

## Miscellaneous Writings

*Find comfort and hope in religion  
Not the adding and subtraction of sin.  
Give ghosts, miracles and myths their place  
As they are vague outlines of the veiled face.  
Do not use God for pride, anger or greed  
Love is not selfish over want and need.  
Keep true to the spirit of knowledge  
Let it not bring you back to the edge.  
Be thoughtful, always judge others fairly  
Be not blind to ally or enemy.  
In every way you can be as cruel  
The true foe of your own principle.  
In your heart make the stranger welcome  
You may become a wanderer for a home.  
God is not always seen in the world  
But is there, like sky mirrored on still water  
Beliefs pass, and leave only a residue  
But the truth must be discovered anew.*

*I am from Dalkey of the Seven Castles, a pretty village tucked beneath a hill on the southern tip of Dublin Bay. Off its shore is an island that became a sanctuary for The Wandering Tribes - first the nomads who eked a living by hunting small prey of the forest, fishing by the river mouth, collecting limpet shells from the rocks on the beaches and cliffs, gathering nuts and berries when in season. The people named their new home Dagger Island because it was shaped like the stone implement, and could only have been created by the gods - for them. But the tribe feared the dark forests and worshipped the Stag God above all other deities. The shaman told his tales beside the hissing campfire in summer or inside the hide-covered tents during the cold windswept winter nights: the people were mesmerized by his voice, the shape-changing priest was half man half stag. They feared and respected him. As they listened and watched, the antlers would rear and tail wag; enthralled they knew he could vanish and fight with demons. Only he could protect them. They never strayed from the river inland; this was the gods' world, - the shaman world - beyond their command.*

*The second tribe brought with them the knowledge of farming - seed crop and livestock. They did not fear the forest, they hacked at the trees with their polished-stone axes. They had other gods - Goddess of Fertility, the most potent of them all. This tribe was also at the mercy of Nature: each stage of life's cycle was met with adversity. The precious seed-corn by the hearth had to be protected from the damp and the weevil; when sown protected from the birds - when grown, from the boar and the hare. The land was large and the people few: they traded, intermarried and lived in peace.*

*Thirdly to arrive were the tomb builders, who buried their dead rulers under cold slabs on hilltop or by whispering streams. With the dead were placed beautifully decorated pottery and personal items, to ease the harrowing pain of loss. The places became mounds for the tribe to worship - tombs for the Gods. They believed the Sun God gave them mastery of the world. The Gods spoke to them and the priests wrote their words on stone: understanding these words was the secret to survival and prosperity. The sage priests of the people could read the stars and count the days of each cosmic cycle. The year like the life of a man or animal came to pass. The cycle did not end, for in the darkness of winter the human spirit could feel the warmth of spring.*

*The fourth tribe heralded the end of the Stone Age: the beginning of the Bronze Age. Their ritual of death was simpler than their way of life. To the next world the deceased would carry a humble food vessel, often little more. But the society of the living would develop great sophistication. They were metal shapers, and had unearthed the mystery of the rock. They could melt the stones, from which copper would flow. The people searched the land for green malachite and blue azurite, and created hardened implements for farming and war. They made copper axes, daggers and javelins: their knowledge made them arrogant. They were accomplished archers. They swept across the mountains down to this bay, and made Dagger Island their home. Their skill set them aside from others, and made them wealthy - a class of their own. They also refined the rough nuggets of gold deposited in the riverbeds, and made them into beautiful ornaments - lunula, gorget, bracelets, fasteners - glinting like the sun. Trade with other peoples over the sea brought new gold ore and the knowledge of tin, alloyed with copper made bronze.*

*The fifth tribe were the Celts, carrying with them weapons of iron, stronger than anything the natives had. In time they would rule. This fearsome people built their homesteads on the fertile lands, and created great meadows and pastures for their cattle. They built their promontory forts and raths on the rim of the bay. The year had its division of warm and cold, and a festival for each of the seasons. Samhain was the chief festival, doorway between death and life: darkness and light. It was a magical time, and occasion of celebration, when all the tribe gathered together on November eve. They feasted and told stories by the hearth. Samhain was a time for children, who got up to mischief as parents drank. But there was a sinister side to this happy festival, which did not always show its face. It was a dark place that belonged to the gods and goddesses. Animals were killed, their blood spilt to appease the goddess of the tuath. But the votive offerings were not always enough. For cattle became diseased, their flesh wasted and the udders became dry. The fields would not produce any crops. Mothers would give birth to stillborn babies; young warriors would die in battle, in great numbers. The whole tuath could face death. Enemy tribes could sweep in and subjugate the people – kill them or worse make them slaves. When animal offerings failed, the next logical step was clear. But nobody spoke of these happenings, deep among the oaks.*

*The Isle of Thorns lay beyond a dark wood, on a lonely road from the west, the route Begnet took, the holy woman in search of a hermitage. She was a Christian – the sixth tribe – a princess of the Dal Messincorb. Begnet devoted her life to contemplation and prayer, and chose the land of Thorn Island to be her hermitage, the place of gorse and rock, as hard as the crown that her Savior wore. With the sore feet of the pilgrim Begnet came to the clearing beneath the wooded hill. She did not care that the soil was stony, no farmer's prayer, she had her goats and hens. She did not fear the cry of the wolf; he would not come near such lean shores. She set her kinsmen to work cutting down the ancient oak to build her church. From the clearing Begnet could see the island, with its remains of an old fort. She saw it as a place of beautiful solitude; that was where she built her cell. It was a place of meditation, where she could find the grace of God. Begnet was young and principled, happy to shun a life of comfort and wealth. She chose the plain cloth of the ascetic over fine purple, gold embroidered dresses. Her life was one of pious peregrination, but the cell was her spiritual home.*

*On the moonless night she saw the angels dancing on the sea, and knew day would come. Love sustained her more than the craving of food - goat's milk, bread and hot nettle soup. Before dawn her nuns would tip toe to the goats and relieve the warm sagging bellies. They took yesterday's loaves from the baker's stove, hurrying not to miss Morning Prayer. Then they carried the food across the choppy waters to Begnet's door. Sometimes Begnet would be awake, to hear the curragh scrape upon the shore. No footsteps would be heard on the path: then the rattle of jug and plate on the plinth. And once again she was left to her solitude and meditation. Other days only the matins bells would wake her, bones weary from last day's labour. In winter she feared the sun had perished, grey waves under a grey sky. The east wind made her bones ache as flakes of snow gathered on her cowl. Hunger devoured her stomach as she worked, and her eyes could not help look out in hope. She raised her head, looking for the boat bringing the bowl of vegetable broth. Begnet prayed for those suffering in purgatory, and for the sins of the living, that they would escape damnation. That was her life since the gold trinket crumpled in her palm to the sound of wings. After her death it was said the relic brought healing to the sick. There were miracles for those who prayed and the water from the well brought pilgrims to the Isle. Two humble churches of stone were built in her memory in an age of great monasteries and gold-glittering wealth.*

*The seventh tribe came from the north, seafarers plundering the Christian world. They murdered, burned churches, desecrated shrines and relics. Their longboats penetrated the deepest rivers to find the most bright and opulent sites. The tribe settled a wooded ridge by a wide river, a lonely spot where two ancient roads met. From the marshy banks the city of Dublin rose. Families settled in its hinterland where the mountain slopes were still dark with oak, beech and hazel. In the sheltered sound of Thorn Island they moored the longboats - vessels to carry goods and slaves over the seas. The farmsteads fed the city of Dublin with dairy produce, eggs, poultry and grains. They supplied vegetables and fruit, wool and flax that had been carded and spun. The rivers were plentiful in fish and the marshes loud with wildfowl. From the shore came the whirr of the grindstone, the scratching of the saw as the skeletons of new ships were born, the high pitch ting of the blacksmith's hammer. But the days of power - parading in rich gold and silver jewelry, rich satin and silks in exquisite scarlet and greens - came to an end. For those who controlled Dublin controlled its*

*hinterland - and Ireland. Brian Boru had set his lust on that conquest. The King of Munster wanted to master all: the Norsemen allied with the enemies. April twenty third, Good Friday, they met a bloody Clontarf. Round thorn Island wives and mothers fretted, staring anxiously across the calm bay. The Viking had come back from defeat before, but this was the final bite at the feast. The manhood dreams of Valhalla had gone for the mystery of resurrection.*

*The eighth tribe was enticed to Ireland by an Irish king in a dispute over the kingship of the country. Strongbow led a force of Normans, greedy for the spoils of new conquest. He took Dublin by stealth of the mountains, cutting through thick woods and shoulder length ferns, his soldiers sweltering in helmet and chain mail. On this shore came the gentle summer breeze, leaves rustling in the dark-green shaded forests. Clouds made shadows on the fields of corn and rustic bells of stone churches sang out. Terrible news travelled the dusty tracks: how yet more blood had been cut in Dublin. With King Henry's victory Dalkey was given the merchants of Bristol. They would make this town the port of Dublin, with the cogs dropping anchor in the Sound. For centuries it prospered, the castles were built to store the valuable merchandise - silks, spices, wines, gold, iron, coal - riches from all over the world. Taxes were levied to protect the town with a wall. But the prosperity would have its day: the street through the town became overgrown as trade moved away and the carts stopped rumbling over the rocks and cobbles; the castles fell into disrepair, the walls crumbled. The island on the church was long disused, its only company a tower with cannon to keep enemies away, and the occasional pirate hanged on nearby rocks. Fortunes would continue to ebb and flow.*

*Until a man called Carrig stood upon the musician's rock. Poet and prophet, he warned the people crowded on the shore by the island that a day would come when a sun would explode in the heavens, the skies turn blood-red and the waters bubble and evaporate. Man, women and child would roast - their skin blister, go mulberry colour and peel off. They would be driven from the wreckage of their homes, masses of people fleeing the flames. But the land would become a wilderness for all but a few - the people would starve or die of disease. But there would be a ninth tribe that would make Dalkey its spiritual home: humankind would only survive if it learnt the lessons of the past, and was guided by the mysteries of the divine.*

*I have seen the very moment of creation, and the very destruction of the universe. It was revealed to my confused mind. My spirit was broken but I still hoped for the light of God. In the darkness of the night upon the hill, under the faint light of the harvest moon, the first Saturday of August, I saw a vision. The Times of Despair were near, when fires would fall leaving bone and stone a desert of ash. A breeze rustled through the long wet grass. The sky opened moon, stars and clouds in the heavens fled away. I found myself in a black void; then saw a faint light - like a torch - showing me I was not alone. The light grew and grew until it became a glowing fireball. From it were born the galaxies and the stars: light from the billions of suns, like milky jewels, began to pierce the haze that burned red and blue. I saw my own familiar sun take shape from the forces of gravity, and the planets that formed her orbit - Mercury barren and scorched; Venus raining drops of acid; cold red Mars fading from the Sun's heat; Jupiter, great layers of coloured clouds, in a forever swirling storm; Saturn, the queen of the ringed planets, with her carousel of rock and ice; pale green Uranus, tossed on her side; Neptune, a blue sea of icy gas, in a swirling never-ending storm; tiny black rocky Pluto, the Sun only a bright star the rims of the rims of her jagged hills. Among the planets was the Earth, and she could be as cruel as any other. This hill viewed a different landscape: its surface was a red molten sea, with meteors of creation's debris showering down. The skies were a blanket of gas, glowing above a howling furnace. From this cruel, merciless place I saw the mountains and the plain form as the earth cooled. In a world of dense, hot steamy clouds, the rocks on the ground began to glint as water formed, which rose to make one great ocean. Lightning glistened upon the waves: below the first invisible traces of Life were being born. Soon the seabed was a meadow of swaying coral, flooded by the rays of the sun. But life would not be doomed to the ocean floor. Sea worms wriggled in the mud silt, and ghostly, boneless jellyfish swam atop the great swells. Evolution was now free to move. From the ocean it conquered the land, a red windswept wilderness, baking in the heat of the sun. And verdant forests rose from simple mosses on the shore. Arthropods swarmed from the rock pools and fish flailed their lobefins in the mud, and sniffed the air and grew legs that they would walk and live among the vegetation. The world was in constant change: swampy forest drenched in mist and whirring with the buzz of giant dragonflies; or dry dusty landscapes, rivers trickling to a salty sea. In this world giant reptiles fought and ruled, until the forces of chance - twin of evolution - plunged their world into darkness. No life moved, much having taken shelter back in the sea, to escape the scorched blistered earth. But life did return, from the wriggling scorpion to the fiercest of dinosaur, which became the masters of Gondwana and Laurasia. With the blossoming of the earth's rebirth came the flower, bringing colour and beauty to the toned greens of fern and cycad - a new splendour of creation. The seed spread on*

the breeze, with the sweet fragrance of new beauty. The bee found a taste for its nectar, gold for a queen and a slave colony. But catastrophe struck again – though fortuitous for the scurrying mammal. And onwards rolled the chance events that so cleverly hid purpose and intent. On the open plains a strange creature, hairy but upright, walked alone – frightened. For he was weak, and the beasts of prey that lurked in the grass were powerful. This animal was set apart from the world and its creatures. With shaking hand he picked up the stone from the dust to fend against the fearsome predator. The new tribe fed on berries, soft fruit, and termite colonies. They scavenged with the cackling vultures, as it was not yet their freedom to choose. The hyenas chased them away, then devoured what was left to eat. The tribe looked on from the edges, until they learned the skills to change the rules. The new apes could not dispel the fear; hated it: still needed it to live. Yet so often it did not serve them, and came death with its burning sorrow. The child snapped by the crocodile's jaws and consumed beneath the murky river. Children strayed beyond their mothers' reach, on innocent adventure of no return, killed by the lioness for her cubs. Though primitive, the bond of love grew fast. Without it they would be pickings for beasts. The mother came to love her child, and celebration welcomed each new life. The wife loved her husband and he loved her. The pleasure of flesh was a gift from afar. And the tribe looked beyond its boundary for the marriages of its community. A woman was brought to a man's tribe, fearful and lonely in a strange place. She was welcomed and made to feel proud, and the occasion was celebrated. She lived to see her children grow, watch her sons take wives and daughters go. The cycle of the family was born: one man one woman – one union. Still likeness pulled to likeness and the sexes became divided forever. The women mastered the power of language. They gave comfort to the pregnant mother, helping her through the months of pain and hope, soothing her with gentle assuring words as the shrieks of labour echoed out. And they wiped the sweat from the tormented brow as she heaved to hear her infant's cry. They would help her through those dangerous days as the baby clung to the breast, mother anxious the child would suckle. Men were not part of this world: in this they did not live as one people. Compete, fight and hunt were the man's domain. Tears only filled them with self-doubt. When a boy grew up he moved among the men and the childhood games were now for real. Father taught his son the power of stone. A strange clicking rang through the bush as stone was chiselled against stone. Long practice could make perfect: tools to cut the thick hides of prey to show nutritious blood rich flesh. From calloused hands civilisations formed. Meat made them strong and fast, energy to spare in the endless hunt. The new tribe shaped the world, chiselling it into their vision. They travelled north, following the herds, until they came to new worlds. Generation after generation followed the same path. They made the caves their homes, safe from the elements and the wild: from Shanidar above the Greater Zab to the steep cliffs of the Dussel. They would come to build the greatest civilization. They learned to farm the land, and wondered if only the rocky soil could feed them – the answer would turn the soil into a gem. The people noted the contrasts of the seasons: clear hot skies, then dark blue clouds bringing the rains. Then the rough barren ground came alive,

strands of barley and wheat would sway and wave. The people wished they could capture the golden corn. They saw where the crops grew better by the fertile banks of the river. The wild crop was difficult to harvest - the human intellect found its test: rachis lost with swipe of the sickle; rotten heart of the unripe kernel; pain of undivided seed and husk. When the season came the tribe rushed to gather the ripening grain, before the cycle began again. From the humble seed, and human enterprise, great centres of trade grew, from simple mud huts to the walls of Jericho. Nature gave humans the greatest chance: the annual rains that flooded the Tigris and the Euphrates, inspired the Sumerians to build ditches and canals to store the water. The peoples of this land became rich. When the snows melted in the mountains the waters of the Nile rose above its banks, then fell to leave the rich fertile soil. In the Indus Valley natural forces gave impetus to human achievement in the cities of Mohengo-daro and Harrapa. These great societies thought they could never crumble - but they did. Sargon's empire was the first of many: it, and all empires after, would fall to rising powers and faltering fortunes. The tombs of the pharaohs were plundered by robbers, remains discarded in the dust, royal authority long lost. The Indus was finally overrun by the Aryans, a multi-God culture with strict division of social order. The knowledge of farming spread across plains and mountains, through rivers and valleys. It came to place thick in forests, inhabited by branches of the newcomers' family, who had settled this place a long, long time before. They lived by hunting and fishing, and had lived through ages of great hardship: when their world was covered in ice and snow, frozen roots buried deep below. With the howling winds daylight would die, and blizzards build up mountains of snow. Overnight they would sweep them away again. A storm could rage and rage for days, till the sun trickled through a yellow haze. The scene would glitter in the lifeless calm. Then the winds would sweep in yet another storm. But Nature's cycles were merciful and the great masses of ice began to flow. The land filled with a long-forgotten sound, water running into the buried ground. The layers of permafrost melted to sludge. From the thawed soil grass began to grow. The hunter-gatherers had themselves conquered an earlier race, and took over the deep valley caves, and hunted the herds of reindeer that migrated up the sun trapped valleys in summer; They had fished the fast-flowing rivers, plentiful in salmon, trout, perch and eel. In the mild season the nomads had travelled the plains, where they had built homes out of mammoth bones, using hides for the roofs and walls, and the creatures' skulls to adorn the doors. They traded with others from the east, weapons for the sparkle of amber. They gathered in great number: bartered, told stories and held marriages. They adapted and co-operated. In the deep winter cave the tribe expressed their experiences in paintings on the walls - art and religion as one was born. The climate began to change, and so did the ways of Man - and long extinct were the mammoth, woolly, rhino and lion - when the farming tribes arrived, travelling by canoe along the wide still-flowing rivers. Like all other things came to pass, so too did the lifestyles of hunter-gatherers. The newcomers cleared forests to grow their crops and keep their livestock. They built homes from the native timber, and thatched them with reeds. Those who settled on the naked shores

of the windswept ocean built their dwelling from the bountiful material – the rocks. The people came to praise the memories of their dead and the glory of their gods. Sacrifice of kin and animal became ritual, and an expression of love to appease the supernatural. And what monument could be more eternal to honour the gods than very the stones of the earth itself? The stone shaper learned the secrets of the rocks, noted the glint of a crystal's form, a streak of distinctive colour. With the intense heat of the flame the tightly grasped secrets could be made to flow. Red copper, often tarnished to a differing hue, had a softness that could yield its ore. With the use of clay moulds it could be formed into any shape – cold and hard. Copper became an implement for agriculture and an implement of war. Trade and migration carried the Bronze Age west to Europe; the Stone Age of the hunter-gatherer, and the later Neolithic farmer, disappeared in the rapids of human history. By blending copper with tin the metal smiths created the alloy tin – even stronger still. It became jewellery for the rich and sword and spear for the warrior. But it was the soft untarnishable gold that was the ultimate mark of status. Shining yellow, its nuggets could be picked from the mouth of the river – as if gifts from the gods. It could stand the elements and time: to its owners it seemed they possessed immortality. But gold would be a reminder that flesh and blood left no impressive trace. The discovery of iron, and the way it curved and snapped the brittle bronze sword, would not save the Hittites from the Sea People. There was one nomadic tribe that wandered the desert, the Hebrews. They believed in one God, and their holy book, the Bible, became the basis of a world religion that would last until the end of this civilization. Enslaved by the Egyptians, conquered by the Assyrians, the Babylonians and the Persians this people would still stand proud thousand of years after rivals and foes had crumbled into dust. The plain but shrewd, Empress, Cleopatra, saw her lands come under the power of Rome; the warlike Assyrians, inspired by tales of their hero-king Gilgamesh, witnessed the destruction of the sacred city Ashur and Nineveh with its vast library of tablet writing; in Persia, the Magi kept the sacred fire of their prophet, Zoroaster, alight, but the empire grew weaker after Xerxes' death and was conquered by Alexander the Great. He was a great warrior king from Macedonia in Greece. Greek civilization grew from the Minoan world, which was conquered by the Mycenaean's, who in turn lost its empire and its wealth. A dark age descended on the land of city-states; the poignant reminders of Mycenae power the tombs of gold and silver goblets, daggers and swords. From a Dark Age Greece grew prosperous, trading throughout the Mediterranean. She became the cradle of world philosophy and science, on a diverging path from Egyptian and Babylonian thinkers. Greece's navy took revenge for the burning of Athens; its hoplites brought victory at Plataea. Alexander, student of the philosopher Plato, led his army on a campaign to create the largest empire in the world: from Tyre to Siwa, from the burning of Persepolis to the defeat of Porus, from the mountains of Afghanistan to the valley of the Indus. So often the fate of soldiers – refused death in battle – Alexander died of fever in the 33<sup>rd</sup> year. A great legacy of bravery and endurance replaced by division and conquest; Greece became part of the growing Roman Empire. Rome rose from a tiny farming village on the Tiber to rule the world from

Britain to the Middle East. Ruled by kings, then a republic, and finally under the command of Caesars. With the Punic War she went on to take more and more, reaching her height under Trajan. The first Caesar defeated Gaul, and the ancient Celtic civilization began to fall, a race that had once ruled from Iberia to the Carpathians, and had struck fear in great civilizations. But the remnants would rechristianize Europe from the Dark Ages. When the empire declined so did its culture and technology; the road system of Europe became cracked and overgrown; the towns - with their amphitheatres, temples and baths - crumbled and were lost. The villas - with their tiled terracotta coloured roofs, mosaic floors, hot running water and central heating - were overrun. Aqueducts fell into disuse; such engineering feats would not be seen for hundreds of years. Weaknesses from within invited opponents from without. Efforts by Diocletian would, like all such efforts, ultimately fail. Constantine temporarily reunited the divided empire, but nothing could stop the "barbaric" tribes, as the Romans described them, with their fearsome francisca throwing axes. Finally the eastern empire was sacked by Vandal and Visigoth. The eastern empire of Byzantium would survive another thousand years. Also called Constantinople, its artists created glittering mosaics, religious icons, delicate embroidery and ivory carvings. From here religion fought religion and Christians split among themselves. Justinian's dream surrendered to the Ottoman Turk, and the beautiful cathedral of St Sophia was made a mosque. The followers of Jesus of Nazareth, crucified by Pontius Pilot, spread their faith throughout the Roman world, and converted the very source of power itself. The date of his birth, on Christmas Day, was how the Christian west could notch up the years in anticipation of the Last Day and the Resurrection. In the year 610 a holy man called Mohammed founded a new religion - Islam. It shared a common ancestry with the Christian, and a devotion to the mother of Jesus, but the two would become bitter foes, and engage in shameful wars against each other. The words of Allah, preached by Mohammad, were recorded in their sacred book, the Koran. This faith quickly spread through Arabia, into North Africa and Spain. From the fragmented Roman world of Europe sprang Charlemagne's domain, the ruler's dream of a new Christian empire. But the reality did not last long; on Charlemagne's death, divisions led to weaknesses. And he always had to contend with the pagan Men of the North, who plundered and pillaged with their swept moving sailing boats. It was Otto the Great who received the title of Holy Roman Emperor from the pope, for his defeat of the pagan Magyars at the Battle of Lechfeld. Christianity in Europe had suffered many reversals since the collapse of Rome. But how was the renewed dream built on Christian principles and classical civilization. Though the power the vision would be a cause of rifts between pontiff and emperor. Normans, christianized descendents of the Vikings, were great sailors and warriors; a fierceness that ran through their veins. In 1066 William the Conqueror invaded Anglo-Saxon England, ostensibly for a broken promise. At Hastings he defeated and killed King Harold - the throne was his. In time discord grew between England and Normandy. Edward III made his claim and The Hundred Year War had commenced, but would end in English defeat. In its aftermath came the bitter War of the Roses. Then Europe was struck a

pestilence so great that it wiped out half of its people, and many believed the Race of Adam would perish, or that God's judgement was being brought down upon them for their evil ways. The disease came to be known as the Black Death. Carried by fleas on the backs of rats, the tiny hopping creature with claws to stick to fur and clothes. The evil malady spread from east to west, a rolling fog travelling from city to city, town to town, village to village, hamlet to hamlet. The people prayed for deliverance, while others speculated on the source of this pestilence: did death come with escaping Genoese, accursed for helping Turk and Saracen? From the black comet or the configuration of the planets? Or the corrupt air blamed by the savants? Fanciful tales of horror spread. Frogs, serpents, lizards and scorpions fell from the sky; followed by nights of thunder and lightning, with sheets of fire falling from the heavens; all the towns of Greater India were burned to the ground. These were the forces that infected the whole continents and left the land covered with dead, and the survivors fleeing to the mountains. But reality - who nobody really believed would reach them - was far more horrific: it was happening, not a tale told beside a home fire or while drinking ale in a tavern. Unnoticed the flea bit its human host, and regurgitated the bacteria in its stomach into the bloodstream of its latest host. The victim, first struck with fever, would then start to exhibit the signs of Death - black or purple swellings on the armpits and groin. These buboes would swell to the size of apples, then burst, releasing a black liquid that stank, that could be smelt on the streets and in the fields. Death was not far beyond. The communities were ravaged; entire families wiped out - their homes, door swinging on the hinges, marking that place of life their silent tomb. Prayer and penance were of no avail. Even the jolly parish curate was taken. He had given the Last Rites to so many, Death's spectre following him house to house. In the heat sluggish black flies gathered as swollen corpses were carted away, the stench wafting till the bodies were in their pits, no more room on sanctified ground. The cart rumbled down the streets and the dying heard the Devil's hooves. Pitiful cries came from homes. No neighbour or family member entered until silence had erased the torture, buboes burst and oozing on the straw floor. Children, dying, screamed for a dead mother, their little faces scrunched with uncomprehending fear. Parents could not understand God's anger, leaving them powerless in their children's death. There would be too few to bury the dead: too few to gather in the harvest. But recovery from the Plague brought a blessing to the living, putting muscle on the labourer's price: more cheese than common grain to eat; more creamy milk than spring water to drink. For Europe was a feudal society: the king, nobles and knights, and last of all the peasants. Of this group the richer villein in his longhouse, the lowly cotter in his cabin - all but none in fee to their lord, at dawn tramping out to the master's fields. The peasant's life was hard. In spring seed was planted with care and fear when the soil was warm and free of frost. They were wary of plowing too deep too early, that the fields might become muddy at sowing. Spring crops were sown four bushels to the acre, with a prayer the season would be fair. Late summer the work became more urgent, for the fall had to do them through winter. As fields matured the villagers gathered to work, all but the very young, the old or lame. The slicing

sickle sang through the fields with the chatter of binders following after. The spears were tied thoughtfully into sheaves, set in shocks to dry, then stored in the barns. No ear of corn was unimportant, even the lowly gleaner was of worth. Hay was gold, to be mowed with great skill, for cattle grew thin and weak in winter. A good hay crop would keep livestock till spring; a good grain crop the same for humans. The sun glinted on the reaper's scythe, thirsty work in baking September heat. The reapers knew their right in ale, to wash down their portion of wheaten bread. The harvest was in by Michaelmas, in the purple gloam of autumn. And the stubbled fields, glinted silver as angled light weaved through wood and hedge. Winter was a quieter time, to pray the store would take them through. Christmas was the dark season's point of hope, told in the feast of the nativity. The church and houses were decked in holly, ivy or any other greenery; a time when the poor could rest and indulge from Christmas Eve to Epiphany. A bright star might shine over the village and a poor serf's home become the manger. Trade with far off lands had spread the Black Death - rats scurrying among the ships loaded with silks and grains. The West was not the only civilization, and merchants brought goods and tales from India, China and Africa. From India came jewels, silks and spices and accounts of two religions strange to Christian beliefs - Hinduism and Buddhism - the first with an array of gods; the second, followed the teachings of a prince who gave up his riches and preached that the most important thing is to care for others. That rich land had been invaded the Mongols, who spread their domination to Europe; a tribe of horse warriors - in the tradition Scythian and Hun - lived on the plains of Central Asia, always in search of fresh grasslands. Muslims also added to the culture of India, but these peaceful settlements would lead to violent conflict. The Silk Road led to China, a civilization older than Europe; the Chinese found profitable use for the silkworm; they invented paper, discovered gunpowder and created china pottery. Qin Shi Huangdi united the country at a cost, built the Great Wall against barbarian invaders. Marco Polo brought tales of this strange and wonderful land back to Venice. Kubla Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, conquered China; but the wild seas off Japan - island of the Samurai warrior - would let him go no farther. There came stories from Africa of King Lalibela's great empire trading in gold, ivory and slaves; the mysterious forest kingdoms with palaces made of ivory and bronze; the powerful kingdoms beyond the Sahara. There were many other civilizations vaguely heard of, or waiting to be discovered: the tribes of North America from the Inuits in the frozen north to the cities of Cahokia and Pueblo Bonito in the south; the Aztecs of Mexico - though their sacrifices would not save them from the rapacious hand of the serpent god; the Maya with their city of stone, though the priests did not predict that greatness would be reduced to tiny villages of mud huts; and the Incas, victors of the Andes, would also become victims of the Spaniard's lust for silver and gold; or the peoples of the Pacific - some who led passive simple lives, others who were warlike and sailed far. The 14<sup>th</sup> century saw the flowering of the Italian Renaissance, inspired by the age of classical Greece and Rome. Works of art were created to befit the new age and its wealthy, powerful patrons. But the changes were not confined to the visual arts or writing, but saw the rise of humanism, in such scholars as

*Erasmus, and scientific discipline. Leonardo da Vinci - genius artist, architect, musician and inventor - foresaw and devised future inventions long before the technology to make them was conceived. Machiavelli wrote about cruelty and the order of the state. Alchemists still tried to turn base metals into gold. Gutenberg introduced his printing press and transformed the world of knowledge and dissemination. The Renaissance paralleled an Islamic cultural peak centuries before. Conflict among Christians marked the greatest division of Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, everlasting and more bitter than the Great Schism and disputes between ecclesiastical and temporal authorities - much blood was shed, grievous wrongs committed on each other. A monk called Luther attacked the papacy for its opulence and splendour, its Renaissance extravagance. He nailed his demands on the cathedral door in Wittenburg, and so was banished from the Catholic Church. Theology was always a deadly weapon in the arsenals of war. The age saw the Habsburgs at the zenith of their power, and holders of the title, Holy Roman Emperor. The whole continent would be plunged into the Thirty Years War. Emperor Charles V fought successfully against the French and drove the Ottoman Turks from the gates of Vienna. A pious man, he chose to end his life in a monastery, though he was often in conflict with papal authority. He divided his vast empire between his sons: Philip was given Spain, Italy, the Netherlands and the American colonies; to Ferdinand, Austria and title of emperor. Philip grew hugely rich on the exploitation of colonial gold and silver. But it was not enough to match his vast administration. Protestant rival England began raiding Spanish ships for their booty. So Philip sent an armada of ships to attack Queen Elizabeth's seat of power, but the enemy and the forces of nature conspired against him, and most of his vessels were lost to the sea. In France rose the light of the Sun King, who built for himself the magnificent Palace of Versailles, with its glittering Hall of Mirrors. But if only the king could have seen the reflection of himself and his royal dynasty. The burden of heavy taxation upon the people would have its consequences. In England monarchy was overthrown, and a republic formed after two civil wars. King Charles I was beheaded, and the people of England led by parliament and Oliver Cromwell, who sailed to Ireland to defeat the remaining loyalist forces and the Catholic enemy. But within ten years the divine right of king was restored - though never the same. After Dutch Prince William was presented the throne of England, he followed the deposed James to Ireland and did battle at the Boyne, in pursuit of his broader military aims. The Dutch provinces had become rich on trade across the globe. Europe entered the age of reason and revolution, when ancient certainties became modern doubts. Astronomers discovered earth was not the centre of the cosmos, the ordered heavens upset by a brilliant new star in the constellation of Cassiopeia; though it faded, the doubts did not. Medicine made incisions into the working of human anatomy, explorations that would bring sweeping benefits to humankind before the same race would destroy all its own achievements. Along side, the 18<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of two monarchies in Europe: Catherine II of Russia ensured that trade and culture accompanied the country's expanding territories, from the Baltic to the Black Sea and the lion's share of Poland; Frederick*

the Great doubled the size of Prussia by the end of his reign, while banning the torture of prisoners and showing religious tolerance. North America was being colonized, an unstoppable force since Columbus. In time the colonizers broke away from King George's rule, and the 13 colonies fought a war of independence. Their acts were to set the course for another great empire, though it still would not last. Revolution found willing hearts in France against the royal family. The Bastille was stormed, its prisoners, with this symbolic act the revolution spread. With revolution followed a Reign of Terror and fear of instability overflowing France's borders. Britain now had a far more dangerous enemy than the court of Louis XVI. The swish and thud of the guillotine made the ruling classes of Europe uneasy. In France a brilliant young general, Napoleon Bonaparte, came to power. Creating himself emperor he conquered most of Europe. But his ambition overstretched him: fronts in the Iberian Peninsula in the south and Russia in the east brought him final defeat at Waterloo. Europe had a period of peace, but one to keep France and revolution in check. Then came the Industrial Revolution, led by Britain, bringing dramatic changes to the ways of life. People moved off the land into the expanding cities and towns; rural life changed, the domestic trades of wool spinning and cotton threading vanished, replaced by factory machine. Smoothly surfaced roads and canals replaced the basic mud track used by horse and carriage ever since the Romans. Britain built an empire on deposits of coal and iron, and its maritime dominance. Great fortunes were made and huge slums created. Workers formed themselves into trade unions to fight for their rights, and some of the wealthy sought to improve the lot of their workers. In 1848, a year of revolution throughout Europe, *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx was publishing, calling on the workers to seize the means of production and wipe out capitalism forever. In Britain a group called the Chartists demanded that all classes be allowed to vote. Communism came to rule half the world for half the world for much of the following century. Reform movements in other countries improved living standards, health and education, through parliament and agitation. The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw an upsurge in nationalism - from the independence of Greece to the unity of Germany, from the rebel Garibaldi of Italy to the revolutionary Simon Bolivar of South America. In the second half of the century the scramble for empire intensified, the biggest winners Britain and France. America grew stronger. After a brutal civil war, the United States followed many other nations and banned slavery throughout the whole country. Native Americans were defeated at the Battle of Wounded Knee, after the temporary glory of Little Big Thorn. By the end of the century the USA was poised to be a world power, as millions of emigrants set off after the American dream. But at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century few had any idea what an evil century awaited them. Women fought for, and won, the right to vote, but not before the great powers of Europe fought the continent's bloodiest wars to date. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife by a Bosnian Serb student set crumbling Austro-Hungarian Empire on the road to war. Her Slav imperial rival, Russia, mobilized her troops, though German expansion was her real fear. The Kaiser gave the order to mobilize, speed needed for the two fronts - France and Russia. Britain entered

*because of her obligations to Belgium. Train and trunk brought troops to the battlefields; the airplane became an instrument of war; artillery and machine gun devastating against columns of soldiers; the introduction of the tank, a mechanized knight in armour. The war that the powers were edging towards since the previous century had begun: The Great War; but it would come to be known as only the First. The Second World War came twenty-one years after. Germany was defeated and humiliated by the Treaty of Versailles; Russia overthrown by communist revolution, and Nicholas and his family murdered; the Austro-Hungarian Empire was gone, the Habsburg, in decline since the triumphal reign of Maria Theresa, were no more. America, who came into the war late, and perhaps no one really appreciated it, was the true winner. Perhaps the dilapidated European powers did not want to accept the eventual loss of greatness - military, cultural and political. Extremes of ideology surfaced in Europe: Hitler being its very worst. He led his country into another war - Germany lost again. Hitler's anti-Semitism led him to the Holocaust - the systematic murder of six million Jews - and the greatest blight on European civilization. Soviet Russia, led by Stalin, a ruthless leader who lifted his people from the worst extremes of depravation - but at a horrendous and inexcusable cost - joined with Britain and America to defeat the Nazis. Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour, an attempt to cut the noose of sanctions, brought the USA into the war. Germany was defeated, and took his own life in his Berlin bunker, rather than be caught by the Russians. A new technology was used in the Second World War - and this would change the balance of power forever, and the consequences and dangers of any future war. Scientists had unraveled the secret of the atom, and could release its huge destructive energy. Two atomic bombs were dropped on Japan; surrender had been won, but at a price, the survival of the whole human race.*

*Waking again to the world around me I caught the last glimpse of time when the oceans go dry and their beds become cracked deserts and their mountain ranges higher than any that had ever been climbed. There was not a single blade of grass alive, no life at all to be seen. The sun grew to fill half the sky - red hot, burning the rocks of the earth. At night the darkness was blood red as the surface of this planet turned to magna. The sun itself died, and the remaining planet in the solar system were left in the cold black permanent night. Then the stars and the galaxies died. Read my words, fragmented and jumbled from the terror of a vision, and see the transience of man and all that civilization holds of importance. Forego what is will come to pass, and hold what is everlasting and important - love.*

*The Times of Despair are near, when fires will fall from the sky, when my family and my world will die. I must now listen to the words of God, uninterrupted by my own thoughts and visions - to words not inspired but sacred:*

*You sought beyond the confines of the mind  
Answers and meaning you could never find.  
From creation, the conjuror's last trick,  
Until the clock of time ceased to tick.  
The limits of comprehension were drawn  
When reality of Space and Time were born.  
Just accept as a hard arduous route  
Your journey to find peace in the truth.  
The prized diamond has beauty and strength  
Made by the flaw in its very depth.  
It is the star in the sapphire crystal  
The cat's eye in the chrysoberyl.  
This flaw runs through all existence  
The opposite to perfect excellence.  
This imperfection is the mystery  
A wall beyond which Man cannot see.  
Early Man walked naked in the grass  
With fear picked the rock from the ground.  
For the beasts of the wild were strong and fierce  
With deadly claws and teeth that could pierce.  
That is why I gave the bond of love  
The greatest gift and preserver of life.  
Without love the species would have perished  
It made the sacred child cherished.  
You have much to learn from your forebears  
It is the true community that shares.  
But with existence came discord  
As it is not the final reward.  
Skill and talent should have their merit  
But also the meshing social spirit.  
To cultivate the crop took a brain  
To watch the cycle of sun and rain.  
But it took all to gather the crop in*

*So hungry bird and weevil would not win.  
The skilled stone shaper made things easier  
But the plot would die without the labour.  
There were those who could smelt metal from stone  
A gift that marked them out alone.  
For stronger weapons and implements  
For status jewelry and ornaments.  
The peoples spread out in search of new worlds  
Claiming plains for pasture, chopping down woods.  
One generation had followed the first  
A need within them, like water for thirst.  
To those simple origins you will return  
Rise again from the ashes of flesh and bone.  
You asked what is right and what is wrong  
To write all that would take too long.  
What is important is the good  
Not always blind rules on whether one should.  
Not all answers are found in the divine  
With much left to you the human.  
You piece together the fragments of chaos  
Then choose your place in the cosmos.  
Early Man saw nothing left to chance  
The Gods of Nature had them in a trance.  
The word written in simple metaphor  
Accounts for an age and its folklore.  
Language is inadequate for the truth  
Its efforts often naïve and uncouth.  
So much in your world is random  
Before and After are God's realm.  
Wealth and power are illusory  
They do not save from the catastrophe.  
They are forgivable comforts  
But it is the soul where richness starts.  
The family is love's very essence  
When you strip away all the pretense.  
Man and woman in equal union  
Married to rear daughter and son.  
Happiness is found in the force of life  
Its beginning, the husband and his wife.  
As one, they will enjoy the physical  
But pleasure needs the heart to feel real.  
Love lifts the soul, makes darkness light*

*And day that would otherwise be night.  
Through its strength we have the will to cope  
Despite toil and hardship it gives hope.  
Love opens the heart to the pain of loss  
Teaches people to care and be selfless.  
There is the wonder of the newborn  
To which the parents must bond.  
This child must be like one of your limbs  
A part, yet vital to your very lives.  
You have learned to suffer at a child's death  
A pain far worse than your own death.  
So care more for your child than yourself  
Your greatest duty is their life.  
Then you work in your child's interest  
Strengthening them for each challenge and test.  
They will see in their parent the model  
When they leave to marry, they'll know their roll.  
As love binds a single family  
So too an entire community.  
No one should be beyond its care  
And each person given their deserved share.  
Show forgiveness and justice to all  
And let motive be honest and truthful.  
Find liberation in duty  
Freedom is not a right, but luxury.  
Pleasure is no path to bliss  
Without the soul's submission to oneness  
These are markers through *The Times of Despair*  
Whatever clothes of belief you wear.  
The end has no fear for those who believe  
Because beyond Nothing there is Love.*

*A dream, I stand at a doorway to a ruined building, all that's  
standing a holly-clad gable wall. I step inside to a forest - winter trees  
piercing the open sky - silent but for a cawing crow and the faint  
murmur of a river.*

*I am a descendent reverencing in this place, I feel I know it. My ancestors knew it. The genomancer had visions of it, he was led there by the ancestral dead.*

*And here he sought out the harmony which allowed him listen to the souls: see the past in the now and vision of the future in all its terrifying reality. The genomancer sought out the magical science that could turn back time - to a better world.*