Root of Silence

Astrid Cabral
Translated by Alexis Levitin


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

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.

The word of the deaf-mute
nested in the gaze
flows discreet, unspoken,
ever 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?