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Colloquy within a Being

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Paul Valéry

COLLOQUY WITHIN A BEING

"Dawn revealed to me the
entire inimical day."

A

Come . . . Leave the moment . . . Compose your forces . . . Extricate your real self from this living mud which lies in the shape of a beaten, abandoned man in the disorder of your sheets. . . Be re-born! It's time. Night is dissolving, rapidly losing its stars, while the poison of the coming day breaks through it. Light instills itself in the profound substance of darkness, corrupting its solemn unity. Like products of this corruption, one can make out, here and there, outlines of things, first symptoms of objects and beings which will require of you responses and actions. . .

B

Have pity! I cannot. You ask nothing less than the impossible! The weight of my body is that of the whole earth beneath me. How do you expect me to rise, to lift at the same time all the being and non-being which are so confused within me? The least effort, the least attempt of mind is at this moment beyond me. Leave me. Ah, leave me!

A

No. I shall urge you to reconstruct yourself.

B

But I tell you I am IMPOSSIBILITY . . . Can you imagine a stone able to change by itself within itself in such a way that it can finally break with the earth and leap marvelously into the air? . . . Listen! Leave me. I am as if absent in my presence, and scarcely half-present in my absence. No link exists within me between *what sees, desires, endures, changes, knows, and what would act* . . . *I do not distinguish between what I was, am, or can be* . . .

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You, my tormentor, force me to answer you, and I find it so painful that I feel tears of weakness and refusal mount to my eyes . . .

A

Weep, but live! . . . Emerge from your cocoon. Disentangle for me this pitiful mixture of equivalent sensations, useless memories, untrustworthy dreams and inconsistent conjectures . . . Rally, call to order all those little disoriented forces dispersed throughout your fatigue. Your weakness is nothing but their confusion. Come, sort out these different elements: group your similar forces; no longer confuse truth and falsehood; each must serve in its turn! Organize the various parts of complex time, which allow you to make *what is not* act on *what is*, and *what is* on *what is not* . . . Set your arms and legs in order, feel your power extend to the limits of your empire over your limbs. Be master of your gaze, and *create space*, instead of submitting to all the irregularities of a falsely presented expanse . . . Then draw, with this moving gaze, the distinct outline of objects. Make certain also of your interior strength. Exact, exert, excite the general freedom of the terms and forms of your language; awaken its resources of combination, transposition, articulation of ideas and distinction of concepts . . .

B

Keep still . . .

A

This is not all . . .

B

What more do you want of me? Do you yourself know whether you revive or murder me?

A

This is not all, I tell you. Put your thought in action. Dwell upon some point which begins to dawn in your mind, the peak of desire and the force of time which will dispose, toward the full development of this seed, the mass of analogies, the space of resonances, the quantity of possibilities, infused in what you are . . .

⇐

B

Keep still! The mere summoning of my strength is too much for me. You compel me to consider the immense difficulty one has in ceasing to be half dead . . . Leave me, at least, the time I need to return without too much pain or regret, from the state of thing to beast, from beast to man, from man to SELF, to the unique . . .

A

I see the worst is over. You are raising yourself on your elbow.

B

Alas . . . Yes, I am awakening . . . I am no longer in a sort of balance between everything and zero: a mere nothing would have driven me back to the oblivion of slumber; a mere nothing would have made me leap up, confirmed in strength, ready to live . . .

A

You will be as different from yourself as a lax cord from the *same* cord drawn taut.

B

Perhaps. But at first I feel strangely the prey of my powers. Memory obsesses me. Intellect demands, and my power to act overflows the muscles it hardens; with no end in view . . . *To feel, be able, desire, learn, owe* . . . All these daylight demons stretch their limbs.

A

Consider this virgin day . . .

B

As virgin as the street . . . I hardly think of it before I make out, in the first rays of my mind, various concerns which take form, various beings *who await me*; and above all, I know not what extremely boring, difficult thing which must be done this very day.

A

What thing?

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B

I tell you I don't yet know. It is still veiled. A certainty without a face. In a moment it will take on all its accoutrements of time, place, cause and executory force . . . To think that I kept *that* within me all night long; that I awaken, and *it* awakens; and a day which does not yet exist is already completely poisoned by it!

A

Wait for the event. Perhaps, toward evening, you will be content with this finished business, and content, perhaps, with yourself.

B

Ah . . . Why return to life? Why have you dragged me from this phosphorescent filth between sleep and waking? To become again MR. SO-AND-SO who bears my name, who is stamped by my habits, my constraints, my opinions, burdened with so many things which might have been entirely different, things I feel to be completely accidental, and yet which define *me*. Why? Why yield to the sun I know, and to the *Sameness* I know even better? When one goes to sleep, is it not a way of demonstrating the perfect adequacy of having lived the day one has just lived? Does not an experience of some hours duration tell everything? *Intelligenti pauca* . . . How often I feel I know myself by heart!

A

Voilà qui va des mieux—as they say in the plays of Molière . . . I see you are thinking, composing your ideas, giving form to your thought. *Usable energy* will before long be superabundant in your economy, and you will yourself reply by projects, decisions, creations and destructions, to the question you ask *me*—or that you ask yourself—a question which will admit no other answer. *When life is at stake, there can be no 'why.'*

B

You may be right.

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PAUL VALÉRY

A

You seem completely revived, restored, reconstituted . . .

B

How can you tell?

A

By the fact that we agree. Then there is no place between us for VAGUE THINGS; for questions which are answers, for answers which are questions; for problems which seek to be stated; for terms believed by those who use them to be more valuable than they themselves; for the naïveté which believes in *knowledge without power* . . . What are you doing? You are leaping up from your bed?

B

Up . . . I am up . . . I am striking with my naked heel the reality of the sensible world . . .

A

This amounts to a coup d'état . . . What next? . . . You're dressing?

B

Hardly. The sea is but a step away. "*Je cours à l'onde en rejaillir vivant.*" "I run to the waves to be hurled back to life."

A

And then?

B

And then . . . I'll do what I must. I am suddenly conscious of an extraordinary energy. I find myself weighed down by life and almost embarrassed by the freedom of thought and action which takes hold of me, a freedom which seems greatly stimulated by the imminence of the difficulties and trials which just a moment ago overwhelmed my soul.

A

Take care! . . . I'm delighted to see you so different from the person I lifted with such difficulty from confusion and disorder. I am

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overjoyed at your metamorphosis. You were nothing and now you would do everything! . . . But be careful . . . Do not abuse this vigor. Night also exists. It always comes.

B

Do you believe my lucidity doesn't see it coming? Do you believe it doesn't imagine its own twilight—and even admire it? Is it not truly miraculous to think that we possess within us the power to leave the self behind while all things, whatever they may be, caught within the single, solitary net which drags them imperceptibly toward darkness—people, thoughts, desires, values, good things and evil, my body and the gods—withdraw, dissolve, come to nothing, darken together? . . . Nothing has taken place. Everything is blotted out at once. Is it not beautiful? When a ship sinks, the sky vanishes and the sea evaporates . . .

But now, friend, see the toughness of my fist as it strikes the table. The same force is in my heart, which is as big as my fist, and beating in full the tempo of my strength! I am measure and excess, toughness and tenderness, desire and disdain; I waste away and yet I gather strength; I love myself and I hate myself, and I am conscious of myself, from head to foot, accepting myself as I am, whatever I am, answering with all my being the simplest question in the world: *Of what is man capable?*

—Translation by William Jay Smith