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Opening extract from

The Young Inferno

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CANTO 1

In the middle of my childhood wonder
I woke to find myself in a forest
that was – how shall I put it – wild and sombre.

No sign of light. Not a star twinkling.
The whole thing was creepy and kind of crawly.
I still shudder in my trainers, just thinking

of those scary monsters lurking in the leaves,
and death itself putting on a grinning mask
and rehearsing its whispers for the breeze.

One moment I'm there, tidying my room,
Next moment, I'm listening to my heart leap
and nowhere to turn but tracks and tracks of gloom.

Maybe tomorrow I'd wake from this nightmare.
But right now this wilderness was for real.
Yes, I was swimming in a pool of fear.

I couldn't tell north from south, west from east.
Suddenly a leopard stood in front of me.
I screamed, 'Out of my way, you spotty beast!'

Now it was a lion that stared back at me,
shaking his golden mane with a great roar
and blocking my steps like a bully.

Next a she-wolf appeared, howling for blood.
The air trembled with the sound, and I though
Why me? Do I look like Red Riding Hood?

I wondered what these three creatures could mean:
A leopard. A lion. A she-wolf –
all scary to look at, yet somehow serene.

Then a dark man appeared over a tree-top.
No taller than a dwarf, he spoke from high.
'I'm your guide,' he said. 'My name is Aesop.'

'You must be Aesop the Fable-Spinner.
I remember that race! Hare versus Tortoise.
Leaping-Legs lost. Slow-but-Sure was the winner.'

'Spot on, my son. Memory will serve you well
as we continue on our journey –
which, by the way, leads to the depths of Hell.

So better start tuning up your ears
for the shrieks and groans of all those
who sizzle in the flames of their own tears.

My job is to see you get there safely.
But you'll have to go by another road.
Then I'll leave you to the Good Fairy.'