

Daniel Tobin

from *From Nothing*

Georges Lamaitre (1894-1966) was a Belgian mathematician, theoretical physicist, and Jesuit priest whose insights during the 1930s and 1940s provided solutions to physical problems stemming from Einstein's general theory of relativity and quantum mechanics that Einstein himself did not foresee. Though a lesser-known figure in cosmology, he was the first to develop a theory of an expanding universe through the explosion of a "primeval atom," what has become known popularly as "the big bang."

To figure from nothing holiness in perihelion—
though one must not proclaim it, but let the matter
spin along its poles into the bright entanglements

like two particles of light flung to opposite zones,
and still the one moves with and how the other moves --
love's choreography in the elegance of the dance.

Though maybe it's more like matter and antimatter,
the one canceling the other in a blinding negation,
number and noumen locked in their separate estates.

You would not collapse them to a point's white heat,
but kept them before you, your physics and your faith,
the divergent roads with their singular horizon

where the radius of space converges into zero,
where what was, is, will be waxes without boundary
into seed and sand grain, a Cepheid luster of eyes:

news of the minor signature keyed from everywhere,
the primal radiation, omnipresent, the prodigal
wave arriving from its Now that has no yesterday,

the proof of your calculus, the tour of the expanse—
“The evolution of the universe might be compared
to a display of fireworks that has just ended,

some few red wisps, ashes and smoke. So we stand
on a well-cooled cinder to see the slow fading of suns;
we try to recall the vanished brilliance of the origin of
worlds.”

*

A little sand, a little soda, a little lime once used
to embalm the dead, and out of black hole and kiln
the molten bubble gathers like honey on a dipper

for the blower to stretch breath into glass, the pipe
a silent horn shaping the form with its emptiness
to be marvered and mandrelled, jacked and lathed.

In your father’s factory the vessels anneal, neat rows
of flagons, jars, mould blown, ribbed and decorated—
every glinted edge and pattern the fire will destroy

so the life foreseen becomes a retrospect foreknown,
the char-black rolling country of the Pays noir
from which your people came: the smelting works

and coal pits, gas, slag-heap, pick-axe and sump.
He rose from all that, and rose again to make good
for the losses, for his laborers, as though justice

were the standard candle he followed in the dark,
or the hidden vein in a seam of earth that opens
on a vault where monstrosity lifts from the monstrous.

In the photographer's studio your mother nestles you
on folded cloth, an heir of miners and weavers,
the scene a tapestry of hills and fields and settling sky.

You could be a girl in your frilled gown, or Rilke,
your eyes as bright and lenient, your right hand
gesturing outward, the left already figuring sums.

*

In the Cathedral Saint-Michel, the chancel window
pours down its lucid spectrum across the altar.
The priest in green chasuble for Ordinary Time

bows before the tabernacle, paten, chalice, *Agnus Dei*.
Uniformly you sit among the pews and schoolboys.
Latin and incense commingle beneath the nave.

The altar servers in their chiaroscuro— white surplice,
black soutane—move in consort to cross and ciborium.
Is it now that you sense the certainty of your calling?

Or had it haunted you nights with your schoolbooks
even back in Charleroi, in the halls of Sacre Coeur:
calculation and consecration, geometry and God?

“There is nothing I think in all of physical reality
more abstruse than the doctrine of the Trinity,”
you would write years later, your primeval quantum

inflating to millennia, into weeks and days –
if only every life, like quires in a Book of Hours,
could unfold from vellum, unique and indelible.

In the glittering fan the priest lifts host and chalice,
bread and wine to body and blood, as though a switch
flickered at the bottom of things, its sizzling foam,

Daniel Tobin

with a word accident into essence alchemized.
While outside immaculate gardens begin to bloom
in riots of light, pallets of flesh, stained glass blazoning.

*

Georges Lemaitre

“A red flare broadcasts its annunciation over the Salient,
Ypres in the half-light of morning, an unnatural silence
broken by the screech of shrapnel shell and howitzer,

machine guns spattering the parapets of No Man’s Land.
Horrible enough the slaughter, hand to hand, house to house,
in Lombartzyde—bayonet, rifle shot, the blood in my nails.

We’ve opened the sea sluices to hold back their onslaught --
Louvain burned, this one strip left of free Belgium.
Now these crater fields, the men mown down in swathes.

Why is it, O my Precious Christ, we do this to each other,
crouching in trench, transverse, the barbed and deadlocked
lines,
who might have joined like harvesters among hedge and
fold?

A hiss, and from enemy dug-outs the strange cloud curls
in waves, grayish, yellow to green, darkest at the bottom.
And I know we’re in a biblical plague, the men fumbling

for bits of flannel, cotton pads, the gassed in spasm, clawing
at their throats, their eyes, vomiting, crawling off to die,
the way the forsaken do in Bruegel’s *The Triumph of Death*,

its black plumes of smoke and burning cities, its scythes
and armies, skeletal, their coffin lid shields, the slit throats,
wagonloads of skulls, that dog nibbling a dead child’s face.

On the ravaged plain, a cauldron of torture and carnage
like ours with its mangles, stench, stumps and splintered
trees,
the Cross still rises skyward, Death hammering the plinth.”