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from The Hands of Day translated by William O'Daly

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Why did I not make a broom?

Why was I given hands at all?

What purpose did they serve
if I only saw the rumor of the grain,
if I had ears only for the wind
and didn’t gather the thread
of the broom,
still green on the earth,
and didn’t lay the tender stalks out to dry
and was not able to unite them
in a golden bundle
or attach a wooden cane
to the yellow skirt
so I had a broom to sweep the paths.

So it was. I don’t know how
I lived my life
without learning, without seeing,
without gathering and uniting
those elements.

At this hour I cannot deny
that I had the time,
time,
but did not have hands,
and so, how could I aspire
with my mind to greatness
and not be capable
of making
a broom,
not one,
one?

II
And how is a sea made?
I didn't make the sea:
I discovered it in its wild
offices,
I found it ready for anything,
crackling,
pacific,
atlantic of lead,
mediterranean
dyed with aniline:
everything was white and deep,
seething and permanent,
it had waves, ovaries,
dead ships:
it's body
was pulsing.

I measured it between the rocks
of the astonished earth
and said, I didn't make it,
no, I did not make it, nobody did:
within that nobody I am
a worthless servant,
like a mollusk cracked
by its teeth. The sea.

I didn't make the scattered salt
nor the wind crowned
by the gust that shatters the whiteness,
no, I did not make
the water’s light nor the kiss that shakes
the ship with embattled lips,
nor the explosions of sand,
nor the movement that wrapped in silence
the whale and its children.

I was removed
from those infinities,
not a single finger of my fellow men
trembled in the water that hastens existence
and I came to be a witness
to the most turbulent solitude
with nothing more than empty eyes
that filled up with waves
and that will close
on emptiness.

III

_Sitting Down_

The whole world sitting
at the table,
on the throne,
at the assembly,
in the train car,
in the chapel,
by the ocean,
in the plane, in the school, in the stadium
the whole world being seated or seating themselves:
but they will have no memory
of any chair
made by my hands.

What happened? Why, if my destiny
was, among other things, to sit down,
why was I not allowed
to plant four legs
of an extinguished tree
into the seat, into the back,
into the very next person
who had to wait for the birth
or the death of someone he loved?
(I failed the chairs, never built one,
in its style transforming
the naturalness of the wood
and in its illustrious form
the rite of the dark trees.)

The circular saw
like a planet
descended the night
until it reached the earth.
It rolled through the mountains
of my country,
it passed, without seeing, through my door of larvae,
it became lost in its own sound.
And that was how I walked
in the fragrance
of the sacred forest
without taking a hatchet to the thicket of small trees,
without taking in my hands
the decision and the wisdom
of cutting off the branches
and bringing forth
from immobility
a chair
and repeating it
until the whole world is sitting down.

IV
When did anyone ever see me
cutting branches, winnowing the wheat?
Who am I, if I created nothing?
Any son of a Juan
could touch the land
and let fall something
that entered like a key
enters the lock:
and the earth opened wide.
Not me, I didn’t have the time
or the know-how:
I kept my hands clean
as those of an urban cadaver,
even axle grease despised me,
the mud, inseparable from the pure ways,
left without me to inhabit the wild provinces:
agriculture never had a place in my books
and not having made that place, lost among wine
cellars,
I concealed my poor obsessions
until I only really lived in farewells.

Goodbye, I called to the oil, without knowing the olive,
and to the barrel, that miracle of nature,
I said goodbye, since I didn’t comprehend
how so many things were made on earth
without the permission of my useless hands.

V
Hands that worked with only
clothes and bodies,
shirts and hips
and books, books, books
until they were merely
shadow hands, nets
without fish, in the air:
only these were attested:
The heroism of other hands
and the generative edifices
that dead fingers raised
and living fingers extend.
There is no *before* with my hands:
I forgot the peasants
who in the coursing
of my blood
ploughed:
it wasn't blacksmiths
that ruled within me, sturdy races
that hand after hand fashioned
anchors, hammers, nails,
spoons and tongs,
screws, rails, lances,
locomotives, prows,
so that railroad stokers
with the slowness of hands filthy
with grease and coal, were suddenly
gods of movement
of trains that passed through my childhood
beneath the green hands of the rain.

*Translated from the Spanish by William O'Daly*