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Introductory Note

After we read Dante's *Inferno* in my English class, I wrote this piece as I was intrigued by Dante's use of circles to illustrate how different people are punished in the afterlife. I felt inspired to create my own Canto after my teacher initially challenged me to compose a Dante-esque piece centered around a modern problem. After researching for a few days, a problem that stood out to me as both significant and troubling was animal cruelty in the entertainment industry. I was sad and in a sort of disbelief when I looked at pictures of Ringling Brothers Circus elephants tied up or Sea World killer whales being operated on while awake. I decided that the focus of my circle would be punishing people who allowed animal cruelty in the entertainment industry because it is terrible and because none of my friends were fully informed about it. I wanted to bring awareness to the issue. Because I had a purpose for writing and have found joy in creative writing, the vision and ideas for this piece came to me fairly quickly. I could see the circle and punishment elements in my mind's eye. For my circle, I saw a desert landscape with a dense rainforest. The desert section represents the sinners who abused land animals and the rainforest section represents the sinners who abused sea animals. For the punishments, my adaptation of a Dantean construct would have two sections. There is one section in which land animal abusers are flung around and starved and one section in which sea life abusers are drowned. To make my Canto feel like it came out of the *Inferno*, I decided to imitate Dante's use of literary devices and his writing style. I made sure to include a guide, Steve Irwin, who was well-versed in protecting animals. He acts as Virgil in my story. I also add

references to Greek mythology and long similes, just as Dante does in many places in the *Inferno*. This circle is a subcircle of the violence section because a majority of animal abuse cases are specifically related to physical assault. My Canto begins with a description of the new circle that I entered. Afterwards, I have a conversation with my guide before observing the punishments. Then, I speak with two souls who ran businesses that were cruel to animals. Finally, I reflect on my conversations and what I saw with my guide, and I move towards the next circle. I hope that my portrayal of animal cruelty and the consequences for those who participate in it, support it, and enable it influences others to prevent it from happening in the future.

The Brutal Punishments for Animal Cruelty

I wake up with my leader by my side as I enter this new circle. I sense a different kind of suffering than I have previously encountered. I am on the edge of a deep, yellow canyon that continues farther than I can see. I begin to walk, and wet gravel crunches underneath my feet. I hear gurgling noises and loud screeches in the distance. I smell the salt of the ocean and the fur of land animals.

“Alex, do you know which souls inhabit this level?” the animal conservationist asks. My guide through Inferno’s levels has been world-renowned animal rights activist Steve Irwin.¹ He wears a beige shirt, khaki pants, wide-brimmed hat, and has an Australian accent.

I reply, “No, I am not sure Mr. Irwin; I only sense I am near both land and sea.”

“Keep moving and listening; it will become clear soon,” he coaches.

Following the protectionist’s direction, I proceed deeper into the canyon. The gurgling sounds grow louder, and I am reminded of Greek army sailors after the Trojan War when Nauplius ravaged their fleet (Smith). On the horizon appears what seems to be a terrarium that includes dry land and water. As my leader and I approach, we observe how souls on dry land are punished. Artemis, the patron goddess of animal protection, flings each soul into the air, and others on the ground hunch over in pain (Cartwright). Artemis’ actions are like a tornado whipping around everything that enters its vicinity, spitting out souls in different directions. The goddess leaves dust in her wake as she patrols the land section of the terrarium.

My glance pivots to the massive pool. The water churns violently with the movement of souls trying to avoid harpoons being shot into the water. The souls choke, as if in a vice’s grip,

¹ Mr. Steve Irwin is my guide through the Inferno as he is extremely knowledgeable about animals and animal cruelty and Virgil was knowledgeable about mythology and navigating the Inferno.

on masses of oil on the water's surface. Just before my guide and I reach the tank, a being jumps out of the top. I recognize her as the one throwing the land-bound souls.

I am Artemis," the goddess declares, "and these souls have been cruel to animals during their lives. I cannot let you venture further into this level as it is only for the deceased."

Reader, here, I worried I could not continue my journey. I committed to travel through all of Inferno's levels to reach heaven, but this obstacle left me doubtful I would succeed. However, my worry was premature.

"We have been willed from heaven to complete this journey," my leader proclaims, and we pass Artemis. My leader and I walk past the land section of the terrarium, and a soul by the edge begins to speak to me. He wears a long coat and top hat that reads *Ringling Brothers Circus* in large letters.²

"A living soul," he says, "should not be here."

My leader reiterates, "We have been sent on a divine mission to pass through and learn from this circle."

"Ok, I will share my story," says the soul. "I was Irvin Feld, manager of the Ringling Brothers circus, which I acquired from the Ringling family. I tried to make our acts as grand and engaging as possible to build the circus' image. As a result, I made elephants a main attraction as they drew large crowds. We overworked them, yes, but it was to sustain and scale the business (Warnecke)."

"You did not mention, Mr. Feld, that the elephants had to stay up 23 hours a day," I rebut ("Retirement of the Ringling Bros. Elephants"). "The circus was not concerned with the well-being of animals and neither were you."

² The Ringling Brothers Circus was notorious for abusing their animals historically.

Artemis flings Mr. Feld into the air and sends him to the other side of the terrarium.³ My guide and I continue our journey. On our way to the circle's edge, a muffled voice from the tank interrupts us, saying "Hello, living soul. I am William."

Mr. Irwin lifts his hand and remarks to me, "You must hear this man's tale."

William Jovanovich begins: "During my lifetime, I wrote many books and started a publishing firm.⁴ My business success allowed me to invest in what I enjoyed. I liked marine life, so I bought SeaWorld parks (Johnson). I thought I could turn a profit and keep animals safe, but my staff treated animals poorly and..." (Luscombe).

"Wait," I reply in surprise. "You are blaming the deaths of captive dolphins, sharks, and killer whales on your staff as opposed to your poor planning and understanding of the field?"

"It was not my fault. If the staff had done their jobs better, the animals would not have suffered," he retorts.

"I see how you ended up here," I scream as the soul erupts into a coughing fit from choking on oil and is sent deep into the pool by a harpoon.⁵

I do not feel pity for these two souls. They took advantage of animals and deserve their eternal punishment. I feel the most awake I have felt during my journey in the Inferno. In fact, it is the most alert I have been since I felt the "straight way was lost" (1. 3).

My leader says, "You know, those sinners may have committed worse crimes than you think."

³ Mr. Irvin Feld is thrown into the air because many animal abuse cases involve animals being shoved, tossed and thrown.

⁴ William Jovanovich was an owner of SeaWorld locations during the period of time when marine animals were physically abused there.

⁵ Jovanovich endures inhaling water polluted by oil as well as prodding from a large harpoon as marine life experiences these abuses in the ocean at the hands of humans.

“How so?” I reply.

“Well, hurting animals is as terrible as harming people because animals can suffer as humans do,” he explains.

I now have a tangible understanding of the suffering I intuited when I started my journey through this circle. The reality set in about how the sinners treated animals, and I understand the rationale and method for their punishment. My eyes focus on the horizon beyond this circle where pillars of fire as tall as skyscrapers illuminate the dark sky. My guide leads me to a small door on the side of the canyon, and we begin our descent into the next level.

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