

1: The Dark Wood. Virgil



- 1 In middle age I wholly lost my way,
finding myself within an evil wood
far from the right straight road we all should tread,
- 4 and what a wood! So densely tangled, dark,
jaggily thorned, so hard to press on through,
even the memory renews my dread.
- 7 My misery, my almost deadly fear
led on to such discovery of good,
I'll tell you of it, if you care to hear.

- I cannot say how I had wandered there, 10
when dozy, dull and desperate for sleep
my feet strayed out of the true thoroughfare,
- till deep among the trees an upward slope 13
gave to my fearful soul a thrill of hope
as rising ground at last became a hill,
- and looking up I saw a summit bright 16
with dawn – the rising sun that shows us all
where we should travel by its heavenly light.
- This quieted a little while the fright 19
that churned the blood within my heart's lagoon
through the long journey of that gloomy night.
- Like shipwrecked swimmers in a stormy sea 22
who, tired and panting but at last ashore,
look back on swamping breakers thoughtfully,
- I turned to view, though wishing still to leave, 25
the terrifying forest in the glen
no living soul but mine had struggled through.
- My weary body rested then until, 28
rising, I climbed the sloping wilderness,
so that each footstep raised me higher still.
- But see! The uphill climb had just begun 31
when suddenly a leopard, light, quick, gay
and brightly spotted, sprang before my feet,
- dodging from side to side, blocking the way 34
so swiftly and with such determination
she sometimes nearly forced me to retreat.

- 37 The sun had reached a height dimming the stars
created with him on the second day,
after the birth of time and space and light,
- 40 and this recalled God's generosity,
letting me feel some good at least might be
within the leopard's carnival ferocity,
- 43 so dappled, bright and jolly was that beast,
but not so bright to stop me shuddering
at a fresh shock – a lion came in sight,
- 46 his mighty head held high, his savage glare
fixed upon me in such a hungry way
it seemed to terrify the very air.
- 49 A wolf beside him, rabid from starvation,
horribly hungry, far more dangerous,
has driven multitudes to desperation,
- 52 me too! For she established my disgrace,
(that worst of beasts) by killing my desire
to climb up higher to a better place.
- 55 A millionaire made glorious by gain
then hit by sudden loss of all he has,
cries out in vast astonishment and pain.
- 58 So did I, shoved down backwards, foot by foot,
by pressure of that grim relentless brute
till forced into the sunless wood again.
- 61 Appearing in its shade a human shape
both seemed and sounded centuries away,
murmuring words almost beyond my hearing,

therefore I yelled, “Pity and help me, please, 64
 whether you be a living man or ghost!”
 and pleaded, crouching down before his knees.

“Not man – though once I was, in Lombardy, 67
 where both my parents dwelled in Mantua,
 and I was born in Caesar’s reign,” said he,

“but educated in Augustan Rome 70
 when the false gods were worshipped everywhere.
 I sang the epic of Anchises’ son,

pious Aeneas, who fled blazing Troy 73
 and founded Rome. I was a poet there.
 Why are you here? Why turn back from your climb

towards the bright height of eternal bliss 76
 and come again to a bad place like this?”
 “You must be Virgil!” Awestruck, I replied,

“Fountain of all our pure Italian speech!” 79
 Rising, I bowed and told him, “All I know
 of poetry derives from what you teach!

The style which makes me famed in Italy 82
 I learned from you who are my dominie!
 Help me again, for see at the hill foot

the brute whose threats have rendered me distraught! 85
 Master, please save me – show me the right way.
 That rabid wolf has driven me so mad

my pulse and every sense have gone agley.” 88
 I wept and, “Take another road,” he said,
 “and leave this wasteland, leave that wolfish whore

- 91 who lets none pass before she bites them dead.
Her starving greedy lust is never sated.
Her appetite increases as she feasts.
- 94 Mated with many beasts, she'll mate with more
till one great greyhound comes to hunt her down
whose fangs will end her life in deadly pain.
- 97 Wisdom, love, courage are his nourishment,
not gold nor land nor any earthly gain.
From birth among the lowly he will rise,
- 100 bringing new glory to the Italian plain
like the old Trojan colonists and kings
whose wars created Rome's establishment.
- 103 Out of each city state he will expel
the wolf before he fixes her at last
back in the place she came from, which is Hell.
- 106 That is not yet; so now you'll come with me
on a straight downward path into the jail
envy released her from, and see God's wrath
- 109 afflicting sinners who forever wail –
no second death will end their agony!
Then a high fiery mountain we'll ascend
- 112 past burning climbers, happy in their flame,
for they will one day join the heavenly choir.
The summit reached, since Heaven is your aim,
- 115 we two must part. A better guide than me
will lead you then. Living I did not know,
could not obey the last great law of He

who made the whole celestial universe. 118
His highest city, capital and throne
are places that I cannot hope to see.

Happy are those chosen to join Him there!" 121
I answered, "Poet, sent by the God whom you
(alas) can't know, let us be gone, I pray,

out of this danger, down that hard, hard road, 124
then to the heavenly gate Saint Peter guards,
seeing the poor damned souls upon our way."

We walked. I followed as he led me on. 127



2: Early Doubts Quelled

- 1 Day ended. Beasts and birds who love the sun
homed to their dens and nests through dusky air.
Mine seemed the only living body there
- 4 going to warfare, marching to battle where
each step ahead would be a struggle of
pity with dread in perpetuity.
- 7 O Muses! Highest altitudes of thought
and memory, recording all I see
by use of noble ingenuity!
- 10 Let me teach others, as I have been taught!
“Poet!” I cried. “Tell me if I am fit
to go the fearful way you’re leading me.
- 13 You sang how great Aeneas followed it
and living, saw the nation of the dead.
God let Aeneas, for it was His plan
- 16 to found a pagan empire by that man –
the Roman Empire Christ inherited,
by crucifixion Christianising Rome.
- 19 He went through death and Hell to bring souls home
to heavenly bliss Aeneas never knew.
How can this living me follow these two?

- Why me? Who has suggested that I go? 22
 I'm not Aeneas, nor am I Saint Paul
 summoned to follow Jesus by a call
- direct from Christ. If feeble me submits 25
 to enter Hell I'll maybe lose my wits!
 Please! You know all! Why *should* I go with you?"
- Blethering thus, unwilling what I'd willed, 28
 I halted in an agony of doubt
 from the brisk pace at which we'd started out.
- Inside a darkened borderland I stood, 31
 my courage to continue almost killed,
 as if again within the evil wood.
- "If I have grasped the sense of what you say," 34
 the ghost of splendid Virgil turned and said,
 "cowardice, which leads most folk astray,
- blocks (as its shadow on the road ahead 37
 frightens a horse) the way that you should tread.
 Listen to what should banish your remorse.
- There came to me in Limbo where I dwell 40
 (the only comfortable part of Hell)
 a holy lady altogether lovely.
- Her eyes like starlight and her quiet voice 43
 angelically sweet, made me rejoice
 to do the utmost thing she asked. Said she,
- 'Poet of Mantua, whose epic song 46
 will last as long as stars and planets move,
 someone I dearly love is going wrong –

- 49 If none will help he may be lost to me.
On hearing this in Heaven I come to you.
O courteous poet, listen to my plea:
- 52 I beg you, join him where he turns aside
from the true track. He stands alone, astray,
at foot of a grim hill. O pity him!
- 55 He needs your strength to guide him the right way.
If you are not too late, say to him this:
you have been sent by love and Beatrice,
- 58 for I am Beatrice, for whom you go
to save both him I love and me from woe.
The love that drew me from eternity
- 61 now draws me back. Soon I will see God's face
within the glory of His sacred city
and praise forever in that holy place
- 64 your goodness.' There she paused. At once I said,
'Lady, by virtue of your heavenly love,
the love that made God form the human race
- 67 with excellence that lifts it far above
all other beasts within this world's small space,
obeying you is what I most desire,
- 70 so much that done at once would be too slow.
But there is something first I wish to know.
Your blessed feet have carried you through Hell
- 73 yet you are not alarmed. How is that so?'
'Because you wish to learn I will explain,'
said she. 'God makes the innocent and wise

- both blind and deaf to Hell's eternal pain, 73
 but not to troubles of a living soul.
 A gentle lady some call Heaven's queen
- has mercy as her special ministry. 73
 She often countermands God's stern decrees
 to save a sinner's soul by purgatory –
- a breach of justice to which God agrees. 82
 She said to Lucy, "Saint of heavenly light,
 your best disciple is about to quit
- his upward climb to us, risking damnation. 85
 Dante's in danger. Get him out of it."
 Lucy sped to the height of contemplation
- where I conversed (she knew) with sage Rachel, 88
 noblest mother of the Jewish nation
 and wife of flock-attending Israel.
- "Beatrice!" she said, "in harmony with God! 91
 Why, why, O why ignore a lover who
 was taught to love divinity by you?
- Can you not hear him miserably cry, 94
 lonely and lost beside death's raving sea
 and threatened by a foul rapacity?"
- As soon as Lucy's words were understood, 97
 nobody ever moved as fast as me.
 I came to you whose wise and truthful speech
- can heal my lover's hurt and do him good – 100
 speech glorifying you and all who hear,
 she said, turning her face to hide a tear.

- 103 Its brightness urged me to this place. The wolf
still blocks the uphill path. We'll reach the top
going the long way round. With me your guide
- 106 and three celestial women on your side,
why hesitate? What have you got to fear?
Why all this cowardice? Have you no pride?"
- 109 As daisies folding petals up at night,
heavy with frozen dew, lean to the ground
until the rising sun's warm, gift of light
- 112 thaws and unbends and opens them, I found
at last my crippled courage stand upright.
Like one set free I cried, "Let us go on!
- 115 The great compassion of that heavenly she,
forbye the wonder of your courtesy
have cured my idiot timidity.
- 118 Your words have filled me with new confidence,
confidence,
making your will and mine a single will.
Guide, Lord and Master, come! Let us go hence."
- 121 The wild path that we followed led downhill.

