

<http://www.pluto.no>

=====

The Inferno - Dante Alighieri

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

The outward color cowardice painted me
When I beheld my leader turning back
Repressed his own new pallor more hurriedly.

He paused with an attentive air, but like
One listening, not watching - for the eye
Saw little in air so dark and fog so thick.

"We have to win this battle," he started to say,
"Or else... and she, who offered so much aid -
Late though it seems to be, and still on the way."

I could see plainly how he strove to hide
His sentence's beginning with its close,
In different words from those he would have said -

Scaring me none the less, each broken phrase
Leading me to a meaning perhaps much worse
Than any it held. "Does anyone whose place

Is the first circle, where the only curse
Is having no hope, ever come down so far
As this grim hollow?" I asked him. "Such a course,"

He said, "is rare among us, though once before
I have been down here - beckoned as a shade
By wicked Erichtho, the conjuror

Who used to summon spirits of the dead
Back to their bodies. My own flesh was but still
A little while denuded of my shade,

The time she made me enter within this wall
To draw a spirit from the circle of Judas -
Which is the lowest and darkest place of all,

And farthest from the heaven whose dome encloses
Everything in creation. I know the way:
Be sure of that. This quagmire which produces

So strong a stench surrounds the city of woe
We cannot enter now except with wrath."
And he said more that I don't remember now -

My eyes were on the tower we stood beneath,
For at its glowing top three hellish Furies
Suddenly appeared: like women, but with a wreath

Of bright green hydras girdled about their bodies,
Bloodstained, with squirming vipers in a crown
Fringing their savage temples. "The fierce Erinyes,"

He said, who knew those handmaids of the queen
Of eternal sorrows: "Megaera on the left;
Alecto howls on the right; and in between,

Tisiphone." Each one was clawing her breast,
And each was beating herself - and screamed so loud
I pressed against him, flinching at the blast.

"O let Medusa come," the Furies bayed
As they looked down, "to make him stone! We grieve
Not avenging the assault of Theseus!" He said,

"Turn your back; close your eyes: should Gorgon arrive
And show herself, then if you looked at her -
There would be no returning back above."

He turned me around himself, and to make sure,
Not trusting mine alone he covered my face
With his hands too. O you whose mind is clear:

Understand well the lesson that underlies
The veil of these strange verse I have written.
Across the turbid waves now came the noise

Of a fearsome crash, by which both shores were shaken:
A sound like that of a wind that gathers force
From waves of heat in a violent collision

And batters the forest, and on its unchecked course
Shatters the branches and tears them to the ground
And sweeps them of in dustclouds, with scornful roars,

And the wild beasts and shepherds flee at the sound.
Taking his hands from my eyes, he said, "Now look:
There where the very harshest fumes abound,

Across the ancient scum." As frogs are quick
To vanish through water and hunch on bottom sand
As soon as they see their enemy the snake,

So I saw more than a thousand souls of the ruined
Flee before one who strode across the Styx
Dry-shod as though on land. With his left hand

He cleared the polluted air before his face
And only in that annoyance did he seem tired.
I knew assuredly he was sent to us

From Heaven, and I turned my head to regard
The master - who signaled that I should be mute
And bow before him. Ah, to me he appeared

So full of high disdain! He went to the gate
And opened it by means of a little wand,
And there was no resistance. "O race cast out

From Heaven, exiles despised there," he intoned
From that grim threshold, "Why this insolence?
Why do you kick against that Will whose end



Cannot be thwarted, and whose punishments
Many times over have increased your pain?
What use to butt at what the fates dispense?

Remember, your Cerberus's throat and chin,
For just this reason, still are stripped of fur."
Then he turned back on the filthy path again,

Not speaking a word to us, but with the air
Of one whom other matters must concern
Than those who stand before him. And so, secure

After those holy words, we in our turn
Stepped forward toward the city and through the gate,
Entering without dispute. Anxious to learn

What their condition was who populate
A fortress so guarded, I cast my eye around
As soon as I was in - and saw a great

Plain filled with woe and torment. As on the land
At Arles where the river Rhŷne grows more subdued,
Or at Pola where the Quarnero sets a bound

For Italy, bathing her borders, on every side
The ground is made uneven by the tombs -
So it was here: but these were of a mode

More bitter, for among the graves were flames
That made the sepulchers glow with fiercer heat
Than a smith could need. Among these catacombs

The lids were raised, with sounds of woe so great
Those within surely suffered horrible pain.
"Master," I said, "who are these people that are shut

Ensepulchered within these coffers of stone,
Making their sounds of anguish from inside?"
He answered, "Here, arch-heretics lie - and groan

Along with all the converts that they made,
The followers of every sect, with like
Entombed with like. A greater multitude

Crowds in these graves than you may think they take.
Some sepulchers grow hotter, and some less."
He turned to the right, and we continued to walk

Between the anguish and the high parapets.