These and These

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There is a tree
500 years long[1]
80 times 'round the sun
Is nearly a ⅙ 'round its trunk
Poets, playwrights
Have vaulted its boughs
Sages and seers swooned
To its balsam scent[2]
Mystics marked its paths
In hushed tones
Over candle-lit tomes.

But there is another tree[3]
So very close to it
Some say that they were entangled[4]
Like lovers in embrace
Winged lions cradling the vibrations of a holy event[5]
Until a mud-man,[6] meant to be so much more,[7]
Cut the cord,[8]
With a knife's precision,[9]

[1] Genesis Rabbah 15:6. All texts cited here can be found at Sefaria.org.
[2] Zohar, Introduction 12:109
[3] This is a reference to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis 2:9.
[4] See, e.g., Shaarei Orah: Fifth Gate, Sixth Sefirah, 251 and Radak on Genesis 2:9.
[5] Exodus 25:22
[6] This word captures the link between *adam* ("human") and *adamah* ("humus, rich soil") in Genesis 2:7 and also refers to the creaiton of humankind by Prometheus.
[7] Humans are meant to be divine avatars on earth (see Genesis 1:27). Like the primordial light and the Sabbath, humans are of this world, yet there is something of the unconditional, or the world beyond, within them.
[8] According to the mystical interpretations of Genesis, the primordial human, Adam, "cut the shoots" (i.e., separated or severed the two trees from one another), thus disconnecting the foundation of life from knowledge. Thereafter, the human being's voracious appetite is for knowledge in order to wield it as power, not necessarily for improving or protecting life. See Shaarei Orah: Fifth Gate, Sixth Sefirah 251.
[9] One might also understand this according to Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), who suggested that "the thread uniting God and man, heaven and earth, has been broken" after the Shoah.

And the dark spark,[10]
And the King's Crown,[11]
And the Queen[12]
No longer
Could bathe
At will
In the primordial waters.[13]

There is a people[14]
Who,
Holding the first tree,
Walking the central beam[15]
Bring Him nearer to
His Beloved.[16]

There is a stream[17]
Who flows between These and These,[18]
Living Waters[19]
And this stream turns this way and that[20]
Like an Egyptian prince
Who became a
Shepherd,

[10] Zohar Bereshit 1:15a
[11] The ideal flow of the divine organism is from Keter (Crown), the highest emanation of divinity, which is totally without any forces or influence of judgements or severity, all the way to Shekhinah (Immanent). When we cut off the tree of knowledge from life, we cut ourselves off from the full range of divine effulgence.
[12] Shekhinah/Malkhut
[13] Shekhinah, which represents the "lower waters," becomes dry when separated from her male source in the "upper waters," which are identified with the *sefirah* of Hesed (Lovingkindness) and flow to Shekhinah from her mate, Tiferet (Beauty or Balance).
[14] ʿAm Yisraʾel
[15] Tiferet/The Holy Blessed One
[16] Malkhut/Shekhinah
[17] Masorti-Conservative Judaism
[18] A reference both to "these and these are words of the living God" (*eilu veʾeilu divrei elohim ḥayyim hein*, b. Eruvin 14b) and to the *sefirot* on the right and the left, taking from both and providing a sense of balance, just as the Bat Qol noted that the words of both the academy of Hillel and the academy of Shammai were vital.
[19] Jeremiah 2:13
[20] Exodus 2:12

A prophet,
A God[21]
Yet in the end became a mother,[22]
Standing between the clefts of the rock[23]
As brother stood between the living and the dead[24]
Gathering us between his breasts[25]
Between the paths of fire and ice.[26]

There is a road
Called progress
And it is paved with good intentions
The diaries of dissidents
And bodies.

There is a serpent
And some say a bull
Biting its own tail[27]
Ready-made by human will[28]

You see, the earthling
They bite again and again
And as they masticate
And master
And machinate,

[21] Exodus 4:16
[22] Numbers 11:12; see also Isaiah 49.
[23] Exodus 33:22
[24] This is a reference to Aaron; see Numbers 17:13.
[25] Aaron and Moses are also compared in midrashic literature (see Song of Songs Rabbah 4:5:1) to two breasts. The one "gathering us between his breasts" could be Moses or a reference to the divine.
[26] See Tosefta Hagigah Lieberman 2:5 with regard to ascending and descending safely like Akiva from holy encounters. The goal is not to be too overcome with one's emotions or zeal and not too distant or stoic, but moderate, attuned to and curious about all sides.
[27] This is a reference to the cosmic rending and separation from higher levels of divine flow that happened both with the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the construction of the golden calf; See Zohar: Introduction 4:15. It also refers to the Ouroboros, the serpentine symbol of eternal destruction and rebirth that we witness in the world of time.
[28] The calf is made by Aaron and according to the will of some of the Israelites. The snake, in the garden of Eden, could very well be a projection of human desire for knowledge for mastery and power.

subjugate,
Each a Pharaonic despot
Entombed within their mediated experience.

Bearers of Sinai[29]
Know
That tree[30] was never
Meant to be bitten,
Or taken
But woven
Her highest boughs only a shadow of the Supernal root,
The Tree,[31]
Or roof[32]
That Hillel
And Levinas,[33]
And Berlin,[34]

[29] "The people of Israel are the Merkavah," i.e., a chariot for the divine throne and a moveable Sinai, bringing the experience and memory of revelation with them; see Perush Ramban: Introduction to Exodus (Sefaria.org).
[30] This is a refefence to the tree of knowledge.
[31] The tree of life is connected to "words of the living God" and "these and these"; i.e., it conveys the idea of pluralism.
[32] See b. Yoma 35b, where Hillel climbs to the roof in order to listen to words of the "living God," paralleling the tree of life.
[33] Levinas's pluralism entails choosing moral courage and moving toward another in an act of service rather than an act of violence, when they come into our sphere, potentially threatening us by their "alterity," by which he means their unique perspective, ethos, or needs. He calls this response "The Face of God in the Person"; see Emanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Duquesne University Press, 1987).
[34] Levinas and Isaiah Berlin were also champions of pluralism. Thus, we read the following in Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford University Press, 1969), https://cactus.utahtech.edu/green/B_Readings/I_Berlin%20Two%20Concpets%20of%20Liberty.pdf: "Pluralism, with the measure of 'negative' liberty that it entails, seems to me a truer and more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal of 'positive' self mastery by classes or peoples or the whole of mankind. It is truer because it does, at least, recognize the fact that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another. To assume that all values can be graded on one scale so that it is a mere matter of inspection to determine the highest seems to me to falsify our knowledge that men are free agents, to represent moral decision as an operation which a slide rule could, in principle, perform. In the end, men choose between ultimate values; they choose as they do, because their life and thought are determined by fundamental moral categories and concepts that are, at any rate, over large stretches of time and space, a part of their being and thought and sense of their own identity;

Climbed.
Sometimes called Liberty[35]
Sometimes the Face[36]
At others "thirst for words of the living God"[37]
Words that dance like coals of fire[38]
Or sparks from the hammer's blow,[39]
Like billions of cosmic seeds implanted within us that whisper "Where are you"?[40]
"Here I am"[41]
"Go"[42]
"I will go."[43]
Like fragile shattered tablets,[44]
Made firm by human hands,[45]
Propping up arms,[46]
Prevailing.

There is a hole in the world,
A widening gyre,[47]
That knows only one tree,[48]
And feeds it birds that tweet
And a human clock that chimes
And tocks

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part of what makes them human."
[35] The balance of positive and negative liberties that Berlin describes enables a culture of pluralism.
[36] This is a reference to Levinas's "Face." Note that the divine emanations or *sefirot* are also sometimes grouped into *partstufim* or faces upon the tree of life.
[37] Psalm 42:3
[38] Ezekiel 1:13. Fire is a symbol of the unconditional. One may revel in its radiance, its warmth, but it is wild and resists control, the monolithic.
[39] b. Sanhedrin 34a
[40] Genesis 3:9
[41] Genesis 22:2, 7 and Exodus 3:4
[42] Genesis 12:1
[43] Genesis 24:58
[44] Exodus 32:19
[45] The second set of tablets according to Exodus 34:27–28 are written by human hands, intimating greater human agency and investment.
[46] Exodus 17:12
[47] See "The Second Coming" by William Butler Yeats.
[48] This is a reference to the tree of knowledge.

And ticks
Built from shards of mirrors
And echoes,
And silos.

There is an ever-turning-fiery-sword[49]
Before the garden gate,
A firestone in our hands[50] and a knife in our hearts[51]
Burning wood upon our children's backs.[52]

But I don't know whether that sword[53] was a blade or a plowshare,[54]
Or the winged lions were predating or embracing,[55]
If Israel was a lover or a wrestler[56]
Whether you are my brother or my enemy.

But I will balance on the central beam,[57]
On the knife's edge
In the meeting of the Face for service and not violence,[58]
In the movement of freedom from toward freedom to
In the nexus of right and left
Supernal and terrestrial
Give and take[59]
These and These
Mercy and Rigor
Yes and…
I will listen from trees

[49] Genesis 3:24
[50] Genesis 22:6–7
[51] This is from Hayim Gouri's poem "Yerusha/Heritage."
[52] Genesis 22:6
[53] This is a reference to"the ever-turning fiery sword" guarding the way to the tree of life in Genesis 4:24.
[54] Isaiah 2:4
[55] Exodus 25:20 and b. Bava Batra 99a
[56] Genesis 32:25
[57] *Qav ha'emtsai*, which can refer both to *Tiferet*, the "central beam" of Kabbalah (which is, incidentally, associated with Jacob) and the *shevil hazahav*, or "golden mean," of Maimonides.
[58] See "Levinas on the Face," Philosophy Overload, YouTube.com, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdFL_odCVdI.
[59] This is a reference to *massa' umatan*, which is essential to the flow of rabbinic discourse.

And rooftops
And through the voices of children,
And artists,
And teachers,
The great messy, glorious, and terrible, teeming mass of life
I take hold of the branches.
Will you join me?

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