

CANTO XII

Where we had to climb down the embankment
Was like Mont Blanc—only worse because of what was there.
Trust me, you wouldn't want to see what we saw.

The terrain was similar to where a landslide once struck
The left slope of the Adige on the Italian side of Trent—
The result of an earthquake, or maybe an avalanche,

Who knows; from the mountain crest to the table below
The steep slope had splintered and slid and now lay
Broken at the bottom as jagged rock one could walk on—

That was the way into the abyss.
Sprawled there, at the upper edge of the downslope,
Was the infamous Minotaur of Crete

81

Who'd been conceived in a counterfeit cow.
As soon as he saw us, he went into a frenzy and bit himself
With the manic violence of a rabid dog.

15

Virgil was brilliant; he yelled out, "You think,
Maybe, this is Theseus, the Archduke of Athens,
Who once cut off your head with a carving knife?"

Get lost, monster, this man didn't find his way here
Via hints whispered by your traitor sister.
He's only passing through to see how people are punished."

Like a bull at the slaughterhouse door, once struck
On the head with a doom-hammer, breaks loose
And can't move forward but can only lunge and writhe,

MARY JO BANG

That's how the Minotaur acted.
Virgil saw this was our moment and yelled, "Run!
While he's in the midst of his fit, let's start down."

So, down the broke-face mountain ravine,
The rocks often shifting beneath my feet
Since no one with weight had ever walked there before.

30

My mind was elsewhere when he said, "Perhaps
You're curious about this landslip ruin that's guarded
By the beast whose outburst I just made a moot point.

I want you to know that the last time
I came down here into this lower level of hell,
The cliff face hadn't yet collapsed.

82

If I remember correctly, it was shortly before
He came down and picked out all the good and holy
From Hell's first circle and took them up to heaven with him.

When this stinking hole quaked and shuddered
On all sides, it made me think the universe had fallen
In love—some say love alternates with hate and it's the shift

That creates repeated periodic states of cataclysmic chaos.
When He died, here, and in one other place, the fossil rock
Slid down and become a cracked and shattered landscape.

45

But look down below, we're coming close to the coast
Of a river of blood where they boil the souls
Of those who cut, rape, maim, or murder others."

I thought to myself—blind want and insane rage
Egg us on for the few minutes we're alive, then we're trapped
For the eternal ever-after in a tub of scalding blood!

Just as Virgil said, I saw
A wide Grand Canyon, bent in an arc, it seemed
To form a circular frame around the flat plain.

Between the cliff-end and the ditch, was a single-file line
Of centaurs armed with arrows—they galloped along
As if they were still one with the world and out hunting.

The moment they saw us, they halted;
Three stepped forward from the group—
Each had a bow in one hand, in the other, a favorite arrow.

60

One called across the distance, “You two,
Have you come down to get your fair share of abuse?
Speak up, or you’ll soon look like bloody Saint Sebastians.”

83

My teacher held his ground: “We’ll answer only
To Chiron and only when we get there. As for you, I see
You’re still a bully, and your own worst enemy.”

He touched my arm, “That one is Nessus—
He died trying to rape pretty Deïanira and with his blood
And last breath plotted his own post-death revenge;

The one in the middle, looking down like Rodin’s sculpture
Of a thinking man, is the great Chiron, who raised Achilles;
The third is Pholus, who couldn’t manage his temper.

By tens of thousands they patrol the surround around the ditch
Shooting cut-on-impact titanium-tip arrows at any soul
That dares lift itself up farther than its guilt permits.”

75

We were getting near those half-horse/half-man speed racers
When Chiron took the shaft of an arrow and used the notch-end
To part his beard and comb it back over his jaw.

Once he'd uncovered his enormous mouth, he spoke
To his teammate marksmen, "Has either of you noticed the foot
Of the one in back moves whatever it touches?"

The feet of the dead don't do that." My teacher,
Whose head just reached the point on Chiron's torso
Where man and beast meet and marry,

Replied, "He's totally alive which is why I, by myself,
Have to walk him through the valley of the shadow of death.
This is pure necessity, not a pleasure trip.

Someone came straight from a choir singing a chorus
Of halleluiahs to entrust me with this bizarre task;
This man's no outlaw, and I'm no ghost-thief.

84

90

I'm asking on behalf of the authority
Who told me to travel this nightmare highway,
That you send a centaur with us

To show us where to ford the river
And who can carry this man on his back because
He's not a spirit; he can't fly through the air."

Chiron looked down over his right breast and said
To Nessus, "Turn around, and play escort.
If you meet another band on the road, make them back down."

At that, we moved on, our escort acting as docent,
Along the bank of the crimson river from which we could hear
The blood-curdling screams of those who were boiling.

There were people in it up to their eyebrows.
The great centaur said, "You're looking at tyrants
Who ruled by the murder-and-plunder method.

105

Here they say their sorries.
Here's Alexander, and no-mercy Dionysius
Who kept Sicily under his foot for decades.

The one with black bangs on his forehead
Is Azzollino, once known as 'Satan's son'; the blond
Is Opizzo of Este, who was,

When he was upstairs, smothered by a 'supposed' son."
At that, I turned to Virgil who said, "Nessus
Is your expert now; I play second fiddle to him."

A little farther on the centaur stopped by a crowd
Who had their heads and necks sticking up
Out of the current of boiling blood.

He gestured to a ghost who was alone, to one side,
"In a church at High Mass he skewered a man
Whose heart's now enshrined in England."

120

Later, we saw a group that managed to keep
Not only their heads but also their chests
Above the flow; I admit I recognized quite a few.

So it went, the blood getting more and more
Shallow until it finally only scalded the feet;
This was where we forded the river.

"The way the river gets more and more shallow
On this side," the centaur said,
"It does the same on the other side;

The bottom gradually deepens
Until the ditch circles back to its deepest-most level
Where the despots get their just desserts.

That's where divine justice sticks it to Attila,
Who had 'Scourge of God' engraved on his name bracelet;
And Pyrrhus and Sextus, and there the boiling blood

135

Keeps prodding non-stop tears from both Rinier of Corneto
And Rinier Pazzo, two highwaymen of the
'Stand and deliver—your money or your life' type."

With that, he turned around and re-crossed the river.

86

Notes to Canto XII

2. *Was like Mont Blanc—but much worse*: Mont Blanc is the highest mountain in the Alps; located on the Italian–French border, it’s 4,808 meters (15,774 feet) high.

18. *Who once cut off your head with a carving knife?*: “Three Blind Mice,” an English round that was first published (in an earlier version) in 1609 in *Deuteromelia or The Seconde part of Musicks melodie*, edited by Thomas Ravenscroft.

Three blind mice. Three blind mice.
See how they run. See how they run.
They all ran after the farmer’s wife,
Who cut off their tails with a carving knife,
Did you ever see such a sight in your life,
As three blind mice?

87

62. *Have you come down to get your fair share of abuse?*: “You Can’t Always Get What You Want”: Written by Mick Jagger (b. 1943) and Keith Richards (b. 1943) of the English rock band The Rolling Stones, the song was recorded in 1968 and originally released on their 1969 album, *Let It Bleed*. In 2004, it was named the 100th greatest song of all time by *Rolling Stone Magazine* on their list of “500 Greatest Songs of All Time.”

And I went down to the demonstration
To get my fair share of abuse
Singing, “We’re gonna vent our frustration
If we don’t we’re gonna blow a fifty-amp fuse

67–69. *That one is Nessus— / He died trying to rape pretty Deïanira and with his blood/And last breath plotted his own post-death vengeance*: In Greek Mythology, Hercules killed Nessus by shooting him with a poison arrow while he was attempting to abduct Hercules’s third wife, Deïanira. Before he died, Nessus tricked Deïanira by telling her that a potion made of his blood mixed with

some olive oil would ensure that Hercules would never leave her. Later, when she learned that Hercules had fallen in love with Iole, she smeared the potion on Hercules's famous lionskin shirt and had his servant deliver it to him. When Hercules put the shirt on, the centaur's blood so burned him that he threw himself on a funeral pyre and died. Deïanira, realizing what she'd done, committed suicide.

70–72. *The one in the middle, looking down like Rodin's sculpture / Of a meditative man, is the great Chiron, who raised Achilles:* The bronze sculpture by August Rodin (1840–1917) entitled *The Thinker* (French: *Le Penseur*) was originally titled *The Poet*; the piece was part of an 1880 commission by the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris for a set of monumental doors to the museum that would be based on *The Divine Comedy* and titled *The Gates of Hell*. Rodin had intended for this piece to represent Dante contemplating his poem.

88 72. *The third is Pholus, who couldn't manage his temper:* Pholus participated in a post-wedding rampage with other centaur guests. William Vernon believed that the three centaurs were meant to represent three principal types of passions that lead people to commit acts of violence: Nessus stands for lust, Pholus, for drunken wrath; and Chiron, for ambition.

136–138. *Keeps prodding non-stop tears from both Rinier of Corneto/And Rinier Pazzo, two highwaymen of the / 'Stand and deliver—your money or your life' type:* In seventeenth century England, highway robbers would demand that their victims “Stand and deliver” (your money or your purse); the phrase “Your money or your life” is reported in mid-eighteenth century British trial transcripts. “Stand and Deliver” (Your Money or Your Life) was a 1981 song by the post-punk New Wave British band Adam and the Ants.