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The Inferno - Dante Alighieri

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

Day was departing, and the darkening air
Called all earth's creatures to their evening quiet
While I alone was preparing as though for war

To struggle with my journey and with the spirit
Of pity, which flawless memory will redraw:
O Muses, O genius of art, O memory whose merit

Has inscribed inwardly those things I saw -
Help me fulfill the perfection of your nature.
I commenced: "Poet, take my measure now:

Appraise my powers before you trust me to venture
Through that deep passage where you would be my guide.
You write of the journey Silvius's father

Made to immortal realms although he stayed
A mortal witness, in his corruptible body.
That the Opponent of all evil bestowed

Such favor on him befits him, chosen for glory
By highest heaven to be the father of Rome
And of Rome's empire - later established Holy,

Seat of great Peter's heir. You say he came
To that immortal world, and things he learned
There led to the papal mantle - and triumph for him.

Later, the Chosen Vessel too went and returned,
Carrying confirmation of that faith
Which opens the way with salvation at its end.

But I - what cause, whose favor, could send me forth
On such a voyage? I am no Aeneas or Paul:
Not I nor others think me of such worth,

And therefore I have my fears of playing the fool
To embark on such a venture. You are wise:
You know my meaning better than I can tell."

And then, like one who unchooses his own choice
And thinking again undoes what he has started,
So I became: a nullifying unease

Overcame my soul on that dark slope and voided
The undertaking I had so quickly embraced.
"If I understand," the generous shade retorted,

"Cowardice grips your spirit - which can twist
A man away from the noblest enterprise
As a trick of vision startles a shying beast.

To ease your burden of fear, I will disclose
Why I came here, and what I heard that compelled
Me first to feel compassion for you: it was

A lady's voice that called me where I dwelled
In Limbo - a lady so blessed and fairly featured
I prayed her to command me. Her eyes out-jeweled

The stars in splendor. 'O generous Mantuan spirit,'
She began in a soft voice of angelic sound,
'Whose fame lives still, that the world will still inherit

As long as the world itself shall live: my friend -
No friend of Fortune - has found his way impeded
On the barren slope, and fear has turned him round.

I fear he may be already lost, unaided:
So far astray, I've come from Heaven too late.
Go now, with your fair speech and what is needed

To save him; offer the help you have to give
Before he is lost, and I will be consoled.
I am Beatrice, come from where I crave

To be again, who ask this. As love has willed,
So I have spoken. And when I return
Before my Lord, He will hear your praises told.'

Then she was silent; and I in turn began,
'O lady of goodness, through whom alone mankind
Exceeds what the sky's least circle can contain

Within its compass: so sweet is your command
Had I already obeyed, it would feel too late.
But tell me how you so fearlessly descend

To such a center - from that encompassing state
You long to see again?' 'You yearn for the answer
Deeply,' she said, 'so I will tell in short

How I can come to Limbo, yet feel no terror:
Fear befits things with power for injury,
Not things that lack such power. God the Creator

Has by His mercy made me such that I
Cannot feel what you suffer: none of this fire
Assails me. In Heaven a Lady feels such pity

For this impediment where I send you, severe
Judgment is broken by her grace on high.
To Lucy she said: "You faithful follower

Needs you: I commend him to you." Lucy, the foe
Of every cruelty, found me where I sat
With Rachel of old, and urged me: "Beatrice, true

Glory of God, can you not come to the aid
Of one who had such love for you he rose
Above the common crowd? Do you not heed

The pity of his cries? And do your eyes
Not see death near him, in a flood the ocean
Itself can boast no power to surpass?"

Never on earth was anyone spurred to motion
So quickly, to seize advantage or fly from danger,
As at these words I hurried here from Heaven -

Trusting your eloquence, whose gift brings honor
Both to yourself and to all those who listen.'
Having said this, she turned toward me the splendor

Of her eyes lucent with tears - which made me hasten
To save you, even more eagerly than before:
And so I rescued you on the fair mountain

Where the beast blocked the short way up. Therefore,
What is this? Why, why should you hold back?
Why be a coward rather than bolder, freer -

Since in the court of Heaven for you sake
Three blessed ladies watch, and words of mine
Have promised a good as great as you might seek?"

As flowers bent and shrunken by night at dawn
Unfold and straighten on their stems, to wake
Brightened by sunlight, so I grew strong again -

Good courage coursing through my heart, I spoke
Like one set free: "How full of true compassion
Was she who helped me, how courteous and quick

Were you to follow her bidding - and your narration
Has restored my spirit. Now, on: for I feel eager
To go with you, and cleave to my first intention.

From now, we two will share one will together:
You are my teacher, my master, and my guide."
So I spoke, and when he moved I followed after

And entered on that deep and savage road.