

To **Reverend Dr. Ambrose Wetherby**,
Curator of the Natural Theology Collection,
OXFORD

7th of April, Anno Domini 1861
In the 24th year of Victoria's World Sovereignty

My dear Wetherby,

I write these lines with a hand trembling less from infirmity than from a sorrow which I scarce know how to name.

It was on the past Sunday, in the midst of the noonday service, even as I discoursed upon the Genesis of our race and the mysteries newly proffered by Mr. Darwin, that the sign appeared.

Through the stained glass above the pulpit, the sun, which had hitherto shone in gentle witness, became circled about with a blue fire — not a rainbow, not a trick of the eye, but a halo of perfect and terrifying purity.

It was as though some vast hand had drawn a ring about our world, not to encircle it in benediction, but to isolate it in judgment.

The congregation grew restless. One woman swooned. I persevered with my homily, though in my heart I knew I spoke words which no longer rose to the heavens.

The sun remained thus ringed for some minutes, and then, without thunder, without storm, faded into the pale common light of afternoon.

I returned home, and took refuge in my study among the specimens and treatises we so often pored over in our youth. Yet they gave me no comfort.

I had believed — and God knows, I still would believe if I could — that the natural world is the second book of the Creator, a testament no less sacred than Scripture.

But now I wonder whether the book has not been closed, or worse, rewritten in a hand we no longer understand.

The flower blooms; the moth flutters; the fossil lies encased in stone. Yet the harmony which once leapt from all these things like a silent song has grown faint, as though a melody, half-remembered, slips beyond the mind's reach.

You taught me once, dear Ambrose, that the order of nature is not self-sufficient, but is upheld by the continual will of God.

What then, if that will has withdrawn?

What then, if the pillars of the sky no longer stand at His command, but lean, and tremble, and fall of their own unguided accord?

I send you this letter not as a record of science, but as a testimony of mourning.

Let it be known:

In the twenty-fourth year of Queen Victoria's reign, when the sun crowned itself in blue at the noonday service, Reverend Dr. Nathaniel Blenkinsop, curate of St. Luke's, inscribed the eclipse of wonder upon the margin of faith.

Archive it among your collections, if you will, among the relics of a faith now slipping into twilight.

And write upon its binding: *The Reverend saw the sun encircled in blue, and knew no new revelation, but only the silent eclipse of wonder.*

In sorrow and with unshaken affection,
Nathaniel Blenkinsop, D.D.
Doctor of Divinity, St. Luke's Parish
KENSINGTON