

To the Reverend Dr. Ambrose Witherby,  
Curator of the Natural History Collection,  
Museum.

My dear Witherby,

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 judgement.

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What then, if that will has withdrawn?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.

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 Blankinship  
Doctor of Divinity, St. Luke's Parish  
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