At one point midway on our path in life
I came around and found myself now searching through a dark wood, the right way blurred and lost.
How hard it is to say what that wood was,
a wilderness, savage, brute, harsh and wild.
Only to think of it renews my fear!
So bitter, that thought, that death is hardly worse.
But since my theme will be the good I found there,
I mean to speak of other things I saw.
I do not know, I cannot rightly say,
how first I came to be here - so full of sleep,
that moment, abandoning the true way on.
But then, on reaching the foot of a hill
which marked the limit of the dark ravine
that has before so pierced my heart with panic,
I looked to that height and saw its shoulders already clothed in rays from the planet that leads all others, on any road, aright.
My fears, at this, were somewhat quieted,
though terror, awash in the lake of my heart, had lasted all the night I’d passed in anguish.
And then, like someone labouring for breath who, safely reaching shore from open sea, still turns and stares across those perilous waves, so in my mind - my thoughts all fleeing still - I turned around to marvel at that strait that let no living soul pass through till now.
And then - my weary limbs a little rested - I started up the lonely scree once more, the foot that drives me always set the lower.

But look now! Almost as the scarp begins, a leopard, light, and lively, svelte and quick, its coat displaying a dappled marking.
This never ceased to dance before my face.
No. On it came, so bothering my tread I’d half a mind at every turn to turn.
The time, however, was the hour of dawn.
The sun was mounting, and those springtime stars that rose along with it when Holy Love first moved to being all these lovely things.
So these - the morning hour, the gentle season - led me to find good reason for my hopes, seeing that creature with its sparkling hide.
Yet not so far that no fear pressed on me, to see, appearing now, a lion face.
This, as it seemed, came on and on towards me hungrily, its ravening head held high, so that, in dread, the air around it trembled.
And then a wolf. And she who, seemingly, was gaunt yet gorged on every kind of craving - and has already blighted many a life - so heavily oppressed my thought with fears, which spurted even at the sight of her, I lost all hope of reaching to those heights.
We all so willingly record our gains, until the hour that leads us into loss.
Then every single thought is tears and sadness.
So, now, with me. That brute which knows no peace came ever nearer me and, step by step, drove me back down to where the sun is mute.
As I went, ruined, rushing to that low, there had, before my eyes, been offered one who seemed - long silent - to be faint and dry.
Seeing him near in that great wilderness, to him I screamed my ‘Miserere’: ‘Save me, whatever - shadow or truly man - you be.’
So now, beyond a drifting cloud of flowers
(which rose up, arching, from the angels’ hands,
then fell within and round the chariot),
    seen through a veil, pure white, and olive-crowned,
a lady now appeared to me. Her robe was green,
her dress the colour of a living flame.
    And I, in spirit, who so long had not
been, trembling in her presence, wracked by awe,
began again to tremble at her glance
    (without more evidence that eyes could bring,
but darkly, through the good that flowed from her),
sensing the ancient power of what love was.
    But on the instant that it struck my sight -
this power, this virtue, that had pierced me through
before I’d even left my boyhood state -
    I turned aside (and leftwards) meaning now,
with all the hope and deference of some child
that runs when hurt or frightened to its mum,
    to say to Virgil: ‘There is not one gram
of blood in me that does not tremble now.
I recognize the signs of ancient flame.’
    But Virgil was not there. Our lack alone
was left where once he’d been. Virgil, dear sire,
Virgil - to him I’d run to save my soul.
    Nor could the All out primal mother lost,
ensure my cheeks - which he once washed with dew -
should not again be sullied with dark tears.
    ‘Dante, that Virgil is no longer here,
do not yet weep, do not weep for that.
A different sword cut, first, must make you weep.’
'Virgin and mother, daughter of your son, greater than all in honour and humility, you are the point that truth eternally is fixed upon. And you have made the nature of the human being proud. Its maker, then, did not disdain to make himself this making. Love, in your womb, was fanned to fire again. And here, in this eternal peace, the warmth of love has brought the Rose to germinate and bloom. You are, for us, the noon-time torch of love. You are, among those mortals there below, the clearest fountain of their living hopes. You are, in dignity and power, Our Lady. All who, in wanting grace, do not seek help from you, might wish to soar yet lack the wings. Nor in your kindness do you give your aid to those alone who ask, but often run, before they ask, to them in generous freedom. In you is pity, in your compassion, in you all-giving power. All good in you is gathered up that creature from can bear. This man is one who, from the deepest void in all the universe, has seen thus far, and one by one, all lives in spirit mode. To you, a suppliant, he comes, and asks that, by your grace, he gains the strength to rise in sight more still to greet the final peace. I never burned for visions of my own more than I do that he might see. To you I offer all my prayers - praying my prayers are not too few - that you should free this man from all the clouds of his mortality, so highest happiness be shown to him. Our Queen, to you, who may do what you will, I also pray you keep him (he has seen so much!) healthy in all his heart intends. Watch, and defeat the impulses of man. See! Beatrice with so many saints closes her hands in prayers along with mine.' The eyes - which God both loves and venerates - attentive to these orisons, made clear how welcome to her were these holy prayers and then turned straight to eternal light in which (we're bound to think) no creature's eye inwardly travels with such clarity. And drawing nearer, as I had to now, the end of all desires, in my own self I ended all the ardour of desire. Now Bernard, smiling, made a sign to me that I look up. Already, though, I was, by my own will, as he desired I be. My sight, becoming pure and wholly free, entered still more, then more, along the ray of that one light which, of itself, is true.

Translation by Robin Kirkpatrick