

## WHERE WISE MEN YET RELUCTANTLY MAY KNEEL

Now every birth becomes a Bethlehem,  
Whence ghost of man, buried in sleeping womb,  
Slips from the dark into a sparkling maze  
Of blazing stars and choirs of singing spheres;  
Where love makes life, wakes life to sacred light;  
Where wise men yet reluctantly may kneel  
Before a commonplace more strange than myth,  
A creed less credible than fantasy  
That simple shepherds never think to doubt  
Who know what's-what, but care not how or why,  
Man's mystery of which men cannot speak,  
For dark tells tales undreamed of in the day,  
But leaves their meanings to interpreters,  
Poets who pit their wit and wishful words  
Against the empty silence of the sky,  
Conjuring up such sweet conceits as feed  
A deeper need, a hunger old as man;  
For, though our loves make light of loneliness,  
Yet every soul alive - and thus, alone  
Is but at heart a puzzled, nuzzling babe,  
Seeking with whimpering mouth some long-lost breast,  
Sweet-suckling warmth, feast of nativity,  
Man's ancient thirst, his oldest appetite,  
Food for his journey, offers viaticum  
Through three-and-thirty steps from dark to dark,  
From light to light, from ghost to wholly ghost;  
From sweetest smile of Marymilk he sups  
While looking upwards in the face of love  
To sourest wince of vinegar he sips  
While squinting downwards at a fading world;  
From dazzling midnight to the dark of noon,  
Where hope must hang, and wonderer must wait,  
Pinioned in pain, to bleed his time away  
Until he yield, there in this field of skulls,  
To nameless God his shamed and shivering ghost,  
Still asking why forsaken man must die....  
No man for all his wit has seen the wind,  
And blind we are to whence it first may rise,  
And blind we are to whither it may blow,  
And blind we are to where it comes to rest.

So may not man stir like a rising wind,  
Shake off the flimsy cerecloth of his flesh,  
Worn by its wearer once as swaddling bands,  
Hemmed garment, seamless gown, or purple robe,  
As raiment parted for some soldiers' play,  
As sweet-spiced linen in the sepulchre?

O may not man, buried in sleeping tomb,  
Slip from the dark into a sparkling maze  
Of blazing stars and choirs of singing spheres,  
Where love makes life, wakes life to sacred light;  
Where wise men yet reluctantly may kneel  
Before a commonplace more strange than myth;  
And feel him pass as softly as the air,  
As light as list the whimsies of the wind,  
And, in his passing, brushed by whispering wings,  
Sense on their cheeks his loving, last caress?

Whence came the baby? Whither went the man?  
For empty as the manger now, the cross;  
And empty as the cross, so now the tomb  
Of all but that limp livery of flesh  
In which we make such love as comes our way....

So, deafened by a host we can not hear,  
And blinded by a star we can not see,  
We wise men stumble at a shadowy stall,  
And fall, still wondering, to unwilling knees,

To seek beneath the gilt a hidden gold  
amidst the fume of frankincense and myrrh.  
No magics, Magi, for the Son of Man!  
Now every birth is helpless Bethlehem,  
And every death is helpless Calvary  
And we who know no whence, no whither, know,  
our only hope lies in his last perhaps  
That, when love dies, it lives to tell the tale....

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