



Image from Rory Dobner

Christopher Bernard

### Against Identity

A friend once asked me, “What are you?”  
(Note: my friend did not say “who.”)

“Myself – neither more nor less,”  
said I – too glibly, I confess.

“Myself”! Well, what, or who, is that?  
A blur, a space, a Cheshire cat,

hardly more real than what he's not.  
How untie *that* Gordian knot?

Alexander's famous shear  
swipe of blade wouldn't quite do here.  
And so I tried to puzzle it out.

Not exactly a *thing* am I,  
though clasped by flesh as by a ring;  
a sack of blood and bone and hide  
where thoughts skitter past grasp inside.

My body? That's a thing I have  
that drags me from the crib to grave.

What I call and feel is "I"  
am – what? – a ghost in this machine?  
Imagining itself what "I" might mean,  
yet, like a diamond, compact of light,  
a sun flaring in an infinite night?

What, then, *am* I?

The little game  
became a little hectic then:  
I seemed to softly disintegrate  
into nothing at all. A little  
panic attack became a howl:  
I woke in a sweat . . .

The answer came  
like a little man who walked up to me  
where I despaired on a windy beach  
that blew me away in sails of sand;  
and, bowing with old world grace, said: "So,  
what are you? Please let me suggest  
the answer that I give below.

The liberty  
of sand and mud and air and sea,

matter made free;

a little god  
of mind within a dazzling seed  
free as a quark, as space, as speed;

free as thought,

for you are blessed,  
as you are cursed,  
with un- , pre-, sub-, and  
consciousness.

You smile, you nod;  
for you are nothing actual,  
so you are *everything* virtual,

a grain of chance, a reverie,  
a virtual scan across a web  
of synapses' electricity.

Revolt  
against the cage of be  
where others would shove you and me;  
into the prison of identity,  
when your being is sovereignty,  
the essence of which, the identity,  
is to be, not this, not that, but free.

Your sovereign I is god and king  
when what you are is everything.

And yet little – no: *no* more than myth,  
projection of the labyrinth  
of nerve and bone, oil, muscle, cell,  
your heaven, your purgatory, your hell,  
your grasp, so brief, of the wind-blown earth,  
beyond price, essence, worth.

Then, like a magician, with a flick  
of the wrist to awe with a caress,  
a delicious flourish, over mile and mile,  
make worlds appear, flower, and vanish,  
as you appear and flower and vanish, like that  
Cheshire cat with its sovereign smile.”

Easter 2021

Who would have thought twelve months could be so long?  
So many gone since last spring stole our year.  
Among the host, a few my own:

old friends, dearest and most mourned:  
Sidney and Harry, and the dearest of all.

And yet the story is most beautiful  
they tell on this day every year:  
a child born in a barren stable,  
a man dying on a nailed cross,  
a god rising on invisible wings  
from the dead,  
a pure myth of love and loss,  
then rising, rising into glory  
for him and all who believe the beautiful story.

Each Easter I enter into it  
among the host of believers,  
though I am not a believer;  
for me, it is only a tale,  
though one that is most beautiful.

Even now, after so much is lost;  
I enter into, I believe it  
as though it were true, all of it.

Whenever I read a story,  
I believe in it. My faith  
is a delicate thing,  
a delicate and fragile thing.  
It makes few demands.  
It is not certain, it is not sure.  
It is full of wonder.  
It invites to gather near its fire.  
It promises only a story.  
But a story you can hold to you  
as strong as truth.

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