

<http://www.pluto.no>

=====



The Inferno - Dante Alighieri

Translated by Robert Pinsky in the book The Inferno of Dante
Canto I

Midway on our life's journey, I found myself
In dark woods, the right road lost. To tell
About those woods is hard - so tangled and rough

And savage that thinking of it now, I feel
The old fear stirring: death is hardly more bitter.
And yet, to treat the good I found there as well

I'll tell what I saw, though how I came to enter
I cannot well say, being so full of sleep
Whatever moment it was I began to blunder

Off the true path. But when I came to stop
Below a hill that marked one end of the valley
That had pierced my heart with terror, I looked up

Toward the crest and saw its shoulders already
Mantled in rays of that bright planet that shows
The road to everyone, whatever our journey.

Then I could feel the terror begin to ease
That churned in my heart's lake all through the night.
As one still panting, ashore from dangerous seas,

Looks back at the deep he has escaped, my thought
Returned, still fleeing, to regard that grim defile
That never left any alive who stayed in it.

After I had rested my weary body awhile
I started again across the wilderness,
My left foot always lower on the hill,

And suddenly - a leopard, near the place
The way grew steep: lithe, spotted, quick of foot.
Blocking the path, she stayed before my face

And more than once she made me turn about
To go back down. It was early morning still,
The fair sun rising with the stars attending it

As when Divine Love set those beautiful
Lights into motion at creation's dawn,
And the time of day and season combined to fill

My heart with hope of that beast with festive skin -
But not so much that next sight wasn't fearful:
A lion came at me, his head high as he ran,

Roaring with hunger so the air appeared to tremble.
Then, a grim she-wolf - whose leanness seemed to compress
All the world's cravings, that had made miserable

Such multitudes; she put such heaviness
Into my spirit, I lost hope of the crest.
Like someone eager to win, who tested by loss

Surrenders to gloom and weeps, so did that beast
Make me feel, as harrying toward me at a lope
She forced me back toward where the sun is lost.

While I was ruining myself back down to the deep,
Someone appeared - one who seemed nearly to fade
As though from long silence. I cried to his human shape

In that great wasteland: "Living man or shade,
Have pity and help me, whichever you may be!"
"No living man, though once I was," he replied.

"My parents both were Mantuans from Lombardy,
And I was born sub Julio, the latter end.
I lived in good Augustus's Rome, in the day

Of the false gods who lied. A poet, I hymned
Anchises' noble son, who came from Troy
When superb Ilium in its pride was burned.

But you-why go back down to such misery?
Why not ascend the delightful mountain, source
And principle that causes every joy?"

"Then are you Virgil? Are you the font that pours
So overwhelming a river of human speech?"
I answered, shamefaced. "The glory and light are yours,

That poets follow - may love that made me search
Your book in patient study avail me, Master!
You are my guide and author, whose verses teach

The graceful style whose model has done me honor.
See this beast driving me backward - help me resist,
For she makes all my veins and pulses shudder."

"A different path from this one would be best
For you to find your way from this feral place,"
He answered, seeing how I wept. "This beast,

The cause of your complaint, lets no one pass
Her way - but harries all to death. Her nature
Is so malign and vicious she cannot appease

Her voracity, for feeding makes her hungrier.
Many are the beasts she mates: there will be more,
Until the Hound comes who will give this creature

A painful death. Not nourished by earthly fare,
He will be fed by wisdom, goodness and love.
Born between Feltro and Feltro, he shall restore

Low Italy, as Nisus fought to achieve.
And Turnus, Euryalus, Camilla the maiden -
All dead from wounds in war. He will remove

This lean wolf, hunting her through every region
Till he has thrust her back to Hell's abyss
Where Envy first dispatched her on her mission.

Therefore I judge it best that you should choose
To follow me, and I will be your guide
Away from here and through an eternal place:

To hear the cries of despair, and to behold
Ancient tormented spirits as they lament
In chorus the second death they must abide.

Then you shall see those souls who are content
To dwell in fire because the hope some day
To join the blessed: toward whom, if you ascent

Continues, your guide will be one worthier than I -
When I must leave you, you be with her.
For the Emperor who governs from on high

Wills I not enter His city, where none may appear
Who lived like me in rebellion to His law.
His empire is everything and everywhere,

But that is His kingdom, His city, His seat of awe.
Happy is the soul He chooses for that place!"
I: "Poet, please - by the God you did not know -

Help me escape this evil that I face,
And worse. Lead me to witness what you have said,
Saint Peter's gate, and the multitude of woes -"

Then he set out, and I followed where he led.