

Inferno: Canto XV

Now bears us onward one of the hard margins,
And so the brooklet's mist o'ershadows it,
From fire it saves the water and the dikes.

Even as the Flemings, 'twixt Cadsand and Bruges,
Fearing the flood that tow'rds them hurls itself,
Their bulwarks build to put the sea to flight;

And as the Paduans along the Brenta,
To guard their villas and their villages,
Or ever Chiarentana feel the heat;

In such similitude had those been made,
Albeit not so lofty nor so thick,
Whoever he might be, the master made them.

Now were we from the forest so remote,
I could not have discovered where it was,
Even if backward I had turned myself,

When we a company of souls encountered,
Who came beside the dike, and every one
Gazed at us, as at evening we are wont

To eye each other under a new moon,
And so towards us sharpened they their brows
As an old tailor at the needle's eye.

Thus scrutinised by such a family,
By some one I was recognised, who seized
My garment's hem, and cried out, "What a marvel!"

And I, when he stretched forth his arm to me,
On his baked aspect fastened so mine eyes,
That the scorched countenance prevented not

His recognition by my intellect;
And bowing down my face unto his own,
I made reply, "Are you here, Ser Brunetto?"

And he: "May't not displease thee, O my son,
If a brief space with thee Brunetto Latini
Backward return and let the trail go on."

I said to him: "With all my power I ask it;
And if you wish me to sit down with you,
I will, if he please, for I go with him."

"O son," he said, "whoever of this herd
A moment stops, lies then a hundred years,
Nor fans himself when smiteth him the fire.

Therefore go on; I at thy skirts will come,
And afterward will I rejoin my band,
Which goes lamenting its eternal doom."

I did not dare to go down from the road

Level to walk with him; but my head bowed
I held as one who goeth reverently.

And he began: "What fortune or what fate
Before the last day leadeth thee down here?
And who is this that showeth thee the way?"

"Up there above us in the life serene,"
I answered him, "I lost me in a valley,
Or ever yet my age had been completed.

But yestermorn I turned my back upon it;
This one appeared to me, returning thither,
And homeward leadeth me along this road."

And he to me: "If thou thy star do follow,
Thou canst not fail thee of a glorious port,
If well I judged in the life beautiful.

And if I had not died so prematurely,
Seeing Heaven thus benignant unto thee,
I would have given thee comfort in the work.

But that ungrateful and malignant people,
Which of old time from Fesole descended,
And smacks still of the mountain and the granite,

Will make itself, for thy good deeds, thy foe;
And it is right; for among crabbed sorbs
It ill befits the sweet fig to bear fruit.

Old rumour in the world proclaims them blind;
A people avaricious, envious, proud;
Take heed that of their customs thou do cleanse thee.

Thy fortune so much honour doth reserve thee,
One party and the other shall be hungry
For thee; but far from goat shall be the grass.

Their litter let the beasts of Fesole
Make of themselves, nor let them touch the plant,
If any still upon their dunghill rise,

In which may yet revive the consecrated
Seed of those Romans, who remained there when
The nest of such great malice it became."

"If my entreaty wholly were fulfilled,"
Replied I to him, "not yet would you be
In banishment from human nature placed;

For in my mind is fixed, and touches now
My heart the dear and good paternal image
Of you, when in the world from hour to hour

You taught me how a man becomes eternal;
And how much I am grateful, while I live
Behoves that in my language be discerned.

What you narrate of my career I write,

And keep it to be glossed with other text
By a Lady who can do it, if I reach her.

This much will I have manifest to you;
Provided that my conscience do not chide me,
For whatsoever Fortune I am ready.

Such handsel is not new unto mine ears;
Therefore let Fortune turn her wheel around
As it may please her, and the churl his mattock."

My Master thereupon on his right cheek
Did backward turn himself, and looked at me;
Then said: "He listeneth well who noteth it."

Nor speaking less on that account, I go
With Ser Brunetto, and I ask who are
His most known and most eminent companions.

And he to me: "To know of some is well;
Of others it were laudable to be silent,
For short would be the time for so much speech.

Know them in sum, that all of them were clerks,
And men of letters great and of great fame,
In the world tainted with the selfsame sin.

Priscian goes yonder with that wretched crowd,
And Francis of Accorso; and thou hadst seen there
If thou hadst had a hankering for such scurf,

That one, who by the Servant of the Servants
From Arno was transferred to Bacchiglione,
Where he has left his sin-excited nerves.

More would I say, but coming and discoursing
Can be no longer; for that I behold
New smoke uprising yonder from the sand.

A people comes with whom I may not be;
Commended unto thee be my Tesoro,
In which I still live, and no more I ask."

Then he turned round, and seemed to be of those
Who at Verona run for the Green Mantle
Across the plain; and seemed to be among them

The one who wins, and not the one who loses.