

# *Pages From An Unpublished Autobiography*

## I: *FRIAR*

IT IS DEEP NIGHT, autumn, 1953. In the cloister garth the herbs, boxwood and ivy and the lank selal, wrapped in the thick, warmth-retaining darkness of their autumnal foliage, reach out their limbs to draw the last vigor of the year, and from their secretive pores they yield that indefinable odor of the season, half-wild, interrogative and mysterious as the whispering of time, to question and inform the dark, the mingling testimonial of the profferance of seed. The monastery, shrouded in the depths of its recollection, gathers into focus the diffuse consciousness of its correlated lives. It is a Dominican House of Studies, and I, a Lay Brother, contingent to that study but not engaged in it, pause in my rounds to taste a moment of the translucent night, grateful for its goodness, its wise regardful stars.

And standing among these autumn-laden herbs I let my mind lift over the monastery roof, slate-steep, jugged with gables and the high-flung cross; lift over the oaks outside; lift over the endless avenues lacing the narrow shelf of earth between the moulded hills and the eastern edge of the Bay. Westward the lights of San Francisco dapple the tranquil shore. I see them every night from my cell high in the monastery, a myriad glitter, uncountable. Northward the Sacramento, draining the inland valley and the immense watershed beyond, spends itself in the Bay, crossed and re-crossed by its bridges arching their lanes of traffic high in the voiding night. Beyond reclines the Pacific, swart, resistant, unquenchable to the mind, and deeper than man yet knows. Beside it, hugging the Bay like a harlot clasping a sleeper, the city murmurs its insolent provocation, hectic under its flotsam lights, its water-woven mists, flushed with the fantastic vision it holds of its own uniqueness, restlessly stirring the hunger of its unfulfillable wish.

And the great secular age, the strident and profane creation of free thought and humanistic sufficiency, lifts itself up to its sanguinary consummation, more shrill and intense than any which preceded it, more corrupt because more complacent, more vulnerable because more complex, vitiated by more grandiose dreams, cutting itself

off from the earth by the institution of the machine as the great civilizations of the past cut themselves off from the institution of slavery; and in the cutting, losing more and more of its interior unity, that frail ghost of its Christian past, utterly fragmenting; and as the fragmentation sets in, striving, as invariably occurs, for the purely mechanical unity of enforcement: Caesar's necessitous expedient. Everywhere the torque toward mere mechanical unity intensifies; the passivity of the East solidifying into the terrible blood-stained emphasis of economic collectivism; the activism of the West narrowing into the insane intensity of technological concentration, each in its over-simplification scanting the vision of a transcendent God etched on the heart of man.

THE NIGHT, LIKE A CONDOR'S WING, vast and unruffled, holds over the monastery. From a side door the Novice Lay Brothers emerge into the cloister and make their way 'round toward the chapel for their evening prayers. They whisper. I see only the white sides of their tunics blur between the arches, their black scapulars one with the gloom. They will kneel in the denser dark of the chapel and say the Rosary, their voices rising and falling in liquid accents. They are very young, and have tasted almost nothing of the implacable war of that world; but it will come to them, as it comes always to the innocence of life, clarifying it, obtruding upon the rapture of its vision the necessity of choice, temptation and faith grappling together in the interstices of the being, the world's battle plunged into the very depths of the soul. They are not aware. The peace of the cloister, the peace of the monastery hangs huge and unruffled, hovering the dark.

And I lift up my eyes to the rows of windows where, each in his cell, the young clerics lean above their texts, bringing their minds to bear upon the mystery of knowledge unresolved. They too are young, these Student Brothers, but more formed now, and growing into the deep integration of manhood. Soon they will be priests. For seven years they give themselves to the absorption and mastery of knowledge and the deep formation of prayer; the formation of the liturgy and

the common life, and the contemplative's unceasing commitment; and for the rest of their lives they will spend it. If they are true Dominicans they will die exhausted, expunged of the ineluctable burden of truth; will die on that line where the violence of the world and the violence of God engage each other, to be transformed by that violence into the vast tranquillity of Heaven.

And faintly, off there in the city, I hear the hourstroke of the carillon high in the distant Campanile. The University is closing down its lights for the night, its students trailing off into the eucalyptus darkness, boy with girl, books bunched under their arms, lingering. Its Professors swing down from the great library stacks to waiting automobiles, wheel toward home in the Berkeley hills and a book by an autumnal fireside to round out the long day of their knowledge. A good life, and a useful one, and for many deeply enviable. But I, a friar, musing in my cloister, who had only to move through the life of secular learning to find it not whole, have turned in here to a deeper integration. But yet the University is there, with its own validity, and its own vision of the Truth; and insofar as it is true we also are bound to it. For though the Franciscans, whom I envy, take by instinct to the wilderness, the Dominicans have always planted their houses by the great centers of learning. Who remembers now the days when the Friars dominated the intellectual life of Europe, St. Thomas and St. Albert delivering from behind the most renowned lecterns in the world? They are quite vanished. And almost as a direct consequence of that neglect (I mean the repudiation of the God-centered man from the halls of learning), on a hill over the Campanile bulks the dome of the Cyclotron, that womb of the Bomb, the weapon of the man-eating atom. Are we then bound as well to *that*? Indeed we are. That is our time, our century. The monastery was conceived as counter to the actual world, the world as it exists, in whatever century, and it cannot relinquish its function.

AND IN THE CLOISTER DARK, in the monastic solitude, possessed of that comprehension, I ponder the leaf-fall, summer's lingering devolu-

tion, ponder the fall of seed, the fall of life, ponder the disjunctured human violence, and the mind's flight beyond. And suddenly, over the cloister wall, like a kind of fatal confirmation, shrill and intense as the screech of an unclean demon, floats the high wail of a siren. Off there, in the tangled web of the city, an ambulance is threading its way down the long arterial to some congested intersection, where disaster perches on the twisted steel, over the smashed glass and the running blood. And there flashes across my mind, made lurid now by cumulative terror, the vision of those mute bystanders huddled in fascination about a spot on the asphalt, a focal area of concentrated pain. And the mind gags on revulsion, confronted with the city's ugly enormous abstractness, where human value dies in the mass and is made nothing, the intense episode seen merely as one of the vast organism's local agonies, no more than some spasmodic clot of reaction, an automatic reflex twitching a ganglion.

But the heart fights free. What suffers out there on the asphalt is the anguish of a soul, shorn of its bodily amplitude, and face to face with death. It is hard enough to pray for an age, much less the ganglion's abstract reaction, the jerk of a tortured nerve, but a *soul* draws prayer like a magnet draws iron. And under his scapular the heart of the friar grapples the invocation and finds its mode, is delivered up to it, the whole grasp of his function. In the heart of the Christian, pain and the individual anguish find their tortuous center, and he draws it into himself in that act of willed approximation which is the thing he is sent to do, his act of worth, perhaps his deepest usefulness. In his heart's own torment, the world's anguish is taken up and finds its hospital, its rehabilitation, the act of mercy and comprehension, which is his prayer.

Now the siren tracks down its destination, and its wail hangs hushed. And before it begins again, back on the merciful homeflight, the monastery draws upon itself its immemorial silence, its deep ingesting peace. The herbs, boxwood and ivy and the lank selal, drink of their sustenance, drink of the earth's bestowal, and the air's clean gift. The hour, spent now, dissolves into its aftermath, and the night glides on.

## II: POET

AND ONCE AGAIN I let my gaze probe into the close darkness of the garden, and taste with my nostrils the gifts of its beneficent herbs. High and deep lifts the night, hanging above the small lemon trees, the privet hedges and the ivied plots. I can see the stars shiver in the small earth-bound sky of the garden pool, where a stone dryad clasps in her childish arms the shape of an up-wriggling fish, and I am grateful that the obscuration of the dark relieves me from considering again its dulcet figuration. The entire garden is conceived in the pattern, if hardly the perfection, of the Italian Renaissance, and in my sojourn here it has filled me with distinct repugnance. From the first I judged it more fit for the resorts of that world out there than for the very heart of a Dominican monastery. In a cloister I wanted nothing more for vegetation than the long-bladed cactus that grows in the desert. I wanted it set in otherwise denuded earth, with one of those unforgettable Spanish crucifixes dominating the center. I wanted everything here to evoke, call up and project, yes, cry out the Passion and Death of Our Lord Christ Jesus, King and Redeemer of men, that we might be called hourly to our own passion, that death of self, that redemption of the interior man, in the eternal crucifixion which is the life of man in God.

It is this attitude, doubtless, which confirms me as the complete rigorist, an attitude accountable, I am told, in terms of my particular past, and forgiven with it, but with the very forgiveness discounted and ignored. How, I wonder sardonically, does one defend oneself against an epithet? Are these "born Catholics" so omniscient that their most complacent opinion approximates the authority of an infallible definition? This Irish-American clerical mentality, stabilized in a convenient *modus vivendi* with middle-class respectability, does it, perchance, constitute the august Magisterium of the Church? I spit upon the ground, disgusted, and turn aside.

And having yielded this much I cannot check myself, and suddenly my heart convulses in an upsurge of blistering pride and resentment, that

leaves me choked in a spasm of dangerous contempt. It is the pathetic liability of the *donatus*: unstable, rootless, unattached, essentially unbelonging. And then the anger leaches away into pure self-pity, and I am spent in the hopeless sequence of uncheckable emotion, riddled and confused. Where has all my vaunted monastic certitude fled to, I, an utter anachronism, with my fake medieval attitudinizing in a modern cloister? I recall how one of our parish priests, returned to the monastery for the annual retreat, cocked a thumb my way as I stalked hooded about the chapel and asked, *sotto voce*, "Whom have we here, pray tell, Ephraim the Deacon?" I suck in my breath, all badgered sensibility, and hug my sides.

BUT ABOUT ME THE MONASTERY, withdrawn and unwitnessing, keeps its peace, and makes no comment. That immemorial silence, ancient with the contemplative wisdom of two thousand Christian years, maintains the free simplicity of its mode. The monastic life has witnessed many such outbursts as mine in its long past and has made no judgment, knowing its slow silence will heal all, knowing its peace will pervade after the imperfect lives of every generation of monks and friars that it sees nourished and fulfilled and laid in the earth, are gone. And I perceive that the monastery is in fact not so much a physical object, a structure or dwelling place, but rather a *condition*, a spiritual perspective, an attitude, a transcendent motive, beyond all the temporal appurtenances of its material composition, so that we bring to it, each of us, our individual conformation, and are each transformed.

And I, wretched rigorist, shake myself, and wonder how so nebulous a thing as a man's past can make so great a difference between him and his Brothers. What is it I see that they do not? What is it they accept that I cannot? Things, to them, are more or less as they should be; but I, emerged from my past, renounced all that, renounced it once and for all at great cost; and the knowledge of renunciation envelops me, and I ask myself piteously if I gave up so much to rest in so temperate an equation. The past is dead. But if the past is dead indeed, what lives on? What

compelling memory infects the roots of the being, and shapes the man to its bias, twisting the receptivity of the new to the hard deformation of the old? What course foredooms the mind to its unconscious rigorism (if rigorism it be), and in the definition invalidates the value, makes a falseness of the true?

That past! That past! "It is memory that prophesies, prophecy that remembers!" And in the memory's muscular engagement the spent years surge across me, and all those violations, the hysterical acts of a soul fractured with conceit, with error, and the misjudging mind, perch vultured on my shoulder. And in their aftermath I turn my thought to the rough draft of that indeterminate book, which is all memory, the story of the *thrust*, where it lies now, on the table in my cell, earnestly begun, but far indeed from finished. It is the story of a conversion, a conversion as manifested in the poetry it occasioned. The conversion has been accomplished, and for all its consequences and its excruciating choices, it lies behind me in the indefinite contour of past event. Nothing remains to show now but the poetry, and what is that? Something of the energy is contained there, but also something of the shapelessness, something persisting in the mystery of form, the mystery which blankets and obscures the outline of its temporality, but somehow releases the abiding energy, the force, and the inherent motive that made the act what it was.

AND I AM TAKEN BACK in my mind to that other autumn, when all the latent consequence was drawing to a head. It was Advent, 1948, and the time drew down to the winter solstice. I was writing out the last poems of *The Residual Years*, that long chronicle of my guilts, my old allegiances and my deep betrayals. I had begun it fifteen years before, a few tentative pages of verse established out of the needs of early manhood, and then built poem by poem over the decade and a half of war and peace that held the centering quest of my life. Publishing it at first as I could, in slim sheaves, under various titles, I was largely unaware of what was shaping, but I gradually gained a sense of its continuity; until at last these collections were gathered up

and issued under the final generic name, to form a kind of comprehensive edition, not complete in itself, and with much more to come, but yet the looming bones of the thing apparent enough.

*The Residual Years*, then, is a work of slow accumulation, but what for me emerges out of the flight of time is the blood-line in it, the ancient Viking heritage of my father, that quintessential Nordic sorrow, mood of the fens, of the fjords, and the remorseless Arctic Sea, which shaped in pain the spirit of his people, and which all the blaze of California sun could not in me extinguish. For it is in fact only the earth-emphasis, the mood of primal and latter-day paganism, a paganism which, no matter in what century it appears, late or soon, evokes out of man only his ultimate futility, and the blind, unhoping quest for his fulfillment. It is the sign of *Wyrð*, the ancient Scandinavian concept of implacable destiny. Under that sign I had written: *Do you not doubt, being lonely of heart, / The fate that so forces? / Men doubling on death deny with their eyes / The joy that drew them . . .* This was its theme, the heart of that saga, chanted over and over, the long groundswell of *The Residual Years*.

And back and forth, modulating the groundswell, the other influences rose and fell away, and wrought upon it their transient figuration. There was the baffling complex of familial issue and unfulfillment: my father, the restless Norwegian musician, one who might almost be called a latter-day wandering *scald*, a man of strange and thwarted genius, closed in a forbidding mixture of compulsive rages and matchless personal integrity, savage agnosticism and unbending civic rectitude; and over against him the modulating Celtic softness of my mother, fundamentally religious, intelligent, poetic, affectionate; between them creating an imbalance that filled the soul of their son with a throttled intensity, but tempering it as well in a context of earnest sincerity, social responsibility and the purposiveness of truly Christian ideals. It is the unconscious struggle between *Wyrð* and Christ that tightens the pitch of *The Residual Years*.

And there is also that other ambivalence, the long frustration with her whom I found in ado-



lescence, clung to, and made in time a marriage; a marriage that broke in the long ruination of the war, through which as an Objector I endured its years of denial, and joined the heart of that loss to the great unfulfillment until it seemed to make of it one prolonged moan, the caught breath and the outgone sigh of deprivation, the overtone and the undertone, the long threnody of *The Residual Years*.

And last, and most consequential, the final years with her, who, born Catholic, married in the Church and fallen from the Church, yet made with me the second mating, and gave me to know what a fuller maturation of earthly love could mean; who with a kind of holy fierceness born of her fierce inward need, clarified the twisted ambivalence and doubt that had become my heart, and out of that clarification brought me to the threshold of the Faith.

AND NOW THE DARKNESS is probed by the single note of a bell. It is time for the chanting of Matins and Lauds. Up in the *Studentate* the young friars are forming their twin lines; and soon I can see them through the narrow windows, descending the switchback of the stairs, the hood over the head, and the white scapular dancing before and behind, floating out from the movement of the feet, which gives the light and buoyant tread that somehow catches up the indefinable blitheness, the gaiety of the Order; and as they descend they intone between them the *De Profundis*, that ancient, unsurpassable Psalm; so that the delight of life and the poignancy of death, the unflinching concentration on essentials which is the centrality of the Dominican vision, float down as I stand in the cloister, here in the autumnal shrubbery, with the season, in its speechless manifestation, pervading its quality in the advancing night.

Now the chapel lights go on, and from the other side of the house the priests are coming in, in ones and twos, dropping the hood back as they emerge into the cloister, and saluting each other gravely before they too disappear into the chapel. Inside, by now, all have taken their places, facing each other in the two banked rows of the oak-wood choir-stalls; and they kneel there, and in the hush of an expectancy hung on the verge of

a magnificent articulation, they await the bell that will begin them once more upon the centuries' old recitative that is the *Choral Office*, in which the contemplative restores in the Divine Chant the focus of soul that is the life of the spirit in God. I look up into the unsearchable witness of the night. The stars repose there, sustained in a vastness beyond comprehension. It is almost time for the bell. I move to join them, and as I pass out of the cloister-garth and into the hushed interior of the chapel, I leave the night to its witness.

### III: CONVERSION

IN THE AUTUMN OF 1948, I read St. Augustine's *Confessions*. It was a book I might have encountered earlier with nothing more than admiration, but because of the ripening of my life, it was made, when I came to it, my own book. Not only did I perceive my soul there, but it let me see something of the true stature of this baffling belief that had challenged my old incertitude: those elusive elements that are almost the last things to come to you, the mysticism and the mind. In St. Augustine the Faith became for me what I most desperately needed—a man's religion; but it was a thing that had as yet no correlation in my own life. I could see it in the book; I could not see it in the Church. I began to seek to find the mysticism of the book, and it was this that brought me more and more willingly into the churches. I still had no comprehension of the Mass; it remained a thing closed to me. I went, as I say, because she went, because she told me the mysticism was there, in the mystery of the Mass. I hoped to find what she had found, what the book had promised.



AND IT CAME ABOUT that we decided to attend a midnight Mass, that Christmas of 1948, in the Cathedral across the Bay, the first Christmas since the disorders of the war years that this custom was resumed. The nuns had prepared the Crib to one side of the sanctuary, with fir trees banked about a miniature stable. And as I sat in that familiar estrangement of feeling which had never left me in the Catholic churches, there came to me the resinous scent of the fir trees. It cut across everything else my senses had to contend with in that place, there in the heart of the great alien city, far from my early home and the reassuring simplicity of my old life. That scent was the only thing I could seize on with anything like true realization, but this time it did not raise in me the passion of rebellion it certainly would once have done. Now out of the greatness of my need I sensed in it something of a verification, a kind of indeterminate warrant that I need not fear, were I to come to the Christ, that He would exact the dreaded renunciation of my natural world. On the contrary it was His, His own, of His making, for me to take, by which I might be brought to know the complexity of the means that are His. It was there in the Cathedral, mixed in a faint odor of incense, like a tantalization, wooing me to probe back behind the facade of appearances, the externals of things in which His might is couched, to seek for the reality that lay behind them all.

I could look with my eyes to the place from which I knew the scent was coming, the somnolent odor of forests, and I saw in the miniature stable the several statuettes, and I recognized there the figures of the shepherds. As shepherds, as Orientals, they had no relation to anything authentic in my life, save perhaps the Christmases of long ago and the yearning suspense of childhood. What was all this to me, I reflected, as I often did before these things in my puzzlement, what was all this to me who had never so much as seen a shepherd? But hold. That scent in the air, it was taking me back into a past where something powerful and obscure was being enacted again within me; and searching there I saw the correlation. It was the shepherders. Who were they? Dark Basques or Mexicans, watching their flocks on the great flats west of Fresno, or taking their way into

the foothills and slopes of the sierra, or coming down again in autumn to graze the edges of vineyard country. And then those Navajos I had seen long ago, out there on the high New Mexican mesa, their impenetrable faces grouped around that campfire, staring without motion into the embers while the old prospector told us of their lore.

And suddenly, traced back on the long scent of the fir branches, I saw the shepherd in the shepherd, and the shepherd came alive. And the meaning of the Incarnation, the meaning of the Birth, in terms of the shepherd, as I remembered him, began to widen within me. In the folklore of the West the shepherd is certainly of all types the most low. Half-crazed, it is thought, with solitude, and hence impenetrably ignorant, unfit for any more likely employment and in consequence depraved, he has become, in the obscene humor of the smoking room, a kind of minor rural god of the vice of sodomy. I too had relished this sort of vile humor, but nevertheless I had never lost my respect for his dignity, and for the occupation that took him straight to the heart of the wilderness which I, in boyhood and in manhood, had virtually worshiped.

SO THERE WAS TRULY a deep and powerful bond between us, the shepherd and I, though I had forgotten him. What I saw now was that he stood on the verge of the Mystery. For some obscure reason, hidden within the frame of the Event, he had been touched, and I sensed that the demarcation was not merely fortuitous. But what was the thing that made him so eminently liable, gave him that unconscious candidacy for the divine? Was it mere ignorance? It could hardly be innocence, standing there in the complicity of his earthly sins, as inveterate as Adam and as culpable as Cain. Was it simply that he was common as dirt, "the perdurable fellahin," prime specimen of the Great Unwashed? In a churchful of Solid Citizens, he was as incongruous as a sheepdog at a dance, and the sympathetic incongruity of mind and manner yoked us together. In the essence of his utter simplicity, his total lack of pretension, he stood there, ripe with the odor of sheepdung and juniper twigs, mutton grease and fir resin, and I recognized him.

When a few days later I came to write *The Uncouth*, that was the underlying force of it, seated in such ancient affinities, making it what it is.

But there was more at work here than the genesis of a single poem. For one thing, that night saw the fashioning of a bridge, a mode of transference from the involvement of the past to the requirement of the future. There is a time when, after the logical structure of the Faith has been perceived, its truth acceded to, its use affirmed; when the insufficiency of one's past is wholly realized, and the sufficiency of the Church has been gradually discerned—still, there remains a final blankness of those areas of association which make in the mind the living thing a religion must be, and until this blankness is spanned it is not possible to shape the deep assent a whole faith requires. And it was the odor of the fir, the memory of sheepdung and mutton grease, cutting across the closed interior air of the Cathedral, that transformed the shepherd into the shepherd, and brought me with him to my knees at the Crib. In the choosing of the shepherd I too would be chosen, and in this choosing, this bringing, this bridging, would be dispelled the old anxiety I spoke of, the fear that the acknowledgement of the Christ, who somehow had remained in my imagination as a kind of sacerdotal decoration, a roofed-over church-god, would deprive me of that fullness of religious response relative purely to Earth, the natural kingdom and the great sustaining Cosmos, the only religion I had ever had. For it had been pantheism, mistaking effect for cause, rather than atheism, asserting effect without cause, which had all those years secured my adherence.

AND GAZING NOW across the multitude between me and the sanctuary I saw the tabernacle, set back upon the altar, contained in its own reservation, as mysterious and impenetrable as some thoughtless stone. "Unknown God," I said to myself, "What can you be that I should come here and wait for your word? If the hills and the sky and the stars have not spoken, what hope from you? O lifeless bread housed in the lifeless bronze! If the vast cosmic god hears not, nor cares, why should any man speak to you?"

We had genuflected, on entering, as I had learned to do, and then I had knelt a moment beside her, not merely to conform, but to see if perhaps in the approximation of the empty act the thing might be evoked; but I soon sank sighing back on the pew, as if even so little an effort as this were too much to expend. She herself had kept kneeling, as was her custom, and now in the sight of her presence there at the margin of my vision, I became conscious again of that special quality she seemed always to possess in such moments: the character of a subdued but vibrant expectancy, as of one waiting, fastened upon an interior alertness; the body tensile with a hushed and quickening excitement; the head bent slightly forward in the listener's attitude; the neck, seen from the side and behind, arched with a poised presentment; and the heavy hair, coifed, caught up and coiled under the scarlet turban. What mystery, I wondered, what revelation did she wait for, something which in its very expectation sealed me off in my plight? What does she wait for, when she waits like this, kneeling, contained within the ineluctable principle of that femininity, out of the knowledge of its very incompleteness made receptive and serene? What does she see there, sense there, across the infinity of the nothingness that faces man? Is it a mystery the soul of woman is made to meet? A mystery the mind of the male, in its terse abstractness, can never truly grasp? Is it a woman's wisdom, a woman's necessity (I idly toyed the question), unreal for any man?

Any man? I asked it again, like an echo, turning my gaze back toward the crib. Can it be true even of the primitive, in all his subjectivity, in all his celebrated intuition? But the vision of those shepherders, impassive, crouched there on the cold sheep-flats outside Bethlehem struck through me, before the inconsequential question could find its rebuttal. I saw the ridges flecked with frost, the wind crumbling the ruined darkness, blowing the bronze dust of the Ammonite, and the flake of the Babylonian bone. And the vision of the shepherd became the tragic vision of the race, cut off from finality by the unwitnessing layer of darkness that has no edge. And in the hovering night of that vindictive upreaching void

an immense terror dropped over me. I remembered all the wildernesses I had known, the measureless night, and sensed their plight out there, those primitives, those shepherders, watching their beasts through the jackal-haunted blackness, huddling a blaze.

AND IT ROSE NOW, that void, empty and foreboding through the tall lofts of my imagination. It rose over the cathedral, over the city, over the long ribbon of coast, over the continent, breathing and vast on the web of the waters, over the great dream-sunken hemisphere and the planetary earth itself, up into ultimate heights where no life is, ever, and the nameless galaxies grope their way through deserts of space that will never be probed. And sustained in those altitudes the winter constellations walk their great way, bearing yet the fabulous names the Greeks had given them, back there, so long ago, before the time of the epoch of Christian man: Orion and Taurus, Andromeda and Perseus, Cassiopeia and Draco; and the great Ursa, circling forever that nailhead of the North. The Greeks had given them names indeed, but how pathetic! We in our enlightenment know that the gods are dead, the stars no more than titanic blobs of fire, unthinkable vast, and going nowhere.

And the terrible universal enmity, set against the isolate human heart, came into me, and the loneliness of man, trapped in a universe he cannot subdue. Westward that hostile, man-hating sea throws its storms upon all coasts, chews its islands, smashes its ships, breeds its interminable, indissoluble fog. It will be coming in soon, I reckoned, that low invective, that sundering sea-hugging cloud, blowing through the Gate, running its outrider pennant far up-river to cut off the cliffs. And it will spread sideways, and widen, possess the Bay and all its boats, the wharves and the barges. And the great buoys will mourn in it, sad, souging their thick and doleful note into the sodden ear of that cloud. And gliding it will possess the houses on the shore, all the peninsular towns. And it will cover the highways, and the fast lanes of traffic will be slowed, and men will die in it. And the long trains will nose through it, crying, those sleek metallic runners, in from Cheyenne, from



Omaha and Chicago, footing their way cautiously on the dewed iron, anxiously calling ahead to the crossings, crawling between the flexing lights. And the airports will be sealed, the great planes in from the ends of the earth will circle and go elsewhere. And behind the cities the nude heads of the hills will take it too, and the redwood canyons claim it as theirs, for they love it, fog is their element, they drip it endlessly; it is their embrace, their thing of love; and it is beautiful.

But for the men on the Bay, the men in the machines, the pilots and the drivers, those in the long ships creasing the sea, it is not beautiful. Man sets himself over against sea and earth, and they both fight him. The mountain fights him, raiding winter after winter the troublesome road that binds its base, stabbing down its rockslides, smashing its giant pines across that thread. And the river fights him, the dyke-breaker. It drinks rain and breaks out. And the storm fights him, gathering its cyclic strength and hurling itself in on the land. And fog fights him. Crashing on uncharted reefs the split ship shrieks and starts down; deep in its bowels the boilers burst open, disgorging men and metal on the tangled kelp. The crew abandons, pushing off in rafts, riding out the back-surfing roil where the hulk sucks under. They drift, float out in the white smother. They call and call across to each other before they divide, before they are lost each to the other, left each alone, the echo of their shout dies out on the water, in the waste of fog.

And the great burden of human life, of the man-life, the great burden of my own life, endless, without End, rose like a vision seen in my heart; and my mind was drenched. And I cried out in my heart at the doom of man, the doom beyond the brute denial as the sea deals it, beyond death as the fog delivers it; the more terrible doom of which these elemental dooms are somehow the type; the real doom of cut-off man dis severed from God, adrift on the raft of earth in a universe of night, a universe of fog, of galactic dust, and no port to make. I had come without knowledge to the root of one of the great historic dilemmas—that teleological liability, that absolute block by which the quest of man is shut from its attainment; the curse that he only, of all seeking things,

cannot attain to his needful goal; the curse of man that he alone may never achieve the essentiality for which he was made.

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AND THEN, in a long correlative insight, comprehension was given me. And all the instrumentality of that search—the witness of the woman; the perusal of baffling, halfread books; Mass after Mass sat through in ignorance; all those sermons falling on the deafest ears in Christendom; my false misguided hope; the intensity of search cramped most desperately into my soul, compressed and hardened there in the ferocious pressures of that agony—now all were fused in the instant of my enlightenment. That night, that Christmas Eve in the San Francisco Cathedral, with the shepherd hunched by his dung-fire outside Bethlehem bitter in the wind of a ruined world, all, all leaped into focus. And the knowledge of the Christ, the power of a stupendous disclosure poured into my heart. I saw that beyond the intellectual act of the Greek or the religious one of the Jew, the emergent Christ had spoken, revealing what the combined intelligence of all philosophers, the total aspiration of all worshipers, could never have conceived. In a single act of love and expiation Christ plunged the human soul into the very actuality of God, and quenched it there, and its purified gaze met the gaze of that God, was unified in a single look, made face to face. The mystery is open. Man's thwarted end burns in the glance of an unspeakable Love—it is the Beatific Vision.

For into the human context, into the ignorant heart of the human shepherd, penetrated the transcendent principle, the Word. In the mystery of flesh God walked the world; healed men, taught men, was nailed to the sky and killed there; tomb-sealed; rose up out of death's mechanistic chaos to touch on sacrificial fullness, and in the mystery of the Church maintains the salvific principle which makes men of the divine. . . . It is the great renewal a self-offering God casts ever on earth, the immortal fire which finds its kind in the individual heart, and they burn together, they make one blaze.

Suddenly through the spiritual denseness of a man's grossness that Grace is given, and he sees

the Church as the Incarnate One, and he comes. Upon Her altars Christ flashes the realism of unsubduable God. In the sacrifice of the Mass God stoops and proffers, stoops and proffers, descends, rises, is nailed to the sky. Over and over, spending and redeeming, He is never done. Out of His joy He yields Himself immortally in the supreme act, the Redemption. That wave of restoration drives through the chaos of the world, dissolving sin, dispelling darkness, casting out rancor and evil, killing hate in the human heart. A man is touched. His pride-stiff soul crumbles before an ineffable grace and he comprehends. The once sinister Church, seen only as evil, becomes in a trice the resplendent Mother of Men, the Christ as pure beneficence, and he skips in singing.

Can this be him of whom the common jibe is given: "He fears liberty as much as he needs bondage"? O foolish men! You see darkness where there is light, and light where there is darkness! How long will you hunch in your fears, squatting there on your ancient earth-soiled loins, the fear of those venal loins polluting your vision? How long will you crouch in the servitude of that sexual terror? Day after day Christ on the altar dispels all that, repeats His passion, pours out the running wave of His grace, the flux of His perfection. It would drown your wrath in its vastness, would lift you on its swift upreach, but you clench and resist, you fear. Adam-wise, you prefer your wretched fig-leaves to prime spiritual nakedness, the blazing exposure of a soul made new in God, brought face to face, burned pure in the excoriate gaze of Christ.

I too crouched out there on the sheepflats of man's terrestrial ambiguity, with nothing but the rags of pitiful pride between me and that death, but something was spoken into my soul, and hearing I followed. When the fir-smell reached me across the closed interior air of the Cathedral, binding as it did the best of my past and the best of my future, shaping for the first time that synthesis of spirit and sense I had so needed and never found, I was drawn across, and in the smell of the fir saw it for the first time, not merely as an existent thing, but as a *created* thing, witness of the Word, the divine Logos, who made all earth, and me, a soul in His own image, out of very love.

And I saw in the fact of Creation the end of Creation; and in the end of Creation saw indeed the unspeakable Lover who draws the loved one out of the web of affliction, remakes him as His own. It was then that I could rise from the pew, and, following like a hound the trace on the air, go where the little image lay, in the Crib there, so tiny, among the simple beasts, watched over by the cleanly woman and the decent man, and these humble ones, my good friends the shepherders, who in that instant outleaped the philosophers. That was the night I entered into the family and fellowship of Christ—made my assent, such as it was—one more poor wretch, who had nothing to bring but his iniquities.

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AND ALL THIS WHILE the Cathedral had been steadily filling, and I was vaguely aware of it, though too absorbed in my own thoughts to be conscious of time. But suddenly there began behind me the sound of the rising of people, a sound coming up out of the hush that held it, and filling the hush, gathering in waves from here and there, as section after section, in the gathering awareness, rose to the feet. Even in the days of my greatest resistance, this had been one of the most compelling things I had experienced in the Catholic churches: a kind of inner spontaneous coming-up, as a flock of birds of the fields, out of some inner instinctual thing, rises: the commonness of it, the mutual identity of the need, and this, the response to the need. Just before the Canon you hear it. In the better-mannered parishes they wait discreetly for the bell, but in the poorer parishes they do not wait. When the Preface is on and they know the Sanctus is drawing near, they begin to go forward from their seats to the kneeling; you hear the spread of the sound of them moving ahead to kneel. I received it now as the great hushed and expectant congregation rose to its feet, and looking up I saw that the acolytes were coming in, the subdeacon and the deacon, and behind them, in his great vestments, the Archbishop himself. But now he was no longer the Archbishop. He was any priest before any altar in the whole of Christendom, bending into the Confiteor. And the Mass began.

# A ROBINSON JEFFERS MEMORIAL

Photography by: EDWARD WESTON and BRETT WESTON