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Conscience

John Nerber

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I am glad when you are silent. It is as if you were far away,
 as if you were complaining in a butterfly's lullaby.
 From a distance you hear me and my voice does not reach you.
 Let me be silent with the silence which is yours.

Let me also speak to you with your silence,
 clear as a lamp, uncomplicated as a ring.
 You are the night, silent and star-splashed.
 Your silence is a star's silence, simple and distant.

I am glad when you are silent, as if you were absent,
 distant and mournful, as if you had died.
 Then only one word, one smile is enough,
 and I am happy, happy, that it is not true.

P A B L O N E R U D A

Translated by Rachel Loughridge

C O N S C I E N C E

My devil will in water suck the tide
 To cast the sleepy and indignant whale
 Up wiggling on my beach until he dies,
 That I may sweat and curse and so obey:
 Stern and unjust, he holds me in his sway,
 And if I rebel, and will not listen,
 He changes shape to creep into my ear;
 Small as a bug, he stalks the tender floor:

He lurks in air, or deep beneath the ground
 To thrust up like a flower in my face
 The twin, my evil self, nestling in the green,
 The clump of fern lodged in the bubbling swamp:
 My devil greases cliffs for climbing feet,
 That I may hang an instant in pure space,
 Suspended as a gull, sprawled on my face
 Over the needles of the rocks below:

And I must hurry, harried by his haste;
 He blasts my buds, and nips my ripened crops;
He drives me like a ship on icy floes
 To founder on myself, the hidden ledge;
He is an owl who sees me in the grass,
 Crouched like a rabbit from his old maid's eye;
Or like a cat, his claw clutched in my fur,
 He playfully leaps, to toss me in mid-air:

And I would run, but where is there escape?
 He is the vista of my ending street;
The vision framed in the window of my church;
 The image lingering when I close my eyes;
I cannot move, but that he walks with me;
 And if I run, he likewise too will flee;
And if I die, his voice last shall I hear,
 Chuckling his "told you so" into my ear:

But first, O Lord, but let me catch him once
 With my two hands: One hour would I spend
Upon his head, munching on his ears;
 Then half a day meandering on his nose;
At least a week to flay him like a goat,
 Slicing meanwhile the hams; then last geld,
To hoist him and to hang him while he howls,
 Nailed to a post by his long flapping tongue!

JOHN NERBER