

The Lost Canto

*Assent into new bolgia: sexual assault – the lustful – Sextus Tarquinius – the controlling – Brock
Turner – the psychopathic – the angry*

Cool dirt collects under my fingernails as I claw my way up the steep ledge. I pause to catch my breath upon reaching the top. I strain my eyes in the darkness as I look for a clue as to what lies ahead.

My eyes fix on the outline of a gray spherical shape that stands before me. I begin to make out more shapes as my eyes adjust. They begin to emerge from the darkness like the numerous stars of the Tuscan sky. I discover that the objects that lie before me are stones of all shapes and sizes.¹

Exhaustion comes over me before I can determine the purpose of these stones. I sit down on a rock that rests near my tired feet. I suddenly feel Virgil's presence behind me.

"Stand up," he commands, "for we have a ways to go."

"How long will our journey through this circle last?" I ask, standing up to follow my guide through the darkness.

"We are yet to reach the four quarters," Virgil replies. He murmurs something else, but my attention is drawn elsewhere. Faint screams disrupt the still, cold air as we walk forward. Virgil steps in front to guide me through the rocks that have now grown in size and created a sort of maze. Shriill shrieks pierce the air as we step closer to the hidden chaos.

A large boulder twice the size of Virgil and me combined comes into sight. Four trenches emerge from underneath it and flow in the directions of a compass rose, dividing the ground into four sections.

Figures frantically run about the stone like ants about a destroyed mound. I observe that the sinners in each of the four regions stay within the borders of their quarter, but despite their separation, they all appear to move with the same intent, their attention drawn to the top of the rock.

The longer I observe them, the more apparent it becomes that the sinners are racing each other to the top of the rock. I watch as a single sinner makes it past those around him and reaches the top. Before I have exhaled my next breath, the sinner is shoved off the rock and replaced by another.²

“My guide, who are these shades who hopelessly race to the top of this rock as if there is nothing more their hearts desire?” I ask.

Virgil gestures towards a fallen sinner and replies, “why do you not ask this miserable soul about the source of his strife?” I approach the sinner before he is able to stand.

“You who lies on the ground beneath me, what is your name?” I ask the shade, trying to meet his frantic eyes. He turns to rise, but I again step in front of him saying, “tell me the story from your life on Earth that has caused you this fate.”

He hesitates before finally responding: “I am Sextus Tarquinius, king of Rome before Rome turned against me in the name of Lucretia, with whom I had once lain in bed. I was said to be the cause of her death, leading her to take a knife to her own heart. My intent was not to arouse anger in my cousin’s heart; I was a lonely man who sought love from a woman with a heart as sensible and dedicated as Lucretia’s.”

Before I can utter a single word, Sextus runs back to the rock where he begins his climb. Seeing the defeat and confusion expressed on my face, Virgil grabs my hand and leads me past the trench and into the next quarter.

“Are not these sinners those who committed sexual assault?” I ask my guide. “Why must they be divided into fours?”

“The sinners have indeed committed sexual assault,” he replies. “They are separated based upon their reasons for sinning but all share the same goal of reaching the top of the rock.”

Virgil points to the quarter in which we had previously stood. “There with Sextus Tarquinius lies the lustful, whose desires overpowered all reason and let them astray. Those who stand before us in this quarter wrongly sought power and control. The third quarter consists of the psychopathic, and the final quarter holds those who were consumed by anger and acted violently against others.”

We continue to watch as the shades fight each other to reach the top. While making our way to the next quarter, the sinner who most recently fell from the top rolls in front of our feet.

“What is your name?” I ask the sinner. “Tell me your story.”

“I am Brock Turner. I was top of my Harvard class and certain to become a great athlete, but now I am left with the title of sex offender.”

“I recognize your face!” I reply. “It was you who took advantage of an unconscious woman and outraged the nation.”

“After my conviction I was found to be guilty on three charges of felony sexual assault,” Brock continues. “But praise the Lord, my days in jail were rightfully shortened and I only served half my time; for a person such as myself does not deserve to share that label with these types of people.”

A scream interrupts him as a sinner comes crashing down from the top of the boulder and lands with a thud. Brock scampers back to the rock where he joins the rest of the shades in their eternal climb.

Virgil and I pass through the last quarters in silence. He leads me through the winding maze of rock walls until we reach the ledge where we begin our descent, moving forward into the darkness.

NOTES

1. stones: The numerous rocks symbolize the stone hearts of the sinners who turned an act of love into an act of violence and harm.

2. Figures frantically run. . . replaced by another: The contrapasso of these sinners guilty of sexual assault is to selfishly fight for the pointless objective of reaching the top of the rock without considering the feelings of others. The sinners are then unfulfilled upon reaching the top and end up hurting themselves and others along the way, as have those who commit this sin.