



**AN ELEMENTAL THING**

**ELIOT WEINBERGER**

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## PREFACE

In the Aztec empire, every fifty-two years, once in an average lifetime, the world was on the verge of coming to an end. The sun would no longer move, night would be eternal, and man-eating demons would descend to rule the earth.

On that day all fires were extinguished, and floors were swept clean. Old clothes, the images of gods kept in the house, the hearthstones on which cooking pots were kept, mats, pestles, and grindstones were cast into lakes and rivers. Pregnant women were given maguery masks and locked in granaries; if the world ended, they would turn into monsters.

That night, everyone dressed in new clothes, climbed onto terraces and rooftops; no one touched the ground. Children were poked and threatened, to keep them awake; those who slept would wake up as mice. In Tenochtitlan, the capital, eyes were fixed on the temple atop the Hill of the Star. There, at midnight, the priests were watching the stars called Tianquiztli, the Marketplace, our Pleiades, to see if they would cross the meridian and ensure another fifty-two years of life.

In the temple, a prisoner without physical blemishes, with a name meaning *turquoise, year, fire, grass, or comet*—words that denote precious time—was stretched across a flat stone with a piece of wood on his chest. As the Tianquiztli constellation crossed the line, a priest began furiously spinning his fire drill into the wood. A little smoke, a few sparks, and then, as the wood took flame, the prisoner's chest was slit open with an obsidian knife, his heart pulled out and set in the fire. Four bundles of tied wood, each with thirteen logs, were piled around him so that his whole body was consumed by flames.

As the bonfire became visible, the people slashed their ears and the ears of their children, scattering blood toward the flames. Messengers carried torches from the Hill of the Star to the principal temples, and from there to the palaces, and from the palaces, street by street, house by house, until the whole city was lit again. All night, relay runners carried the new fire throughout the empire. People threw themselves at the fire to be blessed with blisters.

Children born in the night were given the name New Time. In the morning new mats were spread out, new hearthstones placed, incense lit, and honey-dipped amaranth seed cakes eaten by all. Quails were decapitated.

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# AN ELEMENTAL THING

# 1: THE WIND

**W**ind: what is it? You don't see it but you hear it, and you feel its force. It brings the rains, the drought, the cold, the heat, the locusts, the dust; it drives them away. It bangs the shutters, rustles the branches, flattens the house, spreads fire; it pushes the boats along or makes the waves that sink them. Its breezes in spring inspire affection, its howling in winter dread.

In China, the calendar was circular and divided into eight periods of forty-five days, each ruled by a wind coming from one of the eight directions, and each determining the rituals of government, the foods to be eaten, the robes worn, the punishment and pardon of criminals, the hours to wake or go to sleep, the times and places to take a walk, the gifts the Emperor should send.

There were "proper" winds and "evil" or "empty" winds: winds that blew from the right direction at the right time, and those that did not, causing sickness or chaos, for, it was said, the hundred diseases arose from the wind, and entered the 84,000 holes of the body, the acupuncture points, just as it blew through the hollows of the earth.

Everything is fine, says Chuang Tzu, when the world is still. "But when the wind blows, the ten thousand holes cry and moan. Haven't you heard them wailing on and on? In the awesome beauty of mountain forests, it's all huge trees a hundred feet around, and they're full of wailing hollows . . . When the wind's light, the harmony's gentle; but when the storm wails, it's a mighty chorus. And then, once the fierce wind has passed through, the holes are all empty again."

Wind was the vengeance of unhappy ancestors. Wind came from the mouths of snakes, and shamans wore snakes to blow them to the other world; in China or in Mexico, the shaman was portrayed in its gaping jaws. WIND, the character, was constructed from the pictograph of a sail and the pictograph of a snake. WIND plus SICKNESS meant "insane." WIND PURITY was sexual longing; HORSE WIND was a horse in heat; MALE WIND was sodomy. An anonymous woman in the 5th century sings:

Spring flowers so delightful,  
Spring birdsongs so moving,  
Spring wind so passionate,  
It blows open my silk skirt.

And WIND (*feng*) also meant "song." Song was how the government found out what the people were thinking, and the word came to mean "mood" or even

“customs.” The first Chinese anthology, the *Shi Ching*, the Book of Odes or Songs, opens with a section called *Kuo Feng*—STATE WIND—the songs, the moods, from the provincial states. The *Great Preface* to the *Shi Ching*, says: “By WIND superiors transform their inferiors, and by WIND inferiors satirize their superiors.” It was said: “Hear the WIND [the songs from a certain state] and you will know the WIND [the mood of the people].”

WIND SCENE, a landscape. WIND LAND, wind and land, the local conditions. WIND WATER, wind and water, *fengshui*, the way one found one’s place in the world. WIND RAIN, wind and rain, hardship. WIND WAVES, wind and waves, the changes in affairs. WIND TIDE, wind and tide, political unrest; the WIND GROUP, the opportunists.

The bird of paradise was the WIND BIRD; a WIND EXPRESSION an aristocratic demeanor; WIND GLORY, wind and glory, elegance and talent. WIND MOON, wind and moon, gaiety and a woman’s seductive arts. WIND DUST, wind and dust, the difficulties of travel, military chaos, and the life of a prostitute.

A WIND MAN was a poet. WIND FLOW meant distinguished, sophisticated, talented in literature, and dissolute. WIND DELIGHT was merely humor, but WIND SORROW meant excellence in literature.

Hear the wind and you will know the wind. Wind blows, and the generations are its leaves. There was no higher praise than what was said of Confucius: He knows where the wind comes from.

## 2: CHANGS

Chang Chih-ho, in the 8th century, lost his post under the Emperor and retreated to the mountains. He devoted himself to fishing, but never used any bait, for his object was not to catch fish.

Chang Tsai, in the 3rd century, was Secretary to the Heir Apparent. His ugliness was so extreme that children pelted him with stones whenever he went outside.

Chang Chio, in the 2nd century, called himself the Yellow God and led an army of 360,000 followers, all wearing yellow turbans. They brought down the Han Dynasty.

Chang Chao, one of the Five Men of Letters, fell off his horse in the 18th century, but impressed the Emperor by continuing to write poems with his left hand.

Chang Chen-chou, in the 8th century, was known for his unmatched honesty. Upon being appointed Governor of Shu-chou, he held a banquet for all his friends and relatives, gave them lavish gifts of silk and cash, and then, tears in his eyes, told them that from now on he could never see them again.

Chang Seng-yu, in the 6th century, painted a pair of dragons without eyes on the Temple of Peace and Joy, and warned that the painting should never be completed. A skeptic filled in the eyes, and the walls of the temple crashed to ruins as the dragons flew off.

Chang Chung, in the 14th century, was a philosopher who roamed the mountains wildly and always wore an iron cap.

Chang Ch'ien, in the 2nd century B.C.E., was the first Chinese to travel far to the west. He was captured in Bactria, and held prisoner for ten years before escaping to Fergana. From there he brought back the first walnuts and cultivated grapes, knotty bamboo and hemp, and the art of making wine.

This same Chang Ch'ien traveled so widely that it was believed he had found the source of the Yellow River, which flows down from the Milky Way: After following the river upstream for many months, he came to a city where he saw a young man leading an ox to water and a young woman spinning. He asked what place this was,

and the girl gave him a shuttle and told him to show it to the noted astronomer Yen Chun-p'ing. Upon his return, the astronomer recognized the shuttle as belonging to the Weaving Girl, the constellation Lyra, and said that he had noticed, at the exact moment Chang had entered the strange city, an errant star crossing between the Weaving Girl and the Oxherding Boy.

Chang Ch'ao, in the 17th century, said: "Flowers must have butterflies, mountains must have streams, rocks must have moss, the ocean must have seaweed, old trees must have creepers, and people must have obsessions."

Chang Ch'ang, a scholar and governor in the 1st century B.C.E., was in the habit of personally painting his wife's eyebrows. When the Emperor asked him why, Chang replied that women consider eyebrows to be of the highest importance.

Both Chang Cho in the 8th century and Chang Chiu-ko in the 11th century could cut out paper butterflies that would flutter around and then return to their hands.

Chang Chu, a poet in the 13th century, wrote a line, "The cataclysm of red sheep," that no one has ever been able to explain.

Chang Hsu-ching, a Taoist, no one remembers exactly when, obtained the elixir of life and discovered that tigers would do his bidding.

Chang Jen-hsi, in the 18th century, wrote a treatise on ink.

Chang Li-hua, in the 6th century, was the Emperor's favorite concubine and renowned for the beauty of her hair, which was seven feet long.

Chang Jung, a poet in the 5th century, was given a fan made of white egret feathers by a Taoist priest, who told him that strange things should be given to strange people. The Emperor said that the kingdom couldn't stand to be without one man like Chang Jung and couldn't stand to be with two.

Chang Hsun held out bravely in the siege of Sui-yang in 756 and, as supplies and food ran short, even sacrificed his favorite concubine, to no avail. His patriotic rage caused him to grind his teeth with such fury that after his execution it was discovered that he had no teeth left at all.

Chang Fang-p'ing, in the 11th century, was a prolific writer who never wrote a rough draft.

The family of Chang Kung-i, in the 7th century, was noted for having had nine generations of harmonious living. When the Emperor asked how this was possible, Chang Kung-i called for pen and paper, and wrote the character "patience" over and over.

Chang Kuo was one of the Eight Immortals of the 8th century. The Empress sent a

messenger to summon him to court, but by the time the messenger arrived Chang was already dead. Later he appeared again, and the Empress sent another messenger who fell into a swoon that lasted for years. A third messenger was successful, and Chang entertained the Court by becoming invisible and drinking poison, but he refused to have his portrait placed in the Hall of Worthies.

Chang I, in the 2nd century, wrote an encyclopedia of miscellaneous information. Chang K'ai, in the same century, could raise fogs.

Chang Ying, in the 17th century, was the official Reader to the Emperor.

Chang Tsu, in the 7th century, was too critical and always getting into trouble, but it was said that his essays were like a thousand pieces of gold chosen from a thousand pieces of gold. This meant that they were all precious.

Chang Ying-wen, in the 16th century, could never pass the examinations, as he thought only about antiques. Fortunately he became a connoisseur.

When Chang Shao died, sometime in the Han Dynasty, he appeared to his best friend Fan Shih in a dream. Fan immediately set out for the funeral, many provinces away. For weeks no one was able to lift Chang's coffin, until Fan rode up on a white horse, dressed in mourning.

Chang Huang-yen, the last supporter of the Ming Dynasty in the 17th century, retreated to a barren island, where he trained apes to warn him of an enemy approach.

Chang Tsao, in the 9th century, would paint trees simultaneously using his finger and a worn stump of a brush—one for the living matter, the other for the dead branches and fallen leaves.

Chang Hua, in the 3rd century, wrote a famous rhapsody or rhymed prose poem (*fu*) on the wren: The wren is a tiny bird. It eats only a few grains; it makes its nest on a single branch; it can only fly a few feet; it takes up little space and does no harm. Its feathers are drab; it is useless to humankind, but it too receives the force of life. Ducks and geese can fly up to the clouds, yet they are shot down with arrows, for their flesh is plump. Kingfishers and peacocks must die because their feathers are beautiful. The falcon is fierce, but is kept on a tether; the parrot is intelligent, but is locked in a cage, where it is forced to repeat its master's words. Only the little wren, worthless and unlovely, is free.

Chang Hua, like many poets, did not listen to himself. He came from a respected family that had fallen into poverty. In his youth he was a goatherd, but his intelligence was so notable that he managed to marry the daughter of a prominent official and was appointed as an erudite to the Ministry of Ceremonies. From there he became Deputy Compiler, then a Gentleman of Palace Writers, and the Emperor often consulted him on matters of ritual and protocol. In 267 he was given the title of Marquis of the Passes, and in 270 invented a system of organizing and cataloging the Imperial Library

that was used for centuries. He went on to become the Marquis of Guangwu and the Military Governor of Yuchou. In 287, the ridgepole in the Great Hall of the Imperial Ancestral Temple collapsed and Chang, now Director of the Ministry of Ceremonies, was held responsible and fell in disgrace. A few years later, with the accession of a new Emperor, Chang returned to the Court, and held posts as Imperial Household Grandee of the Right, Overseer of the Masters of Writing, Duke of Chuangwu and, his highest post, Minister of Works. In 299, he was caught in palace intrigues and refused to join what became a successful coup d'état. He and all his sons and their sons were executed.

### 3: WRENS

Wrens live almost everywhere; they eat almost anything; they adapt to most climates—converting, for example, from polygamy to monogamy where food is scarce. There are twenty million of them in the British Isles alone. They build their nests almost anywhere, even in the beard of Edward Lear’s Old Man with a Beard. The pastor-naturalist Rev. Edward A. Armstrong wrote that he found a nest in a human skull, but he didn’t explain how.

Yet the prolific and anonymous wren is not simple. In many of the European languages, its name means “king of the birds” or “winter king.” Killing one was bad luck: you’d break a bone, break out in pimples, get struck by lightning; the fingers on the hand that did the deed would shrivel and drop off; your cows would have blood in their milk.

Once a year, an exception was made. In most of France, Ireland, and the British Isles, there was a ritualized wren hunt that is recorded in Medieval texts, is undoubtedly much older, and was widespread until recent times. Though it varied from village to village, the essential ceremony was the same:

Sometime around the winter solstice—on Christmas or St. Stephen’s Day (December 26) or New Year’s Eve or New Year’s Day or Twelfth Night—boys or young men would blacken their faces and dress up in crazy clothes—women’s dresses or pyjamas or suits of straw—and, accompanied by fife and drums, would go out to beat the bushes for a wren. The boy who successfully caught one was named King of the Hunt and often required to perform tasks such as jumping naked in a lake. The slain wren was hung on a pole with its wings outstretched or carried on a bier decorated with ribbons and mistletoe or even in a miniature house complete with doors and windows. Its size was exaggerated: the boys pretended to stagger under the weight of the pole or bier, and in some places the bird was bound with heavy ropes and placed in a cart pulled by four oxen.

The Wren Boys then proceeded from house to house, singing songs and collecting coins. One of the versions of the song went:

The wren, the wren, the king of all birds,  
St. Stephen’s Day was caught in the furze;  
Although he is little, his family’s great,  
I pray you, good landlady, give us a treat.

The money paid for a banquet and a dance that night, one that usually featured trans-

gressive games or rituals for the newly wedded and the still unmarried. The next morning the wren was solemnly buried.

That the little wren comes from somewhere far in the past is evident in the stories about it. The wren is a subverter of Christianity. As St. Stephen was about to escape from jail, a wren landed on the guard's face and woke him up, leading to the saint's martyrdom. The Irish St. Moling cursed all wrens because one ate his pet fly "that used to be making music for me." St. Malo chose to freeze rather than wear his cloak, for a wren had built a nest in it. Wrens are sometimes known as the "bird magician" or the "Druid bird."

The wren, in countless stories, is the enemy of the eagle, whom it usually outwits. The soaring eagle is the quintessential symbol of the sky, storms, and the sun. The wren—which doesn't fly high, which creeps into mouse holes and crevices—is an emblem of the earth. (In Greece, Trochilos the wren was the son of Triptolemos, the inventor of the plow.) And more: through the gender reversal so common in folklore, the wren, though "king of the birds," is female. She is Jenny Wren or Kitty Wren, the wife of Cock Robin, the universal bringer of fire. The wren is pagan, chthonic, female.

Four to six thousand years ago in these same parts, two distinct kinds of megaliths were constructed: circular passage graves with a single entrance and rectangular gallery graves with two entrances. As each is confined to various large and specific geographical areas, and as they rarely overlap, it is believed that they represent two distinct cultures or religions.

In the 1950's, the Reverend Armstrong mapped all the places where the Wren Hunt occurred and discovered that it was largely absent from the areas where gallery graves are found. In Ireland, the area of passage graves and Wren Boys and the area of gallery graves and no Wren Boys corresponded almost exactly with the national entities now known as Ireland and Northern Ireland. Wrens go deep.

## 4: THE DESERT MUSIC: NORTH

In the northern Peruvian desert that stretches south for two thousand miles, it is gloomy, the thick clouds trapped between the Andes and the sea, the temperature tepid, cold at night, and always the same. Once every ten years it rains. There is only one wind, it blows from the south. But the Pacific there has more fish than anywhere, rivers come down from the mountains making irrigation possible, and the valleys have been inhabited for ten thousand years. Cultures have risen and fallen, some, it is believed, because their villages and canals were buried by shifting dunes of what the archeologists call aeolian sand.

One, the Moche, once known as the Mochica, once known as the Proto-Chimú, had no major cities, but they constructed two pyramids, dedicated to the sun and the moon, each made from fifty million adobe bricks. Masters in gold, silver, and bronze, in the weaving of cloth and the weaving of feathers, the Moche are best known for their ceramics, an encyclopedia of molded depictions of every aspect of their lives: houses, food, flora and fauna, funerals and childbirths, individualized portraits of the high and low, precise representations of diseases and, most unusually, their sexual practices. They wrote on beans, but only a few of those beans have survived, and the writing has faded away.

Their successors, the Chimú, devoted themselves to commerce and empire; their art was an inferior version of the Moche. Around the year 1000 they built a gridwork city, six square miles within its walls decorated with elaborate friezes, with a hundred thousand people inside and tens of thousands scattered in its outskirts, with a ceremonial road sixty feet wide leading into the city that was called Chan Chan. Their empire, the Kingdom of Chimor, was the size of ancient Egypt, its boundaries marked by walls running over the barren mountains. Moon worshipers, they were defeated by the sun worshipers, the Inka, shortly before the Spanish arrived; on the verge of defeat, they set fire to their own city. Even more than the Spanish, the Inka were repelled by the sexual life of the Chimú—in particular their fondness for heterosexual sodomy—and they executed whole clans in a useless exercise of moral reform. Both Inka and Chimú marked the death of kings with the mass sacrifices of young women and llamas.

Chan Chan was first mapped and described in detail by Ephraim George Squier in the mid-19th century. Squier, born in Bethlehem, New York, in 1821, started out as a poet, a contributor to *The Literary Pearl* and *The Lady's Cabinet* and *The Poughkeepsie*

*Casket*; he later characterized his poetry as an infantile malady comparable to the measles. He became a motivational speaker, promoting American self-improvement and self-reliance, then moved into journalism and was appointed the editor of a small-town newspaper in Chillicothe, Ohio in 1845. It was the moment when New World ethnography and archeology were being born: collections, explorations, excavations; John Stephens and Frederick Catherwood in Mexico and Central America; John “The Pathfinder” Fremont in the Far West; George Catlin’s monumental writings and illustrations of North American Indians. Squier found himself in Ohio near the Indian mounds and earthworks, which he surveyed and dug. His subsequent report was published as *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* (1848), the first book from the new Smithsonian Institution.

Much of anthropology then was a matter of skulls—skulls were disproving the Biblical genealogy of the Original Pair, were classifying and ranking the races, allying scientists and slave owners in the belief in innate inferiority. Squier was particularly proud to discover an original Mound Builder skull, which he turned over to Samuel George Morton, the author of *Crania Americana*, and the reigning expert. Morton took it as further evidence of his theory that the hemisphere had originally been inhabited by two subgroups of a single race: the Toltecs, or semi-civilized tribes, who had built the mounds in the U.S. and the cities and monuments of Mexico and Peru, and an intellectually inferior American or Barbarous group, whose descendants were the current North American tribes.

Squier’s friend W. H. Prescott urged him to investigate Latin America, and Squier received a commission to head an official delegation to Nicaragua to discuss treaties and the possibility of building a canal to link the oceans. (Nicaragua, said Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés in the 16th century, was truly “Muhammad’s paradise.”) Squier’s long stay, exploring sites, collecting artifacts, compiling indigenous vocabularies, resulted in *Nicaragua: Its People, Scenery, Monuments* (1852), the first scientific study of the region. He then wrote a novel, disguised as a travel book, under the pseudonym Samuel A. Bard: *Waikna, or Adventures on the Mosquito Shore* (1855), as precise and drily descriptive as the previous book, except now the narrator, Bard, had the kind of adventures that had eluded Squier himself, including shipwrecks and gun battles with bandits. Many books, articles, lecture tours followed; Squier was the leading Central Americanist of his day.

Like Prescott, he began to go blind. His doctors advised absolute rest, which Squier assumed could only be found on an expedition to Peru. In 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, Lincoln named him as a Special Commissioner to settle some trade agreements about the mining and export of guano. He finished his work in a few months, and then spent two years traveling the country, mapping, cataloging, and photographing ruins and monuments; somehow, this restored his eyesight. He collected a hundred cases of pottery, carved stones, metalwork, and skulls. His maps were perfect, and he intuitively grasped the unique and complex clan arrangement of Chan Chan, which the archeologists proved a hundred years later.

Squier’s photographer in Peru was the French aristocrat and adventurer Augustus Le Plongeon, who, still in his thirties, had already sailed and crashed yachts across the Atlantic and around the Horn; worked as a surveyor in California during the Gold Rush and made a fortune in land speculation; gone to England and learned the new

process of paper photography from Fox Talbot himself; traveled to Australia and China; run a photo studio in San Francisco; and received a medical degree. In Peru, he opened another photo studio and an “electro-hydropathic” clinic where patients were treated with electrical currents running through a medicinal bath, pursued his studies of seismology, and wrote two books against the Jesuits and the local abuses of the Catholic Church. After eight years, and a devastating earthquake he thought proved his theories, Le Plongeon moved to the Yucatan with his new wife, Alice. There, the couple camped out in the ruins and through years of civil war, plagues of locusts, and epidemics of cholera, they became fluent in Yucatec Maya, and undertook the first scientific excavation and documentation of the archeological sites.

Their methodology, impeccable for the time, was at the service of a novel theory: the Mayas were 12,000 years old and were responsible for much of world civilization. Augustus believed that he could read the Maya glyphs, and he found there the tragic story of the royal house of what he called Mayax: Princess Moo, queen of Chichen Itza, marries her youngest brother (as was, according to Le Plongeon, the custom), the great warrior Prince Coh. Their brother, Prince Aac, king of Uxmal, coveting Queen Moo and jealous of Prince Coh’s fame, has Coh murdered. War breaks out between the cities. Queen Moo flees first to Atlantis, but it is already gone, so she continues on to Egypt, where she is known as Isis, and brings Maya technology and wisdom, including pyramid construction and hieroglyphic writing, to the Nile.

Augustus and Alice thought they were the reincarnations of Coh and Moo. He saw his likeness carved on a frieze in Uxmal; she always wore a jade pendant he had unearthed. Among many other things, Le Plongeon claimed that Biblical Aramaic was Maya, and that the words “Eli, Eli, lamah sabachthani” were actually the Yucatec Maya “Hele, hele, lamah zabac ta ni,” meaning “Now, now, I am fainting, darkness covers my face.” It was, he thought, out of character for the last words of Christ to be a complaint that God had forsaken him.

Squier, on his return to the U.S., lapsed in and out of madness, working, in his lucid moments, on a book that his brother finally assembled years later: the 600-page *Peru: Incidents of Travel and Exploration in the Land of the Incas* (1877). For long stretches he believed that he was still in Nicaragua. He died in 1888 in a lunatic asylum, and his last words were: “The pottery of the Mochicas is their language.”

A teenager, I was hitchhiking across that sunless desert, and for hours the only living thing I saw was a shirtless man in a loincloth carrying an enormous wooden cross. “Who’s that?” I said and the truck driver shrugged, “Oh, just another penitent.”

When we reached the ruins of Chan Chan, I asked to be dropped off and wandered alone into the grid of crumbled mud walls that seemed to have no end. There was no one around, but the landscape was scattered with mounds and rectangular pits dug by grave robbers, as random as mole hills. Lying next to one of them was a skull. I sat down, feet dangling in the pit, and put the skull on my knee. I stuck my hand inside, and talked to it, or imagined that we talked, on that empty plain in nowhere.

Decades later, a friend who was near death told me he had been reading the passage where Chuang Tzu finds an old skull and, using it as a pillow, falls asleep. In a dream, the skull appears and tells Chuang Tzu that among the dead there are no rulers

or subjects, no work to be done, and spring and autumn are endless. Chuang Tzu asks: “If I got the Arbiter of Fate to give you a body again, make you some bones and flesh, return you to your parents and family and your old home and friends, you would want that, wouldn’t you?” The skull replies: “Why would I throw away more happiness than that of a king on a throne and take on the troubles of a human being again?”

“It is comforting,” my friend said, “but I don’t believe it.”

## 5: GIUSEPPE

Giuseppe Desa's father was a carpenter who went broke, lost everything, and vanished. His mother, always severe and now embittered, was forced, on June 17, 1603, to give birth to her son in a stable. The boy was apparently not bright. He would sit for hours with his eyes rolled upward, gaping; the other kids called him "bocca aperta," open mouth. For years his body was covered with sores.

He loved the Church and everything about the Church, but his uncle, a priest, thought him unfit for the cloth. Some Capuchins took him in as a lay brother and assigned him to the kitchen, but he was hopeless: breaking dishes, knocking over pots into the fire, mistaking the rye for the wheat. He was expelled after a few months, returned home in rags, and was berated by his uncle and mother.

Somehow he found work in another monastery, tending the mules, and his piety, or other-worldliness, was such that they accepted him as a novitiate. He had difficulty learning, and only passed the examination by a miraculous coincidence: the Bishop happened to ask him the one question to which he knew the answer.

He spent sixteen years in the monastery at Grotella, in a cell bare of even the few things monks are allowed. His self-mortifications were extreme. Draped in chains, he would beat himself with a scourge studded with needles and star-shaped pieces of steel; the walls of his cell were sprinkled with blood. For most of the year he ate only on Thursdays and Sundays; his food was dried fruits and beans—not even bread—to which he added an unknown bitter powder. A friar once tasted Giuseppe's dinner and was so disgusted by it he couldn't eat for days.

He didn't understand when people spoke to him. After he warmly greeted two women on the road, a companion asked Giuseppe if he knew them: "Of course. It's our Blessed Mother Mary and St. Catherine of Siena." When he spoke at all, he would mumble bits of prayers or snatches of Scripture, sing songs of his own invention, or say enigmatic things. Once, on meeting a Protestant, he exclaimed, "Be cheerful: the deer is wounded," and the man later converted. He would often tell sinners, "Go and adjust your bow," but no one knew what this meant. He once ran outside in the midst of a furious storm, shouting "Dragon! Dragon!" and the storm suddenly ceased. He could summon birds by calling them. He would go into trances, and the other monks would prick him with needles, hold torches to his skin, or touch his unblinking eyeballs, with no reaction. Opening the door to his cell, he always invited his guardian angel to enter first.

He avoided women, and loathed money. When the pious attempted to give him a

donation for the monastery, he would refuse and tell them to speak to a superior. Someone once slipped a silver coin into his cowl. Giuseppe began to breathe heavily and sweat and finally cried out, "I can't take it anymore!" He returned to normal when the coin was removed. He drove a flock of sheep into the chapel, recited the litany to them, and they baaed in unison after every "Sancta Maria."

There was something else about Giuseppe. Devotion had reduced his body and his mind to the state of physical zero for which Gandhi, in his celebrated fasts and elaborate tests of resistance to sexual temptation, had longed. Giuseppe was barely here at all, and therefore he could fly. Twice a day at Mass, and on countless other occasions, he would suddenly shout out a word or two: "Love!" or "Holy Mother!" or "Beautiful Mary!" or even "Immaculate Conception!" He described those words as the gunpowder in a cannon. And then he would shoot up toward the ceiling of the cathedral or church or chapel, hovering in the air, sometimes for hours, singing praises with his knees bent and his arms outstretched.

Two popes, ambassadors, various government and church officials, and thousands of others saw him and have left scores of eyewitness accounts. Once, he flew to the top of a tree and its branches did not bend, as though a small bird were perched on it. Once, he took the hand of a confessor, lifted him up, and danced with him in the air. Once, he threw a lamb up as high as a tree, rose and caught it in his arms and dangled there for two hours. Once, a deranged man, the Chevalier Baldassarre, was brought to him tied to a chair. Giuseppe untied him and pulled him by his hair to the top of the cathedral altar. Upon their descent, the man was sane again.

Questioned by a Cardinal, Lorenzo Brancati, about what exactly was happening during his flights, he replied in the third person, and said that Giuseppe found himself in a great gallery filled with beautiful and rare objects. Among them was a bright mirror that Giuseppe would stare into and, in a single glance, Giuseppe could see the forms of all the things in the world and all the hidden mysteries of the universe that God had chosen to show him.

Royalty came to visit, but the Church didn't know what to do with him. The Inquisition investigated; his presence was too disruptive; he was sent to obscure monasteries, traveling at night on back roads, where he was given the most hidden of the cells, but crowds of pilgrims still found him. Toward the end of his life, under orders from the Pope, he was sent to Osimo and forbidden to see anyone outside the monastery.

On September 18, 1663, after six years of solitary confinement, Giuseppe, in a fever, whispered, "The donkey is climbing the mountain." The next day, preparing the body for embalment, the monks discovered that his heart was bloodless, completely shriveled and dry. He had once said of the Virgin Mary: "My mother is very strange; if I bring her flowers, she says she does not want flowers; if I bring her cherries, she will not take them; and if I then ask her what she wants, she replies, 'I want your heart, for I live on hearts.'"

## 6: THE TREE OF FLOWERS

**M**artim Afonso de Sousa, a Portuguese swashbuckler, having discovered and named the site of Rio de Janeiro, was bored in Brazil. In 1534, he set sail for Asia with five ships and two thousand soldiers, and the official title of Captain-Major of the Seas. On the west coast of India, he defeated Ottoman armies and local kings, established colonies, was the sword that cleared the path for the cross of his colleague Francis Xavier and, seven years later, settled in Goa as Governor of Portuguese Asia.

What he had not done, however, was to achieve the fame that accompanied the conquest of a city of enormous wealth. He was jealous of Cortés and Pizarro, and transfixed by stories of Tirupati, on the rarely explored east coast of India, where millions of pilgrims came to worship at the temple of Venkateshvara, Lord of the Seven Hills, where the idols were draped in necklaces of pearls and emeralds and diamonds from the nearby mines, where there were piles of gold coins, as high as ten measures of wheat, the donations of the faithful and the tribute from the one hundred and fifty villages the temple owned, and where, it was said, it would take two thousand slaves to carry away all the treasure.

In Europe, the word *pagoda* had first referred to the heathen idols in the Indian temples, then to the temples themselves, and then, in the mixture of repulsion and greed, to the gold coins the temples hoarded. In 1543, Martim Afonso launched the Great Pagoda Voyage from Goa to conquer Tirupati, with twenty-five hundred soldiers, many of them merchant volunteers, and two hundred cavalry. They were wracked by unusual storms along the western coast, and then were becalmed on Neduntivu, which the Portuguese called Cow Island, in the shallows of Chilaw, in the straits between India and Ceylon. They sat in the windless heat for days, until Martim Afonso was overcome with an uncharacteristic melancholy and abruptly ordered his forces to return home. No one knows exactly what happened there, and he never attempted another expedition again.

In the villages around Tirupati, the nights were spent telling stories. One of them was about two beautiful sisters whose parents had died in a flood and who lived with their grandmother, a poor sweeper, in a ruin of a shack, surviving on handfuls of rice and scraps.

“We must help our grandmother,” said the elder sister to the younger. “I will tell you a secret: I know how to turn myself into a tree of flowers. We’ll collect the flowers and sell them in the market. But you must follow my instructions precisely.”