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They, Who are I

Daniel J. King

In a solemn channel between day and morrow,
I sat, head in hands, nursing the broken pieces
Of anguish I was not allowed to scream.

What cause for this? There was no peril,
Nor castigation, nor loneliness, no...
Tormented from within, by within, I knew
I had to journey inward, to find the spring
From which sprung pain and the sea
Where I might see solace, at last.

And so I sought my Virgil in my starry wood,
And found him there. Tall, handsome fellow,
With stubble on chin and hair unkempt,
Benignly sloven. He beckoned to me with a nod,
Leaning 'gainst a tree, unhurried, unworried,
Comfortable to breathe in the dusty morning
Of the now rising sun. Saturday was his name.

“Can you guide me?” I asked. He sighed, shrugging.
“There’s nowhere you need to be,” he said,
“Why spoil the moment, always back and forth,
Forward and reverse, how tiring.” Morose,
He blew out his breath, unwilling to do more.
“Please,” I said, “I need to know what I am, and why.”
He closed his eyes, and smiled despite himself.
“Very well,” said he, “Your despair is right before you,
If you would only care to look.” So I looked.

A man, grey beyond his years. Grey in hair,
Grey in face, grey in thoughts, grey in spirit.
He stood over a desk, back bent from the weight
Of many arms with many burdens. Spiderlike,
His eight arms hurried through their paper tasks,
This one stopping to wipe his wrinkled brow,
That one stopping to pound the desk in frustration,

As he muttered through cobwebs in his throat,
“Not enough, not enough, not enough, not enough.”

Horrified was I by this sight, yet on Saturday’s face,
Mere disgust. “That’s what’s inside you,”
He said, with a gesture, “That’s what keeps you
Angry and afraid.” I shook my head, unaccepting,
Even as tears of clarity spilled from my eyes.
“That can’t be me,” I said. Saturday chuckled.
“It is,” he said, “But it isn’t all of you.”
Then he gestured the other way, and I followed.

There, sitting in the foremost pew, hands clasped
Before the sacraments and the lights of that holy place,
Was a different man, youthful beyond his years.
After one more moment of silent gratitude,
He lowered his hands and opened his eyes, smiling at me
As he put his glasses back on. Valentine, the peaceful.
“Don’t fear,” he said, rising to meet me, “God walks
Beside you even when your mind refuses him.
He is your friend, always, regardless of what faith
You have in yourself.” As I heard these truthful words,
I felt a presence beside me, infinitely patient.
And I knew that I had been bad to my faithful friend,
For forgetting his gentle sustenance so often.
But still, my searching thoughts needed answers.

“Please,” I said, “How do I defeat this poison inside me?
These things are blades of glass, I do not see them
Until they are marked by my blood.” Valentine
Put a hand on my shoulder. “Have faith, young one.
Look how far you’ve come already. You’ve survived
Darker times than these, and come through stronger.”
“Darker times than these,” I repeated, and saying it
I felt the Earth slide forward, and myself back,
Falling through time to an eternity recently ended,
Yet so alien now. There he was, the teenaged thing
Which refused all humanity, dressed in the darkest dyes,
Hair wild over a face with shattered eyes and

Grinding teeth. One by one he nailed the bodies
Of strangers to the walls of his cell. He drove
The rusty spikes with his bare hands through
Flesh and bone, crucifying the masses for the
Rejection he blamed them for, so that the walls
Dripped and drenched with the blood of people
He had never given a chance to give him a chance.

Then his shattered eyes saw me, and his hands
Tightened around another rusty spike. He did not
Recognize his future self, and would have refused
To believe it anyhow. He knew only to defend,
To destroy, to kill in his heart what his mind
Labeled impossible. He came at me with the spike—
Ankle deep in his bloody hell I had nowhere to run—
I screamed, and two arms pulled me away.

I came to on the shore, sand between my fingers
And the ocean in my ears. My savior sat
Next to me, legs drawn up to his chest,
Chin resting on his knees. His fluffy hair
tossed about in the salt breeze, and from his back
A pair of snow white wings huddled close for warmth.
An angel without a halo, his name was Feather.

“Thank you for saving me,” I said. He sighed,
My gratitude sliding off his self-deprecating
Exterior. “You should stay out of the past,”
He said, “There’s nothing for you here.”
“There must be something to learn from it all,”
I ventured. He replied, “Only to keep looking
Forward.” He sighed again, “I’m not the right person
To ask. There might be some inspiration yet
From the person you always wanted to be.”
He pointed inland to a little bandshell,
A modest venue, between a gift-shop and a row
Of parking meters. People walked by, touring
Up and down the beach. A few sat in front of the
Bandshell just to take a rest and send a text.

But the young performer before them took little notice
Of his audience. All the stage was his world.

He was wearing two denim vests, one open,
One closed, and a pair of dark sunglasses with a
Kamikaze sun on a sash tied above on his forehead.
He was singing forgotten songs with all his heart
Into a microphone that was not plugged in.
But that was an irrelevant detail. His name was
Jimmy Jimmy, and he was a jester marionette
Holding his own shining strings and dancing.

At the end of his song he received a modest applause,
And he bowed with a grand sweep of his arm.
As I walked up to the stage, he jumped down,
Landing on his feet, a feline child at heart.
My reflection in his sunglasses mused,
“So rarely was I you. So rarely, so free.”
He tilted his head, raising an inquisitive eyebrow.
“You were always free,” he said, “And you always are.”

“I was always afraid,” I replied, “And I still always am.
I don’t even know if I can dream as big as you did.”
Jimmy Jimmy nudged his sunglasses down
So he could wink a dazzling eye at me. “Just watch,”
He said, and jumped back onto the stage.
As his feet hit the floor, twenty years went by.
The boy became a man, and the man, a better man.
Now Dr. King looked out over a captive audience
Of wide-eyed college faces. He wore a fine
Collared shirt with a fine pair of pants, too cool for a tie.
He sized up his mewling herd with a knowing grin.
The tired whiteboards behind him bespoke
A tangled mess of facts, maps, and figures
Sharpened and scrawled in multicolored marker.
The class was not here for the notes, however.
They were here for the man. And the man knew
When to hold them and when to let them go.
“Class dismissed,” he said. And the world changed.

Then without missing a beat, he smiled down at me,
Folding his arms and leaning against his podium.
I nodded, "This is what I want." He replied,
"This is what you could be if you live your
Life without flinching. I am the best of you, like
Valentine and Jimmy Jimmy. Your future fears
Have not yet materialized. You have not yet chosen
To compromise who you are, to back down, to hide."
"Can compromise be avoided?" I asked, eyes narrowed.
"Maybe," he replied, "Maybe not. But it's up to you
Either way. Just remember that fear's worse than failure.
True success lies in having cared, and having dared."
He glanced at his watch, there was work to be done,
Mountains to move, just as with me in the present.
Yet he smiled, and his back was straight, and strong.
He chose the mountains, and the mountains were scaled.
He put on a pair of sunglasses, praying silently his thanks,
As he left the room for a future far beyond my sight.

At that I returned from my visions, and breathed.
The world was new and vast around me.