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## CANTO IV

### ARGUMENT

Dante wakes up to a roll of thunder and looks around. The sounds of terrible sufferings rise up from the depths below. He notices that even Virgil looks a bit nervous about the tortures under them. They follow a path down to Limbo, the First Circle. Here they see all those who lived decent, sinless lives, but whose misfortune was to have been born before the time of Jesus Christ and therefore can't be Christians. They are the Unbaptized Innocents and Virtuous Pagans. These souls spend their time pleasantly, but are tormented by the knowledge that they can never get into Heaven. Virgil admits that he lives here and introduces Dante to his friends, many of the great poets, philosophers, and writers from ancient times. Dante is thrilled and awed by them and sees many others. He wants to hang out longer, but Virgil leads him back out into the night to continue their trip down to Hell.

I woke up to a loud clap of thunder, which was probably the only thing that could've awakened me from that deep sleep. I was pretty groggy and dazed, like you'd expect.

As I lay there getting myself together, I looked around, and, after a minute, I got up to get a better look. I needed to figure out where in Hell I was.

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Once I could get my bearings a little, I saw we were standing right on the edge of a cliff overlooking a huge valley. There were loud cries coming up from below, but it was so dark down there that the more I strained to see what was going on, the darker it seemed and the less I could make out in the gloom.

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"We're going to have to go down there," Virgil said nervously. And I could tell he was scared himself. "I'll go first and you come down after me."

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Seeing him nervous had me worried, and I said, "If you're scared, how do you think I feel? This whole thing seems a bit sketchy to me, but if you're leading, I guess I have to go along."

But Virgil played it off like he was OK and said, "The cries of the sufferers don't make me scared as much as they make me feel sorry for the ones down there—I think you're confusing pity with fear. I am not afraid. Come on, we should move now." He started off walking and led the way down into the First Circle of Hell.

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As we went down the path, I listened closely but didn't  
hear any real cries or yells, only sad sighs echoing  
all around in the darkness. They didn't seem like sounds  
of pain, only of grief and sadness. As I walked, I could  
make out some of the people around us in the gloom.  
There were men and women of all ages and even little kids.

As we went, Virgil turned his head back and said, "I notice  
you're not asking much about all these souls and ghosts.  
But you should know some things before we go much farther:  
none of these souls around us has sinned. They were decent people,  
but it wasn't enough to save them from Hell. Some were never baptized,  
and that is the only true way into Heaven. Even though it was not their  
fault that they happened to be born before Christ, they weren't always living  
and praying the way they should have. And this I know all too well, because  
this is Limbo, and I live here, too. We were born before Christ lived and  
therefore can't be Christians. We are all now eternally lost. That's why  
you hear the sighs and despair. We're barred forever from any hope,  
and everyone is despondent about it."

Shit, that doesn't seem right, I thought. How is it fair  
that even righteous, decent guys like Virgil should be  
trapped in Limbo, forever? I was totally confused, and  
I needed to figure out this whole unfair Christianity  
thing. "Hold on a second, let me ask you something,"  
I said to him. "Has anyone ever gotten out of here, either  
on his own or with help or something? Can these  
people ever get to Heaven someday?"

He turned his face toward me like he knew what  
I was getting at, and replied, "Early on, not long after I had  
come down here, I saw the Shining One come floating  
down wearing this big, ornate victory crown.  
He picked up our first parent, Adam, in his arms and  
grabbed his kid Abel. Then he got Noah and Moses  
(the world's first lawyer), Abraham the Patriarch,



CANTO IV, 65-66: LIMBO—THE INNOCENTS:

*We kept walking, and by now, we were heading through a bleak forest so full of lost souls that they were everywhere.*



David the King, and Israel with his dad and kids. He  
took Rachel, too, the girl Israel was with for so long.  
Besides them, he gathered many more who were somehow  
chosen for the eternal bliss of Heaven. But here's the  
thing: before those souls were rescued out of here, no  
other human soul had ever been saved. Ever." 60

As he explained all this and told about how it had all happened,  
we kept walking, and by now, we were heading through a  
bleak forest so full of lost souls that they were everywhere. 65

We hadn't gone too far through the woods when  
I saw a bright light glowing up ahead. It cast  
a little circle of light that cut through the trees.

Even before we had gotten very close, I could see  
a group of guys standing around a fire, and I  
could tell that they must be pretty important. 70  
"Hey," I said quietly to Virgil as we neared,  
"who are those guys that they get to hang out by  
their own little fire all separate from everyone else?" 75

"I'll bet you'd have heard of most of them up where you're from,"  
he answered. "And, as on Earth, being famous allows certain  
privileges down here as well. That's why they're blessed with the best spot."

We got closer as he was talking until one of the guys saw us and  
said to the others, "Hey, check it out, here comes our old poet  
again, the one who disappeared on us. It looks like he just  
got back from someplace." Everyone turned and looked when  
he said that, and the four biggest of the ghosts approached  
us, all totally deadpan, with zero emotion. It was spooky. 80

through a  
everywhere.

Virgil leaned toward me and said softly, 85  
"Look at the one with the sword,  
the one who seems to be their leader.  
That's Homer's ghost, the original poet. Behind  
him is Horace, the satirist, next is Shakespeare. Ovid's  
behind him, and Yeats is on the right. And the last one is Lucan. 90  
Since they're all poets, same as me, our voices all  
sound the same down here, if you noticed.  
It's an honor to be included with these great writers."

So there I was, hanging out with all these famous guys, these great  
poets and writers, guys who had written some of the most 95  
famous books of all time—I was blown away just being there.

After they all hung out and chatted for a while with Virgil,  
they turned toward me and called me over.  
I could see Virgil was smiling when they did that.  
Not only did they welcome me into their circle, they were 100  
all pleasant and interested and treated me like an equal,  
as if I was just some guy like them. It was really cool.

Soon we all started walking along toward a light in the distance.  
We were talking about casual stuff as we went—it doesn't really  
matter what, because it was pretty much all just idle chitchat. 105

Before long, we came to a big castle surrounded by  
seven walls of stone, with a nice little stream  
running along the outside. The guys we were with just  
strolled right on in over the bridge like they belonged there.  
I tried to blend in and followed them through the gates—it was cool, 110  
almost like having a backstage pass. Inside we came to this beautiful  
meadow with flowers everywhere. The place was filled with what  
looked like more important people. They looked really serious, and  
when one of them spoke, it was in a soft, quiet voice.

5 We went a little farther up and came to a nice patio. 115  
It was all open to the air and lit up, way higher than before.  
There was a good view, and we could see all the people better.  
From there I could see that the whole meadow below  
was full of famous people from ancient times,  
milling about quietly. It was an impressive sight. 120

5 Among the crowd, I could see Electra standing in a group  
nearby with guys like Hector and Aeneas and Caesar,  
who looked like he was dressed for a battle or  
something. There was Camilla and Penthesilea,  
Foucault, Jung, and farther down was the Latian 125  
king hanging out with his daughter Lavinia.  
Brutus, the guy who drove out the Tarquin, was there  
and so were Lucretia, Julia, Marcia, Hemingway, and  
Cornelia. Saladin was hanging out off to himself a bit,  
and when I looked a bit higher up the meadow, 130  
I saw the star of the party, the sage of reason, Aristotle,  
surrounded by his group of fellow philosophers.

5 Everyone near Aristotle was checking him out. He  
got all the attention. Plato and Socrates were right there  
in the close group around him. Democritus, who studied 135  
all kinds of random stuff, was there with Diogenes, Thales,  
Anaxagoras, Zorba, Empedocles, Zeno, and Heraclitus.  
There were so many Greeks it was like a frat party.  
I saw that guy Dioscorides, who came up with the names  
for all the herbs, and Orpheus was there and so were 140  
Tully, Linus, and Seneca, that moral guy.

There were math guys and philosophers and medical guys all hanging out  
together: Euclid, Ptolemy, Hippocrates, Galen, Avicenna, Hawking, and  
Averroes, who wrote that Commentary thing from school, remember?  
I don't even have time to begin telling you about all the guys I saw, 145  
because this story is long enough as it is. And I want to tell you about  
everything else, so I'm going to have to leave some stuff out.

After a while, we left those guys and their group, and  
Virgil led me out of that pleasant meadow. But when we stepped  
through the gates, we walked right into a huge storm. It was 150  
howling wind again, and you couldn't see worth shit.