Inferno, Canto II

The day’s last light and the darkening air
Set free the creatures of the darkening earth
From their long and wearying daylight labours.

And alone I prepared to fight the battle
Of the path and the pathos that both lay before me,
And this I retell now through unerring memory.

My muse and my genius come help me now
O memory that harbours all things that I saw
Make known to all your deepest nobility.

And so I began: “My poet and guide,
Judge now my courage that it be not wanting
Before you entrust me to cross the high pass.

You sang then of how the father of Silvius
Courageous Aeneas while yet in the flesh
Strode without fear into the eternal.

It can be no surprise to all men of high vision
That the Lord who delivers us from every evil
Would show him great kindness while on that dark journey

Knowing full well the fate that awaited him
The fate fore-ordained by the powers of heaven
To be father of Rome and of all her wide empire,

The purpose whereof, to speak truth more clearly,
Was to bring into being that hallowed high place
Where the heirs of Saint Peter would later be seated.

And by that descent which you praised in your telling
He learned of the ways that would bring him to glory
And lead to the mantling of popes through the ages.

The vessel Saint Paul underwent the same journey
As the instrument chosen to strengthen our faith
In the way that will bring us to certain salvation.

But why should I come and by whose decree?
I am not Aeneas. I am not Saint Paul.
There is none who would deem me be worthy of this.
For if I agreed to take on this journey
I fear that our going would lead us through folly
Hear me my sage for my reason is slipping.”

And as one who unwills that which he first willed
Whose purpose reverses with each new reflection
And turns back from what he has just undertaken

So too was I on that darkening slope
When by vacillate thinking I squandered the valour
That had so charged my spirit just moments before.

“If I well understand the words you have spoken”
Replied the generous spirit before me
“Your heart is now gripped by the cowardly dread
That can so stun a man that he holds back in terror
From doing what honour and courage demand
Just like a beast that fears its own shadow.

So to free you forever of this useless fear
Now I will tell you what drove me to find you
And how I first learned of your piteous plight.

I dwelled in the place of spirits suspended
When the voice of a blessed and beautiful woman
Called and I fell to her fragrant command.

Her eyes shone more brightly than stars do in heaven
And she spoke to me gently with words soft and calming.
In the tones of an angel she said to me:

“O kindly spirit of Mantova born
Whose fame still shines bright in the memory of men
And will further illumine the ages to come

A dear friend of mine though no friend of fortune
Now flounders alone on a harsh stony waste
Lost and obstructed in nervous retreat.

And from what I’ve heard told by others in heaven
I fear that he may have so lost his way
That I have arrived now too late to save him.

So rise and make use of your eloquent powers
And all other means you can summon to save him
So that I may find peace and that I be consoled.
I am Beatrice who now sends you to find him
And I yearn to return to the place that I came from.
It is love that impels me to ask for your help.

And when I return to my Heavenly Master
I will speak of you often in praise and thanksgiving.”
She then stood silent. I then began:

“O woman of beauty and of purest high virtue
By whom humankind has come far to surpass
All that is held in the orbit of heaven

Your command so fills me with pride and with honour
To accept it this instant would be yet belated
I wish for no more than to faithfully serve you.

But tell me, why have you deigned to descend
To these terrible depths that for so long have held me
Far from that realm that is your true home?”

“Since you wish so strongly to know of my purpose”
Said she, “I will tell you both briefly and clearly
Why I have come here without trepidation.

One should only be wary of things that may carry
The force and the power to bring harm upon you
Fear nothing else, for they are as shadows.

I was made by our God in his infinite mercy
In such a way that your pain cannot touch me
Nor the flames and the fires that flare all around us.

Our Mother above was deep moved by sorrow
For the plight of the one to whom I now send you
That the stern judge of heaven Himself has been softened.

She called to Lucia, the bearer of light
Saying to her: “Your true servant now needs you.
I call upon you to bring him protection.”

So Lucia the foe of all who are ruthless
Arose and then came to the place I was sitting
Alongside Rachel our well-renowned elder.

She said: “Beatrice, beloved of God
Why do you not tend to the man who so loved you
That he left the low ways of the derelict herd?”
Are you not moved by his cries and his callings?
Can you not see the death he contends with
Flooding upon him more strong than the sea?

There is none on the earth who could move more swiftly
Even while fleeing the darkest of dangers
Than I after hearing what she had recounted.

I came down to you from my blessed throne
Fully trusting the power in your honest speech
That uplifts both yourself and all who would hear it.”

And after the telling of all of these things
Her luminous eyes full with tears turned away
Which made me hasten determined to find you.

And so I have come to you just as she wanted
To lead you away from that vehement creature
That is blocking the way to the mountain before you.

But tell me now what folly has gripped you?
Why is your heart so ensnared and so doubting?
And what has become of your courage and passion?

You have three blessed women who now look upon you
With care from the heart of the high court of heaven
And my words of truth as a promise of good.”

And just as closed florets burdened by night-frost
When graced by the light of the sun’s warming fires
Will rise and will open to breathe in the day,

So too did my failing honour revive
As the spirit of courage emboldened my heart,
And I spoke as one now fully transformed:

“O blessed woman who has come to my rescue,
And you kindest soul who without hesitation
Accepted the labour that she put before you

You have charged my heart with a will and desire
Your fine speech has drawn me to take on this journey
My resolve to be with you now fully restored.

So let us away with but one will between us
With you as my guide, my lord and my master.”
After I said this, he turned and proceeded.

And we moved on towards the high wooded pass.