

INFERNO

CANTO XXI

Thus from one bridge to the next we came until we reached its highest point, speaking of things my Comedy does not care to sing.	3
We stopped to look into the next crevasse of Malebolge and heard more useless weeping. All I could see was an astounding darkness.	6
As in the arsenal of the Venetians in wintertime they boil the viscous pitch to caulk their unsound ships	9
because they cannot sail -- one rebuilds his ship, while still another plugs the seams of his, weathered by many a voyage:	12
one hammers at the stem, another at the stern, this one makes the oars, that one twists the ropes for rigging, another patches jib and mainsail --	15
so, not with fire, but by the art of God, a thick pitch boiled there, sticking to the banks on either side.	18
I saw the pitch but still saw nothing in it except the bubbles raised up by the boiling, the whole mass swelling and then settling back.	21
While I stared fixedly upon the seething pitch, my leader cried: 'Look out, look out!' and drew me to him, away from where I stood.	24
Then I turned like a man, intent on making out what he must run from, undone by sudden fear,	27
who does not slow his flight for all his looking back: just so I caught a glimpse of some dark devil running toward us up the ledge.	30
Ah, how ferocious were his looks and fierce his gesturing, with wings spread wide and nimble feet!	33

One of his shoulders, which were high and pointed,
 was laden with the haunches of a sinner
 he held hooked by the tendons of his heels. 36

From our bridge he said: 'O Malebranche,
 here is one of Santa Zita's Elders.
 Thrust him under, while I head back for more 39
 'to that city, where there's such a fine supply.
 Every man there -- except Bonturo -- is a swindler.
 There money turns a No into an Ay.' 42

He flung him down and turned back up
 the stony ridge. Never did a mastiff
 set loose to chase a thief make greater haste. 45

The sinner sank, then rose again, his face all pitch.
 Then demons, under cover of the bridge, cried out:
 'This is no place for the Holy Visage! 48
 'Here you swim a different stroke than in the Serchio!
 Unless you'd like to feel our hooks,
 don't let yourself stick out above the pitch.' 51

Then, with a hundred hooks and more,
 they ripped him, crying: 'Here you must do your dance
 in secret and pilfer -- can you? -- in the dark.' 54

In just the same way cooks command their scullions
 to take their skewers and prod the meat down
 in the cauldron, lest it float back up. 57

Then my good master said: 'Squat down
 behind that rock and find some cover
 so that they do not see that you are here. 60
 'As for any outrage they may do me,
 have no fear. I know this place and had
 exactly such a scuffle here before.' 63

After he had crossed the bridge
 and reached the other bank,
 he had to show how resolute he was: 66

With all the rage and uproar
 of dogs that rush upon a beggar --
 who quickly starts to beg where he has stopped -- 69
 they swarmed on him from underneath the bridge
 with threatening hooks. But he cried out:
 'Wait! Let none of you do harm! 72

'Before you grapple at me with your hooks let one of you come forth to hear me out. Then take counsel, whether to use your claws.'	75
All cried: 'Let Malacoda go.' One moved -- the rest stood still -- and he came forward, grumbling: 'This won't do him any good.'	78
'Consider, Malacoda,' said my master, 'whether you would see me come this far unstopped by all your hindering	81
'without the will of God and favoring fate? Let us proceed, for it is willed in Heaven that I guide another down this savage way.'	84
Then his pride was so abashed that he let drop the billhook to his feet, saying to the others: 'Enough, let no one touch him.'	87
And my leader said to me: 'You there, cowering among the broken boulders of the bridge, now you may come back to me in safety.'	90
At that I stirred and hastened to him. Then the devils all came surging forward so that I feared they might not keep the truce.	93
Just so do I recall the troops afraid to leave Caprona with safe-conduct, finding themselves among so many enemies.	96
I drew my body up against my leader but kept my eyes fixed on their faces, which were far from friendly.	99
They aimed their hooks, and one said to another: 'How about I nick him on the rump?'	
And the other answered: 'Sure, let him have one.'	102
But the demon who was speaking with my leader turned round at once and said: 'Easy does it, Scarmiglione!'	105
And then to us: 'You can't continue farther down this ridge, for the sixth arch lies broken into pieces at the bottom.	108
'If you desire to continue on, then make your way along this rocky ledge. Nearby's another crag that yields a passage.	111

'Yesterday, at a time five hours from now,
 it was a thousand two hundred and sixty-six years
 since the road down here was broken.' 114

'I'm sending some men of mine along that way
 to see if anyone is out to take the air.
 Go with them -- they won't hurt you. 117

'Step forward, Alichino, Calcabrina,'
 he continued, 'and you Cagnazzo,
 and let Barbariccia lead the squad. 120

'Let Libicocco come too, and Draghignazzo,
 Ciriatto with his tusks, and Graffiacane,
 Farfarello, and madcap Rubicante. 123

'Have a good look around the boiling glue.
 Keep these two safe as far as the next crag
 that runs all of a piece above the dens.' 126

'Oh, master,' I said, 'I don't like what I see.
 Please, let us find our way without an escort,
 if you know how. As for me, I do not want one. 129

'If you are as vigilant as ever,
 don't you see they grind their teeth
 while with their furrowed brows they threaten harm?' 132

And he to me: 'Don't be afraid.
 Let them grind on to their hearts' content --
 they do it for the stewing wretches.' 135

Off they set along the left-hand bank,
 but first each pressed his tongue between his teeth,
 ready to blow a signal to their leader, 138

and he had made a trumpet of his asshole. 139