

BRIAN STRANG

THE INFINITE INFANT

1. HORSEMEN

“Now hear the fourfold roots of everything: enlivening Hera, Hades, shining Zeus, And Nestis, moistening mortal springs with tears.” --Empidocles

the four cardinals are flat relics
sacred bones like all bones
anonymous prone
the points of a compass:
ashen ravens of rain
milky land of winds
carmine lips of Lucifer
golden faces in soil
crux of poppies worms
become swollen scarlet
through skulls trees bud
scatter of petals four rivers
from this osseous cross
clouds crowd the sphere
to the roots of creation
deep in the other world
where antecedents
form a council
stream bright as flame
loam like the aether
between elders who know
this world is a shadow of their own
of stillness of waves
it multiplies and re-creates
as golden poppies
from the bones
of cardinals

*

the horsemen are consecrated
are merciful
exactly as pictured by that mind
that wanders amidst faces
waking or sleeping or liminal
senses into the kingdom
a newborn to be gathered
a cradle of breeze into
the unknowable eye
into the remembered kingdom
land of garlands and candles still
eternal is rest is nothing is blessed
in linen laid into the earth
by murmurs breathed by beloved
on skin then sinew then shining bone
horses undulating across the land
the wind through their ribs
sings a different song for every soil
breaks branches overextended
into the land rattles the bones of trees
the blood-filled limbs of every animal
shadowed by furies across the plains
medusas shred and scatter
carve their song across the land
their ashen eyes see nothing
but impermanence

*

the elements are not four but infinite
time relived eternally

caressed from itself infinitely multiple
lotus upon navel upon lotus upon navel
so that in the over and over of worlds
in their arrival and destruction
distances dissolve bend toward
aching equilibrium without gravity
governing earthbound days
grind with gravitas straining us
til we tick through the gate
and into depth of nubile night
where cells whirl and fires wake
into the warm crust of earth
in waters of the womb
deafening drumbeat
systole and diastole of devotion
waxes and wanes rises and falls
in the long slow universal rhythm

*

the kingdom within is sacred is profane
every breath every hand every one
every blood-dripping newborn beats
with a red-black heart unforgettable
the gift and curse of unforgettable
the kingdom within the very wind
fills the lungs of the furrowed wail
chant in a circle of shimmering souls
the kingdom is within and within it
the sacrosanct other kingdoms
creatures two legged and four
feather and fin and nothing at all

on the head of a pin every one
within every star every star
within a kingdom inside another
lotus from navel and lotus from navel
inside another inside another
all of it a land once thought mythical
but all the more real for it

2. FALLING FORWARD INTO THE FUTURE

“Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man.” Martin Heidegger

You write as you look at the flat Italian skies. “Flat Italian skies.” You wonder what the phrase could possibly mean. What is a flat sky? What is an Italian sky? What is a flat Italian? What is a sky?

You sit as a young person, the one you once were, at a kiosk café. What is a kiosk? A café? In a part of Spain, not Italy, you write the phrase that comes to you as a young person, seemingly from the air, from the sky, from the Spanish sky. The sky suspended over the café table, the one with the notebook and pen, the one with the coffee and spilled sugar and later that day with the red wine spilled from the nearby vineyards. Grapes grown and picked by people you know, by families who are not wealthy but prosper archaically, families that operate by land, by sun, by rain, by wind, while you struggle in an air-conditioned glass hallway over the ocean.

At this moment you are here, every age, every possible self: infinite worlds. But the infant appears to you in the middle of the air. A newborn is suddenly present, in the middle of the air, right in front of you, slowly twirling, its umbilical cord twisting away into the distance. To where? The sun? The soil? You look at your surroundings to assure yourself you are actually here, not dreaming.

Yes, you are here. Very much so. Yet the infant is also here, not a projection or a dream, but actually in front of you, very much so, just across the table and slightly above your head. It even casts a shadow. And so you write it down. You write words which approximate, which fail the experience. You leave symbols and marks, draw a picture, in your notebook. Each effort is a single experience, each a beautiful failure, each multiplies its presence. Each becomes another infant but none of them do anything to change the fact that this infant is in front of you.

You imagined an infant floating in the air still dripping its umbilical blood. Infant with ancient eyes, gilded by the many versions of itself. You imagined it and it appeared. Did imagining make it so? And now it exists irrefutably, not imagined but actual. It cracks its golden lids, licks its marbled lips, utters the first language, gives you the gift of language, a

language that creates itself, that floats a newborn in front of your very eyes. It looks directly at you.

You see windmills all around. Dozens and dozens of wooden windmills spinning wildly, faster than the wind itself. You know you have imagined these, projected these out to the world, that they are uniquely yours, that they exist but nobody else can see them. They become deafening, ringing your ears, propelling the sound through your body. They haunt you day and night, powered by the fury of your nightmares, by the terror of obligation.

But everyone sees an infant. You didn't imagine it; you woke to it. Everyone has always seen this same infant falling forward into the future. It existed long before you ever did. The infant is the same infant billions of times over, as it always has been. Its form is nowhere but its center is everywhere and everyone is born, collective wonder spinning from its own center, and it smiles and reaches to touch you. It smiles and reaches toward anyone who is ready.

3. PROPHECIES

*“Sadly we sing and with tremulous breath
As we stand by the mystical stream
In the valley and by the dark river of death
And yet ’tis no more than a dream”
Charles W. Ray*

the predictions went like this:
“the ones who now dance
will float just above the ground
the ones who lie
will be shortened—about a foot tall
the ones in the valley
will be flooded and will falter
they will be made of wood
and will become as old
this is what will become of
those left behind”
and they were true
in the lymph of your misgivings—
the hands of elves—
centipedes capsized and convenient
the uninitiated fold themselves
crows will grow to blind you
swarming with bees
harrowed holes for eyes
a coiled snake skeleton
is a coliseum of compost
ruin of renewal—the very center of the world
a wheel of toil—the very essence of the world
this is the city of after
city of forgotten faces

this is the holy city
faces peeled of rinds
of the roles they're playing
letting the precious gift
of unfolding futures fade
the prediction went like this:
"half-sized souls sprout legs
turning tadpoles to torpedoes
abandoned to anachronistic outposts"
each misfortune an omen
an open mouth
that refuses to heal that murmurs
the story of people twisted
from twigs by coyotes
now under land under lie upon lie
a heart in the soil keeps beating
leaking blood all the while
haunting the dreams of occupiers
sores on the face of their god
all around the dead listen
through the grass
hear your doubts and fears
you were certain
but now have only questions
become cleaner clearer soporific
impenetrable replicable
inconceivable city
is this the same world?
the same underbelly
in the gravel of speech
in a once-human figure circling
unconcerned with gravity?

or the circles of flame
and broken hoop of inheritance
never wanting to see itself
in either shadow or light?
people beg and line the roads
uttering a single whisper:
“nothing in the world
will be uncorrupted
dear hearts a blemish
and blight brought
not by justice but by
its abscess revenge
please tell us
how
we are
wrong”

*

the predictions went like this:
“liminal hosts
in a limitless
ovarian heaven
over agrarian land
with glass skin
and waxen hands
will come loose when you shake”
a circle of men in robes
listening to signals
in metadata

*

the eye sinks in the ocean
fish swarm from a bottomless pit
candy-colored and caustic

holy relics, divine images
longing and heartbreak
holy kneeling at holy places
the land where the tide goes out
where you may sleep day and night
and dream of sable crowns
empty sleeves
sweet nothings
below a painless sky
here you reside eternally
everyone lives eternally
everyone you know anyway
eventually
caterpillar to chrysalis
to butterfly
without a mouth
with which to eat
four paths
six directions
arc of a burning eye
the center of the earth
the tracing of a heart
a precious name
the tip of memory
marked by an aurora
new sky over the empty
ancient cities
over orange trees
from infant hands
kneel to say the prayer:
“fatal garden
fertile compass

cardinals
axis of the world
poppies splitting bone.”
a city silk-sewn
by a spider upon
lotus upon lotus
the eye entwined
in the roots of a tree
of a desire unwished
says come sing my song:
“a winter
carcass
hums with
living
voices”

4. THE TREE

“Truth did not come into the world naked, but it came in symbols and images. The world will not receive truth in any other way.” --Gospel of Philip

Rooted into the underworld is the canopy of creation. The dead climb the branches and fall again with each leaf, born anew in the dying breeze, bedeviled by winter’s blackening until pierced by spring’s spears when they sink back into their circle, redoubling their efforts for the next cycle.

During the day, necromancers, men in red robes lying prone, facing each of the cardinal directions, lie face down as stepping stones. They ritualize to find the story they want to accept. You wander away and into your new reality, something is wiggling and gnawing into your head where it whispers intricate instructions, making you a cat’s paw to your celestial double. You sigh with relief. The land speaks through your mind.

The indelible moment circles on itself, the irreversible: the forests, the plains, depopulated towns. Flesh and blood are cleaved, strangers to their cascading former selves, each of which falls to the bottom of a starless lake. Twins stare at you from within, not seeing but knowing.

Their eyes are your eyes. Their eyes are the black mirror of water. Their eyes are the eyes of an infant.

The tree is endless, boughs bejeweled by stars, sphere upon sphere, tree upon tree, bloom upon bloom. A clatter of bones in the branches, feathers aflame. Cardinals dangle and adorn the branches, still seeking acceptable stories, until their gilded remains slip from their robes, blacken the soil and bring scions wherever they land: infinite infants, each with the snowy head of an owl.

Witches tell a story from one thousand seasons ago, written in silk, a story that repeats itself so many times that it becomes a forgetful old man in an infinite spiral. While you slumber, they stuff your belly with needles, circle your lips and leave a diadem of dread. In the morning, you sit up suddenly awake, touching the coarse twine stitches on each articulated pair of your ribs.

Endless. Boughs bejeweled by stars, sphere upon sphere, tree upon tree, bloom upon bloom.

The moon: a spoon of silver on the Elysian sphere, a medicine sewn into the sky. When swallowed by a fathomless blackened rose, when staring upward from the bottom of a deep lake, you will see the two birds in the sky, circling with wings spread, telling you of the shame of crippling servitude and how to float on the soundwaves above it. This is the gift you will receive, a gift of rising song. This is the touch of infinity, forever unfolding. The gift is this very instant and nothing more.

A newborn in the dark, initiates around a campfire, radiant horizons, a slaughtered bull.

Hawkmoth among the bees, rowan tree circled with candles, black-eyed raven, twilight forest of the hunt.

Black ocean, wind-whipped alabaster plain, the stretched bones of a cardinal rose, pyramid of golden skulls.

Saucers of stars for eyes, twin owls, messengers in a hail of diamonds, spiral arms of the Milky Way.

This very instant and nothing more. Endless.