for our son, Paul Mariani, S.J.
Above the bluebleak priest the brightblue fisher hovers.
The priest notes the book upon the table, the lamp beside the book.
A towering Babel of papers still to grade, and that faraway look
as once more the mind begins to wander. Ah, to creep beneath the covers
of the belled bed beckoning across the room. He stops, recovers,
takes another sip of bitter tea, then winces as he takes another look
at the questions he has posed his students and the twists they took
to cover up their benighted sense of Latin. The fisher hovers
like a lit match closer to him. The windows have all been shut against
the damp black Dublin night. After all these years, his collar chokes
him still, in spite of which he wears it like some outmoded mark
of honor, remembering how his dear Ignatius must have sensed
the same landlocked frustrations. Again he lifts his pen. His strokes
lash out against the dragon din of error. The fisher incandesces in the dark.

—Paul Mariani
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PART I

WE ARE SO GRAFTED
ON HIS WOOD

1844–1868

Robert Bridges and Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1863.
Chapter 1

In the Breaking of the Bread:
Horsham & Home, 1866, and the Early Years

“The world is charged with the grandeur of God,” Hopkins believed. He believed it from his undergraduate years at Oxford as an Anglican seeker. Believed it so strongly that it led in large part to his conversion to the Roman Catholic Church. Believed it as a Jesuit, and called on both Ignatius’s Spiritual Exercises and the insights of the philosopher Duns Scotus into Christ’s Incarnation to formulate a theodicy and a poetics which would articulate and sing what his whole self—head and heart—felt. And the evidence of that grandeur came to be everywhere for him: in the sublime Alps as in violets and running streams and in the ten thousand faces which reflected the very face of God.

All that was wanting, he believed, was the beholder. And when the beheld and the beholder once met, when the essential nature of the thing was instressed upon the eye, ear, tongue, and mind, the heart could not help but rise up as at a sudden unheard symphony, a dance, the heart growing “bold and bolder” as it hurled itself after its Creator, the One who bode there and abided. But to realize this way of seeing into the heart of things would eventually cost him everything, for it would mean giving himself over to this new reality, deeper and more satisfying than anything else he had ever felt, an unbearable lightness everywhere about us, and only the insulation of self-preoccupation keeping the self from feeling its staggering, terrifying sweetness and tenderness.

More, Hopkins’s own poetry would come to be charged with incarnating this same reality. It would be his response to the incredible gifts God had lavished on him as on others. His language too would come to be charged with a barbarously refined new energy, but only as he remained true to what he had been charged with doing: singing the earth’s praise and bringing news to others of what he had been privileged to see and understand. It would be his overture responding to God’s smile. He would not sing of him-
self, as Whitman was singing of himself there in the New World. Nor would he dwell on himself, as Lucifer had done before his fall. Rather, he would direct himself outwardly toward the sublime Other. At least that was his dream, his reason for uttering his poems, though in time he would plunge deeper into the abyss of the stark self than any poet since Milton.

“Oh, / We lash with the best or worst / Word last!” he would come to understand:

How a lush-kept, plush-capped sloe
Will, mouthed to flesh-burst,
Gush!—flush the man, the being with it, sour or sweet
Brim, in a flash, full!

That final yes or no to God’s universe, of which he realized with honeyed exaltation or salt bitterness he was but a mere spark, a floating mote, would be at the heart of it, and provide for him on his journey—if that was what it was—through its unexpected, protean shiftings. And not only for the years of philosophical inquiry. Not only for the search at Oxford for what remained of Newman and Pusey’s movement toward a more integrated Catholic vision. Not only for his search for a religious community to which he could swear fraternal fidelity—whether as a contemplative with the Benedictines, or with the Franciscans, or, as it turned out, with the Jesuits, together with Ignatius’s vision of a contemplative order in action, serving wherever it was needed, as needed, like a soldier following Orders.

“I did say yes,” he would acknowledge, trembling at the memory of it, when “at lightning and lashed rod” God heard him, “truer than tongue, confess / Thy terror, O Christ, O God.” But was that confession a cry of surrender, or the cry of someone unable any longer to hold back the stress of something surging through the very marrow of his soul? It would be the beginning too of his realization that he would have to give up remaining where he was, on ground he understood—the symbolic remembrance of Christ in the Eucharist—because that way of seeing things was no longer enough. He would come to hunger after nothing less than the Real Presence, God actually indwelling in things as simple as bread and wine, and see it as the logical extension of God’s indwelling among us, pitching His tent in the desert of ourselves so that He could speak to us as He had with Moses in the tent.

Two look at the world around them. One thinks of oil or gold or another human being and puts a value on it or him or her. Another looks at the
world and sees news of God’s presence calling. Or two look at a piece of bread or a cup of wine and see bread or wine only—the quotidian, the physical thing itself, while another looks at the same two things and is shaken to the very core by the God-saturated reality brimming in the deepest self. And these ways of seeing come to make all the difference in one’s life, one’s thoughts, even in the way one comes to taste words.

And so with Hopkins, who for complex reasons needed, he felt, to become a Catholic and (better, worse) a Jesuit priest. Neither choice could possibly lead to preferment or even acceptance in his world, the world of late Victorian England. But they were—those choices—the logical outcome for him of much deep thinking and soul-searching. It would mean going counter to the secular and agnostic cutting-edge thinking of his own day, whether that thinker was Hegel or Lyell, Darwin or Freud. It would mean creating a radically new idiom that would lead to the renewal and possibilities of English, giving it back something of its original Anglo-Saxon force, besides recovering anew the all-but-forgotten beauties of plainchant. It would mean a poetry lettered and saturated with a language shimmering with the possibilities of a sacramental vision of the world around us. It would come to mean the possibility of actually renewing both the world and its words.

So give it a day, a date, a going forth, a crossing over, all in an instant, finally, a yes and a yes again. Call it Wednesday, July 18, 1866. Call it an out-of-the way point somewhere south of London and name it Horsham, on a dull midsummer’s day with curds-and-whey clouds faintly appearing and disappearing. Call it what he would with its wondrous, irresistible forces working on him. The instress of it, like the ooze of virgin oil crushed in the press of God’s hands, an anointing, a yielding, a yes.

**July 18, 1866, Horsham:** Hopkins—Gerard Manley (the Manley after his father)—has been hiking the fields and roadways around Horsham now for hours, listlessly observing the oaks and elms of the Sussex countryside a hundred miles to the south of London and his Hampstead home. He is just shy of his twenty-second birthday, five foot four, thin, fair-haired and athletic, with a scruffy thin beard which does not become him. And while he can joke and banter with the best of them, he seems tired, tired beyond his years, tired of standing on the sidelines as the great appetitive world spins on. Isn’t that what he himself had written the year before, about the alchemist in the city pining for something, something substantial, something immortal as diamond, beyond the mere cloudlike transitoriness of it all?
Like Moses, preparing to go out into the wilderness calling to him beyond his own too-human concerns? "My window shews the travelling clouds," he had written then,

Leaves spent, new seasons, alter'd sky,  
The making and the melting crowds:  
The whole world passes; I stand by.

Others build. Build massive edifices of one kind or another to crown their days. Even birds build nests. But what of him, watching his life drift away in meaningless activity?

They do not waste their meted hours,  
But men and masters plan and build:  
I see the crowning of their towers,  
And happy promises fulfilled . . .

And yet something—call it some ineffable mystery—has been calling to him, for he too, like so many of the earnest young starting out, would love to somehow turn the dross of the quotidian to gold. He too would pierce, if only he knew how, "the yellow waxen light" of the phoenix sun, "with free long looking, ere I die." But that would mean surrendering—would it not?—giving up so much: the support of his family, his friends at Oxford, his tutors, his confessor Liddon, the magnetic Dr. Pusey, Urquhart, all those who have counseled him to keep within the Anglican Church into which he was born and raised by caring parents with close connections to that Church.

Nearly all his relatives are Church of England moderates, among them his mother and father and seven siblings, of whom he is the oldest and the one to whom the younger ones look up. If he should go over to the Roman Church, if his imminent "perversion," as his Anglican religionists prefer to name such defections, becomes a fact, it will mean loss of preference, loss of a university professorship at Oxford, loss of prestige among the majority of his countrymen, lookings askance, distrust, and the certain knowledge that his father especially will never understand, certain now that his poor lost prodigal son, with such a promising future ahead of him and who has done so well at Oxford, will have gone mad from too much reading and so gone over to the enemy. And all for what? Out of sheer self-will, to follow a chimerical vision? Or to finally surrender and go over, like his hero, John
Henry Newman, and others before him—to the old Catholic faith, whatever the cost, if he is ever to find rest from his motionable mind?

And yet something like a colossal smile has been drawing him in that very direction. Not only his High Church Anglican teachers and tutors who are still part of this thirty-year-old Oxford Movement which somehow survived even Newman’s defection to Rome twenty years before, but churchmen like Pusey and Liddon and his protean, wind-wavering friend Urquhart, along with so many of his own Oxford contemporaries: undergraduates attending Anglican masses where vestments are worn, and incense burned and confession in the form of the writing out of one’s sins in exacting detail have become regular practices. Young men quivering like erratic magnets to take that last step of crossing over to Rome, and only waiting for the time when the Spirit will summon them there.

The questions, the pros and cons, the arguments and counterarguments, in short, the logistical nightmare of it all, have been torturing Hopkins for two years now, at least as far back as his telling his friend Ernest Coleridge that he was afraid Coleridge was not very Catholic—he meant Anglo-Catholic then—and warning him against doing what he himself had done when he’d first come up to Oxford: adopting the fashionable attitude of the so-called Liberal and Enlightened Christian. That Laodocian attitude, he had come to see, only led to the loss of one’s faith altogether. The truth, the one “great aid to belief and object of belief,” the underpinning of it all, came down to the fact of the real presence of God in the Blessed Sacrament. Without that anchor, without that centering and safeguard, Christianity was “sombre, dangerous, illogical.” With it, Christianity was not only consistent and grounded in certainty, it was, above all, “loveable,” something not only his searching mind but his hungry heart could latch onto. Hold to that, he counseled Coleridge, “and you will gain all Catholic truth.”

But it is, he sees, as insects drone and light plays about him on a quiet country road, the very definition of “Catholic” itself which has changed for him in the last two years. Consider John Henry Newman, his hero and spiritual father, a man now in his mid-sixties and a tried veteran of these religious wars, stung into answering his Anglican critics for his abandonment of the Church of England, at last publishing his Apologia pro Vita Sua. In a justly memorable passage there, Newman had recalled the day he left his beloved Oxford for the last time. It was the morning of February 22, 1846, and he was then forty-five. After years of arguing with himself and others, he was finally going over to Rome, leaving Trinity, dear Trinity, which had
never been unkind to him, behind forever. Twenty years on, and Newman could still see in his mind’s eye the lovely “snap-dragon growing on the walls opposite my freshman’s rooms there.” It was an image he had long taken “as an emblem of my own perpetual residence even unto death in my University.” And yet Newman had had no choice then, as he, like other Catholic converts from Anglicanism had seen it, but to leave his university and its environs forever if he was to follow his conscience. He would not see his beloved Oxford again for many years, “excepting its spires,” and those only “as they are seen from the railway.”

The previous January, Coleridge had come up to Oxford to see how Hopkins was faring amid the gray walls and river meadows of the university. During that time he and Hopkins had had another of their endless peripatetic philosophical talks, the topic this time centering on what seemed the inevitable inconsequentiality and triviality of life. You were born, Coleridge had insisted, you lived, you married (or didn’t), had children (or didn’t), you toiled, ate, slept, you grew old, you sickened, you died. In the course of the discussion, Coleridge had opined—like so many young men trying on the immense abstractions of an idea—that it seemed a sheer impossibility that God should allow a place like hell to exist in the divine scheme of things. It was Origin’s ancient argument for apocatastasis—the final emptying of hell—all over again, Hopkins had realized, only this time fitted out in Darwinian evolutionary dress. How could anything like eternity, Coleridge had argued, depend “on anything so trivial and inadequate as life is”? From a purely scientific perspective, human life did not even amount to a drop in the ocean of eternity.

A week later, still worrying the idea, Hopkins had written him, laying out what he thought being separated from God came down to. He understood Coleridge’s point of view, he assured him, but it was equally true that it would be absolutely intolerable to the human mind (and heart) if there was nothing whatsoever—no authority, no touchstone—to “correct and avenge the triviality of this life.” Life had to have meaning, he had come to believe, just because God had created the universe and held it at every moment in being. True, God’s immensity made our “ordinary goings on look more ridiculously trivial than they wd. otherwise.” But there was another argument against the triviality of life so prevalent in contemporary thinking, and that was the fact of the Incarnation—of God’s breaking into the world by taking on human flesh in spite of all its staggering limitations.

Indeed, it was one of the most significant and adorable “aspects of the incredible condescension of the Incarnation . . . that our Lord submitted
not only to the pains of life, the fasting, scourging, crucifixion etc. or the insults, as the mocking, blindfolding, spitting etc. but also to the mean and trivial accidents of humanity” that, after making the world, the Creator should “consent to be taught carpentering, and, being the eternal Reason, to be catechised in the theology of the Rabbins.” If, therefore, the Incarnation—the Creator’s taking on the very stuff of His own Creation—could manifest itself among “trivial men and trivial things,” why was it so surprising “that our reception or non-reception of its benefits shd. be also amidst trivialities”? By entering our world and pitching His tent among us, God had lifted everything to an utterly new level of significance.

Trinity Term, mid-April, 1866: An auspicious beginning to Hopkins’s third year at Balliol. He has just settled into new lodgings at 18 New Inn Hall Street, in the heart of Oxford, with William Addis, fellow High Church Anglican, who, like himself, is seriously considering going over to the Catholic Church. One afternoon, in fine spring weather, the two walk out together to the Hinkseys, where Hopkins—that inveterate observer of nature—notes the robin’s-egg blue spring sky “pied with clouds” while the two discuss religion. On another afternoon, he walks out with his tutor, Walter Pater, Fellow of Brasenose, to discuss Renaissance aesthetics (da Vinci, Botticelli, Pico della Mirandola), the Pre-Raphaelites (among whom Pater has made several friends), John Ruskin, and the work of the German archeologist Johann Winckelmann, though he shies away from speaking of religious matters or anything resembling ascetical practices. Those topics belong rather to the other camp of Liddon and his ilk.

Another afternoon, out walking alone, Hopkins’s eye catches swallows “playing over Christ Church meadows with a wavy and hanging flight . . . shewing their white bellies,” so that he stops to listen to “the lisp of their wings.” Crossing the college cricket grounds, he runs into Tom Case, who tells him about three Christ Church men he caught laughing at a rat whose back had been broken, which kept nyling at a bulterrier tormenting it, until Case kicked the dog away and put the rat out of its misery. This too, Hopkins sees, is part of life here at Oxford: baiting a rat the way one smashes an opponent on the field.

Early May. Scholar Gypsy country: Hopkins and Addis stroll across the fields from Bablock Hythe to Cumnor Hill to view the new Anglican church of St. Philip’s and St. James’, where their friend Edward Urquhart has served as curate for the past two years. How lovely the new-turned earth here, its “vivid green slanting away beyond the skyline,” the clouds tinged a pale