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The Inferno - Dante Alighieri

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

Continuing, I tell how for some time
Before we reached the lofty tower's base
Our eyes were following two points of flame

Visible at the top; and answering these
Another returned the signal, so far away
The eye could barely catch it. I turned to face

My sea of knowledge and said, "O Master, say:
What does this beacon mean? And the other fire -
What answer does it signal? And who are they

Who set it there?" He said: "It should be clear:
Over these fetid waves, you can perceive
What is expected - if this atmosphere

Of marsh fumes doesn't hide it." Bow never drove
Arrow through air so quickly as then came
Skimming across the water a little skiff

Guided by a single boatman at the helm:
"Now, evil soul," he cried out, "you are caught!"
"Phlegyas, Phlegyas - you roar in vain this time,"

My lord responded. "You'll have us in your boat
Only as long as it takes to cross the fen."
Like on convinced that he has been the butt

Of gross deception, and bursting to complain,
Phlegyas held his wrath. We boarded the boat,
My leader first - it bobbed without a sign

Of being laden until it carried my weight.
As soon as we embarked, the ancient prow
Turned swiftly from shore; it made a deeper cut

Into the water than it was wont to do
With others. In the dead channel on rose abeam
Coated with mud, and addressed me: "Who are you,

To come here before your time?" And I to him:
"Although I come, I do not come to remain -"
Then added, "Who are you, who have become

So brutally foul?" "You see me: I am one
Who weeps," he answered. And I to him, "In weeping
And sorrow remain, cursed soul - for I have seen

Through all that filth: I know you!" He started gripping
With both hands at the boat. My master stood
And thrust him back off, saying, "Back to safekeeping

Among the other dogs." And then my guide
Embraced my neck and kissed me on the face
And said, "Indignant soul, blessed indeed

Is she who bore you. Arrogant in his vice
Was that one when he lived. No goodness whatever
Adorning his memory, his shade is furious.

In the world above, how many a self-deceiver
Now counting himself a mighty king will sprawl
Swinelike amid the mire when life is over,

Leaving behind a name that men revile."
And I said, "Master, truly I should like
To see that spirit pickled in this swill,

Before we've made our way across the lake."
And he to me: "Before we see the shore,
You will be satisfied, for what you seek

Is fitting." After a little, I saw him endure
Fierce mangling by the people of the mud -
A sight I give God thanks and praise for:

"Come get Filippo Argenti!" they all cried,
And crazed with rage and the Florentine spirit bit
At his own body. Let no more be said

Of him, but that we left him still beset;
New cries of lamentation reached my ear,
And I leaned forward to peer intently out.

My kindly master said, "A city draws near
Whose name is Dis, of solemn citizenry
And mighty garrison." I: "Already clear

Are mosques - I see them there within the valley,
Baked red as though just taken from the fire."
And he, "It is fire blazing eternally

Inside of them that makes them so appear
Within this nether Hell." We had progressed
Into the deep-dug moats that circle near

The walls of that bleak city, which seemed cast
Of solid iron; we journeyed on, to complete
An immense circuit before we reached at last

A place where the boatman shouted, "Now get out!
Here is the entrance." Above the gates I saw
More than a thousand of those who Heaven had spat

Like rain, all raging: "Who is this, who'd go
Without death through the kingdom of the dead?"
And my wise master made a sign, to show

That he desired to speak with them aside.
And then they tempered their great disdain a bit,
Answering: "You, by yourself, may come inside;

But let that other depart, who dares set foot
Within this kingdom. Let him retrace alone
His foolish way - try if he can! - and let

You remain here, who have guided such a one
Over terrain so dark." You judge, O reader,
If I did not lose heart, or believe then,

hearing that cursèd voice, that I would never
Return from there. "O my dear guide," I said
"Who has restored my confidence seven times over,

And drawn me out of peril - stay at my side,
Do not desert me now like this, undone.
If we can go no farther, let us instead

Retrace our steps together." That nobleman
Who led me there then told me, "Do not fear:
None can deprive us of the passage One

Has willed for us to have. Wait for me here
And feed your spirit hope and comfort: remember,
I won't abandon you in this nether sphere."

So he goes away and leaves me, the gentle father,
While I remain in doubt, with yes and no
Vying in my head. What they discussed together

Or what my guide proposed, I do not know,
For they were out of hearing. Before much time,
The demons scrambled back, where we would go -

And there I saw our adversaries slam
The portals of the entrance in the face
Of my master, who remained outside and came

Back to me walking slowly, with downcast eyes.
His brow devoid of confidence, he said,
"Who has denied me this abode of sighs?"

And then he said to me, "Don't be dismayed
By my vexation: I will conquer this crew,
However they contrive to block our road.

This insolence of theirs is nothing new;
At a less secret gate they've shown it before,
One still unbolted and open, as you know:

You read the deadly inscription that it bore.
Already on this side of it - down the steep pass,
Passing the circles without an escort - be sure

Someone is coming to open the city to us."