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Psalm, and: Variations

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Jean-Paul de Dadelsen (1913-1957)

Psalm

The whale, says Jonah, is war and its black-outs.
The whale is the city and its deep wells and its barracks.
The whale is the country stuck in its mud and its one grocery
and the pulled punches and the unwashed crotches and the money.
The whale is society, and its taboos, its vanity, its ignorance.
The whale is (in so many cases, my brothers, my sisters) marriage.
The whale is self-love. And still other things that I'll tell you
Later, when you are a bit less obtuse (after page x).
The whale is incarnate life.
The whale is creation, superfluous after all is said and done, but indispensable for that
gratuitous and after all almost incomprehensible experiment.
The whale is always farther, vaster; believe me, you barely escape, you have a hard
time escaping from the whale.
The whale is necessary.

And don't think that you'll understand everything all in one go.

Because after all,
Of course war is a bloody bore
Of course society
Of course marriage
But we haven't yet found a better way
So that in the end
In the last analysis, all that's left as the source of bloody boredom
Is self-love.
For you must know, looking within or without
(As I did when the whale opened its jaws—or through me).
That precisely: war,
Society, marriage... there are those
Who make use of them
As a springboard to leap beyond themselves...

Translated from the French by Marilyn Hacker

Variations

on a theme of Baudelaire

« Mon enfant, ma soeur »

1

Unknown one, as if I had begotten you with a foreign woman,
I can understand you, though, as if we came from the same womb.
Against my neck your younger heart
Marks a newer hour than mine, o confident
Enemy and sweet accomplice all at once, listen
To our linked bloodstreams filling with the same murmur that rises
From the depths of our natal night.

2

Beyond the years where you did not come to join me, beyond
The useless totems' defenses, so much newer than we are,
I find you again.
I should be able to smile at you at last and take your hand
To lead you to the spouse from another tribe. O dangerous and secret one,
I recognize your sullen, patient look that wordlessly reminds me
Our thirst is not quenched.

3

Who will prove to me, silent one, that you are telling the truth? I do
Not know you, Madam, and do not have what would satisfy you.
Go back to your husband!
I am not what you think. We are deceiving each other, lovely lady!
This is a treacherous season, when everything labours hidden in the earth.
But say something! speak! to refute at last the implacable
Certainty of your silence.



4

The temples were new. We watched out for the columns' fresh paint.
This wasn't our first life.
When I came back caked with the blood of our brothers, of our enemies,
You began to heat up a basin of pure water.
(Some of them were our brothers and in fact our enemies, and some,
Foreigners, nonetheless our allies.)
In the firelight, I watched your narrow hands wash my slashed legs.

Later, you went alone
After your last night as a girlchild, to throw into the flames,
On the altar of the impassive goddess
The innocent linen stained by the first blood that separated us for life.
You followed me
With what was already a woman's gaze when I left under the olive trees,
When I went back to war.

5

Where, in truth, might we depart together? The poets ramble on.
The braggart poets always forget the animals bleating in the barn,
The wheat rising, the hungry children,
The trees to be grafted, the rooftiles laid, after the squall.
We have always been the ones who fed the fire and kept the feast-days.
As long as I've known you, we have always had to wait, then depart,
In different directions, on the last night.

6

There was a time when it was known that we had always been a couple.
I can see the low dwelling, the nuptial platform, before I left you
Alone with the captive stranger.
To fool the gods, to link them to our successful sowing,
To make them believe that they were protecting our predestined marriage at last,
The magician had me lie between the poor intruder and you, motionless
Like a sacrificed spouse.

7

Going elsewhere doesn't take us beyond our misused hearts,
Going farther doesn't lead us out of our exile, going elsewhere
Doesn't reopen the ancestral portals.
Come, switch off the lamp, close your eyes that know me by heart,
Closed garden, deep fountain, love immemorial, hear
Through these dark and gentle bodies our first union seeking itself.
Elsewhere is in our arms.

8

You know, I know that country that resembles you,
That promise night makes.
That land beyond the waters, that dwelling on the other bank,
That always-rediscovered country.
You know very well what nocturnal passageway will lead us to the door
That will open on our ancient sun.
You know that the angel forbids you to open it before the predestined hour.
It would be too easy.
It would be, he says, useless to cut the voyage short, to return
Empty-handed
Like a child sent to carry food to the fields
And who took fright
And returned, without courage, without new love, to bring back to the house
Tears that quench no thirst.

9

Stay another ten minutes. I'll call you a taxi. Be calm. I'm
Part of you; I am you yourself; you aren't your own. You must go back
To what they call "home".
I know. You'll come back, to chew hopelessly with me
The bitter, silent opium of our lost likeness. Regret nothing.
Their taboos are powerless. But not our stern angels. It is written
That we shall love others more than ourselves.

Translated from the French by Marilyn Hacker

