

Inferno: Canto 1

Dark Wood - Maundy Thursday Night: Good Friday 6 a.m.

Midway this way of life we're bound upon, 1
[I woke to find myself in a dark wood](#),
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.

Ay me! how hard to speak of it — that rude 4
And rough and stubborn forest! the mere breath
Of memory stirs the old fear in the blood;

It is so bitter, it goes nigh to death; 7
Yet there I gained such good, that, to convey
The tale, I'll write what else I found therewith.

How I got into it I cannot say, 10
Because I was so heavy and full of sleep
When first I stumbled from the narrow way;

But when at last I stood beneath a steep 13
Hill's side, which closed that valley's wandering maze
Whose dread had pierced me to the heart-root deep,

Then I looked up, and saw the morning rays 16
Mantle its shoulder from that planet bright
Which guides men's feet aright on all their ways;

And this a little quieted the affright 19
That lurking in my bosom's lake had lain
Through the long horror of that piteous night.

And as a swimmer, panting, from the main 22
Heaves safe to shore, then turns to face the drive
Of perilous seas, and looks, and looks again,

So, while my soul yet fled, did I contrive 25
To turn and gaze on that dread pass once more
Whence no man yet came ever out alive.

Weary of limb I rested a brief hour, 28
Then rose and onward through the desert hied,
So that the fixed foot always was the lower;

And see! not far from where the mountain-side 31
First rose, [a Leopard, nimble and light and fleet](#),
Clothed in a fine furred pelt all dapple-dyed,

Came gamboling out, and skipped before my feet, 34
Hindering me so, that from the forthright line
Time and again I turned to beat retreat.

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The morn was young, and in his native sign The Sun climbed with the stars whose glitterings Attended on him when the Love Divine	37
First moved those happy, prime-created things: So the sweet season and the new-born day Filled me with hope and cheerful augurings	40
Of the bright beast so speckled and so gay; Yet not so much but that I fell to quaking At a fresh sight — a Lion in the way .	43
I saw him coming, swift and savage, making For me, head high, with ravenous hunger raving So that for dread the very air seemed shaking.	46
And next, a Wolf, gaunt with the famished craving Lodged ever in her horrible lean flank, The ancient cause of many men's enslaving;	49
She was the worst — at that dread sight a blank Despair and whelming terror pinned me fast, Until all hope to scale the mountain sank.	52
Like one who loves the gains he has amassed, And meets the hour when he must lose his loot, Distracted in his mind and all aghast,	55
Even so was I, faced with that restless brute Which little by little edged and thrust me back, Back, to that place wherein the sun is mute.	58
Then, as I stumbled headlong down the track, Sudden a form was there, which dumbly crossed My path, as though grown voiceless from long lack	61
Of speech; and seeing it in that desert lost, "Have pity on me!" I hailed it as I ran, "Whate'er thou art - or very man, or ghost!"	64
It spoke: "No man, although I once was man; My parents' native land was Lombardy And both by citizenship were Mantuan.	67

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Sub Julio born, though late in time, was I, 70
And lived at Rome in good Augustus' days
When the false gods were worshipped ignorantly.

Poet was I, and tuned my verse to praise 73
Anchises' righteous son, who sailed from Troy
When Ilium's pride fell ruined down ablaze.

But thou — oh, why run back where fears destroy 76
Peace? Why not climb the blissful mountain yonder,
The cause and first beginning of all joy?"

"[Canst thou be Virgil?](#) thou that fount of splendor 79
Whence poured so wide a stream of lordly speech?"
Said I, and bowed my awe-struck head in wonder;

"O honour and light of poets all and each, 82
Now let my great love stead me — the bent brow
And long hours pondering all thy book can teach!

Thou art my master, and my author thou, 85
From thee alone I learned the singing strain,
The noble style, that does me honour now.

See there the beast that turned me back again— 88
Save me from her, great sage — I fear her so,
She shakes my blood through every pulse and vein."

"Nay, by another path thou needs must go 91
If thou wilt ever leave this waste," he said,
Looking upon me as I wept, "for lo!

The savage brute that makes thee cry for dread 94
Lets no man pass this road of hers, but still
Trammels him, till at last she lays him dead.

Vicious her nature is, and framed for ill; 97
When crammed she craves more fiercely than before;
Her raging greed can never gorge its fill.

With many a beast she mates, and shall with more, 100
Until the Greyhound come, the Master-hound,
And he shall slay her with a stroke right sore.

He'll not eat gold nor yet devour the ground; 103
Wisdom and love and power his food shalt be,
His birthplace between Feltro and Feltro found;

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Savior he'll be to that low Italy For which Euryalus and Nisus died, Turnus and chaste Camilla, bloodily.	106
He'll hunt the Wolf through cities far and wide, Till in the end he hunt her back to Hell, Whence Envy first of all her leash untied.	109
But, as for thee, I think and deem it well Thou take me for thy guide, and pass with me Through an eternal place and terrible	112
Where that shalt hear despairing cries, and see Long-parted souls that in their torments dire Howl for the second death perpetually.	115
Next, thou shalt gaze on those who in the fire Are happy, for they look to mount on high, In God s good time, up to the blissful quire;	118
To which glad place, a worthier spirit than I Must lead thy steps, if thou desire to come, With whom I'll leave thee then, and say good-bye;	121
For the Emperor of that high Imperium Wills not that I, once rebel to His crown, Into that city of His should lead men home.	124
Everywhere is His realm, but there His throne, There is His duty and exalted seat: Thrice-blest whom there He chooses for His own!"	127
Then I to him: "Poet, I thee entreat, By that great God whom thou didst never know, Lead on, that I may free my wandering feet	130
From these snares and from worse; and I will go Alone with thee, St. Peter's Gate to find, And those whom thou portray'st as suffering so."	133
So he moved on; and I moved on behind.	136