

Encasement

by Andrew Kenneally

A universe, all of it, was encased in glass. However, those dwelling within a certain world within this universe did not know they were so encased for the glass was perfectly transparent and gave away at a distance nothing of itself. If they had been less unaware, who knows, they might have been blissfully so.

“In glass? Wonderful!”

But if over time, gathering dust and various wandering rubbish to itself, the glass becoming muddied and the universe within compelled to become dimmer, would the inhabitants begin to guess at all the glass? “The light is fading,” some wail. “We must be displeasing the gods!” Others: “We are polluting the atmosphere,” whilst others again, thoughtful, deduce the sun to be consuming itself, drawing low on its own reserves, and so this fading a precursor, in itself harmless, of the real disaster to come.

But it's much more likely I suppose that instead this dimming, if there was any dimming, would be both so slow and so faint as to go altogether unnoticed.

Something though that didn't go so unnoticed was the appearance of a crack in the glass. Why a crack? Because a stone had been thrown from somewhere effecting this crack. Thrown from inside or outside? Outside. The glass was of a scale that anything hitting it from the inside would have been far too weak to

have caused a scratch, never mind a crack, and so it must be from the outside it came.

And so a stone was thrown, accidentally or malignantly, or maybe just

unconsciously, that is inanimately, an unthinking movement of unthinking matter, and regardless, however, a great big crack appeared, clearly visible from all points within the glass, or at least visible whenever and wherever whoever was looking from was immersed in night and the crack above unobscured by clouds, and so, whatever the source, shafts of light could be seen striking the edges of the crack, creating an incredible, fearful, even mystical effect.

And with this immense, obscure appearance across the night sky, confusion, terror, people on their knees, floods of prayers sent into the void, and amongst whatever else, a great rush to interpret the appearance, but none in their interpreting proving inspired enough to surmise either glass or crack.

“My God! What is it?”

“Nothing to worry about. Something to do with the sky.”

One of the less impressive offerings. And so anyway, there it was, this wild, jagged line, unexplained across the heavens. “Heavens”, by the way, was enjoying a renaissance, and you could even, if you wished, make a case for now dividing people into two halves; one for those still using the prosaic “sky” when talking of such, and the other for those now saying “heavens” when talking of same - this use maybe natural or innocent at first, but pointedly soon enough after. There were also though a few of what you might call agnostics, who found themselves in the awkward position of not knowing what word to use, the use of either seeming to place you firmly within one of the two camps, and so they tried to intersperse both equally, but rather than being applauded for their delicacy, they ended up more or less just annoying everyone.

So the archaic style was back, portentous and poetical; in some hands serious, unforced; in others a fashion accessory; perhaps in others again sarcastic - even if this sarcasm might now seem a bit unsure of itself. Phrases like, "The starry vault has been sundered," became almost a commonplace; things you might hear, never mind behind closed doors, out on the street in the middle of the day.

The likes of Nostradamus was poured over; lines produced, discussed, thought about; perhaps the biggest fuss made over the following:

*A jug spills, milk disappears.
A horseman descends, fearsome and hungry.*

Whatever about the Frenchman's disappearing milk and descending horseman, that this was the kind of thing you could now mention in normal life without fear, or much of it, of being thought mad was, you could say, an emblem of the times, the times distilled.

And so now, on the cusp of these strange times, there they were, waiting.

But what happened in time with this waiting but more or less nothing - no Apocalypse, no dawning New Age, as said - nothing. And back out from the shadows began to emerge the sarcastic, slowly at first and looking about them, but then in a surging rush. "Go on with your Apocalypse!" they jeered, and began, making an awful lot of noise, to enjoy themselves. Whether there was really any enjoyment at the other end of all the noise I can't really say, maybe just a lot of noise signifying enjoyment; but that was the way it went anyway: In the absence of an apocalypse you enjoy yourself. There may have been some still waiting, but if they were, they were keeping their waiting to themselves.

So a return to something like normality; the crack becoming part of the furniture, no longer so novel, soon to be not novel at all; its prolonged existence proof of its banality. Relief, disappointment, a sense of futility and emptiness - all mingled. The coming time hadn't come, the great harbinger had foretold nothing, and the archaic style faded back away. You might still hear something like "The starry vault has been sundered," but this time in a certain tone, followed by laughter.

Interpretations became more a matter of idle intellectual musing than apocalyptic sooth-saying; money still being poured into scientific alleyways, the crack had become, one was given to understand, the personal property of the learned, debated in smooth, antiseptic tones, and in a leisurely manner. It was, they might concede, yes, for now, genuinely quite interesting; a bit of an anomaly, but we had all the time in the world and there was nothing particularly at stake - or if you like there was

something very particular at stake, the anomaly bit, but it would soon be an anomaly no more and no rush about it.

From those exalted and intellectual quarters, stern or amused looks

arrowed themselves downwards now towards any remarks about the crack rising up from regions beneath. If someone from below had for instance insisted on the great thing across the sky's still being a deep mystery and was honoured enough to receive in response to these words other words coming back down rather than just a descending look, those words would probably go something like: "A mystery? Only because we don't yet know what it is." If this someone beneath were stupid enough to

persist with his mystery, not realising he'd been crushed, he would probably find himself in an enclosure of silence hard to get out of.

And so, all in all, the crack in the distant glass still a riddle, but people a lot less concerned. Many disappointed, many not; tension eased but things a bit boring.

This relaxing of tension was dealt a very cruel blow though when another stone struck the outside of the glass, sending another but this time far larger crack scything across the surface. If in their observing our people had been anywhere near the glass, they would have experienced a sharp, very audible crack simultaneous to the appearance of the visual one, but being so far away they didn't. Light informed them of the frightening event long before any revealing noise, but the noise didn't just lie down, and instead rumbled its immense way across space, gaining if anything it seemed rather than losing in mass, before finally rolling hugely over the

humble world, flattening all other sound and terrifying everything upon it evolved enough to have got as far as experiences like terror. And, as if this weren't enough, as the huge roar slowly moved off on its way, fading at last to a low rumble, up struck across the continents a chorus of howling dogs, accompanied in places by howls more primal and awful again, human ones, pouring themselves out of abysses deeper than history - pardon the poetics.

When terror subsided enough to allow thought pour back in they tried to make sense of what had happened, to fit it into some conceivable map of existence; many even still in spite of all hoping this map could somehow be a reassuring one. Even the cynics though were shaken very deep.

"Now this is serious."

"Yes, this time it really is serious."

"I thought it was serious the first time."

"But" — some other exchange — "you don't think it could have been some kind of thunder?"

“Thunder? That was no thunder.”

And so religion on the rise again, more floods of prayers, a sense of impending doom, some souls strangely exhilarated, more terrified, some few even trying to let on to be amused by it all - the cracks, the noise, the howls, the terror - but these efforts now all too obviously strained, and inclined more towards the hysterical in the mad sense than the humorous.

“Who knows what will happen next — the sun might explode.”
“Still, we might get a tan. Ha ha!”

And still they hadn't figured out they were encased in glass. But then another stone struck the outside of the glass, and this time the glass shattered outright; great shards descend upon the formerly enclosed spaces, sending everything - suns, moons, planets - that they smash into flying; and finally, the shards descending, the now horrifying, previously harmless truth of the universe's crystal encasement begins to dawn.

And . . . Apocalypse? But the strange truth is, no matter how doomed our planet appeared, however certain various collisions appeared, it defied perhaps all logic and escaped without a scratch. All shards and splinters passed it by.

And so, the danger passed, aware at last they had been encased in glass, they were encased no more.

Word count:

