



The Longest Night

It was evening. They had quenched the candles,
taken the Host away
to the altar of repose; one by one, the congregation made their way
out; where there was light, now was only
a sorry dimness. Already a sense of loss
oppressed me. I dropped
to my knees again, breathing only a few futile words; I found
the story difficult, the echoes disconcerting.

I left. And it was night. Our gentle Lord
lay on the ground, scared
under our weight of dread and horror, this man of flesh
and bones, man of peace; it was dark
in among the trees, where he fell prone,
human, and pleading.
I walked awhile, towards the town, disoriented; a mist
drifted across the empty streets where high
street-lights threw tau-shaped shadows
over the pavement.
Our lover Lord was stretched in grief along the earth,
the night-birds silent, the olive-buds swelling.

I was startled as a shade moved swiftly out
from a side-alley,
a man, startled as I was. He stopped, slight, intense, hesitated.
'Damp evening!' I said, and then, foolishly,
'Happy Easter'. He wore a shabby coat, his hair
was thin, uncombed.
(I tell myself still, the state that I was in, this may have been all
dream or, rather, nightmare;) for he came close,
grabbed my arm above the elbow, spoke
in spittled fury:
'Happy! ridiculous!' I recoiled a little, his eyes were wild, teeth
clenched. 'They slaughter us in our kitchens,

our hospital beds, in our schools and under
our domes of worship!
A chosen people they may be", he went on, 'but their leaders
choose another god, unacknowledged, self-created,
violent, bitter, vengeful. . .'. His staring eyes
were like olive stones –
but why did I think, then, along our hedgerows and ditches
that the daffodils and primroses would be shining.
'They have tanks, artillery, they rain down missiles
till all is rubble,
leaving the tens of thousands of little children dead, broken,
women, too, our stones and slings useless. . .?'


I thought of our suffering servant, how, it is said,
they held him for hours
chilled and standing, while they spat on him, slapped him, mocked
and jeered him, how his profound silence
disconcerted them, how his gasps of pain
gratified;
how, later, they dragged him from tyrant to tyrant, pointlessly,
for tyrants live within the darkness of their minds.
'They build,' the stranger said, 'high walls
across our meadows,
steal our fields, our olive groves, they are a stain and a disgrace
upon the earth.' He sighed, and turned away.

I knew, from the story, they would make a thorn crown
to clamp on him,
they would scourge and whip him mercilessly, out of their own
boredom and ignorance. The stranger had hurried back:
'War', he said, 'war makes beggars of us, victors both
and vanquished,
it drags humanity back towards original darkness. And' –
– he gripped me harder, 'your world of privilege
assists them mightily in their genocide!' Then, suddenly,
he was gone.

I saw the children, so many, in fearful suffering, laid down
on wooden pallets, bones of the face and body
obtruding, eyes staring, their gaping mouths scarce able
to scream. All innocence
betrayed. I was alone, in the chill of mist and darkness, the still
houses suddenly alien. I felt the tears on my cheeks
falling for him, for our all-powerful Lord, I heard
such human cries, knew
all of us to be part of it, capable of love's destruction, of truth
crucified. Words failed me; prayer seemed futile.

It was long past midnight; I was chilled, and I heard
the sound of thunder
a great way off; black night and mist held the world enslaved;
I hurried on, cautious, disconsolate, into the dark.

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