

Broad wings have they, and necks and faces human,  
And feet with claws, and their great bellies fledged;  
They make laments upon the wondrous trees.

And the good Master: "Ere thou enter farther,  
Know that thou art within the second round,"  
Thus he began to say, "and shalt be, till

Thou comest out upon the horrible sand;  
Therefore look well around, and thou shalt see  
Things that will credence give unto my speech."

I heard on all sides lamentations uttered,  
And person none beheld I who might make them,  
Whence, utterly bewildered, I stood still.

I think he thought that I perhaps might think  
So many voices issued through those trunks  
From people who concealed themselves from us;

Therefore the Master said: "If thou break off  
Some little spray from any of these trees,  
The thoughts thou hast will wholly be made vain."

Then stretched I forth my hand a little forward,  
And plucked a branchlet off from a great thorn;  
And the trunk cried, "Why dost thou mangle me?"

After it had become embrowned with blood,  
It recommenced its cry: "Why dost thou rend me?  
Hast thou no spirit of pity whatsoever?"

Men once we were, and now are changed to trees;  
Indeed, thy hand should be more pitiful,  
Even if the souls of serpents we had been."

As out of a green brand, that is on fire  
At one of the ends, and from the other drips  
And hisses with the wind that is escaping;

So from that splinter issued forth together

Both words and blood; whereat I let the tip  
Fall, and stood like a man who is afraid.

"Had he been able sooner to believe,"  
My Sage made answer, "O thou wounded soul,  
What only in my verses he has seen,

Not upon thee had he stretched forth his hand;  
Whereas the thing incredible has caused me  
To put him to an act which grieveth me.

But tell him who thou wast, so that by way  
Of some amends thy fame he may refresh  
Up in the world, to which he can return."

And the trunk said: "So thy sweet words allure me,  
I cannot silent be; and you be vexed not,  
That I a little to discourse am tempted.

I am the one who both keys had in keeping  
Of Frederick's heart, and turned them to and fro  
So softly in unlocking and in locking,

That from his secrets most men I withheld;  
Fidelity I bore the glorious office  
So great, I lost thereby my sleep and pulses.

The courtesan who never from the dwelling  
Of Caesar turned aside her strumpet eyes,  
Death universal and the vice of courts,

Inflamed against me all the other minds,  
And they, inflamed, did so inflame Augustus,  
That my glad honours turned to dismal mournings.

My spirit, in disdainful exultation,  
Thinking by dying to escape disdain,  
Made me unjust against myself, the just.

I, by the roots unwonted of this wood,  
Do swear to you that never broke I faith  
Unto my lord, who was so worthy of honour;

And to the world if one of you return,  
Let him my memory comfort, which is lying  
Still prostrate from the blow that envy dealt it."

Waited awhile, and then: "Since he is silent,"  
The Poet said to me, "lose not the time,  
But speak, and question him, if more may please thee."

Whence I to him: "Do thou again inquire  
Concerning what thou thinks't will satisfy me;  
For I cannot, such pity is in my heart."

Therefore he recommenced: "So may the man  
Do for thee freely what thy speech implores,  
Spirit incarcerate, again be pleased

To tell us in what way the soul is bound

Within these knots; and tell us, if thou canst,  
If any from such members e'er is freed."

Then blew the trunk amain, and afterward  
The wind was into such a voice converted:  
"With brevity shall be replied to you.

When the exasperated soul abandons  
The body whence it rent itself away,  
Minos consigns it to the seventh abyss.

It falls into the forest, and no part  
Is chosen for it; but where Fortune hurls it,  
There like a grain of spelt it germinates.

It springs a sapling, and a forest tree;  
The Harpies, feeding then upon its leaves,  
Do pain create, and for the pain an outlet.

Like others for our spoils shall we return;  
But not that any one may them revest,  
For 'tis not just to have what one casts off.

Here we shall drag them, and along the dismal  
Forest our bodies shall suspended be,  
Each to the thorn of his molested shade."

We were attentive still unto the trunk,  
Thinking that more it yet might wish to tell us,  
When by a tumult we were overtaken,

In the same way as he is who perceives  
The boar and chase approaching to his stand,  
Who hears the crashing of the beasts and branches;

And two behold! upon our left-hand side,  
Naked and scratched, fleeing so furiously,  
That of the forest, every fan they broke.

He who was in advance: "Now help, Death, help!"  
And the other one, who seemed to lag too much,  
Was shouting: "Lano, were not so alert

Those legs of thine at joustings of the Toppo!"  
And then, perchance because his breath was failing,  
He grouped himself together with a bush.

Behind them was the forest full of black  
She-mastiffs, ravenous, and swift of foot  
As greyhounds, who are issuing from the chain.

On him who had crouched down they set their teeth,  
And him they lacerated piece by piece,  
Thereafter bore away those aching members.

Thereat my Escort took me by the hand,  
And led me to the bush, that all in vain  
Was weeping from its bloody lacerations.

"O Jacopo," it said, "of Sant' Andrea,

What helped it thee of me to make a screen?  
What blame have I in thy nefarious life?"

When near him had the Master stayed his steps,  
He said: "Who wast thou, that through wounds so many  
Art blowing out with blood thy dolorous speech?"

And he to us: "O souls, that hither come  
To look upon the shameful massacre  
That has so rent away from me my leaves,

Gather them up beneath the dismal bush;  
I of that city was which to the Baptist  
Changed its first patron, wherefore he for this

Forever with his art will make it sad.  
And were it not that on the pass of Arno  
Some glimpses of him are remaining still,

Those citizens, who afterwards rebuilt it  
Upon the ashes left by Attila,  
In vain had caused their labour to be done.

Of my own house I made myself a gibbet."