

MARY JO BANG

CANTO X

Now my teacher takes a half-hidden path
Between the city wall and the tombs of torment;
And I'm right behind him.

"You, my pole-star of moral excellence,
Who's leading me round and round these circles of sin,"
I said, "There's something I'd like to ask.

Am I allowed to look into the tombs
At the people lying there? I mean
The lids are all tipped up and no one's watching."

66 He said, "They'll all be locked down
When they return from the judgment at Jehosaphat,
Dragging back the bodies they had left behind.

What we have here is the cemetery of Epicurus
And all his fans and followers;
They believe the soul dies with the body.

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As for the question you just asked, you'll find out
About that while you're still here, that *and*
What you'd like to ask me but haven't."

"I only keep my deepest thoughts private," I said,
"in order not talk too much,
As you yourself have warned me more than once."

"Hey, Tuscan, you're walking around still breathing in and out
In this city of fire and fumes and talking so nicely;
Maybe you could stop by and talk to me for while.

THE IOWA REVIEW

From your speech it's obvious you're a native
Of that illustrious city, to which the overcritical might say
I did too much damage."

That voice, coming as it did
So suddenly out of a coffin
Caused me to jump two steps nearer to my teacher,

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Who said, "Turn back around! What are you doing?
It's Farinata! He's sitting up so you can see the upper half
Of what he's been turned into."

We locked eyes as he raised himself
With his chest and forehead held high as if we, the world,
Should understand his utter contempt for hell.

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The firm hands of my teacher promptly pushed me
Forward and guided me between the tombs,
Saying, "Don't mince words."

When I reached the foot of his tomb,
He looked me up and down for a full ten seconds, then asked,
With what was close to a sneer, "Who were your people?"

Keeping in mind what my teacher had said to do,
I kept nothing back but laid out my lineage in some detail,
At which he raised his brow a bit

45

And said, "They were, in every way, my most bitter enemies,
Mine and my parents', and my party's, which is why
I sent them scattering not once, but twice."

"Excuse me, Sir," I said, "it's true you drove them out
But they returned both times, from here, there,
And everywhere, an art your set never managed."

Then another shade rose up at the ledge
Of the open coffin, visible only as far as his chin.
From the way he peered out, I assumed he was on his knees.

He looked all around, as if hoping to find
There was someone else with me;
Once he saw that it sadly wasn't so

He said, in tears, "If you're such a genius
That you can walk through this no-light prison
Where's my son and why isn't he with you?"

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I told him, "I'm not alone;
The one waiting over there is taking me through;
Perhaps your good son Guido didn't appreciate him."

68

The way he was being punished and what he'd asked
About the son made me feel certain I knew
To whom I was speaking, which is why I spoke as I did.

He suddenly stood up, "What did you say?
'He thought'? Past tense? He's no longer alive?
The happy-making light of day doesn't reach his eyes?"

When he sensed I paused before replying,
He fell back down and out of sight,
Face-up, like a corpse in its cigarette carton.

That other larger than life soul who had first engaged me
Didn't change his face, not an iota,
Nor did he turn to look at him, or even nod,

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But instead immediately picked up the thread
Of our earlier conversation, "That they haven't done better
At that art, that bothers me more than this bed. However,

The moon's lamp, whose shade wears the face
Of the queen of Hell, will be turned on fifty more times before
You'll see how hard the art of exile is to master."

Then he said, "In the hope that you do manage to return
At some point to the sweet world, could you tell me why
The Florentines treat my family so harshly in their courts?"

To which I said, "The Florentines only ask God
To avenge them for that savage massacre
That made the water of the Arbia run red."

He sighed, shook his head, and said,
"I wasn't alone in that, nor would I ever have joined
The others without sufficient provocation.

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69

I was the only one to object when the proposition was put forth
To bulldoze Florence, *and* I was the only one
Who openly defended her in front of everyone."

"So that the little you began life with
Will find peace at the end," I said, "would you be willing
To untangle a rat's nest that won't let my mind rest?"

If I understand right, you can see
What time will bring with it before it arrives
Yet you can't see anything in the present."

"We see like the myopic see," he said,
"What's distant is what's clear.
The Ruler will still give us that much light.

When the future is near, or becomes the present,
We know nothing; unless a new recruit brings
Your news to us, we have no way to get it.

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So, now you can understand—
All our knowledge will die and stay dead
When the end of time reaches the door of the future.”

I then realized that I'd done some damage. I said,
“Would you please tell the one who fell back
That his loving son is still among the living.

Tell him if I hesitated when he asked me,
It was only because I was confused about something
That you've just now cleared up for me.”

My teacher was gesturing that we needed to get going
So I quickly asked the spirit
Who else was in the tomb with him.

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He said, “More than a thousand others
Are lying in here beside me. But Frederick the Second
And the Cardinal are the only names worth mentioning.”

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With that he sank back down, and I walked off
Toward the Roman Era poet, preoccupied
With the grim prophesy I'd just been given.

He walked on, and as we went along, he said,
“What are you worried about?”
I told him what was worrying me.

“Of course, keep in mind the ominous warning,”
He wisely advised, “but for the time being
Pay attention to this.” He pointed at what was above.

“When you reach the insightful and luminous
Sweet Beatrice, she'll tell you
Where the long and winding road is meant to take you.”

He turned left and we walked away from the wall
And headed for the center by way of a trail
That cuts down into a deep valley, from which

135

A noxious garbage-strike stench reached all the way up here.

71

Notes to Canto X

4. *You, my pole-star of moral excellence*: Confucius (originally named Kong Qui, 551–479 BCE), *The Analects* (trans. William Edward Soothill, Oliphant, Anderson, & Ferrier, Edinburgh, 1910). Chapter I of the section “Concerning Government” is, in its entirety:

The Master said, “He who governs by his moral excellence may be compared to the pole-star, which abides in its place, while all the stars bow toward it.”

11. *When they come back from the judgment at Jehosaphat*: Jehosaphat (sometimes spelled Jehoshaphat, or Josaphat, or Yehoshafat) is translated as “Yahweh judges.” The Valley of Jehosaphat was believed to be where the Last Judgment will take place. See the King James Bible, Joel 3.2 and 3.12.

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13-14. *Of Epicurus / And all his fans and followers*: Epicurus (341–270) was a Greek philosopher who founded the philosophical school called Epicureanism. He believed in science and the scientific method (and that the physical world is composed of random-pattern moving atoms), egalitarianism (including education for women, slaves, and humane treatment for the mentally ill), a life of moderation in which one should try to minimize the harm one does and maximize the good. He believed that death was the end of awareness and that while gods may exist, they don’t punish bad or reward good; they are immortal and blessed and that’s all we can know about them; and they don’t concern themselves with humans.

81. *You’ll see how hard the art of exile is to master*: Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1975), “The Art of Losing”:

The art of losing isn’t hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

132. *Where the long and winding road is meant to take you*: “The Long and Winding Road” is a ballad written by Paul McCartney (b. 1942) and performed by the English rock band, The Beatles. It originally appeared on the group’s twelfth and final studio album, *Let It Be*, which was released on May 23, 1970. For information about the role of “The Long and Winding Road” in the breakup of the group, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Long_and_Winding_Road.