

Speech

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Speech is easy, and to trace words across the page,
is, as a general rule, to incur little risk:
the work of a lace-maker, snug,
peaceful (we may even have asked
of the candle a gentler, more deceptive light),
all words are written with the same ink,
'flower' and 'fear', for example, are quite alike,
and in vain will I repeat 'blood' from top to bottom
of the page, no stain will be visible,
no wound will be opened.

So it is that we may come to detest this game,
that we cease to understand what was intended
in playing it, instead of venturing outside
and making better use of our hands.

That
is when pain can no longer be avoided,
when, like someone looming up,
it rips through the mists that wrap us round,
laying low the obstacles one by one before it,
traversing the weakening distance—suddenly
so near that nothing can be seen
but its snout filling the horizon.

Then is it that speech seems to lie or, worse, thrust
cowardly insult in the face of pain, wasting
the little time and strength that is left to us.

We have all seen one day (although today
the very sight of fire they seek to hide from us)
what becomes of the leaf of paper near to the flame,
how it retracts, quickly shrivels
and frays . . . That too may happen to us,
that movement of convulsive withdrawal, always too late,
and yet continued for days,
always weaker, more frightened, jerkier,
in the face of worse than fire.

For fire still retains a splendour, even though it ruins,
it is red, it is akin to the tiger
or the rose, we might even claim
or imagine we desire it
like a language or like a body;
in other words, it is, as it always has been,
the substance of poetry, capable of setting the page alight,
illuminating the entire room, the bed,
the garden, with a flame suddenly leaping and vital
and yet not burning the skin — as if, on the contrary,
you were yourself more ardent the closer to it, as if
it gave you back your breath, as if
you were once again a young man with the future
endlessly stretched out ahead . . .

It is another thing, and worse, that makes man
shrive within himself, withdraw
to the depths of the room, call out
for anyone, anyhow:
it is what has neither shape, nor face, nor any name,
what can not be tamed in the fortune
of images, nor subjected to the laws of words,
what gashes the page
as it gashes the flesh,
what disallows speech in any language other than animal.

Speech is yet, sometimes, other
 than the blanketing of a shield of air or straw . . .
 Sometimes it is as in April, with the first warmth,
 when every tree becomes a spring, when night
 seems to stream with voices like a cave
 (and there is, no doubt, more to do in the darkness
 of cool foliage than sleep),
 it wells up from within like a kind of happiness,
 as if of necessity, as if it were necessary to expend
 a surplus of energy and amply acknowledge to the air
 the thrill of drinking from the frail glass of dawn.

Such speech, known once as song
 and today barely risked,
 is it deception and delusion? Yet it is the open gaze
 that nourishes such language, as leaves
 their tree.

All we see,
 all we must have seen since childhood,
 hurled down within us, churned about, perhaps misshapen
 or soon forgotten — *the procession of the little schoolboy
 to the cemetery, beneath the rain; a very old lady in black,
 sitting at the high window and looking down upon
 the saddler's shop; a yellow dog called Pyramus
 in a garden whose trellised wall
 echoes the merriment of guns:
 bits and pieces, the debris of years —*

everything that rises up again in words, so
 light, so fine that in its wake we imagine
 we are fording even death . . .

Might there be things that live more readily
in words, and that find agreement with them
— those moments of happiness happily recovered
in poems, a light that shines through words
almost erasing them — and other things
that rear up against them, changing them, destroying them:

as if language cast off death,
or rather, as if death rotted away
words themselves?

Enough! enough.
Destroy this hand that can trace nothing
but smoke,
and look hard:

So does this vessel of bone that has borne you move away,
So does it sink down (and the deepest thought
will not heal its joints),
So it fills with a bitter water.

In the absence of some great net of light
beyond hope, let there be,
for each old vessel of life in these mortal precincts,
remission of pain, a gentler wind,
a childlike sleep.

I should have like to speak without images, simply
push open the door...

I am too afraid
for that, too unsure, my pity too great:
we do not live long, as do birds,
in the evidence of the sky,
and fallen upon the earth,
we see in them precisely mere images
or dreams.

Speech, then, is difficult, if it is seeking—seeking for what?
a faithfulness to the only moments, the only things
that go deep enough within us, withdrawing—
if it is weaving a vague shelter for a prey beyond reach...

If it is wearing a mask truer than the face
to be able to celebrate a long-lost occasion
with others, who are dead, far away or still
sleeping, and barely stirred from their rest by
this murmur, these first stumbling steps, these shy fires
— our words:
whispering of the drum, however light the brushing
of the unknown finger...

Tear to pieces these shadows at last like rage,
dressed in tatters, false beggar, haunter of shrouds:
to ape death at a distance is shameful,
to be afraid when the time comes is enough. Now,
dress yourself in a fur of sun and go out
like a hunter against the wind, like a cool
and rapid water stride across your life.

If you were less afraid,
you would no longer cast a shadow on your steps.

— *Philippe Jaccottet*
(translated by Michael Bishop
from *Chants d'en bas*, in
A la lumière d'hiver,
Paris: Gallimard, 1977)