

Poem

TABOO

by Christopher Southgate

Otto Hahn and Lise Meitner collaborated on the experiments that led to the discovery of nuclear fission in 1938–39.

It is in our bones, in the knitting of them,
In the assembly of our atoms
Into community. Taboo was there in Eden.
For one fruit glowed with forbiddenness;
On one tree, plain enough perhaps
To look at, which in spring had flowered
Like an outbreak of stars, or in blossoms
Fine as a flamingo's wing, but then
Was ordinary in leaf, half-hiding
The exquisite harvest – on that one tree
We may imagine concentrated all
The chantment of a world made by God –
All the left-over star-stuff of the cosmogoner.
So that to eat the faintly glowing fruit
Was to come a hair's breadth, a photon-burst too close
To the one who had formed all things. To be exposed
To a blast of possibility
Too vast to be contained within our frame.
Which we did, and have dealt since then –
Man to blamed woman, human to all
This glory-scattered planet – evil.

Christopher Southgate is Research Fellow in Theology at the University of Exeter, Amory Building, Exeter EX4 4RJ, U.K.; e-mail c.c.b.southgate@ex.ac.uk. This poem appears in *Easing the Gravity Field: Poems of Science and Love* (Nottingham: Shoestring, 2006).

[*Zygon*, vol. 42, no. 4 (December 2007)]

© 2007 the author.

Journal compilation © 2007 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0591-2385

But what if the fruit
Revered, measured from an admiring distance,
Should then be found to fragment *of itself* –
To drip its star-stuff on the innocent?
It had been doing so for years, when Otto
Helped his Lise pack her bags for Sweden.

Even in the dull, static lab photo,
Two of them staring stiffly at the frame
From a suitable distance apart
You can see the respect, yes, but also
The intensity of their affection, Otto's
Sturdiness, Lise's passionate commitment –
Severe, brilliant, Jewish, banned.

He writes to her about her other luggage
And by the way that he – silly – cannot
Seem to separate product from carrier
In the tests on the slow-neutron block.
Poor man. He has put the answer into
The question, used a cider barrel to test
For apple-juice.
Lise, exiled from everything she knew,
Writes back – challenges, explains, confides
“A few private requests,” especially
“My index card file.” She pushes him
To look clearly into the dark glass.
On an envelope he notes her suggestion
As to the energy release. That
Is the horror. And he cannot sleep,
And he cannot but – out here beyond
Eden, where there is no concealment –
Cannot but consider (knowing his species),
The taking of his own life.
For once we find the innermost kernel
Can be made to melt before our eyes
The world is filled with a deadly, tabooless searching,
Pressing life hard against the unmeltable sword.

Later, watching the neutrons do their work,
Brighter than the New Mexico sun, a man
Wrote that he had become death,
Quoting Krishna. We reinvoke our favorite
Myths to look for limits. The lovely world
Is full of dissipate enchantment
And of the toxins we have made of it –
To poison a lamb at two thousand miles,
To kill a river with a teaspoon's dose.

Bring on the myths, then, and let them play
In the violent sunsets of this man-fired world.
And let but one taboo remain –
Against the crushing of that respect
I see in Otto's photograph. The furred
Rose of love, unanatomized,
Allowed to be itself, the high meadow
Allowed its brief tossings of joy.
For thirty years they worked together,
Always staying late. When the chemistry went well
They would sing Brahms to each other.
And every night each
Walked back from the Institute alone.

Bring on the myths again, but let them never
Lose (worst mockery of all)
The sense of how love can suffer and forgive
And give its secrets up – from Stockholm
For a card file, from many Golgothas.
Releasing us – to play death with the whole
Soul-stuff of the world – or into peace,
The furrow worked as though a garden – the future
Hoped for, as though it might belong to God.