



My Face to the Light

THOUGHTS ABOUT CHRISTMAS

Seed Catalogs like Paper Flowers

I did not know what Christmas was until I moved to the West Coast. During much of my adult life I'd viewed it as a season marked by the ritual killing of millions of trees, just as, for me, Thanksgiving is a day that represents the ritual killing, and eating, of millions of birds. I was sickened by the thought of all those stumps, all those bleeding necks, and by the message given to children that it is okay to sacrifice living beings in order to express appreciation for being alive yourself, or in order to celebrate the birth of a sacred person, Jesus Christ, who was himself against killing.

As a child I had not thought of this at all. Then, the message was entirely different. I grew up in a historically oppressed (racially), economically poor, rural black Southern community where Christmas was the only time it was possible to collectively celebrate the only generous and cheerful white man anyone in the community was ever likely to know: Santa Claus. This was done with such enthusiasm and tenderness—and Santa's rosy cheeks

were described with such bemused accuracy—that as a three-year-old one Christmas morning, I announced I'd actually seen him the night before, as he stole about the house, sampling the pies and cakes my mother always made and left out for him, and filling our shoeboxes and brown paper bags with apples, raisins, oranges, and nuts. (What would have been the imprint on white children's minds, I was later to wonder, if once a year they were encouraged to welcome a stealthily moving large black man into their sleeping houses in the middle of the night?)

When I became a student in college and studied the oppression of black people by white ones, and by the laws of white supremacy that still obtained in the South (so that as a child I could not enter a "public" restaurant, library, or swimming pool), I was angry with my parents for their Santa Claus worship. Until I realized that, like the white figure of Christ, whom they also appeared to worship, Santa Claus represented an ideal person who was *compelled* to be white (in a society in which the country's president, the mayors of towns, and the police were also white), and that their intention in accepting him was to help us all remember that there could indeed be an ideal white man, worthy of friendliness and tender regard (in a setting where not one white man was known to fit Santa's merry, adventuresome, and indiscriminating description). It was their desire to instill in us, amid the racist violence of the segregated American South, as perhaps it is the desire of black parents today to instill in their children in the apartheid violence of South Africa, a degree of faith in the miracles that one can expect to occur in human nature *per se*: a degree of hope.

But when I moved to Northern California I left behind all I had known about Christmas, and against the hectic shopping days that Christmas has become for so many, I barricaded myself. Going to the beach, reading, taking long walks, eating at Chinese or Thai restaurants on Christmas Day, or fasting on fruit. And then, because of the person with whom I share many of life's rituals (and a good number of its trials), I discovered what Christmas is. That it is the day of the winter solstice and was originally celebrated on

the twenty-first or twenty-second of December, the day when the sun, having gone as far south as it ever gets, begins to move back north. It is, my friend said, the day the sun, the light, begins to come back in the Northern Hemisphere. In a way you could say it is the first day spring becomes possible. The birth of Jesus has been affixed to the seeming rebirth of the sun, but the rebirth of the sun has been worshiped since many millennia before Christ. Undoubtedly it has been worshiped, by plants and single-cell animals, since the very beginning of the planet's life.

This changed forever how I feel about Christmas. And how I celebrate it—usually, these days, with a sweat (via sauna), a vegetarian feast, and music making and dancing, with friends. I would never dream of killing anything for it; or even of thinking of it as an event that requires the least bit of frantic activity. For me, the excitement about the sun's return begins to build several days in advance of the winter solstice, and my celebration consists of a heightened awareness of the losing ground of winter, no matter how cold the days might be, and an intense expectation of the day itself, which, when it arrives, is greeted by my face turned up to the (if I am lucky) sunny heavens. The days after are spent in quiet appreciation of the possibility of another spring (my favorite of all seasons) and thoughts of seeds and planting. I lie late in bed, thinking of the sun as of a long-traveling friend who is at last coming back home to me, my collection of seed catalogs covering me like paper flowers.

It isn't that I don't think of Christmas at all anymore as a possible birthday for Jesus Christ (though it's true that I never think of Santa Claus, faith in whom, it seems to me, has been perhaps permanently lost), but I think of it more as the rebirthday of every being that longs for the return of the warmth of the sun and loves the light. Surely it is my rebirthday too.