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The Inferno - Dante Alighieri

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

Braking the deep sleep that filled my head,
A heavy clap of thunder startled me up
As though by force; with rested eyes I stood

Peering to find where I was - in truth, the lip
Above the chasm of pain, which holds the din
Of infinite grief: a gulf so dark and deep

And murky that though I gazed intently down
Into the canyon, I could see nothing below.
"Now we descend into the sightless zone,"

The poet began, dead pale now: "I will go
Ahead, you second." I answered, seeing his pallor,
"How can I venture here if even you,

Who have encouraged me every time I falter,
Turn white with fear?" And he: "It is the pain
People here suffer that paints my face this color

Of pity, which you mistake for fear. Now on:
Our long road urges us forward." And he entered
They abyss's first engirdling circle, and down

He had me enter it too. Here we encountered
No laments that we could hear - except for sighs
That trembled the timeless air: they emanated

From the shadowy sadnesses, not agonies,
Of multitudes of children and women and men.
He said, "And don't you ask, what spirits are these?

Before you go on, I tell you: they did not sin;
If they have merit, it can't suffice without
Baptism, portal to the faith you maintain.

Some lived before the Christian faith, so that
they did not worship God aright - and I
Am one of these. Through this, no other fault,

We are lost, afflicted only this one way:
That having no hope, we live in longing." I heard
These words with heartfelt grief that seized on me

Knowing how many worthy souls endured
Suspension in that Limbo. "Dear sir, my master,"
I began, wanting to be reassured

In the faith that conquers every error, "Did ever
Anyone go forth from here - by his own good
Or perhaps another's - to join the blessed, after?"

He understood my covert meaning, and said,
"I was new to this condition, when I beheld
A Mighty One who descended here, arrayed

With a crown of victory. And He re-called
Back from this place the shade of our first parent,
And his son Abel, and other shades who dwelled

In Limbo. Noah, and Moses the obedient
Giver of laws, went with Him, and Abraham
The patriarch. King David and Israel went,

And Israel's sire and children, and Rachel for whom
He labored so long, and many others - and His
Coming here made them blessed, and rescued them.

Know this: no-human soul was saved, till these."
We did not stop our traveling while he spoke,
But kept on passing through the woods - not trees,

But a wood of thronging spirits; nor did we make
Much distance from the place where I had slept,
When I saw a fire that overcame a bleak

Hemisphere of darkness. Well before we stopped
To address them, I could see people there and sense
They were honorable folk. "O Master apt

In science and art, who honor both, what wins
These shades distinction? Who are they who command
A place so separate from the other ones?"

And he: "Their honored names, which still resound
In you life above, have earned them Heaven's grace,
Advancing them here." Meanwhile a voice intoned:

"Hail the great Poet, whose shade had left this place
And now returns!" After the voice fell still,
I saw four great shades making their way to us,

Their aspect neither sad nor joyful. "Note well,"
My master began, "the one who carries a sword
And strides before the others, as fits his role

Among these giants: he is Homer, their lord
The sovereign poet; the satirist follows him -
Horace, with Lucan last, and Ovid third:

That lone voice just now hailed me by a name
Each of them shares with me; in such accord
They honor me well." And so I saw, all come

Together there, the splendid school of the lord
Of highest song who like an eagle soars high
Above the others. After they had shared a word

Among themselves, they turned and greeted me
With cordial gestures, at which my master smiled;
And far more honor: that fair company

Then made me one among them - so as we traveled
Onward toward the light I made a sixth
Amid such store of wisdom. Thus we strolled,

Speaking of matters I will not give breath,
Silence as fitting now as speech was there.
At length, a noble castle blocked our path,

Encircled seven times by a barrier
Of lofty walls, and defended round about
By a handsome stream we strode across: it bore

Our weight like solid ground; and after that
I passed through seven gateways with the sages.
We came to a fresh green meadow, where we met

A group of people. With grave, deliberate gazes
And manners of great authority, they spoke
Sparingly and in gentle, courtly voices.

We drew aside to a place where we could look
From a spacious well-lit height and view them all:
On that enameled green I saw - and take

Glory within me for having seen them, still -
The spirits of the great: I saw Electra
With many companions, among whom I knew well

Which shades were those of Aeneas and of Hector,
And Caesar - who wore his armor, falcon-eyed.
I saw Camilla, and Penthesilea beside her;

I saw King Latinus on the other side,
And sitting by him his daughter Lavinia.
I saw that Brutus from whom Tarquin fled,

I saw Lucretia, Julia, Marcia, Cornelia;
And sitting at a distance separately
I saw lone Saladin of Arabia.

I rested my eyes a little, and there was he
Who is acknowledged Master of those who know,
Sitting in a philosophic family

Who look to him and do him honor. I saw
Nearest him, in front, Plato and Socrates.
I saw Democritus, who strove to show

That the world is chance; Zeno, Empedocles,
Anaxagoras, Thales, Heraclitus,
Diogenes. The collector of qualities

Of things, Dioscorides. And Orpheus,
Cicero, Linus, Seneca the moralist,
Euclid the geometer, Ptolemy, Hippocrates,

Galen, Avicenna, Averroës who discussed
The Philosopher in his great commentary -
I saw so many I cannot tally the list;

For my demanding theme so pulls my story,
To multiply the telling would be too little
For the multitude of fact that filled my journey.

The company of six divide and dwindle
To two; my wise guide leads me from that quiet
Another way - again I see air tremble,

And come to a part that has no light inside it.