PHAM VAN KY

WHITE MAN, WILL I BE YOUR SURVIVAL MACHINE?

L'appui que tu crois le plus sûr,
N'est que le vide le plus noir.

I, alone and aloof in quiet seclusion,
Astride two cultures’ knee,
Knowing how to stay aloft, plumb in the middle
Of Western deafening uproar
And Far-Eastern whirling hieroglyphs,
I, born with an almost tactile empathy
With the humdrum Inane
And the sense that the universe is dreamt,
Dreaming empty dreams which bear evidence
Of having been occupied,
I woke from a troubled sleep — gargoyles
Fanning the lurid fire of Western doubts
Like a wooden octopus throwing out tentacles.

What hints had I taken of my danger, I
The receiver of the stolen last word beyond words?

I, alone and aloft, feeling reverence for inessentials,
While laying a finger on the world pulse,
I, without any attempt at disguise, engulfed
In contradictions, sucked out of my local stagnation,
My rawest nerve touched, I, unspeaking at all parties,
But breaking, now my oath of secrecy, I, for whom the West
and the Far-East were one and the same ages ago,
I convey a hidden message inside the very Western arcana.

Hear the grating of diamond hinges
When the seldom-used door is opened.

Who or what is me? The remains of a little happy flame
That had burned from the remotest time, then a privileged
Vision, an instant global consciousness
Only the wounded know.

Someone in my inmost recesses, bathing in my blood,
Cowered in my shadow in a grip of desperation,
Someone irretrievable, long-missing, long-lost, long
Since much lamented, his presence as long as his absence,
Someone with a begging bowl in his hand
— *Mon double en creux comme une sorte d’intaille?*

Someone pulled back from profundity,
Bearing a special weight, a strange sounding name,
Someone had been stealing from me
Like wrought language robbed of meaning!

The high noon of my age never divulged,
I, believer in absolutes — assuaging balm, hot scent
Of Kashmir poppy or sandalwood, I the multitudinous
Set and insulated in the Buddhic gloomy umbrage
— The mazes of a boundless Nothingness — I
To whom forgotten cultures had been in travail,
I now, like the low ease of a well-rehearsed ceremony,
But seeming to be more real in Western clamorous needs,
I was bending over the overwhelming impulse to possess,
Over all that was mortal of me:

My earlier infantile cry was not “What or where I am?”
But “Whose fragrances linger in nostril
From the far-off being desired and unassailable?”
The West ingrained, the Far-East dying, inside of me,
My latest adult cry is “Agree to my entering
The nethermost reaches of the soul only the wounded know.

What do you mean, white man, piling data upon data
With your enormous thumb? you lumbering guzzler
Eating into your computer, probing into its palpitating
Entrails.

Will I be your survival machine,
Wrapped up in the Far-Eastern constricting cerements?

Behind the Western deceptive façades,
Now broken now restored, in my awe of what I might become,
Hold the ancient mirror to my mouth full of decay
And let it fog up,
For I am being in fight for recognition
Without taking either side.

When I revert to the other horn of my dilemma,
When I shrink into myself for inventories of nostalgia,
I never wake up from my long opium-induced sleep
— A naked state of transient nescience, plain and purl,
In the trailing Karma chain.

During aeons upon aeons where ran the divide?
At the Zenith of their fortune ages ago
The West and the Far-East were one and the same.
Agree to my taoist retreat into my embryo natural nook,
Into the root up to womb — not a limbo of oblivion —
Into the tiny land-locked kingdom I once ruled,
Called then into being in all my quintessential,
Animal, vegetable and inanimate forms, never divulged
My bygone age and its attendant ills.
Who or what is proof of my truth when the testing times
Come, driven to argue in an ultimate paradox?

On stating my identity
Bogged down in a long initiatic spiral
By need to touch the Western extremities
Only the wounded know, the wounded at their last gasp,
I am forced to wane into my chief significance,
Into the forbidden ego.

All my strength for so many centuries
Had to go into saying no,
One no that deepens and darkens around the unfathomable
Vulgarity of modern disintegrated man,
Carrying his own refutation in his crazed painted face
Amid signs of satiety and abbreviated symbols.

Who had been snipping off the head of the seamless Triad
Left now in abeyance or appearing in various guises
In the thither side of untrodden mountains?