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The Inferno - Dante Alighieri

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

THROUGH ME YOU ENTER INTO THE CITY OF WOES,
THROUGH ME YOU ENTER INTO ETERNAL PAIN,
THROUGH ME YOU ENTER THE POPULATION OF LOSS.

JUSTICE MOVED MY HIGH MAKER, IN POWER DIVINE,
WISDOM SUPREME, LOVE PRIMAL. NO THINGS WERE
BEFORE ME NOT ETERNAL; ETERNAL I REMAIN.

ABANDON ALL HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER HERE.

These words I saw inscribed in some dark color
Over a portal. "Master," I said, "make clear

Their meaning, which I find too hard to gather."

Then he, as one who understands: "All fear
Must be left here, and cowardice die. Together,

We have arrived where I have told you: here
You will behold the wretched souls who've lost
The good of intellect." Then, with good cheer

In his expression to encourage me, he placed
His hand on mine: so, trusting to my guide,
I followed him among things undisclosed.

The sighs, groans and laments at first were so loud,
Resounding through starless air, I began to weep:
Strange languages, horrible screams, words imbued

With rage or despair, cries as of troubled sleep
Or a tortured shrillness - they rose in a coil
Of tumult, along with noises like the slap

Of beating hands, all fused in a ceaseless flail
That churns and frenzies that dark and timeless air
Like sand in a whirlwind. And I, my head in a swirl

Of error, cried: "Master, what is this I hear?
What people are these, whom pain has overcome?"
He: "This is the sorrowful state of souls unsure,

Whose lives earned neither honor nor bad fame.
And they are mingled with angels of that base sort
Who, neither rebellious to God nor faithful to Him,

Chose neither side, but kept themselves apart -
Now Heaven expels them, not to mar its splendor,
And Hell rejects them, lest the wicked of heart

Take glory over them." And then I: "Master,
What agony is it, that makes them keen their grief
With so much force?" He: "I will make a brief answer:

They have no hope of death, but a blind life
So abject, they envy any other fate.
To all memory of them, the world is deaf.

Mercy and justice disdain them. Let us not
Speak of them: look and pass on." I looked again:
A whirling banner sped at such a rate

It seemed it might never stop; behind it a train
Of souls, so long that I would not have thought
Death had undone so many. When more than one

I recognized had passed, I beheld the shade
Of him who made the Great Refusal, impelled
By cowardice: so at once I understood

Beyond all doubt that this was the dreary guild
Repellent both to God and His enemies -
Hapless ones never alive, their bare skin galled

By wasps and flies, blood trickling down the face,
Mingling with tears for harvest underfoot
By writhing maggots. Then, when I turned my eyes

Farther along our course, I could make out
People upon the shore of some great river.
"Master," I said, "it seems by this dim light

That all of these are eager to cross over -
Can you tell me by what law, and who they are?"
He answered, "Those are things you will discover

When we have paused at Acheron's dismal shore."
I walked on with my head down after that,
Fearful I had displeased him, and spoke no more.

Then, at the river - an old man in a boat:
White-haired, as he drew closer shouting at us,
"Woe to you, wicked souls! Give up the thought

Of Heaven! I come to ferry you across
Into eternal dark on the opposite side,
Into fire and ice! And you there - leave this place,

You living soul, stand clear of those who are dead!"
And then, when he saw that I did not obey:
"By other ports, in a lighter boat," he said,

"You will be brought to shore by another way."
My master spoke then, "Charon, do not rage:
Thus is it willed where everything may be

Simply if it is willed. Therefore, oblige,
And ask no more." That silenced the grizzled jaws
Of the gray ferryman of the livid marsh,

Who had red wheels of flame about his eyes.
But at his words the forlorn and naked souls
Were changing color, cursing the human race,

God and their parents. Teeth chattering in their skulls,
They called curses on the seed, the place, the hour
Of their own begetting and their birth. With wails

And tears they gathered on the evil shore
That waits for all who don't fear God. There demon
Charon beckons them, with his eyes of fire;

Crowded in a herd, they obey if he should summon,
And he strikes at any laggards with his oar.
As leaves in quick succession sail down in autumn

Until the bough beholds its entire store
Fallen to the earth, so Adam's evil seed
Swoop from the bank when each is called, as sure

As a trained falcon, to cross to the other side
Of the dark water; and before one throng can land
On the far shore, on this side new souls crowd.

"My son," said the gentle master, "here are joined
The souls of all who dies in the wrath of God,
From every country, all of them eager to find

Their way across the water - for the goad
Of Divine Justice spurs them so, their fear
Is transmuted to desire. Souls who are good

Never pass this way; therefore, if you hear
Charon complaining at your presence, consider
What that means." Then, the earth of that grim shore

Began to shake: so violently, I shudder
And sweat recalling it now. A wind burst up
From the tear-soaked ground to erupt red light and batter

My senses - and so I fell, as though seized by sleep.