

**The Seekers** ( the first of four poems in a series called **Magi**)

You ask from whence we came—  
from many places. Some are legends now,  
some unremembered. You make us into kings.  
We were not kings, not even of ourselves.  
Were we from the east? That is a point of view.  
We set out from where we were. You give us names  
like Melchior and Balthazar,  
but those were not our names. From time to time  
we have been called by many names—  
Plato, Confucius, Archimedes,  
Copernicus, Galileo, Newton,  
Descartes, Darwin, Einstein, Heisenberg.  
How long did the journey take? Months? Centuries?  
When does a myth take hold,  
in a moment or a thousand years?  
Though calendars and clocks may shepherd it  
with careful numbers, yet in the wilderness time  
howls like a pack of wolves. We heard it all night long.  
We were both men and women. What we shared  
was an unquenchable desire to know  
something not known before. Were we wise?  
Wise to leave our homes, acquaintances and all  
the comfort of familiar irritations,  
shedding the fabric of our former lives  
like an old coat? Wise to risk  
everything on our unlikely theories  
with no guarantee of safe return,  
and reckless that the truth that we discover  
may prove, for all we know, fatal  
to everything to which we have thus far clung?  
If this is wisdom, yes,  
you may say that we were wise.

## The journey

There were signs in the sky  
but we misread them badly. For a long time we thought  
the sun moved round the earth, and yet  
our calculations showed up something wrong.  
Like curious boys we took it all apart  
piece by cosmic piece. We followed the stars,  
carefully recording each small change  
until the evidence was inescapable.  
We dug up rocks and bits of bone,  
but this made matters worse.  
We broke them down into their elements  
to see what they were made of—  
earth, water, fire and air  
did not stand up to cross-examination.  
Anxious for tools we dreamed technology:  
the microscope and telescope were two ways  
of asking the same question. We carried on  
through molecules, atoms and electrons  
to quarks and antiquarks, the smallest stuff  
that anyone could find, following  
our star at speeds approaching light  
between the particle and wave, where matter turns  
to energy, and energy is all that matters.  
It was much simpler when we could believe  
that stars were lamps and God the kindly lamplighter.  
There had been wars, each one bloodier  
than the last, but none as terrible  
as standing on those borderlines of truth  
and finding every one a cheap stockade  
of prejudice and fear. We were burned  
as heretics and witches, tortured,  
excommunicated, ridiculed or quietly ignored.  
When all humanity begged us to stop  
we pressed on, into the human gene  
and to the mapping of the mind.  
We will uncover everything in our search  
for something we can worship.  
We have trampled down each nice distinction  
until the stars we followed are no more  
than patterns of the cosmos' DNA.  
We found no Eden: we were made this way.

The second of four poems in the sequence [Magi](#).

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## The gifts

We bring the very best things we have made.  
We made wealth, lots of it. At first we made it  
for our benefit, a mark of fruitfulness,  
the limited but real success of the Genesis command;  
but then we made it for its own sake, and it grew  
like Jack's beanstalk, climbing to the sky,  
to a promised kingdom of financial markets,  
a world of make-believe where Giant Greed  
thunders blindly around looking for lunch.  
Sometimes he eats up whole economies  
in his hunger for a dividend, yet he dreads  
the sound of reality chop-chop-chopping that will pull  
the whole thing crashing down about our ears.  
We bring our wealth, and our contempt of it.  
We made religion, plenty of it. We made it  
mainly for our benefit. We shaped it carefully  
into Aladdin's lamp, so that when we rub  
and say the proper magic words  
God rises like a genie from the spout,  
our wishes his command. We lie awake  
murmuring prayers of open sesame  
for the door of the magic cave to spring  
on all the riches of eternity. Sometimes  
our fickle genie seems unsatisfied with them and so  
we use the lamp more sparingly these days.  
We bring religion, and our contempt of it.  
We tried to make life, but so far without success.  
Determined that like Cinderella we shall go  
to the ball of endless youth, the cryogenic fairy waves  
her wand of magic promises:  
diets, hairdos, workouts, facials,  
lifted chins, and now re-engineering—  
fresh hips, new lungs, transplanted hearts  
and spare part organs grown from embryos  
to turn the pumpkin of our body  
into a glittering carriage. We don't look bad,  
on a good day in a sympathetic light,  
but when the clock strikes twelve our time's still up  
and our carefully-fashioned show returns  
to mice and vegetation. It's a bore.  
Prince Charming needn't hold his breath:  
we can't yet bring life, and so  
we bring death, and our great contempt of it.  
The gold, the incense, the embalming spices,  
our pantomime contains the lot.  
We hope you like them. They're the best we've got.

The third of four poems in the sequence [Magi](#).

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### **The epiphany**

A stable's a good place for revelations.  
Some of the most profound discoveries  
are made in back rooms, half by accident,  
by people half-exhausted, looking for something else.  
Just as we felt like giving up,  
when the whole thing had become ridiculous  
and had gone on much too long, and we were blaming  
everybody else for our mistakes,  
we came upon the unexpected answer  
in the most unlikely place:  
a speechless, thoughtless, helpless child  
who just lay there, needing to be loved.  
In this defiance of all natural things  
was born the enabling power of sacrifice—  
a being whose ambition was to seek  
its own destruction and then call upon  
his followers to do no more or less.  
What kind of way was this to rule a world?  
He just lay there, needing to be loved.  
It would be stopped. Each Herod would conspire  
for its destruction, when they cannot tempt it  
with possessions nor subdue it with pain  
nor lull it to sleep with alcohol or television.  
Here was something we could not buy or cure,  
digitise, transplant, update, invest in,  
analyse or write a business plan for.  
He had no army, text-book, voters' mandate  
or computer markup language  
with which to implement this great design:  
he just lay there, needing to be loved.  
It was the most implausible demand.  
Anything else we might negotiate  
but not this secret life secured through death:  
grace, born out of deprivation,  
grace born of the endurance of the oppressed,  
grace born of the hardships of the poor,  
grace born of the forgiveness of the intolerable,  
grace borne in the dignity of silence, grace born  
from incomprehensible submission  
to the absolute abuse of power.  
In the strength of his weakness  
he just lay there, needing to be loved.  
Aeons after energy exploded into matter  
here in this stable was let loose  
a yet more potent power:

shedding the fabric of his former life  
like an old coat, reckless that the truth  
would prove for all he knew fatal  
to everything to which he had thus far clung.  
Our gifts were tokens. There was nothing more to do  
but leave the child to his own terrible story,  
and return by different routes  
to our own countries, strangers to us now,  
yet seeing them as if for the first time,  
how they just lie there, needing to be loved.

The last of four poems in the sequence [Magi](#).

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