

Canto 33

Circle Nine: Cocytus
Pond Two: Antenora
Pond Three: Ptolomea

Compound Fraud
The Treacherous to Country
The Treacherous to Guests and Hosts

In reply to Dante's exhortation, the sinner who gnawing his companion's head looks up, wipes his bloody mouth on his victim's hair, and tells his harrowing story. He is *Count Ugolino* and the wretch he gnaws is *Archbishop Ruggieri*. Both were in Antenora¹ for treason. In life they had plotted together. Then Ruggieri betrayed his fellow-plotter and caused his death, by starvation, along with his four "sons." In the most pathetic and dramatic passage of the *Inferno*, Ugolino details how their prison was sealed and how his "sons"² dropped dead before him one by one, weeping for food. His terrible tale serves only to renew his grief and hatred, and he has hardly finished it before he begins to gnaw Ruggieri again with renewed fury. In the immutable

Law of Hell, the killer-by-starvation becomes the food of his victim.

The Poets leave Ugolino and enter *Ptolomea*, so named for the Ptolomaeus of *Maccabees*, who murdered his father-in-law at a banquet. Here are punished those who were *Treacherous Against the Ties of Hospitality*. They lie with only half their faces above the ice and their tears freeze in their eye sockets, sealing them with little crystal visors. Thus even the comfort of tears is denied them. Here Dante finds *Friar Alberigo* and *Branca d'Oria*, and discovers the terrible power of Ptolomea: so great is its sin that the souls of the guilty fall to its torments even before they die, leaving their bodies still on earth, inhabited by Demons.

The sinner raised his mouth from his grim repast
and wiped it on the hair of the bloody head
whose nape he had all but eaten away. At last

Who you may be, and by what powers you reach
into this underworld, I cannot guess,
12 but you seem to me a Florentine by your speech.

he began to speak: "You ask me to renew
a grief so desperate that the very thought
of speaking of it tears my heart in two.

I was Count Ugolino, I must explain;
this reverend grace is the Archbishop Ruggieri.³
15 now I will tell you why I gnaw his brain.

But if my words may be a seed that bears
the fruit of infamy for him I gnaw,
9 I shall weep, but tell my story through my tears.

That I, who trusted him, had to undergo
imprisonment and death through his treachery,
18 you will know already. What you cannot know—

¹ Antenora: part of the ninth circle set aside for traitors; named for Antenor, who, in some versions of the story of the Trojan War, betrayed Troy to the Greeks.

² "sons": Actually, two of the four men bricked up with Ugolino were his grandsons; the younger one was fifteen.

³ Ugolino . . . Ruggieri: Count Ugolino and Archbishop Ruggieri were originally allies in political factions jockeying for power in the city of Pisa. In 1288, Ruggieri betrayed Ugolino and imprisoned him and his sons. The next year Ruggieri had the dungeon sealed and starved the prisoners to death.

that is, the lingering inhumanity
of the death I suffered—you shall hear in full:⁴
21 then judge for yourself if he has injured me.

A narrow window in that coop of stone
now called the Tower of Hunger for my sake
24 (within which others yet must pace alone)

had shown me several waning moons already
between its bars, when I slept the evil sleep
27 in which the veil of the future parted for me.

This beast⁵ appeared as master of a hunt
chasing the wolf and his whelps across the
mountain
30 that hides Lucca from Pisa.⁶ Out in front

of the starved and shrewd and avid pack he had
placed
Gualandi and Sismondi and Lanfranchi⁷
33 to point his prey. The father and sons had raced

a brief course only when they failed of breath
and seemed to weaken; then I thought I saw
36 their flanks ripped open by the hounds' fierce
teeth.

Before the dawn, the dream still in my head,
I woke and heard my sons, who were there
with me,
39 cry from their troubled sleep, asking for bread.

You are cruelty itself if you can keep
your tears back at the thought of what
foreboding
42 stirred in my heart; and if you do not weep,

at what are you used to weeping?—The hour
when food
used to be brought, drew near. They were now
awake,
45 and each was anxious from his dream's dark
mood.

And from the base of that horrible tower I heard
the sound of hammers nailing up the gates:
48 I stared at my sons' faces without a word.

I did not weep: I had turned stone inside.
They wept. 'What ails you, Father, you look so
strange.'
51 my little Anselm,⁸ youngest of them, cried

But I did not speak a word nor shed a tear:
not all that day nor all that endless night,
54 until I saw another sun appear.

When a tiny ray leaked into that dark prison
and I saw staring back from their four faces
57 the terror and the wasting of my own,

I bit my hands in helpless grief. And they,
thinking I chewed myself for hunger, rose
60 suddenly together. I heard them say:

'Father, it would give us much less pain
if you ate us: it was you who put upon us
63 this sorry flesh; now strip it off again.'

I calmed myself to spare them. Ah! hard earth
why did you not yawn open? All that day

4. you shall hear in full: By 1300, supposedly the date when Dante began the *Divine Comedy*, everyone in adjacent cities would have known that Ruggieri had imprisoned his former ally. But because the dungeon was sealed, no one would have known exactly how he and the others met their deaths.

5. This beast: i.e., Ruggieri.

6. the mountain that hides Lucca from Pisa: Mount San Giuliano stands between the two cities.

7. Gualandi . . . Lanfranchi: Like Ugolino, these three were nobles of Pisa and friends of Archbishop

8. my little Anselm: Anselm, Gaddo (line 67) and Ugucione (line 89) were the sons and sons entombed with Ugolino.

Ugolino, the eldest, fell before me and cried,
wretched at my feet upon that prison floor:
"Father, why don't you help me?" There he died.

And just as you see me, I saw them fall
one by one on the fifth day and the sixth.
Then, already blind, I began to crawl

from body to body shaking them frantically.
Two days I called their names, and they were
dead.

Then fasting overcame my grief and me."

His eyes narrowed to slits when he was done,
and he seized the skull again between his teeth
grinding it as a mastiff grinds a bone.

Ah, Pisa! foulest blemish on the land
where "si" sounds sweet and clear,⁹ since those
nearby you
are slow to blast the ground on which you stand,

may Caprara and Gorgona¹⁰ drift from place
and dam the flooding Arno¹¹ at its mouth
until it drowns the last of your foul race!

Or if to Ugolino falls the censure
for having betrayed your castles, you for your
part
should not have put his sons to such a torture.

you modern Thebes!¹² those tender lives you spilt—
Brigata, Uguccione, and the others

91 We passed on further,¹³ where the frozen mine
entombs another crew in greater pain;
93 these wraiths are not bent over, but lie supine.

Their very weeping closes up their eyes;
and the grief that finds no outlet for its tears
96 turns inward to increase their agonies:

for the first tears that they shed knot instantly
in their eye-sockets, and as they freeze they
form
99 a crystal visor above the cavity.

And despite the fact that standing in that place
I had become as numb as any callus,
102 and all sensation had faded from my face,

somehow I felt a wind begin to blow,
whereat I said: "Master, what stirs this wind?
105 Is not all heat extinguished here below?"

And the Master said to me: "Soon you will be
where your own eyes will see the source and
cause
108 and give you their own answer to the
mystery."¹⁴

And one of those locked in that icy mall
cried out to us as we passed: "O souls so cruel
111 that you are sent to the last post of all,¹⁵

13. **We passed on further:** Here Dante and Virgil pass into Ptolomea, the place of punishment for traitors against hospitality; named for Ptolomeus, who invited Simon Maccabaeus, king of Judea, and his two sons to a banquet and then assassinated them in 135 B.C.

14. **their own answer to the mystery:** The answer to Dante's question about the source of the wind will be given in Canto 34.

15. **the last post of all:** This sinner thinks Virgil and Dante are condemned souls who are being sent to the very lowest part of the ninth circle because their crimes were worse than his.

9. **the land . . . sweet and clear:** Italy; *si* is the Italian word for "yes."
10. **Caprara and Gorgona:** two islands near the mouth of the Arno River, possessions of Pisa.
11. **Arno:** river in Italy; Florence and Arezzo are located on its banks, and Pisa is located at its mouth.
12. **you modern Thebes:** Ancient Thebes was the scene of much violence and bloodshed.

relieve me for a little from the pain
of this hard veil; let my heart weep a while
114 before the weeping freeze my eyes again."

And I to him: "If you would have my service,
tell me your name; then if I do not help you
117 may I descend to the last rim of the ice."

"I am Friar Alberigo," he answered therefore,
"the same who called for the fruits from the bad
garden.¹⁶
120 Here I am given dates for figs full store."

"What! Are you dead already?" I said to him.
And he then: "How my body stands in the
world
123 I do not know. So privileged is this rim

of Ptolomea, that often souls fall to it
before dark Atropos has cut their thread.¹⁷
126 And that you may more willingly free my spirit

of this glaze of frozen tears that shrouds my face,
I will tell you this: when a soul betrays as I did,
129 it falls from flesh, and a demon takes its place,

ruling the body till its time is spent.¹⁸
The ruined soul rains down into this cistern.
132 So, I believe, there is still evident

in the world above, all that is fair and mortal
of this black shade who winters here behind me.
135 If you have only recently crossed the portal

from that sweet world, you surely must have known
his body: Branca D'Oría¹⁹ is its name,
138 and many years have passed since he rained down.

"I think you are trying to take me in," I said,
"Ser Branca D'Oría is a living man;
141 he eats, he drinks, he fills his clothes and his bed."

"Michel Zanche had not yet reached the ditch
of the Black Talons," the frozen wraith replied.
144 "there where the sinners thicken in hot pitch,

when this one left his body to a devil;
as did his nephew and second in treachery.
147 and plumbed like lead through space to this
dead level.

But now reach out your hand, and let me cry:
And I did not keep the promise I had made
150 for to be rude to him was courtesy.

"Ah, men of Genoa!²⁰ souls of little worth,
corrupted from all custom of righteousness.
153 why have you not been driven from the earth?

For there beside the blackest soul of all
Romagna's evil plain,²¹ lies one of yours
156 bathing his filthy soul in the eternal

glacier of Cocytus for his foul crime,
while he seems yet alive in world and time!

16. the fruits from the bad garden: To avenge an insult, Friar Alberigo invited his brother Manfred and Manfred's son to dinner. At the signal, "Bring in the fruit," hired murderers killed them.

17. before . . . thread: According to Greek mythology, there were three Fates: Clotho spun the web of a person's life; Lachesis measured out its length; Atropos cut it at the moment of death.

18. a demon . . . its time is spent: Dante includes in Hell the souls of some who were still alive at the time of writing. He explains this by suggesting that certain sins are so grave that the sinners' spirits are immediately damned, while their bodies, animated by demons, live out a natural span of life.

19. Branca D'Oría: he invited his father-in-law, Michel Zanche, to a feast and then murdered him.

20. men of Genoa: Branca D'Oría was a Genoese.

21. Romagna's evil plain: a region of northeastern Italy, formerly part of the Papal States.