

CANTO 24

*Climb out of sixth bolgia—seventh bolgia: thieves—metamorphosis—
Vanni Fucci*

1 In that part of the youthful year when the sun
tempers its locks under Aquarius and already the
nights are moving south,
4 when on the ground the frost copies the image of
her white sister, but her pen retains its temper only
briefly,
7 the peasant, his provisions running short, rises to
look, and sees the fields all white; and he strikes his
thigh,
10 goes back in his house, and complains here and
there, like a wretch who knows not what to do; then
he goes forth again and stores hope in his wicker basket
again,
13 seeing the face of the world has changed in a
short time; and he takes his crook and drives the
little sheep forth to pasture:
16 so my master made me lose confidence, when I
saw his brow so clouded, and just as quickly he
applied the plaster to the wound;
19 for, when we came to the ruined bridge, my
leader turned to me with the sweet expression I first
saw at the foot of the mountain.
22 After first having taken counsel with himself by
examining the ruin carefully, he opened his arms
and took hold of me.
25 And like one who uses judgment as he acts,
always seeming to look ahead, so, carrying me up to
the top
28 of one rock, he would look to another great
splinter, saying: “Pull yourself up to that one next,
but first test whether it will hold your weight.”

- 31 It was not a path for anyone wearing a cloak,
since only with difficulty, though he was light and I
was pushed from below, were we able to climb from
outcrop to outcrop.
- 34 And were it not that there the wall was shorter
than on the other side, I do not know about him, but
I would have been quite overcome;
- 37 but because all Malebolge slopes toward the
opening of the lowest pit, the nature of each valley
requires
- 40 that one wall be steep, the other low. Finally we
reached the point where the last rock had broken off.
- 43 My breath was so milked from my lungs when I
arrived there that I could go no further, but rather
sat down as soon as we arrived.
- 46 “From now on you will have to cast off sloth in
this way,” said my master, “for one does not gain
fame sitting on down cushions, or while under coverlets;
- 49 and whoever consumes his life without fame
leaves a mark of himself on earth like smoke in the air or
foam in water.
- 52 And therefore stand up; conquer your panting
with the spirit that conquers in every battle, if it does
not let the heavy body crush it down.
- 55 A longer ladder must we climb; it is not enough
to have left those others behind. If you understand
me, now act so that it may help you.”
- 58 I stood up then, pretending to be better furnished
with breath than I felt, and said: “Go, for I am strong
and bold.”
- 61 Up along the ridge we took our way, which was
jagged, narrow, and difficult, and much steeper than
the last.
- 64 I was speaking as I went, so as not to seem feeble;
and then a voice came from the next ditch, unapt to
form words.
- 67 I do not know what it said, although I was
already mounting the arch that crosses there, but the
speaker seemed to be moved to anger.

- 70 I was looking downward, but my sharp eyes
could not attain the bottom, because of the dark; and
I: "Master, when you reach
73 the next belt, let us descend from the ridge; for as
from here I hear but cannot understand, so I look
down but make nothing out."
76 "No other reply," he said, "do I give than action;
for a virtuous request should be obeyed without
discussion."
79 We came down from the bridgehead where it joins
the eighth bank, and then the pouch was made
manifest to me;
82 and I saw within it a terrible crowding of
serpents, and of such a strange kind that the memory
still curdles my blood.
85 Let Libya brag of its sands no more; for if it
produces chelydri, jaculi, and phareae, and chenchres
with amphisbaenae,
88 never did it show so many pestilences nor so
poisonous, together with all Ethiopia and what lies
beyond the Red Sea.
91 Amid this harsh and savage plenty were running
naked, terrified people, without hope of a crevice or
a heliotrope:
94 their hands were bound behind them with snakes;
these thrust through the loins their tails and
heads and were knotted in front.
97 And behold, a serpent hurled itself at one near
our bank and transfixed him where the neck is
knotted to the shoulders.
100 Neither O nor I has ever been written so fast as he
caught fire and burned and was all consumed,
falling, to ashes;
103 and when he was on the ground, destroyed, the
dust gathered together by itself and instantly became
the same one again.
106 Thus the great sages profess that the Phoenix dies
and is reborn, when it approaches its five hundredth
year;

- 109 in its life it eats neither grass nor grain but only
tears of incense and of balsam, and nard and myrrh
are its winding sheet.
- 112 And like one who falls, he knows not how, by the
force of a demon that pulls him to the earth or of
some other occlusion that can bind a man,
- 115 when he stands up he gazes about all dismayed
by the great anguish he has suffered, and sighs as he
looks:
- 118 such was the sinner when he stood up. Oh the
power of God, how severe it is, what torrents of
punishment it pours forth!
- 121 My leader then asked him who he was; and he
replied: "I rained down from Tuscany, not long ago,
into this fierce throat.
- 124 Bestial life pleased me, not human, mule that I
was; I am Vanni Fucci the beast, and Pistoia was a
worthy lair for me."
- 127 And I to my leader: "Tell him not to sneak off,
and ask him what sin drove him down here; for I
saw him a bloody, wrathful man."
- 130 And the sinner, who heard, did not feign, but
turned to me his mind and his face and was covered
with sad shame;
- 133 then he said: "It pains me more to be caught in the
wretchedness where you see me than when I was
taken from the other life.
- 136 I cannot refuse what you ask: I am placed so far
down because I stole the beautiful appointments
from the sacristy,
- 139 and it was falsely blamed on others. But lest you
joy in seeing me, if you ever get out of these dark
places,
- 142 open your ears to my message, and listen. Pistoia
first thins itself of Blacks; then Florence makes new
its laws and people.
- 145 Mars draws from Val di Magra a hot wind
wrapped in roiling clouds, and with impetuous, bitter
violence

148 they will fight above Campo Piceno; and he will
suddenly break the cloud, so that every White will be
stricken by it.

151 And I have told you this that it may grieve you!"

