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The Inferno - Dante Alighieri

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

So I descended from first to second circle -
Which girdles a smaller space and greater pain,
Which spurs more lamentation. Minos the dreadful

Snarls at the gate. He examines each one's sin,
Judging and disposing as he curls his tail:
That is, when an ill-begotten soul comes down,

It comes before him, and confesses all;
Minos, great connoisseur of sin, discerns
For every spirit its proper place in Hell,

And wraps himself in his tail with as many turns
As levels down that shade will have to dwell.
A crowd is always waiting: here each one learns

his judgment and is assigned a place in Hell.
They tell; they hear - and down they are all cast.
"You, who have come to sorrow's hospice, think well,"

Said Minos, who at the sight of me had paused
To interrupt his solemn task mid-deed:
"Beware how you come in and whom you trust,

Don't be deceived because the gate is wide."
My leader answered, "Must you scold this way?
His destined path is not for you to impede:

Thus is it willed where everything may be
Because it has been willed. So ask no more."
And now I can hear the notes of agony

In sad crescendo beginning to reach my ear;
Now I am where the noise of lamentation
Comes at me in blasts of sorrow. I am where

All light is mute, with a bellowing like the ocean
Turbulent in a storm of warring winds,
That hurricane of Hell in perpetual motion

Sweeping the ravaged spirits as it rends,
Twists, and torments them. Driven as if to land,
They reach the ruin: groaning, tears, laments,

And cursing of the power of Heaven. I learned
They suffer here who sinned in carnal things -
Their reason mastered by desire, suborned.

As winter starlings riding on their wings
Form crowded flocks, so spirits dip and veer
Foundering in the wind's rough buffetings,

Upward of downward, driven here and there
With never ease from pain nor hope of rest.
As chanting cranes will form a line in air,

So I saw souls come uttering cries - wind-tossed,
And lofted by the storm. "Master," I cried,
"Who are these people, by black air oppressed?"

"First among these you wish to know," he said,
"Was empress of many tongues - she so embraced
Lechery that she decreed it justified

Legally, to evade the scandal of her lust:
She is that Semiramis of whom we read,
Successor and wife of Ninus, she possessed

The lands the Sultan rules. Next, she who died
By her own hand for love, and broke her vow
To Sychaeus's ashes. After her comes lewd

And wanton Cleopatra. See Helen, too,
Who caused a cycle of many evil years;
And the great Achilles, the hero whom love slew

In his last battle. Paris and Tristan are here -"
He pointed out by name a thousand souls
Whom love had parted from our life, or more.

When I had heard my teacher tell the rolls
Of knights and ladies of antiquity,
Pity overwhelmed me. Half-lost in its coils,

"Poet," I told him, "I would willingly
Speak with those two who move along together,
And seem so light upon the wind." And he:

"When they drift close - then entreat them hither,
In the name of love that leads them: they will respond."
Soon their course shifted, and the merciless weather

Battered them toward us. I called against the wind,
"O weary souls! If Another does not forbid,
Come speak with us." As doves whom desire has summoned,

With raised wings steady against the current, glide
Guided by will to the sweetness of their nest,
So leaving the flock where Dido was, the two sped

Through the malignant air till they had crossed
To where we stood - so strong was the compulsion
Of my loving call. They spoke across the blast:

"O living soul, who with courtesy and compassion
Voyage through black air visiting us who stained
The world with blood: if heaven's King bore affection

For such as we are, suffering in this wind,
They we would pray to Him to grant you peace
For pitying us in this, our evil end.

Now we will speak and hear as you may please
To speak and hear, while the wind, for our discourse,
Is still. My birthplace is a city that lies

Where the Po finds peace with all its followers.
Love, which in gentle hearts is quickly born,
Seized him for my fair body - which, in a fierce

Manner that still torments my soul, was torn
Untimely away from me. Love, which absolves
None who are loved from loving, made my heart burn

With joy so strong that as you see it cleaves
Still to him, here. Love gave us both one death.
Caina awaits the one who took our lives."

These words were borne across from them to us.
When I had heard those afflicted souls, I lowered
My head, and held it so till I heard the voice

Of the poet ask, "What are you thinking?" I answered.
"Alas - that sweet conceptions and passion so deep
Should bring them here!" Then, looking up toward

The lovers: "Francesca, your suffering makes me weep
For sorrow and pity - but tell me, in the hours
Of sweetest sighing, how and in what shape

Or manner did Love first show you those desires
So hemmed by doubt?" And she to me: "No sadness
Is greater than in misery to rehearse

Memories of joy, as your teacher well can witness.
But if you so great a craving to measure
Our love's first root, I'll tell it, with the fitness

Of one who weeps and tells. One day, for pleasure,
We read of Lancelot, by love constrained:
Alone, suspecting nothing, at our leisure.

Sometimes at what we read our glances joined,
Looking from the book each to the other's eyes,
And then the color in our faces drained.

But one particular moment alone it was
Defeated us: the longed-for smile, it is said,
Was kissed by that most noble lover: at this,

This one, who now will never leave my side,
Kissed my mouth, trembling. A Galeotto, that book!
And so was he who wrote it; that day we read

No further." All the while the one shade spoke,
The other at her side was weeping; my pity
Overwhelmed me and I felt myself go slack:

Swooning as in death, I felt like a dying body.