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Root of Silence

Astrid Cabral

Translated by Alexis Levitin

Astrid Cabral is a leading poet and environmentalist from the Amazonian region of Brazil. She is the translator of Thoreau's *Walden* into Portuguese. Recent collections of her poetry include *The Anteroom*, *Gazing Through Water*, *Word in the Spotlight*, *Intimate Soot*, and *Cage* (second expanded edition). Her poems have appeared in *Pleiades*, *Runes*, *Sirena*, *Amazonian Literary Review*, *Bitter Oleander*, *Catamaran*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Confrontation*, *Dirty Goat*, *Evansville Review*, *Per Contra*, *Poetry East*, *Poets at Work*, and *Osiris*. Her book *Cage*, Amazonian animal poems translated by Alexis Levitin, appeared from Host Publications in July 2008.

Alexis Levitin has published forty-four books in translation, mostly poetry from Portugal, Brazil, and Ecuador. In addition to three books by Salgado Maranhão, his work includes Clarice Lispector's *Soulstorm* and Eugenio de Andrade's *Forbidden Words*, both from New Directions. He has served as a Fulbright Lecturer at the Universities of Oporto and Coimbra, Portugal, The Catholic University in Guayaquil, Ecuador, and the Federal University of Santa Catarina, in Brazil, and has held translation residencies at Banff, Canada, Straelen, Germany (twice), and the Rockefeller Foundation Study Center in Bellagio, Italy.

Root of Silence

From where does silence erupt? From what entrails
alleys corners squares avenues?
With what balance of hours already lived
does it reach me through my markings and my memories?
From what sleepy mornings does it come,
a left-over wisp of dream within the pillowcase?
In what cistern, deep well, or lake
does silence live, pregnant with speech,
the apparition of a word in rags?
In what inhospitable womb is it engendered,
the voiceless fetus floating in the breeze,
mute rhyme that never comes into a poem?
From where does the gag of silence spring,
sealing my mouth from speech?
From where does the sharpened sword of silence come,
that already in my throat slits my very word?

Coelacanth

Poetry?
Coelacanth chant.
Fossil fish
swimming silent
in the darkest depths.

Poetry?
Muted song
for muted ears
in the midst of idiotic
background noise.

Poetry?
Song of the mad
revealing without fear
a secret,
an apparition.

Silent Language

The word of the deaf-mute
nestled in the gaze
flows discreet, unspoken,
never behind back or shoulder blade.
And so it casts its filaments,
weaves and interweaves warp, woof, weft,
and gets to join in the general game.
The word of the deaf-mute
ignores the gift of sound
and relies on a subtle dance.
Ethereal design of fingers
the casting of arms in arcs
a face of expressive features
reveal all that is hidden.
Not every word is born
in the hollow of the throat,
the space between the lips.
Many spring to sight
from the signs of an entire body.

Gaze of the Poet

A gaze to pierce through
 dust skin pores
 clothes and walls.
 A gaze to tear off
 scales and masks.
 A gaze to guess
 the coming rain
 from the cloud of now.
 To see green pastures
 beneath bright snow.
 To discern in the lake
 the millenary glacier.
 To sense in the island
 the submerged mountain.
 A gaze that casts itself
 beyond the present,
 seeing in the egg the bird,
 in the bird the flight.

So Many Words

So very many words
 and not one to embrace
 the strangeness of the soul.

How to clothe vague desires
 or strip bare secrets,
 prisoners of silence.

Turgid nocturnal heart
 far from the threshold of dawn
 sustains a dark silence.

Will there be a term to help
 on the path to the absurd adventure
 of bathing in pure light?

A Certain Kingdom

To open a book
 and read it is simple.
 Who says?

Without a fuss
 a certain kingdom
 takes its place.

From the printed page
 rise walls
 and iron gates.

A universe is founded
 where time advances
 or draws back by centuries.

While out there
 the rest of the world
 evaporates

no thunderbolt
 breaks the silence
 or shakes the island

No matter how daring
 no invader
 can manage to reach

beneath that helmet
 of hair and head
 the impregnable place.

The Accused

The whiteness of the paper
 only fools the careless eye:
 green forests flourish
 behind the pallid page.

The verse planted here
 can it redeem the act of cruelty:
 the pine tree snatched
 from earth, river, sky?

In the Secret Ocean

We who swim the subterranean
 waters of a secret sea
 confront the backs of those who will not con-
 template
 our submerged and humble flow.
 --The professorial gaze reserved
 for lighthouses on the peaks of hills.

Could There Be Silence

Could there be silence
 beyond the stillness of a pause?
 Could silence be nothing
 but the absence of language?

Birds, whales, beasts,
 even man, be still
 and cleanse your listening.

Blood and sap fulfill
 as machines record
 the ritual of on-going life
 minimal sounds throughout our bodies.

Diminishing and discrete,
 eternal echoes crawl along
 in a procession without end.

The constant sound of water
 spreads with the humor of the winds
 or throws itself cascading
 in sudden leaps from the earth.

Flames snap and crackle
 in the occasional fire
 and gargle in the gullet
 of somnolent volcanoes.

And avalanches of snow?
 And the music of the spheres?
 And the residual sounds
 of that old big bang?

Silence, the illusion of deafness.

Absent from the Feast

Hushed amongst blankets and folds
in the sweet cradle of arms and breast
the weeping of the baby in the corner of its eye
does not extrapolate to the half-open lips.
Now it's the monopoly of silence,
what the boy declares to the lovely girl.
Beneath the elegant black mustache
love is well able to stir a fire
that sparkles more than earrings.
The trembling mouth of the old man gives up
a truth that surprises those present.
One can feel it from the expression of the listeners
in the curve of raised eyebrows
arched over frightened eyes.
What could the group at that moment
be thinking that no word reveals to us?
Hypotheses questions fantasies
are the legacy of forms speaking
in enigmatic and laconic ways.
Photo, sad relic of the ruin
of a universe forever submerged.
Where are they gathered, the sounds the words
of those infinitely silent figures
whose sentence is to gaze at us
from the far-off realm of images?