

# SKETCH OF A SERPENT

*R. A. Christmas*

## I

In the tree, the soft breeze cradles  
The viper that I wear.  
A smile, where the fang strikes  
Appetites into flame,  
Drifts, like a prowler, through the Garden,  
And my emerald mask unwinds  
A split tongue into the blue. . .  
A beast, a cunning beast,  
And my venom is vile—but it leaves  
Wise hemlock far behind!

## II

Sweet moments of pleasure. . . . But mortals,  
Tremble—I am strong!  
When I want something huge, I just yawn,  
And my jaws do the rest!  
Now the azure splendors of sky  
Arouse this old reptile, swaddled  
In Nature's innocence.  
Come to me, brainless race!  
I'm coiled and lively, here  
To match necessities.

## III

Sun, sun! . . . Superb mistake!  
Disguising death, O Sun,  
In a pavilion, blue  
And amber, where flowers hold court.  
You, sublime henchman,  
Trap of my traps—with your  
Opaque delights you keep  
All spirits from the truth:  
The universe is merely a flaw  
In perfect Nothingness.

#### IV

Great Star, you give the call  
To life, and lend your fires,  
But you round our days with dreams  
Of phantom landscapes, where  
We see the sweet, obscure  
Illusion of the soul.  
And yet I've always loved  
The lie you stretch across  
The absolute, O king  
Of shadows made of flame!

#### V

Pour me your savage fire  
When idleness burns me cold,  
While I dream of some misfortune,  
As all constrictors will. . .  
This quaint place, where my flesh  
Parts and rejoins, how precious!  
My fury ripens here.  
As I rouse and warm it  
I loll, and through my coils  
My meditation murmurs . . .

#### VI

O Vanity! First Cause!  
Reigning in the Heavens, you spoke  
And lit the universe.  
But God, as if he grew tired  
Of his private spectacle,  
Dissolved it flat, this chaste,  
Perfect eternity,  
And brought himself to squander  
His Principle in effects,  
His Unity in stars.

#### VII

Heaven his error! Time his ruin!  
Animal chaos, gaping! . . .  
What a catastrophe glimmers  
In place of nothingness. . .  
But his first Word of Words  
Was me! . . . The grandest star  
Ordained by the mad maker.  
I am! . . . I shall be! . . . I light  
His decadence with all  
The fires of the Seducer.

## VIII

Radiant object of my hate,  
 I loved you to distraction,  
 And you, in hell's debt, should have given  
 The empire to that lover.  
 Look in my shadow-glass!  
 When you saw your tragic pose,  
 The pride of my dark mirror,  
 Your torment was so deep  
 That your breath upon the clay  
 Was a sigh of despair!

## IX

Absurdly, in the mud,  
 You fashioned these mindless babies  
 Who spend all day in singing  
 The praises of Your triumphs.  
 You made such pretty children!  
 But as soon as they took form  
 And breath, Lord Serpent hissed  
 Hola! New-comers, wait!  
 You're naked as jays, and silly  
 As lambs dropped into light.

## X

In the detested image  
 You were brought forth; I hate you!  
 As I despise the Name  
 Who created so many half-wits.  
 And so I modify,  
 I retouch believing hearts.  
 My finger, secret and sure!  
 We'll twist these unfired clays,  
 These slippery garden snakes,  
 Into furious reptiles!

## XI

My boundless intellect  
 Fingers, in the human soul,  
 A lute of my revenge  
 Made by your very hands.  
 And although your Fatherhood,  
 Veiled in its starry place,  
 Admits but incense, still  
 My abounding witchery  
 Can trigger remote alarms  
 To vex almighty plans.

## XII

I go, come, glide, and plunge  
Unseen in a pure heart.  
Never was a breast so frozen  
That one couldn't inject a dream.  
Whoever you are, am I not  
The soft conceit that rears  
In your soul when it loves itself?  
The basis of such favor,  
I am that matchless spice  
Found only in yourself.

## XIII

Eve, of old, I surprised  
In her first thoughts, her lips  
Half-parted to the nymphs  
That roses bear in the breeze.  
Perfect, she appeared to me,  
Her thighs traversed with gold,  
Not afraid of the sun, nor of man,  
Naked to the eyes of air,  
The soul still stupid—denied  
The doorway of the flesh.

## XIV

O mass of beatitude,  
So fair you are, fit prize  
To capture the support  
Of these, the best of spirits!  
For you need merely sigh  
To bring them to your lips.  
The purest seek the worst,  
The firmest are most bruised. . .  
You've been awaiting me  
From whom the vampires rise!

## XV

Yes! From my leafy perch,  
Reptile with soul of a bird,  
While my gab, my bantering wove  
The net of tricks, I drank  
To you, O lovely clod!  
Calm, ready, fat with charms,  
I dangled, with my eye  
On your red-gold tress, your nape  
Mysterious and full  
Of secrets of your movement.

## XVI

I drifted like perfume,  
Like hints of an idea  
You cannot clarify:  
Treason disguised as air.  
I worried you, my dove,  
O uncommitted flesh,  
Instead of pushing you  
Headfirst into the sublime!  
I'll have you soon, I wager.  
Already your color turns.

## XVII

(Superb simplicity  
Requires immense attentions.  
Her transparent gazes—pride,  
Absence, and bliss—guard well  
This city of delight.  
Let's learn to trip her, how  
By rarest art her soul  
Might be solicited;  
There lies my gift, my aim,  
The method to my end.)

## XVIII

Now, in a blazing spray  
Let's cast our invisible webs  
Where Eve, unoccupied, soft,  
Finds dangers she can't see.  
Here, underneath a charge  
Of silk, this trembling prey,  
Accustomed to pure calm. . . .  
Why there's no finer gauze,  
No thread more dim, more certain  
Than that of my design.

## XIX

Gild, tongue! Adorn for her  
The smoothest tales you know—  
Lies, innuendos, riddles,  
And whispers carved like stone!  
Use anything that prods,  
Flatters, or badgers her  
To lapse into my plans,  
To trip on the slopes that bear  
The spillways of the heavens  
Down to black reservoirs!

## XX

O what unequalled prose,  
 What wit I've poured along  
 The downy labyrinth  
 Of this miraculous ear!  
 And nothing's lost, all thrives  
 In undecided hearts.  
 Sure triumph! if my words,  
 Imploring the soul's treasure  
 Like bees invading corollas,  
 Cleave to the ear of gold.

## XXI

I whispered, "Nothing, Eve,  
 Is less sure than God's word.  
 A flaming secret cracks  
 The ripeness of this fruit.  
 Ignore the Eternal Prude  
 Who damns the smallest bite.  
 But if your mouth can dream  
 Of a thirst for nectar, Eve,  
 This pleasure, halfway here,  
 Means lush eternity."

## XXII

She tasted my little words,  
 And grew strange—she would sometimes sweep  
 The angels from her eyes  
 And come back to my boughs.  
 Subtlest of beasts, who jokes  
 At your resolve, O mass  
 Of treachery refined  
 To whispers in the leaves.  
 —It was a serious Eve  
 Who listened by the branch!

## XXIII

I said, "Soul, quiet retreat  
 Of all forbidden joys,  
 Can you feel the enveloping love  
 I've stolen from the Father?  
 I have it, Heaven's balm,  
 For purposes much sweeter  
 Than the honeycomb. . . Take  
 This fruit now. . . Lift your arm!  
 Your precious hand was made  
 To gather what you want."

## XXIV

Only an eyelid strikes  
 The silence! But what sighs  
 From that darkened breast the Tree  
 Caresses with its shadow—the other  
 Glistening like a pistil!  
 —Ssst, Ssst! It sings to me,  
 And I feel the cunning coils  
 That wind me start to quiver,  
 Unraveling from the beryl  
 Along my crest, toward peril!

## XXV

Genius! O long impatience!  
 At last the time has come.  
 A step toward the new knowledge  
 Will burst from these bare feet.  
 Marble and gold aspire!  
 These blonde supports of shade  
 And amber quake toward movement. . . .  
 She totters, the grand urn!  
 About to lose the gift  
 Of surface quietude.

## XXVI

From your own diversions, yield,  
 Yield, body, to the baits!  
 Since you long to play new parts,  
 Act out a circle of mimes  
 Around the Tree of Death.  
 Feign coming! take vague steps  
 As if weighed down with roses. . .  
 Don't think . . . Dear body, dance!  
 Here pleasures will suffice  
 As cause for the course of things.

## XXVII

Insanely, I took up  
 This empty passion—watching  
 The naked back, so fresh  
 And perfect, shake with sin. . . .  
 Even now, dripping its manna  
 Of wisdom and illusion,  
 The whole Tree of Knowledge,  
 Alive with visions, stirs  
 Its towering trunk which plunges  
 Into the sun for dreams!

## XXVIII

Grand Tree, Shadower of Heaven,  
 Irresistible Tree of trees,  
 Pursuing, in the flaws of statues,  
 Their delicate nectars, and spinning  
 Your mazes, blind with leaves,  
 Where strangling shadows fade  
 In the sapphire distances  
 Of everlasting dawn.  
 Sweet ruin, perfume, or breeze,  
 Or dove predestinate,

## XXIX

O Singer, secret taster  
 Of the depths of gems, O bower  
 Of the reptile troubadour  
 Who sang Eve into dreams,  
 Great Soul, raging for wisdom,  
 As if to see better, you stretch  
 As your gaping summit commands,  
 Sending forth, in purest gold,  
 Stark limbs and smoky boughs,  
 While rooting toward the abyss,

## XXX

You drive back the infinite  
 (A part of your foliage, too)  
 And you feel, from tomb to nest,  
 All Knowledge in yourself!  
 But the old chess master comes,  
 In the glitter of dying suns,  
 And crawls along your branches.  
 His eyes disturb your treasure.  
 Soon there will fall some fruits  
 Of death, despair, disorder!

## XXXI

Sweet snake, lulled in the blue,  
 I hiss, but delicately,  
 Presenting to God's glory  
 The triumph of my sadness . . .  
 Content that in the air  
 Vast hope of bitter fruits  
 Maddens these sons of mud . . .  
 —This thirst that makes you gigantic  
 Exalts into Being the strange  
 Omnipotence of Nothing!