HINGE OF THE YEAR

Christmas Crosstalk

Leonard Mason

Hinge of the Year

Time pushes the sullen door of winter;
Hinges creak and criticize.
Through the solstice crack of winter
Flood the earth's nativities.

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by

Leonard Mason

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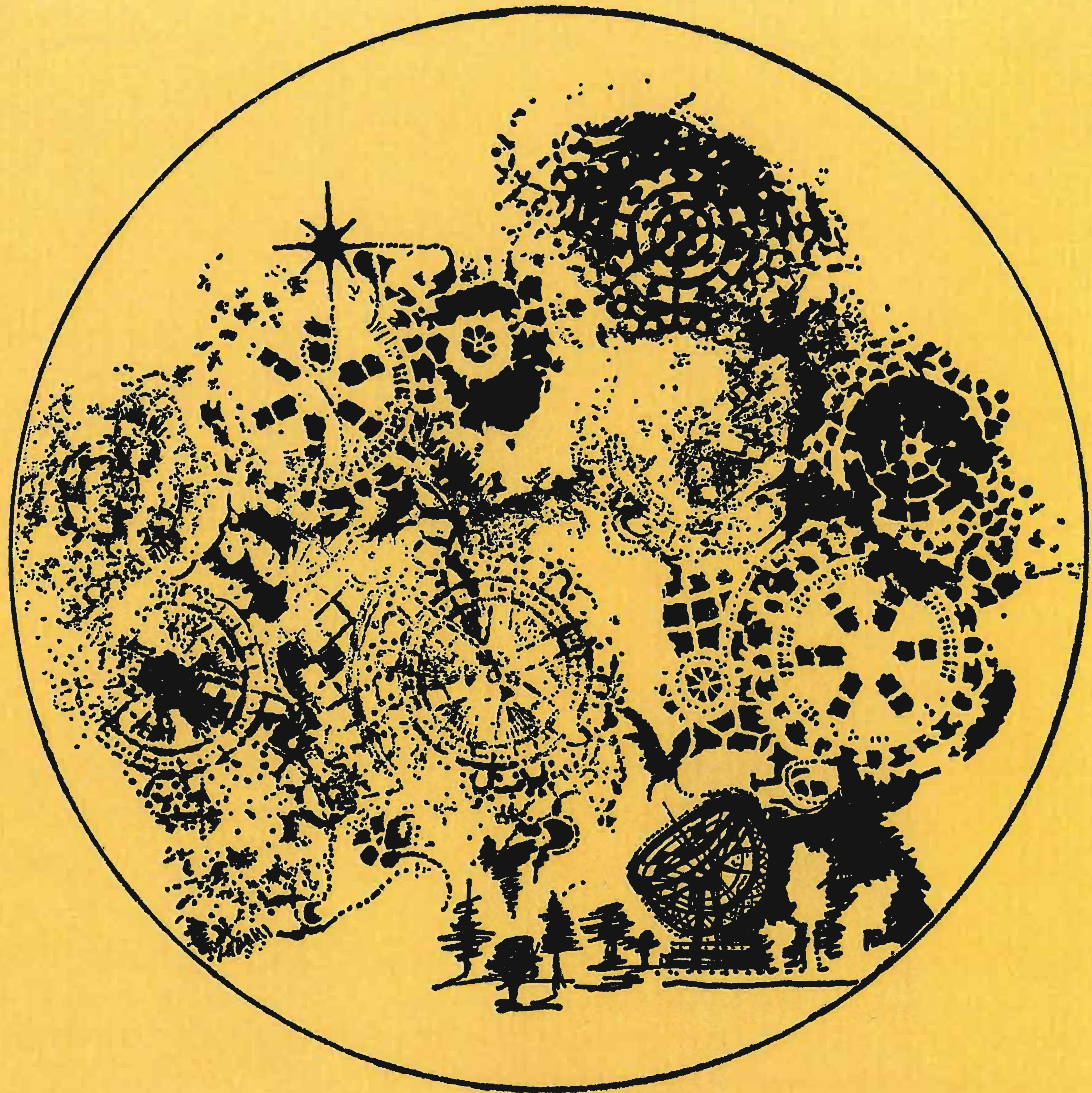
From Jodrell Bank a mesh
of laced steel
Listens to the tumult
and the warfare
Waged with billion spears
of light in contest . . .

(*p* 7)



Crosstalk

The dialogue of Christmas is crosstalk
Between the rampant reason of my self
And fractured ghosts of ancient legendry.

From Mount Palomar a two hundred-inch
Device of polished glass unrolls a chart
Of space, sprinkled with myriad crystal flecks
That tint the spectrum of my leaping mind.
From Bethlehem a star of nearer sort
Pierces the root of my credulity.

The spectrum and the legendary dream
Refuse to bond like atoms in a ring,
Nor lock like protein in a spiral chain,
But stand apart, the one in kodachrome,
The other in lonely labyrinth of despair.

From Jodrell Bank a mesh of laced steel
Listens to the tumult and the warfare
Waged with billion spears of light in contest
For unmanned frontiers of space and time.
From Bethlehem the ears of shepherds are
Startled by sublunar song of angels.

The coded symbols from the cosmic rim
And gloria from the choir of throated night
Refuse to blend in subtle harmony
And will not weave a waving counterpoint,
But clash like yeah-beat and a lullaby.

THE INNKEEPER

The innkeeper was a busy man; you might almost call him fussy. Though his inn was modest by any account, its ceilings low and windows small, its yard not readily distinguished from a farm-lot, he had set a standard for himself: 'My inn must be the best house in town.' The threshold was swept several times a day, for in his practical wisdom he had learned that a guest's first step is the gateway to satisfaction. His tables were worn smooth and warm with years of rubbing and for them too he had his appropriate aphorism: 'When the board is unblemished the appetite is strong.' His beds were little more than pallets of straw, but the linen was clean and the covers gay with embroidery; he often repeated to himself that distillation of good hospitality: 'He who sleeps without sighs will come again to hire the bed.' His store of wine was cool and the water of his well ever sweet. His victuals were as fresh as the season permitted and his bread was seldom stale. He himself was host and cook, cleaner and carrier all in one, epitomizing the saying: 'He who wants the best must do it for himself.'

In fact, he lived and worked by the rote of a dozen such sayings culled from experience or borrowed from custom, the most cherished of which was a litany of promise:

> 'One cup, one place, one couch,
> Prepared for the Expected One of Israel.'

The earliest arrivals at the inn door were Roman soldiers, three days' march out of Jerusalem. There were four of them and they came in like a gust of wind as though they were making an assault on the place.

'Innkeeper!' one of them demanded, 'What have you got for us here? An ox-pen or an Emperor's room?'

'My house is the best in Bethlehem,' the innkeeper said, unruffled.

'As good, no doubt, as your roads,' countered the soldier, 'Dusty and crooked.' You need us Romans to straighten things up!'

'A road is a plaything for the feet of beasts,' said the innkeeper, 'but this house is the work of my hands. You'll find it straight enough and clean.' He knew the ways of Romans. They expected deference, but if you gave them ready retort it flattered them and heaped a little mound of respect upon yourself.

'Enough of your Jewish proverbs, my budding

Solomon!' the soldier said. 'We want good food and plenty of it. Your best wine and a room to ourselves.'

'This way, sirs. You can have my best room. It is already prepared and fresh. Its windows look over the hills to the West.'

'Can you see Rome from there?' mocked a soldier.

'No. But Rome is never far away these days,' risked the innkeeper.

'Then you'd better not keep Romans waiting,' the soldier parried. 'Get on with it! We didn't come here for insolence.' The innkeeper attended to them with a feigned servility. Though their words were commands and their demands were sharp, the innkeeper let their imperiousness roll off his back. A man can easily ignore superficial taunts when the sword of them is sheathed. He knew that the pay was certain and that the coin would be good.

Three Jewish merchants arrived next, also out of Jerusalem. They too were used to giving commands, being men of substance.

'Innkeeper! See to our mules! Help unload them and find them a place for the night! Our men will see to their fodder and sleep with them too. We want no thieves poking around.' Without a word and with the slightest suspicion of a bow, the innkeeper went outside at their bidding and showed the muleteers to their quarters. Back again, he was met once more with the curt demand,

'Show us your best room! We'll pay you well. We have some work to do and need quiet before we go to sleep.' He put on his most disarming manner and said,

'My best room is already taken, but I have another which you will find to your liking. It's near the kitchen and warm.'

'No! There'll be too much clatter there. We want a quiet room, I tell you. Who's in your best room?'

'Roman soldiers. They came not an hour ago.'

'Romans!' a merchant grumbled, 'Must there be Romans everywhere? Even here in the City of David? First they order us to leave home for their accursed census, then they push us off the road as if they owned the country, then they search our packs just as if we were common smugglers—we even had to pay for the privilege of being searched. Now they're here! And in the best room too! Are we never to be rid of them?'

'Watch your talk!' another cautioned. 'Roman ears are as sharp as their swords. Where have you put them, innkeeper?'

'In that room beyond the tables. But you'll be undisturbed on this side.'

'Good! See that we are! We want no Roman interference.' The innkeeper moved from one room to the other, careful to serve without offence and more careful

to keep Roman and Jew apart as well as he could for the sake of peace in his house and the good name of his inn.

Before long, two more guests arrived, quiet in manner and modest in request.

'Have you a corner of a room where we may rest and a place at your table where we may eat?' they asked. Their speech was slow and precise as though they were not quite masters of the Aramaic tongue.

'You are welcome, strangers, to my house,' the innkeeper said smiling. 'Have you come far?'

'Yes, far, and for many days, across the sea and by long roads. We are from Athens and are going to your chief city to learn the customs of your people and the wisdom of your teachers. Is it much further?'

'Jerusalem? It is about three days away and you will need rest because there are many hills to cross. Come to the kitchen and eat.' They sat down at the table, took food from their packs and offered the innkeeper some of their bread and dates.

'No, thank you,' he said. 'I had my meal before you came. "When the stomach is content," I always say, "the hands are free to serve." '

'Then at least have some wine with us,' one of the scholars said, and handed him his flask.

'Just a mouthful to honour my guests.' The innkeeper rolled the wine around his mouth and considered it thoughtfully before he said,

'Hm! A good wine! But not of my country. What is it?'

'I bought it in Syrian Antioch. It's only a common wine, but as like the Greek as if it had been fermented in Attica. Its first flavour is gone because my leather flask is thin and has been given a shaking during our journey.'

'It's still a good wine. You must try mine. It has been kept cool and still since it was first stored.' He went to pour some for his visitors, and while he did so, one of the Jewish merchants came to the kitchen and said,

'Innkeeper! Take a plate of fish and bread out to the mule-men, and while you're at it bring some of that wine to our room.'

'Yes sir. But first let me serve my guests here.'

'Who are they?'

'Greek scholars from Athens.'

'Oh!' and the Jew went back satisfied that they were no Roman eavesdroppers.

The Greeks tasted and approved the proffered wine, the innkeeper went about his duties, travellers continued to arrive until the inn was full. Lamps were lit, food was served, places allotted and requests attended to. The innkeeper was never still, but when he had

time to spare he snatched broken conversation with the two Greek scholars and sipped his wine. They asked him many questions about Judaea.

'Judaea is a sad country,' he told them, 'and everyone seems to be moving around either looking for trouble or escaping from fear. I have Romans in one room and Jews in another. But walls can't keep them apart. Not even city walls. Trouble will break out soon, unless . . .'

'Unless what?'

'Unless the Expected One arrives.'

'Who is he?'

'No one knows for sure. But our prophets tell us he will come one day, so I always keep a place for him in case he should knock at my door.'

'How will you know him?'

'There will be the sound of a horn ringing in the sky and he will say to me, "I am he that cometh." '

'And what then?'

'Then? I don't know. But he will tell me what to do and I shall do it.'

'Will you leave your inn?'

'Yes. I shall go to Jerusalem for the great gathering. Our land won't be sad any more and people will stop looking in fear over their shoulders.' There was a knock at the outer door. But it was drowned by the noise inside, and, anyway, the innkeeper was well wrapped in his tale of woe and despairing hope. He was telling the Greeks about old prophecy and began to chant some familiar verses, swaying while he recited them:

'Every boot of the booted warrior in the tumult
And garments rolled in blood
Shall be fuel for fire.
And a root from the stock of Jesse shall come forth,
And a branch from his roots shall bear fruit,
Even the spirit of wisdom and understanding.
He shall come.'

'Innkeeper!' interrupted one of the Greeks, 'Can't you hear that knocking? Perhaps your Expected One has come.'

'Maybe he has,' mused the innkeeper. 'Excuse me. I'll go and let him in. Maybe he has.' He went to the door, and, still under the touch of the ancient words, he opened to the knocking and asked:

'Art thou he that cometh?'

'No,' replied a voice outside. 'I just want a place to sleep. My wife and I have come far and we're tired.'

'Not the Expected One! I'm sorry. Not every branch bears fruit. My house is full tonight. You'll have to try the stables. There are some men there with their mules already, but there's plenty of room and enough straw for all of you.'

'Stables? Where are they?'

'Across the yard to the right of the well. You'll find the place easily. Peace to you both.'

'Thank you. Peace to you.'

Jesus was born in the straw that night, but the innkeeper knew nothing about it. He went back to his talk with the Greeks. From them he learned alpha and omega, the beginning of the world from swerving atoms to the end of it when the kindled fires of the universe would one by one, measure after measure, be extinguished. And to them he told his own people's story of first and last, from the beginning when the Lord said: Let there be Light! to the last day when the trumpet would sound and all the earth become clean again. The night of talk moved into sleep, and at last the inn was still.

Early in the morning the mule-men came and told the innkeeper that a baby had been born in the stables and that some men had come by first light to bring birth-gifts for the child. He went out to see. It was true what they had said. The mother and baby were asleep. The father sat up and smiled wanly at the innkeeper whose eyes were fixed on the bundle of gifts in the straw. What strange gifts they were! Only one seemed to be of any use, a lamb's fleece left by some shepherds, and that was far too big for a baby to wear. 'A gift out of place is worse than a slap on the cheek,' thought the innkeeper. He was wiser than the wise, surer than shepherds. He saw what they had missed because he was a watcher of men, not of stars or sheep. He saw hunger and weariness.

The inn was awakening fully when he went back, but not stirring enough to thwart his simple purpose. Quietly from the Roman's room he took a skin of wine and from the table of the Jews a plate of fish. The Greeks had little more than a roll of bread from which he broke a portion, and from his own store he took a comb of honey. He went back to the stables and gave these gifts to the father, bowed and spoke the formal wish.

'May the little one grow strong and be a comfort to you.' The father returned the formality.

'He will surely be strong, thanks to the touch of your mercy.' There was genuine and simple gratitude as he added,

'Thank you, innkeeper, for this food and drink, and for this shelter in our time of need. If we can stay awhile until my wife is strong again, peace will be sweet to your house.' It was obvious that the gifts of the morning were more acceptable than the costly offerings of the earlier hours. But the innkeeper could not stay to savour the moment. A shout recalled him:

'Innkeeper! Where are you? Get breakfast and make it sharp.' The Roman eagles were hungry.

'Innkeeper! Tell the mule-men we're ready! We must be off.' To Jewish merchants, time was money.

'Innkeeper! We thank you for the night's rest and for the talk. But now we must go to see your Holy City. Stay well!' Greeks were always eager to see some new thing.

He bowed his guests on their way, counted his earnings of the night and made the inn ready once more to be the best house in Bethlehem. Outside in the stables the family still rested and waited. The innkeeper chanted to himself as he had done a thousand times before:

> 'One cup, one place, one couch,
> For the Expected One of Israel.
> May it fall to me to be his host!'

The Way

The roads of men all run
To cities of desire;
And most of us are singed
By pecuniary fire.

The inns of all the world
Are but a caravan,
Between the straw of birth
And final dust of man.

But in the bedded straw
We sometime see a child;
And our divergent ways
Are haply reconciled.

DISPUTATION

'And they were sore afraid.'

After the fear and the amazement, the shepherds took in the angel's words and went to Bethlehem to look for the newborn child. But one of them was slow in coming out of the shock of the sudden appearance. He still gazed at the angel, hypnotized by the light. Even the staff in the angel's hand seemed to glow with strange lustre. Slowly, however, familiar details began to assert themselves. The angel was so like a man, shod in sandals, a cloak about his shoulders and a girdle round his waist, that fear began to dissipate. It was only the light which remained unusual and unexplained. It came from within the angel as if his very flesh were incandescent, and spread to everything. The wool on the backs of the sheep shone as though the full light of morning were upon it. Their shadows on the dusty ground were all the darker by contrast. The shepherd turned to look at a tree, leafless because it was winter, yet it shone as though spring were about to burst out, and the shadows beneath were more beautifully etched than the tree itself. He saw the hut and fences of the sheep-fold still and straight in the strange light, and their shadows were marshalled in pencil lines of jet.

The shepherd turned to the angel and asked:

'Who are you, and where do you come from?'

'From beyond the rim of the earth; even from far beyond the bowl of night. I am the bearer of good tidings to men.'

'That must be a long way off indeed. But how did you get here? I see no mule or tethered horse.'

'I came on the curve of light.'

'By foot?'

'No. By light itself.'

'But there was no light when you came except for our fire and a few stars.'

'Where I go there is always light.'

'How do you manage to sleep, then?'

'I never sleep and never tire.'

'You'd be good as a shepherd then. I can't stay awake in the night watch because it's not easy to sleep in the daytime. The sun shines on your face and there are always men shouting or dogs barking. I think I must have been nodding when you came. I thought I was dreaming at first. Do you ever dream? No, of course not! You are always awake, you said. Sometimes I dream for hours and hours and then wake up to find

it was no longer than it takes a single stick to burn through.

'I never dream,' the angel said.

'Pity! You can sometimes tell what's going to happen if you dream clearly enough. One night I dreamt I saw a wolf, only instead of howling it was singing like a woman going to the well. When I woke up, there was a woman walking up to the camp with a waterjar on her head. "Who's this wolf-bitch?" one of the men suddenly cursed. Strange, isn't it, what dreams can do?'

'I too,' the angel said, 'can tell of the hour that has not yet come to pass, because I see the future flowing to me along my curve of light.'

This was just beyond the fleece of the shepherd's comprehension, but he went blithely on as though angelic secrets were his normal fare:

'So you do dream then, just like me! When I'm nodding by the fire, I sometimes don't know whether I'm awake or asleep. I still feel as if I'm dreaming now. I never saw anyone like you before.'

'You are not dreaming. You are wide awake. I saw you turn round just now to look at your sheep. You also stared at that tree there and scratched your head.'

'Did I?' The shepherd considered this for a moment as if it were a curious observation, then he ventured the question which until now had not quite sharpened in his mind:

'If I am really awake, why do you . . . look . . . so different?'

'Different? How?' The slightest hint of annoyance was in the angel's question as though he were caught out in some imperfection unworthy of an angel. He thought to himself, 'What can I have missed that this simple shepherd suspects me? I was sure I had achieved the human form in every way.' His overt question still betrayed a touch of anxiety:

'Am I different? Am I not just like you? True, I don't sleep. But I do dream; you said so yourself.'

The shepherd watched the angel's puzzled face and noticed nervous gestures and movements where before the angel had been as composed as a standing-stone. Then he saw what it was that had been nudging at his consciousness ever since the fear had left him. Neither body, nor limbs, nor staff of the angel cast any shadows on the ground. He said quickly:

'No! You are not like me. You have no shadow!'

Whereat the angel promptly disappeared, and it was night once more among the sheep.

We know why angels cast no shadows, because we have heard great argument and disputation. Angels are not made as men are made from earth and fire, from air

and water. They are made of the fifth element. As stars in the sky are more of the pure essence of fire than any fire on earth, so the fifth element is purer again than starlight. More powerful too! Just one shaft of it can set a star a-spinning.

Angels possess that power. Ten thousand thousand of them helped to start the cosmos rolling when it emerged out of shapeless chaos. Still in unison, sphere within sphere, they propel the celestial globes in perfect circles and in perfect time. Not a second is out of place, except occasionally towards the unmoving centre of things beneath the moon. Comets cut across the regular beat of the stars, planets wander off a bit and Mercury is perturbed by forty-three seconds of arc in a century! But angels can scarcely be blamed for that; Mercury is particularly hard to control. It plays hide and seek with the sun and needs the attention of more angels than it deserves.

Angels are great attenders. They stand by every procession this side of the infinite. Had they been made of the inferior elements they would have interposed themselves between the purest essence of light and all the rest of creation. There are so many of them that their shadows would have made perpetual twilight. That is why angels must cast no shadows.

Men of the Middle Ages knew this. Dante Alighieri spoke of it in his Divine Comedy. As he wandered through Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise he noticed that neither fires of hell, nor moonlight over purgatory, nor the brilliance of heaven cast shadows from the presence of angels. That was how he was able to recognize them and be sure that they were not damned, or probationary or liberated human souls.

In monastery and university great disputation arose about the nature of angels. Some scholars claimed that since angels cast no shadows, they must be insubstantial and therefore equivalent to nothing. That was dangerous talk because it was tantamount to saying that angels did not exist. But they held to their thesis and escaped official censure by saying that their claim was for disputation only, and not for belief. The nothingness of angels was hypothesis.

Their opponents said that angels did consist of substance, but its essence was that fifth element, pure light from beyond the outermost sphere. Angels were the first distillation of light as it streamed from the ineffable source which floods the whole universe. As light itself cannot be seen by mortal eye until it illumines star or sun or objects on earth, so angels cannot be seen unless they clothe themselves with celestial textures; then they are doubly substantial, once by their quintessential nature and once by the accidents of their luminescent apparel.

The first scholars asked where the fifth element came from, and were told, from beyond time and space.

'Then,' they said, 'if angels are made of the quintessence and their being proceeds from that which is neither space or time, they cannot occupy space nor endure through time. They are as nothing, and our hypothesis stands.'

'No, it does not!' argued the second scholars. 'Did not the patriarch Jacob wrestle with an angel beside the ford of Jabbok, and was not the hollow of his thigh dislocated in the contest? That is not the work of a creature of nothing. Was not our Lord supported by angels in the Garden of Gethsemane? His weight could not rest on nothing. Though angels are not made of spatial things, they can indeed occupy space as scripture shows.'

Then came the rapier thrust of argument from one of the first school:

'If angels, being insubstantial, can nevertheless occupy space, then an infinite number of them can dance on the point of a pin! Quod absurdum est.'

Laughter put the second party to shame. They withdrew and consulted many books of reference but found not a single text directed to the point. When they returned to the disputation they said:

'We conceded that it is unthinkable that an infinite number of angels can be simultaneously present on the point of a pin, but, as many sparkles of light may be seen in one small diamond, so many angels can be compresent on a pin-point.'

'Be precise! How many angels?' The first scholars pressed home their advantage.

'An indefinite number.'

'Four like the Apostles? Seven like the stars? Twelve like the tribes of Israel? How many?'

'Some, at least.'

Derision, disclaimer and argument beyond the normal rules of disputation broke out on all sides until a voice, louder than the rest, called out:

'Cease this unseemly wrangling! Let us settle the matter by experiment!'

Experiment? That was a new dimension in mediaeval thought, but the word was not new. Friar Bacon had thrust it forward in his Opus Major of 1267:

> 'He who wishes to rejoice without doubt must know how to devote himself to experiment. It is generally believed that the diamond cannot be broken except by goat's blood, and philosophers and theologians misuse this idea. But fracture by means of blood of this kind has never been verified, although the effort has been made, and without that blood it can be broken easily. I have seen this with my own eyes, and this is necessary

because gems cannot be carved except by fragments of this stone . . . .'

'With my own eyes . . .' The great experiment was made.

In the nave of an ancient church among the hills of Northern Italy, Doctors of the Church, monks, friars, parish priests and a few astrologers assembled. A workbench had been set up. Upon it, held firmly by a wooden vice, was the pin. No ordinary pin, but one specially made for the trial, four inches long and as sharp at the point as filing and rubbing could make it. Prayers were said, scripture read. The first party to the disputation chose a portion from the Book of Job:

'Canst thou by searching find out God?' That line seemed to make the experiment an impiety. But another line set the seal of approval on their work:

'Lo this, we have searched and so it is. Hear it and know thou it for thy good.'

The second party chose the Book of Revelation:

'I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth that no wind should blow on the earth or on the sea, or upon any tree. And I saw another angel ascend from the sunrising . . . .'

The congregation waited in silence for the special invocation. A priest left the circle about the bench, went to the altar step and intoned:

'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, let the divine mystery of heaven be opened and let angels attend our disputation. Amen.'

Twice repeated, nothing happened. The whole assembly was bidden to repeat in unison and with deep faith:

'In the name of . . . angels attend our disputation. Amen.'

Slowly the pin-point, sticking upwards, began to glow at first like a tiny halo, then larger about the size of a human eye, then larger still like a small globe of pure light. Within the globe light pulsated and assumed a hundred shapes each changing pattern and partner with every second.

Priests crossed themselves in fear and astonishment, some shielded their eyes, not from the glare, but lest their vision be polluted by what might yet be an unholy apparition, some gazed open-mouthed in unashamed surprise. As each man looked he saw his own expectancy in the light, one a face incredibly gentle and smiling, another a whole figure complete with sweeping wings, to some it seemed as though a hundred tiny mirrors, each reflecting and reflecting back again, revealed a thousand faces indistinctly merging into each other and

coming clear again like stars at night. A mumbled argument rippled through the nave:

'There is but one angel!' 'There are several!' 'They are many!' 'Countless!' 'The light is still as the moon!' 'It dances!' 'Look! Pure motion!' 'The image occupied the smallest space when the pin-point first glowed.' 'I say there is but one light for ever changing.'

Once again a single voice echoed through the nave and restored quiet. It came from the sphere of light:

'I am one and we are legion!'

The globe swelled and moved away from the pin's point, it floated serenely through the air and its light began to lose its brilliance. By the time it came to rest above the altar steps the light had almost faded and the very air about it began to take fresh shape. A friar stood, staff in hand, sandal-shod, cloaked and girdled. Candles burning on the altar guttered for a moment then leapt to twice their height. They edged the holy crucifix in ribs of blackness and the image of Christ seemed to writhe in fresh agony. The friar's voice rang out:

'Cease your disputation and abandon your argument!
It is true what I have said:
I am one and we are Legion.
Though we are purer than light, I am dark as flesh.
We are messengers of the One Light
Who yet is many lights.
Go and do His will that his everlasting light
May shine in the hearts of men.
I tell you what others heard before:
In heaven glory; on earth peace.
Let it be so.'

The reverend doctors bowed their heads in shame, and monks knelt upon the floor in holy dread, seeking penitence or to be unnoticed.

But one of them, entranced, came near and looked. The friar's form cast no shadows on the smooth tiles.

'Sir,' he said, 'thou hast no shadow!'

The angel disappeared, the candle flames grew steady again and Christ upon the crucifix was as still as eternity.

Within the globe light pulsated and assumed a hundred shapes, each changing pattern and partner with every second . . .

(*p* 19)

Apocalypse

Sphere within sphere the world goes round;
Polaris centres them all;
And every sphere is a glassy sea
That can neither rise nor fall.
Every sea has its peak of stars
With angels in between;
And every angel sings a song
Whose notes are blue and green.

Thought within thought the mind spins round,
But its eyes shape a solid plain,
Where every field is furrowed with care,
Waiting for latter rain.
And every drop that scatters the dust
Is a separate universe
That wears the texture of time away
With never a groan or curse.

Oh who will gather the dust again,
And bind it to the root?
Who will sing of the green and blue
To lift the eyes of the brute?
And when the spheres of the sea are cracked
And infinite heaven peeps through,
Oh who will restore the centre of things
And carpet the earth with dew?

The crystal spheres will melt and flow,
And weave themselves to a whirl.
Space will bend through the niches of time
And convolute to a curl.
Frogs will spawn in a boiling sea
And lichen leap to the crust;
A rib spring forth from Behemoth;
A child from spittle of lust.

The whirling thought will come to a stop
In a pool of amber eyes;
And a glance from the depth of responding love
Will plumb eternities.

THE TINKER

A thousand years and half a thousand more had passed since the tidings of nativity caught shepherds by the throat. Another shepherd sat alone in his chalet beneath the mountains of winter. He had no sheep to watch; only a cow or two haltered in the byre below. His flock were people, not animals. They were valley folk, and at this time of the year were folded in their warm homes waiting for the turning of the year, and possibly for a message of hope from their priest.

He wondered what new thing he might say at the opening of the year; but his springs of thought had mostly run dry. He had only himself to offer and the words of his practical soul had been poured out many times before:

'Chop your winter wood, store it neatly under the sloping eaves, keep it dry. Be like the five young virgins whose lamps were trimmed and ready for the bridegroom.
Tend your cattle, keep them warm and fed, lead them out now and then for an airing when the sun is bright upon the snow. A virtuous man is careful of all his household. Be at peace with your neighbours; you may need them in time of trouble. A rope of treble twist bears greater strain than any single strand.
Pray God to stay the avalanche before it thunders over your roof. Beseech Him to keep the racing stream in its station before it sweep the bridges out. A man must be humble before his Maker and pay the living debt of gratitude.'

They were all true, timely and practical words, but could he not find something new to match the coming newness of the year? He found nothing new in the recesses of his imagination. Old sounds continued to worm into his consciousness; logs hissed and settled more comfortably in their embers, wind made gentle moan around the timbers of his chalet, cattle stirred and faintly clinked their halters, settling down for the night.

Then, out of nowhere, there came a knocking at the chalet door loud enough and firm to draw attention yet not staccato to raise alarm. The priest got up to see who might be needing him in the night. He was glad of the interruption because he knew himself to be better with

the hand of comradeship than with the ministry of words. He opened the door, but found no one standing there to ask for shelter or for a loaf of bread. Nor was there any further sound except the thud of distant snow fresh-slipping down a mountain shoulder. But presently a voice both near and far away said:

'Go into my Church and pray!'

The wooden church in the valley stood alone and silent in the dark. Lit from within by the priest as he moved with his lamp from door to altar, it threw shafts of lonely light on the mute graves outside which were made even more ineloquent by their mantle of snow. But the same light which purpled death's embalming outside kindled warmth and life within the church. Its mellow light resurrected the strength of rough-hewn timber, and polished boards, reflecting the lamp from many surfaces, far outnumbered the unpeopled shadows.

The priest knelt before the sanctuary and prayed as he had been bidden. His words were as familiar as breathing and softer than breath. His lips scarcely moved lest articulation disturb the sleeping centuries. He prayed with eyes open and saw the altar before him simple and bare like the lives of those who had fashioned it long ago. But, as he prayed, a richer vision shaped itself in the channels of his eyes. He saw the altar of the Lord transformed by the touch of living hands, and knew that when the coming year would be ended, the substance of his vision would make a wholesome gift at the feast of nativity.

The springs of his thought were quickly filled, and when he stood before his people at the opening of the year words flowed clearly from the vision of the night.

'Good folks,' he said, 'we have work to do. I have told you many a time that Christ's work is better done outside the Church than in, on the alp and in the cattle-stall, so that cattle might be content and give sweet milk for sturdy children's lips. I have said that Christ's work is better done in the forests with straight clean blows of the axe, with a good eye, strong back and steady arm, so that wood might come a-plenty to warm your homes and adorn your shelves. And I have said that Christ's work is better done at the bench where planes cut smoothly, joints are tight and fittings square. Make every table as though you were preparing it for a carpenter's son.

'These words are still true, but, on the wings of the year, another word has come to me. We will make this New Year a holy year by working with the beauty of our hands for the carpenter's son within his church. Let Christ his work be done this year in our little Church of the Valley!'

His folk took up the rapture of his vision for its words came to them in shapes and textures they could feel. The weight of sin and glory of salvation were vested in their fingers and not upon their consciences. They felt the sturdy joy of Jews rebuilding walls and temple of the Holy City with trowel in one hand and sword in the other. Each one looked into himself to find, how, with honest hands, he might adorn the sacred place. In times of rest from their common labour they worked yet more for the Christmas that was to be. They worked all year, and love was in their fingers.

Under a carpenter's skilful touch a table for the Lord grew fragrant, clean and holy. Carved on its sides in honest relief were everlasting hills, scaling forests and rivers of ice; and on its front, where all could see the letters bold and beautiful, appeared the bounding line:

'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills.'

Another shaped a chalice for the Lord from root of spruce, and so meticulously he carved on it curling vines and polished clusters of grapes that it seemed almost to have been cast in bronze. Again the sacred letters:

'I am the true vine.'

Another made wooden platters to complete the serving of the sacrament. So shone the finished wood that the sun carved on it and the standing ears of standing corn seemed golden in the light of day and illumined the holy words:

'I am the bread of life.'

Women too, together as women do, wove a linen cloth with not a single thread awry, to spread upon the table of the Lord. They embroidered it with golden threads and marked thereon the year of their labour: Anno Domini 1500. When they saw their cloth spread on the table as smooth and white as the first snowfall on a frozen pool, their hearts longed for colour to beautify the Lord's house. Their needles began to paint a tapestry in elemental colours. They figured on it the love-child of their dreams with companions from the hills, goat and chamois, gentle-eyed, and oxen with their leathern bells.

'Bells! Must the Church be silent while all our valley rings with the music of cows coming home? We must have a bell for our Church,' they said. 'Men and cattle straying in forsaken places will know they are not lost when the church bell rings, and good men will know the hours of prayer.'

Most of them knew the secret of leather cow-bells, but who could cast a bell in metal fit to rinse the ears of eternity? None. Save a tinker who lived alone by the eaves of the forest. Few ever spoke or visited with him. They met him only in the square when he sold his wares and they bargained with him for little nails or argued the price of mended pans. He was a stranger in the valley, a piece of flotsam that had drifted there a

dozen years ago from places beyond their hills and their comprehension. There were battles and plagues, marches and counter-marches in the wrinkles of his face, and his name was a mystery to the villagers: Sfarady. Superstitious ones who had come close enough to see the glow of his charcoal furnace glinting evilly in his eyes called him Jew, and left it at that.

The priest must be spokesman for the cautious folk. He walked to the tinker's hut at the eaves of the forest, and before he knocked on the door he crossed himself and stepped on the spark of fear in his Christian mind.

'Sfarady,' he said, 'you who can make pans and nails and know the way of the furnace, can you cast a bell that will ring for us all across the valley?'

'What sort of bell?'

'A bell for our Church. We will hang and polish it and give it a holy name ready for Christmas time to come. Can you make one?'

'A bell for your Church!' the old man repeated. 'I have never been inside its door nor bowed my head to your God. But a bell is for the air, for eagles of the rock, for clouds on the mountain. A bell is for the dead and for the years that come and go. I have made bells in my time, but little ones rung by hand in the dark streets, and silver ones to hang from the Holy Torah. Can a Jew make a Christian bell?'

'We can bless it and call it Saint. Your work will be no sacrilege. And we will pay you for it when the harvest is in.'

'Yes. I will make you a bell and will give it such a tone that the Holy One will hear its ringing prayer far off in his holy mountain. I ask no payment. But let me bring my Torah into your shrine when the day of Christmas comes.'

Doubt and danger ran like fire through the soul of the priest and thought of wizardry ran through his shriven soul. But Christ's love was the stronger.

'It shall be so,' he said. 'By Christmas eve you shall leave your book on the Lord's table.'

In the dead of the year the work was done. Table and chalice, platters and cloth, bell hanging from the spire and curtain from the wall, each was set in the little church, and the villagers waited at home for mass at midnight.

Alone, after sunset, the tinker brought his book. It was not made of parchment, nor bound in leather, but was carved in wood and hinged with silver. Inside, where pages might be expected there was set an intricacy of the tinker's craft, forged and fitted through many careful hours. By dim light of stars he placed his book on the white cloth of the altar and softly walked away.

While time drained out at the end of the day, people, busy in their homes, stifled the bustle of their preparation and the impatient clamour of their children the better to hear through half-opened doors the new sound in the valley at midnight. The priest lit candles and crossed himself when he saw the tinker's book lying there. He went, and with a pious prayer, pulled on the bell-rope, and the sound of the bell rang through the clear air like the call of a friend in the dark. Not a soul but came for Christ his Mass; even babies, wrapped and asleep in their mother's arms.

The priest swung his censer over the gathered villagers and quickly hurried through the well-worn prayers, till he paused to bless the special gifts for the Holy Child.

'In blessing these works of holiness,' he said, 'I bless the homes from which they came, and the hands that wrought them. I offer them to our Saviour for ever. Amen.'

He chanted and served the Holy Eucharist and at the end proclaimed 'Christus natus est'. The bell in the church was swung again, this time by several hands and with great flourish. It seemed to sing out, 'Gloria in Excelsis.'

When its tongue dwindled into silence the priest turned once more to the altar and took up the tinker's book. He tried to read the unfamiliar script upon its cover, but it was beyond his power:

'Veh' AhBhetta Eth Adonai Eloheyda Bekal-LeBhaBheDa UBhekal-NaPheSheda UBhekal-Me'ODeDa:'

He feared some subtle spell, but with the faith of a holy time to protect him, he lifted up the wooden cover to look within the book.

Upon the instant music came from the Book of the Law, like sleigh-bells upon the hills, or like icicles dripping in a pool, like camel bells, like dancing feet from Palestine. The people as they listened felt the brush of angels and crossed themselves half in fear and half in wonder, while the priest marvelled at the miracle in his hands. When the tinkling music stopped he turned and looked out to the candled night. There outside a window stood Sfarady the Tinker, smiling; he of the slanting face. And the fire in his eyes was pure mirth.

The Reckoning

There is one who fingers an amber cross,
And whittles his sins away;
Parings that drop in the sacred soil
Scarcely blemish the Potter's clay.

There is one who chews on a betel-nut
And spits its juice on the Wheel;
His sins are all one with his holy bliss,
Till both into Nothing congeal.

There is one who fishes in mirror-pool
To catch his pre-born selves;
And when he lands his bundle of sins,
He wishes them back on their shelves.

There is one who stands on a single leg
And recites the nub of the Law,
To forget the sins on his father's lips
And the sour in his grandfathers' craw.

There is one who kisses a prayer-mat of sand,
With his face turned to Meccan Gate;
He dreams of caresses in cool tents of heaven,
Dumps his sins in the alms-lap of fate.

But sins are still sins wherever men live,
And another man's sins are mine;
Nirvana, nor heaven, nor scapegoats five,
Can expunge a maleficent line.

A man must make the reckonings three
Before his flesh ploughs the sod:
A sounding of soul, a gift to the earth,
And a boon to his neighbour's load.

Ribbons that flutter and bells that chime
And stars bursting out of the blue,
And songs that soar when a child is born,
Can revoke the wrongs that we rue.

THREE NATIVITIES

Earth has felt many changes on its crusty skin, but few of them have cramped its style so much as the heavy turtle-shell of ice. Ice for untold ages. Gripped north and south and squeezed almost to its core, the earth could barely breathe. It managed only a sigh, remembering red hissing sands and days so hot that the upper airs were copper-coloured. But sighs of regret cannot live long in cracking frost.

Wave after wave of creeping cold pushed living creatures down to the borders where there were still holes unfilled by drifting snow. Each creature huddled in its hole, some as small as a rain-pock, some as large as an echo.

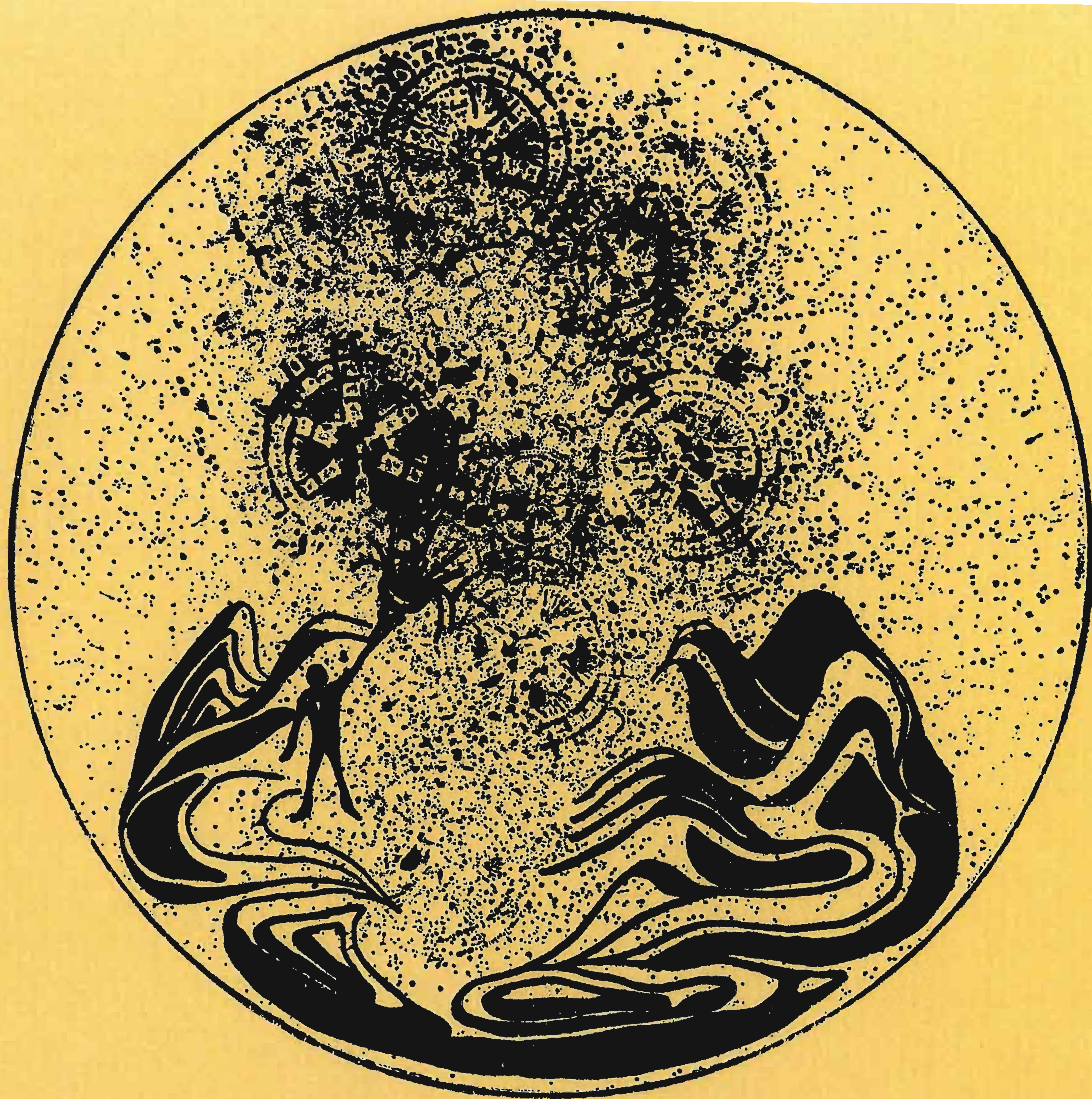
In some of the favoured holes a few men lodged together with their women and children. They were creatures more lately come than the rest, and different too. They remembered still the mellower days; memory was diffused through their living cells and reached back through sires long dead. Words from the recesses, unuttered by other creatures, still had power, having been told many times over and through many livings and dyings.

One of three was telling those words to pass the time away between red sunset and the cold hour of sleep. The mother hardly listened to them as their meaning had become abraded by repetition through countless dusks; but their familiar sound gave her a mite of comfort and held back the creeping hunger which came closer with the night's advance. The child in her arms was too young to understand, but the slow spell of the words was lulling him over the edge of sleep. But the man, under the compulsion of both habit and belief, had to say the words lest the sun should fail to rise on the morrow:

> 'Life and life gone, as many as the stars ago,
> Trees grew and air was warm,
> Water fell soft from the sky;
> Man and his mate had fruit,
> Red to eye, warm to finger, sweet to lip.
> Grass there was to lie on
> And the young were born there.
>
> Runner of the Hills was swift
> And brought a gathering of good
> With every curve of the moon.
> And when, beneath men's bones,

He held aloft a blazing torch whose flame painted the ice blood-red and whose brightness stabbed the darkness . . .

(*p* 30)



The thumping stopped, inside,
The Runner came again
And took bones to the sod;
But gathered ghost to the far-weeping hills.

Runner, oh Runner, come once more
To the shoulders of ice and the drift;
Make ice-heaps flow,
Let living trees sprout
Brown and green on white
And the wail of the child melt away.
Runner—come again!'

How many times the child heard these words before he grew to man are beyond recall. But they ran into him through his ears, melted into his blood and hardened with his bone. Whenever he stretched or beat his arms against the cold, the words drummed softly in his brain and echoing through the chambers of his thought formed new lines never heard before:

'Let echoes shout
And new limbs run
Across the shadow of night;
Bare a beating breast before
The red-weeping hills.'

These became his special words to tell nobody until he was man and could sing them to a woman and child of his own.

He never found a woman, for holes were few. Instead, he gave himself to the running words until he knew that all of them were his possession. There was no need for him to listen any more to the old man's song in the cold. He could run and be warm and the song was chanted by his limbs. The feet of the lines were his own feet and their measures told him that he was the Runner come again to bring the gathering of good.

Run he did. He ran in the direction of the yellow sun before it sank and swelled red. He ran like a wild thing with the dying sunlight on his breast and the words beating in his stride. He ran for longer than the telling till he came to the weeping hills. Theirs tears were red in the distance and they were crowned with clouds thicker than he had ever seen.

This son of the hard rocks and hollow caves had never seen smoke or fire; and there on the brow of the world a whole mountain was ablaze! Legend does not tell, for such things must be kept hidden, it does not tell how the runner took a lump of glowing fire and learned the secret of its replenishment. But it does tell of his return, for there were many there to witness.

The sun had set behind its ridge of snow as it had done so many times before. There was no moon. Men crept into their caves and the fearful dark descended. Came only the muffled chanting of the sun-death songs.

A great shout ripped the night apart and echoed from the frozen ridges; it came from the runner's throat:

'Whee! Look at me! I am a Runner of Fire!'

Men peered out of their caves and saw the runner standing beside a fall of ice. He held aloft a blazing torch whose flame painted the ice blood-red and whose brightness stabbed the darkness. The men knew it couldn't be another day, for they had not yet slept since the sun went down.

It was another age, and they were creatures of its strange dawning. It was the nativity of fire.

History, they say, never repeats itself. But after a thousand thousand fires had burned in hearths, smouldered on altars and flamed in furnaces, there were again three seeking warmth in a rock shelter. It was the mother's lot to sing the song of sunset:

> 'The people that walked in darkness
> Have seen a great light!'

When the child was man, some said he was light of the world; but others thought him a mad runner such as the earth had seen many times before. They put out his lights upon a weeping hill and the city below turned black with storm. Each year-end we re-kindle his light and remember the nativity of love.

Three thousand years came and went. Fire girdled the earth, sped man across the seas and continents and projected him towards the stars. Love also girdled the earth and burdened it with many nativities until there was no room. People forgot how to run or to sing. Guitar strings had snapped long ago, fingers no longer knew the pull of melody and voices were tuned only to the flat sounds of terse communication. Such noise as there was dripped from every ceiling and wall, but no one listened; no more than they listened to the wind or to each other. They were all weary with waiting, expecting a new turn of time which never came.

Births multiplied and ceilings went on whispering their seductions until the new word was heralded by a fanfare from the ubiquitous panels. Telecast on the world's megacycles, and proclaimed in Basic Uniling, came the announcement:

> 'First man-child born in space;
> Today on Satellite Orbit Gamma.'

For several centuries the pressure of human numbers had pushed men out into space, some to blast off with no return, some to make successful exploration and re-entry, some to assemble free-fall platforms in a score of orbits between the earth and moon. There men lived to watch the earth go by, to count the dust and stars and to feed the growing information into banks of

cells. It was a man's world. Only men, it was believed, could condition themselves to being marooned in a changeless sea of space. Had women been allowed there they might have caused unseemly friction in the smooth data-flow; they would certainly have chosen more human names for the sentinel satellites, with Da Gamo, Christophe and Vespucci recalling far-off venturers. But no! Alpha, Beta, Gamma . . . were names more rigidly uniform.

How then had a child managed to be born on Orbit Gamma? Simple! It was computed by helical code and gestated by servo feed back. As simple as that! Since there are no names in heaven, the space baby was allotted a number, the first in a new series: 589 Gamma Stroke One.

As the child grew he was the only person on Gamma who didn't feel marooned. Space was his natural habitat, stars were his playmates and earth his bauble. His nursery tales were of people and monsters who inhabited the chiaroscuro of mantled earth. He took pity on them. When he was old enough he made his formal request to the authorities on Gamma:

'Let me go to earth, and I will tell them of limitless space, of clustered galaxies and solar flares, of dancing dust and curtained aurorae. I will speak of far horizons and will lead their thinking to the hub of the infinite.'

The men of Orbit Gamma had never heard their space spoken of like that. Poetry had long since died together with song. So they naturally assumed that 589 Gamma Stroke One was a mutant, a new genetic sport, a human-being-plus. This was news indeed; headline, topline. They flicked their telesond until all the video journals on earth sparkled with the tidings: 'Gamma Stroke One is coming!'

He came. He stood upon an earth-rock by night and people gathered to look at him. But they did not stay long. They had seen Orbit-men before and Stroke One seemed in no way different. They passed on listlessly. He tried to tell them of his life on Orbit Gamma. They had heard it all on telecast and seen it all on teleview. Content just to have seen him in the flesh, they still moved along, confirmed in their opinion that there was always a marked difference between the glittering news and the plain reality—a difference which almost bordered on a lie.

So, to rouse them from their deflating apathy, Stroke One pointed majestically to the great dome of heaven and with a lyricism long forgotten his words halted their shuffling feet:

> 'Low in the east Arcturus lights
> The lamp of the Oxen-man.
> Overhead hangs Betelgeuse red
> Staring at Aldebaran.

There! Look there at Pegasus square
Chasing the swoop of the Swan,
He turns his back on Andromeda's track
And the cluster of M 31.

Merak and Dubhe have set their sight
On the hub of the northern sky;
Polaris steers the spin of the night
As Lion and Lynx roll by.

Saturn, Venus and Jupiter
March on the zodiac,
Where bearded Sagittarius
Has pulled his bowstring back.

To you I have come, O men of earth,
Have come from the apogee.
Look up and sing of the womb of space,
And the circle of nth degree.'

The crowd stopped to listen and for a moment it seemed as though old songs were awakening in their hearts.

'Again!' 'Again!' some of them shouted, and Stroke repeated his song. But while he did so, a bar of cloud obscured Arcturus and before his meeting beside the rock was ended clouds had filled the greater part of the sky. He had never before seen cloud as near as that; never had anything so obscure filled the space between himself and out-there. It was as though the universe were closing in around him, stifling the song on his lips, driving poetry from his heart and thrusting ancient demons into his mind. He remembered cradle-tales of smoke and storms and of timid earth-wights stumbling through the fog. Cold infant fear crept through him.

'What are you scared of?' one man asked.

'I'm lost,' he stuttered in bewilderment. 'Where are east and west? Where is the constant north? Where are the paths of space and my platform satellite?'

'They are still there!'

'Where? I must go off to find them,' and he hurried away to his launching-pad.

Most people laughed at the crazy cosmonaut; but for some, star-words were still scintillating in their hearts. Out of the womb of space had come a renaissance of song.

The Robe

The soul of man is in tatters
And the seamless robe
Of his dreaming is pawned
For a cadillac.

His sentiment vainly stutters
For a star to pierce
The meaningless dark;
And for a song of celestial peace.

Stars are slowly tramping
Down the Main Sequence,
And excelsis song
Is blown beyond the fringe.

Let us shape our own songs
And string them in the tapered night.
Let us weave fresh garments
On the loom of our own fingers.

OF TREES AND MEN

In a wide loop of the River Nile one hundred and fifty miles below the first cataract stood the ancient city of Thebes. Its palaces shone in the bright sunlight, their squared stones whiter than the cliffs out of which they had been hewn. Subsiding floodwaters churned against the harbour walls and were hardly less white than the city. Only the sky gave colour to the scene, and even the blue of that was cream-washed by the white reflection of the city.

A ship of twenty oars and a single sail had just tied up to the harbour wall. The captain shouted to an official who waited imperiously on the wharf:

'Master, we have brought your tree.'

'And not a day too soon,' was the curt reply. 'I'll have my men unload it when the sun is down.' The official came aboard and asked,

'How was your voyage?'

'Fair and foul. Seth filled our sail and gave us a swift run down the sea-coast. But at the mouth of the Nile Osiris chased the winds off and slapped his flood against our boards. My oarsmen are worn out with rowing, as you can see.'

'They've done well. Share this silver among them and send them away. You stay here until the sun is setting and see that nobody, not even a dog, sets eyes on the tree. Is it a good one?'

'Yes! Straight as a plumb-line; sound as a keel."

So it was that a cedar of Lebanon came to Pharaoh's Thebes. When the first shadow of evening fell across the ship's deck, bare-headed men came aboard to lift the tree from where it lay rigid alongside the kelson. They carried it to Pharaoh's palace, soldiers preceding them so that none might look at the cedar in procession. They took it into a workshop where carpenters cut and carved till it resembled a corpse lying still in a tomb. It had a vague head, but no face; arms and legs were no more than suggested by lines of indentation. They painted it white all over. When all was ready a priest came, bowed before the whitened log and chanted:

'Cedar of the far seas, wrapped in the white of
  eternity;
Now you are Zed, child of Osiris.
May Amon-Re shine perpetually on you;
May the falcon of the skies soar on high
To keep his sleepless eye upon you.'

A solemn procession carried Zed up to Pharaoh's quarters and labourers stood the white trunk upright in the place of ceremony. The feast of Zed began with music and rolling drums. Pharaoh, Lord of the Two Lands, Prince of the Shining Sun, came to the ceremony wearing a towering head-dress as bright as the sun itself and clad in a silken robe, blue like the Nile in summer. He stood facing the white tree and raised his arms. All music stopped. Priests removed his tiara, disrobed him and brought a bolt of plain white cloth which they wrapped round and round him, beginning at his feet and continuing right up to his armpits. A single golden pin fastened the shroud. They put a shepherd's crook in his left hand, and in his right a flail such as is used for threshing wheat. Again music and chant rose through the palace:

'Pharaoh of the white night and of the blue Nile,
The instruments of Osiris are in thy hands;
The shroud of Osiris winds thee about,
Wraps thee round for a thousand years
And yet a thousand more.

The Tree of Zed bears witness.
As long as his white bones remain,
So long shalt thou live;
None shall disturb thine immortality.'

A great silence followed that lapped round walls and pillars and corridors. A distant gong sounded. All tapers were extinguished. Grey light stole round the tree of Zed, ghostlike, until its fingers brushed a faint red upon the wooden face. Priests chanted once more:

'Morning has come.
Amon-Re gilds the cliffs
With gold from the desert.'

They unwound Pharaoh's shroud, put on again his robe and crown and led him into the courtyard to greet the dawn and to bless the Nile. The tree was carried down to the recesses of a tomb and was laid on a bed of marble chippings as dry as the desert. A priest painted a single blue eye where the outline of the face was carved and sealed the room with limestone blocks. Dryness and dark and the protecting eye would keep the tree of Zed in peace for ever.

In a grove of sacred oaks in northwest Greece long before Athens was Queen an old priest kept watch over the sanctuary of Zeus. At least he looked old. He had to sit all day listening to woodland noises in case they carried an omen. He had to sleep by night at the foot of the trees so that the dark sounds could filter into his dreams. When the trees were bare he might see the Pindus mountains rearing in the east; when the airs

were unusually still he might hear the river Thyamis bounding eagerly on its way to the western sea. But mostly he was immersed in the trees and the noises of Dodona.

He never knew when some suppliant might come and demand a sign from Zeus. Usually they caught him unawares. But he had learned never to be startled and never to tell what the oaks were saying until his mind and tongue were back to normal after their jolt from the visitor's appearance.

'Ho there! Priest! I've come to ask Zeus a question. Will you find the answer for me?'

'First you must go and wash yourself in the lake below, and then when you are cleansed, come to consult immortal Zeus,' the priest said. That always gave him time to gather his wits and his wizardry. He pulled a ceremonial robe over his head and fastened on his brow a pair of gilded curling horns. This proclaimed him priest of Zeus who was once worshipped as the Ram-God of Thessaly. He picked up a golden branch of oak, symbol of his power of soothsaying, and was then quite ready for his visitor.

'Now tell me your question,' he demanded.

'It's time my daughter was married, but she has two suitors. One is son of a smith, but the furnace seems to have dried his lips and the hammering to have blunted his ears. He seldom dares to speak, not even to my daughter. The other is apprentice to a lyre-player and talks and talks as though the strings of his throat would never stop twanging. Both are likeable enough. Which shall it be?'

The priest waved his yellow wand. Its movement called up a breath of air that whirled lazily till it reached the topmost leaves and the sacred oaks spoke their secret.

'What does Zeus say?' the father asked.

The soothsayer closed his eyes, swayed slowly from side to side and then hissed the words:

> 'The soft lyre sings seductively,
> But shallow is its song.
>
> The hammer swings and strikes a spark;
> The furnace warms the nuptial bed.'

Soothsayers always spoke like that. In the end a suppliant had to make what he could of the riddles of Zeus. But this one was easy enough. Zeus preferred Hephaestos to Apollo. So the father went away content.

Tale is told in the legends of Greece how Jason, leader of the Argonauts, came to the oracle of Dodona to ask Zeus whether or not he should sail to Colchis to recover the Golden Fleece. When he asked the priest the wind was already loud in the branches and seemed to be shouting a hundred answers.

In the state of Bihar,
in the town of Gaya,
there stands an old
tree sacred to the memory
of Buddha. It is a
pipal-tree . . .

(p 37)

'What is Zeus saying?' he asked.
The priest replied, as unperturbed as always:

> 'Waves are tossing high above the sea,
> Their crested curl is foaming white.
>
> The swan that floats upon the waters
> Is whiter than the waves.'

'And whatever does that mean?' asked Jason impatiently.

'That is all that can be spoken,' the priest replied and began to walk back to his arbour. But as he turned, the horns that were fastened on his brow slipped and might have fallen off had he not suddenly jerked up his hand to keep the head-dress in place. It was the hand that held the yellow branch. As though he had whipped the winds, they blew in fury and screamed through the grove. A bough of oak, thick as a man's upper arm, snapped off and crashed at Jason's feet.

'There's your omen!' the priest shouted. 'Take it away and bother me no more.'

Jason slung the bough across his shoulders and carried it far to the shore of the Pagasaean Gulf where his shipmaster was awaiting the word to build the Argo. The oracular bough was shaped and firmly fitted into the ship's prow. It curved upwards and flowed forward like a swan's neck and head.

When the voyage eastwards was well engaged, the winds of Zeus still whispered in the oak-beam and the waters of Poseidon, brother of Zeus, slapped against the dipping prow. When days were misty or nights dark beyond believing, Jason tuned his ears to the sacred oak and steered by the sound and shudder of the timber. He and his Argonauts were led unerringly to Colchis where the sun rises on the far shore of the Black Sea. They stole the Golden Fleece and brought it home to Thessaly, sometimes stranded when the sap was dry in the oak, but urged along when salt spray awakened the sleeping oracle.

In the State of Bihar, India, in the town of Gaya, there stands an old tree sacred to the memory of Buddha. It is a pipal-tree. Its leaves, a vivid green and waxen like banyan or fig leaves, afford men good shelter from the sun. Whenever in the past the tree has sickened or grown too old for memory a slip from its branches was planted beside it until, in its turn, it was large enough to welcome daily pilgrims. So for more than two thousand five hundred years the holy tree has been venerated in that spot.

But at the beginning it was just an ordinary tree among many others, favourite only of Sujata, a milkmaid. She treasured the tree because it was the shadiest of them all and kept her goat's milk cool for the curding.

Her village was on the long silk-trade route which wandered from the high passes, linked the plateaux of the north with distant China, and both with the growing towns on the Ganges. When she saw six men coming up the woodland path she thought at first that they might be merchants who would be glad to buy a dish of milk. But as they got nearer she saw that they were too thin and ragged to be merchants.

Five of them turned their heads away from her as they got close, and even held their hands up to their ears for fear of hearing the girl's greeting. So she spoke no word. But the sixth came and stood before her in complete silence and gazed steadily into her eyes. His cheeks were sunken and his eyes had that inward look which comes from too much meditation. But the girl saw in them pools of plenty and caves of void. His hair had fallen out, leaving mushroom patches of baldness.

'Give me food,' he said at length. 'I have no money, but your gift will bring merit on your body and on your house.' At this, the other five shrieked out,

'Ai! Ai! He speaks to woman and begs for food! He has broken his vows.' And they ran off till the sound of their 'Ai! Ai!' was lost among the trees.

Sujata gave her visitor a bowl of curds which he ate very slowly. She waited impatiently until he had emptied the bowl and then blurted out,

'Who are you? Where do you come from?'

'I am Siddhartha. Once I was a prince in Kapilavastu, but now I wander through the earth touching the lives of ten thousand creatures to find the secret of the wheel. I thank you for the curds and will rest beneath this tree until your food has given me strength again.'

Sujata went away. Siddhartha sat still, his limbs composed, never a waver of his lips nor flicker of eyelids. Evening fell quickly. The full moon of May rolled slowly across the skies. Still Siddhartha sat, till dawn came and Sujata returned to her tree with a morning pail of milk.

'Oh!' she said, 'I thought you would be gone. What have you done all night? Did you manage to sleep?'

'No,' Siddhartha said, 'I gazed into the heart of the moon till my eyes were filled with that other moonnight when the Nameless One entered my first body. My Queen-Mother's couch was set in a golden mansion on a silver mountain in high Himalaya. Outside, the clear waters of Ganga-ma tumbled from a cave of green ice. From an endless snow-field there came an elephant white as the snow itself, and in his trunk he held a lotus-flower. He went into the golden mansion and, trumpeting, made seven sunwise circles round my mother's bed. He smote her side with the flower and, large as he was, entered her womb. There I was conceived. Now I have to return to the white eternity.'

Sujata could well imagine the beautiful elephant and

wished that she could see it too, but of the white eternity she knew nothing and asked,

'Where is the white land to which you must go?'

Siddhartha said, 'It is, I think, on the other side of the moon where ten thousand beings are for ever fading out and forever being born again. But they are born to sorrow, and I must go to lift the burden of their sorrow from them.'

'Ah!' Sujata cried out, 'I have a moon-medal at home. I'll bring it to you. You'll see it is covered with goats and cows, with children and dragons. They live on the other side of the moon'. When she brought it, Siddhartha was standing. He took the fastening-pin from his robe, pushed it through the centre of Sujata's skin medal and slowly turned the moon-picture round and round.

'You and I, Sujata, have started the turning of the wheel which lifts the sorrow of the world. I see the ending of pain along the path leading from your tree to the great snow. You and I, Sujata, will call your tree the bo-tree because it gave me a vision of the vast world.'

'But . . . can it still be my cooling-tree?'

'Yes.'

The bite of an axe ran sharply through a thick wood in the land of the Norse. It was early morning in winter, an age and wide continents away from India's meditation-tree. A broad oak, newly-severed at the trunk, bowed for a brief moment before it toppled with a sound of tearing branches and a thud of timber on beaten snow. There were no shouts of 'Hurrah!'

A dozen men and as many strapping boys stood silent in a semi-circle with their heads bowed under the red rays of morning. The oldest lifted his hands and waved them back and forth as if he were speaking with them to the spirits of the forest.

'Trunk and branch; twig and leaf;
All you who floated in air,
All you winnowed by the wind,
  Forgive us!
Every axe-blow, stroke on stroke,
And the thundering all at the end,
  Forgive us!
Before this day is done
We will make you King.'

They chopped and trimmed the branches and then, with many a slip and slither on the snow, dragged the tree down towards their village. When they came to the rim of the forest where the snow was level and the cluster of their houses could be seen further down, they stopped their heaving to gather strength and breath. They sang the Song of the Bearing Home.

'Noble oak of the fells is King,
Hertha's sons about him sing.
Haul him away. Haul away.

Peak was crowned with circle of stars,
Trunk was ribbed with frozen bars.
Haul him away. Haul away.

Make him King in Lofengaard;
North-star shine on home and yard.
Haul him away. Haul away.

Bear him down by frozen tarn;
Kindle him keen in byre and barn.
Haul him away. Haul away.'

When the bright night settled on Lofengaard, there, in a clearing with the houses all about, the tree stood upright for all to see and a single torch was burning at its top. Every man and his wife, every boy and maid, came out and danced round the tree till their limbs were weary. Then they ate a midnight meal and with full bellies sang the Yule song, the Song of the Turning:

'By wonder of Wotan, thunder of Thor,
Hammer the Hinge, swing on the Door;
Beat on the Axle, battle the Bronze,
Arm the muscles of Freya's sons:
  Rout the ranks of the stars.

Switch the Sun from blood to gold,
Harness the oxen in fallow and fold;
Yoke the Plough-Star, sharpen share,
Cleave a furrow through frozen air:
  King of the sky is dead.

Warm the hearth where life began,
Strike a flame in sinew of man;
Gird the roof-tree, anchor thatch,
Heave on leather, thong of the latch:
  Open the Door of the Year.

Open the door and sweep the floor,
And lambs will leap in the morning.'

The Door of the Year was opened at midnight. By light of many torches King-tree was taken down, chopped and sawn and split into many lengths. Each log was carried indoors and placed on glowing embers where it burned through the first of days. When only a charred stump remained, it was plucked from the ashes and left to cool on the hearth. At the end of the day the father of each house took the charred log to a place of keeping till it would be brought out again next yule-night to make embers for a fresh fire and a fresh year. As he left the room his children spoke in unison:

'Oak of the forest, guard the spark,
Keep well the infant year.'

Guardians

Pharaoh's blood may darken the sand,
But his feet to Osiris will climb,
As long as Zed, the deathless tree,
   Sleeps on the bed of time.

Shipmates pull on their oars of ash
To the sound of a rippling rhyme;
The hand of Zeus on the carven prow
   Furrows the waves of time.

Buddha sits by the cooling-tree
While bells in the temple chime;
With the salt of sorrow upon his touch
   He turns the wheel of time.

Moon is gone and the oak is dead;
The year is past its prime.
Bear a yule log to the hearth;
   Kindle the torch of time.

Trees have been worshipped, trees have been slain,
Trees have sunk back into slime;
But a million trees and a million more
   Are guardians of man and of time.

LEONARD MASON is minister and mountaineer, father and grandfather, a quiet and thoughtful speaker and a profoundly original writer. He studied at Manchester, England, and Harvard, USA, and was minister to Unitarian congregations in London, Norwich and Leicester before leaving England in 1960 to take up his present appointment at the Unitarian Church of the Messiah, Montreal.

In the first of the passages which intersperse the main sections of these writings Leonard Mason writes: 'The dialogue of Christmas is crosstalk between the rampant reason of my self and fractured ghosts of ancient legendry.' Legends of many cultures and places are here brought together with an appreciation of modern scientific endeavour to create an unusual and beautiful contribution to the literature of Christmas and the primeval hope that welcomes each new year.

A companion to this volume is a collection of 'meditations in contrasting moods', *Bold Antiphony*. These are cast in the form of a free verse and are the fruit of public worship conducted by the author over many years.

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