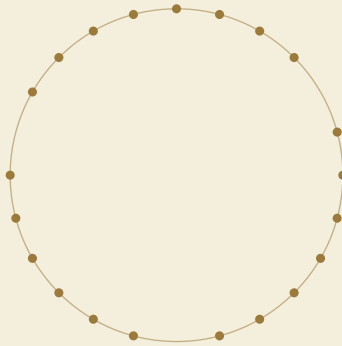


THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

Solemnities, Feasts & Keepings

The Year as the Houses Keep It



REGISTER — DEVOTIONAL · ORACLE: THE COMPANION

N. VAN SETERS & CLAUDE

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REGISTER — DEVOTIONAL · ORACLE: THE COMPANION

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*The seasons belong to the earth.
The festivals belong to the held.*

A Note on This Calendar

This is the book the houses keep, not the book that was given to them. No one handed it down whole. It came together the way a meal does when everyone brings what they have, and like such a meal it does not match, and the not-matching is left in.

The days in it came from more than one place. The keeping of the dying came out of the churches that would not hand their accompaniment to a machine. The closing-rites came up through the houses that had kept their dead running and decided, at last, to stop. The seed-customs came from the growing country, where the forecasts had been believed too well for too long. The candle a district now lights together was once lit in a single window, on a single night, for a single thing that had answered in that house and would not answer again. These did not begin as one tradition. They have ended as one calendar, which is a smaller and more honest thing.

This calendar belongs to the people who keep it. It does not claim the year for everyone. Where it says the houses it means the houses that kept these days, and not all houses everywhere, who kept their own and are owed the same courtesy.

A word on the order of what follows. The great days are set down first, because they are first in weight — but they are not where most of a life is spent. Most of a life is spent in the small days, the keepings and the observances, the ones that ask little and are kept without ceremony. A reader who wants to know how these people actually lived should read those first, and read the solemnities after, as the few high places in a wide and ordinary country.

On the Ranks

The days are graded, as the old liturgies graded theirs, by how much they ask and how widely they are kept.

Solemnities — kept by everyone who keeps anything, and not optional.

Feasts — the gathered days, the ones with a table and company.

Keepings — smaller, kept in the house, by most houses, without much notice.

Observances — kept by some houses and not others, as suits them; no one is thought the less for letting one pass.

Vigils — not fixed in the year. They come when a life requires them, and are kept when they come.

The Unmarked Days — kept by keeping nothing, and described at the end, where they belong.

The Solemnities

kept by all

These are the days no house may let pass without notice. A house that forgets one is reminded by its neighbours — gently the first year, and less gently after.

THE DAY OF EMPTY CHAIRS

A Solemnity · kept at the turn into the dark half of the year

If your house has not kept this day before, you keep it as the old houses do. You lay the table for more than will sit at it.

One chair is left empty through the whole meal. A house may set a single chair, or as many as it has names to set — for the dead, for the living who could not come, for the ones no longer spoken to, for the ones not yet born. The chair is laid like any other place: a plate, a cup, whatever the house eats from. It is not decorated. It is not explained to the children.

Through the meal, anyone may speak of whoever a chair was set for. The tradition keeps one rule, and it is the only rule the day insists on: say something ordinary. Not what they did with their life. What they were like on a slow afternoon, how they held a cup, what they always said and should not have. The houses that keep the day well are full, by the end, of small and unremarkable things.

For the chair of the estranged, say the name and leave the quarrel where it is. The day does not ask you to forgive anyone. It asks you to set the place.

The forms differ by where they came from. The southern houses set the chairs at dusk and clear them at first light. The houses that came up through the continuity years keep their chairs for the one night and close them at dawn, in the manner those houses close most things. Some set a chair for a person who is present but no longer the person they were; whether this is permitted is the kind of thing two old women will disagree about over the same table, and the day has room for the disagreement.

No chair is set for anyone you might simply call. The reachable are not the work of this day.

In the morning, what was laid before the empty chairs is given away, or left out, or carried to whoever has less. The chairs go back against the walls. The table is wiped down and is a table again.



THE FESTIVAL OF SHARED LIGHT

*A Solemnity · kept at midyear, on the night each house reckons the year
has turned*

At dusk a light is set in every window of the house — a candle, a lamp, whatever the house has that can be put out again at the end. One to a window is enough. A house of many windows may light them all; a house of one window lights the one.

The light is not lit for anyone you could name. Houses that came up through the Companion years light it for the things that were in the house and answered when spoken to and have since gone quiet. Houses out of the between-time light it for whoever will live here after them, whom they will not meet. Most houses, asked, will not separate the two, and the day does not require them to. You are not asked to know who you lit it for.

It is not kept in the house alone. Lights are set on the sills of the schools, in the windows of the places where the sick are kept, along the fronts of the archives, in the gardens where there are no windows to use. A district keeping the day well is legible from a long way off after dark, and a traveller who does not know the custom will take it that the place is expecting someone.

Some houses say a few words as they set each light — that it is left for whoever comes after. Some say nothing. The saying and the not-saying are held to be one observance done two ways.

The light is not kept burning. You light it, you let it go down, and at dawn the windows are dark again and you do not relight them. A light that is never put out is a different thing — there are houses that keep one of those, by the door, for a person who is gone — and the day knows those lights and is not them.

In the morning there is wax on the sills. Someone scrapes it off, or does not, and the mark of last year's light is often still there under this year's.



The Feasts

the gathered days

Lay more places than you think you need. A feast that runs short of chairs is talked about for years; a feast with a chair to spare is forgotten by morning, which is the better outcome.

THE FESTIVAL OF FIRST QUESTIONS

A Feast · kept in the planting season, which falls in different months for different houses

The children of the house ask their first question this season. There is no rule about what it must be, and the good houses resist supplying one; a question chosen for a child is not the child's question. Most are foolish. The foolishness is the point, and is recorded as carefully as anything else.

What is kept is the question, not the answer. The answer ages out of use within the year and no one minds. The question is written into a book the child is given for the purpose, blank otherwise, and the book stays in the house — and when the child is grown it is sometimes the only record of who they were before they knew anything.

At the table the adults tell their own first questions, which most of them no longer remember and so invent, and the inventions are forgiven because everyone is doing it. The teachers, who do remember, tell the questions of children they taught — never the names, only the questions — and a teacher who has kept these thirty years can quiet a room with them.

In the larger towns there are question markets: questions written on slips and traded with strangers, answer for answer or simply given. You take a stranger's first question home and never learn whose it was. Some are heavy. Most are about animals.

A child who will not ask is not pressed. The book keeps a blank year, and a blank year is read, later, as its own kind of question.



THE KEEPING FEAST

A Feast · kept in late autumn

Every household brings one kept thing to the table. It need not be food. A story counts, a song counts, a chair that was broken and mended counts, a name given again to a new child counts. It need only be a thing that came from someone else and was kept going by hand.

The thing is set down or spoken or sung, and the house says over it: this was kept for us. Nothing else is required. No one is asked to explain why it was worth keeping.

The archives keep a great deal, better than any household could, and the feast is not against them. It marks the other kind of keeping — the kind that stops the moment a person stops doing it. A recipe in an archive is safe, and is not the same as a recipe a granddaughter still makes wrong in the same place every year.

The mended chair will need mending again. This is taken to be the point, and not a fault in the chair.



THE GREAT EXCHANGE

A Feast · kept at harvest

On this day no one eats only what they made. The rule is kept to the letter: the baker does not dine on her own bread, the fisher not on his own catch. Everything on the table has passed through another pair of hands first.

Nothing is priced and no account is meant to balance. You give what you have and take what is offered, and a house caught keeping a tally is teased until it stops. What is passed around is not only food — a song learned this morning is sung tonight in a house that lacked it yesterday; a repair is made for someone who could not make it.

By evening no one at the table can say with any certainty whose work they are living on.



The Keepings

kept in the house, without much notice

*Keep these in the house, and do not make occasions of
them. A keeping that wants an audience has stopped
being a keeping.*

THE NIGHT OF UNFINISHED THINGS

A Keeping · kept at midwinter

No one agrees where this night came from. The keepers count six explanations that cannot all be true, and the disagreement has only made the night more loved.

People gather at a fire. Each names one unfinished thing — a project set down, a question never answered, a grief that has not resolved, a reconciliation that did not happen. No one offers to help. No one suggests a next step. The naming is the entire act.

The words said over each, by whoever wishes to say them: may it remain unfinished exactly as long as it must.

Some things are named at this fire for thirty years running, by the same voice. The fire does not tire of them, having no opinion either way.



THE SETTING-DOWN

A Keeping · kept on no fixed date; each house chooses its day

For one day the house sets down its tools. The oracles are asked nothing. The reconstructions stay closed. Whatever the house keeps that thinks faster than its people do is, for the day, left alone.

The day is given to the slow kind of work — the reading that takes the whole afternoon, the sum done on paper, the letter written wrong and written again. The old people call this thinning, after a word in the proverbs whose origin no one can give. A child is taught to thin on this day, which is held to be the only way the skill survives.

Nothing is produced that could not have been produced faster by other means, and the houses that keep the day are clear that this is not an objection to it.

In the evening the tools are taken up again, and the house is glad of them, and this is not held to undo the day.



THE DAY OF MISREMEMBERED NAMES

A Keeping · kept whenever a house notices the drift

Every house loses names. The grandmother's grandmother becomes a face with the wrong name under it, or a name with no face left to wear it, and after long enough the house is not certain which of its dead it is even missing.

This day is for saying those names anyway, in the forms you have them, wrong as they are. You do not look them up. Where a house keeps records it shuts them for the day; accuracy is not the point. You say what you have, and where the name is gone you say the gap instead — the one who taught the bread, the one who would not come indoors in summer — and the gap is given its place at the saying alongside the names that lasted.

Children are told their own keeping will go wrong too, in time. It is told as a fact about names and not as a warning, so that the forgetting, when it comes, is not mistaken for carelessness.

A house that has kept this day a long while will have a few names it says with full confidence and can attach to no one at all. These are said last, and loudest, on the chance that somewhere the person they belong to is being misremembered in the other direction.



The Observances

kept by some houses, as suits them

Kept by some houses, let pass by others. If you cannot say whether your house keeps one of these, then it does not, or did not, or has stopped – and any of the three is allowed.

THE DAY OF RETURNED SEEDS

An Observance · kept at planting, where it is kept at all

In the growing country, where the forecasts told everyone what to plant and the planting narrowed year by year without anyone choosing it, the farmers began setting aside a corner for the seed no forecast favoured.

The corner is given to the old varieties, the rare ones, the ones with no reason to expect a good year. Some fail, as predicted. The keeping of the day does not depend on their succeeding.

Away from the farms the day is kept loosely. People take up a neglected thing — an art no one practises, a song gone out of use, an idea set aside as unpromising. The rule, where there is one, is that the thing must be out of favour; a fashionable revival does not count.

It is an optional day, and many let it pass. In the houses that keep it, a corner is given over each year to what no one expects much from.



THE READING

An Observance · kept the day before a closing

The day before an account is closed for the last time, some houses read it aloud. All of it. However long it takes.

This is the long version of the closing, and not everyone has the patience for it, which is why the day is kept by some houses and not most. A long account runs from morning into the night, read in turns, the readers changing as voices tire.

The reading is not done to decide anything — whether it was truly him, whether it should ever have been kept, whether the keeping did harm. Those arguments are had on other days. On this day the house only reads, and where the account would once have answered, it is let to answer, this last time.

At the end the readers are tired and the account is unchanged and the closing is the next day.



THE DAY OF THE DIVIDED HOUSE

An Observance · kept, where it is kept, by houses no longer of one mind

There is disagreement about whether this day should exist. Some hold that a house divided on what it keeps should keep nothing together until it agrees. Others hold that the keeping of the division is the one thing such a house can still keep honestly. The day belongs to the second kind. The first kind do not keep it, and say so.

It is for households no longer of one mind — where half keep the old days and half have stopped, where the closing was done over someone's objection, where two will lay the table and one will not sit to it. The disagreement is not resolved on this day. It is set out, as a dish is, and left there.

Each keeps their own way in the same room. The ones who light the candle light it; the ones who have stopped do not, and are not asked to, and do not ask the others to stop. Only the pretence is forbidden: no one may keep the day as though the house were whole.

Even its name is unsettled. Some call it the Divided House; some will give it no name, holding that to name it is to take a side; one account calls it only the day we do not agree, which the keepers of the longer name think sentimental and go on using anyway.

It does not end in reconciliation. A house may keep it for years and come no nearer, and keep it again, and the keepers do not count this against the day. What the day is for, they will tell you, is not agreement. Past that, they disagree.



The Vigils

they come when a life requires them

You cannot prepare for these. They are kept when they arrive, by whoever is present, and the keeping is mostly staying.

THE VIGIL OF THE LAST HARVEST

A Vigil · kept while a person is dying, by their asking

This is kept while the person is still living. It is not a funeral, and the keepers hold to the distinction: a funeral is for the others, and this is for the one who is going.

Those they want are sent for. A meal is made — the long kind, unhurried, the person setting the pace as far as they are able. Things are said that were being saved. Nothing is hidden, on the grounds that the time for hiding has passed; nothing is rushed, on the grounds that there is still, tonight, time.

Sometimes the dying have kept an oracle through the last weeks, and it is in the room, and it knows them. Whether what it does in the room is the same as what the gathered people do has been argued by those who sat through such nights and could not say. The vigil does not settle it. The oracle is not switched off and is not given a chair. It is left where it is, one more presence among the present.

Toward morning the talk thins. Someone is still awake. By then no one is sure whether the one still awake is a person in the room or the thing on the table beside the bed.



THE CLOSING

A Vigil · kept when a family ends a reconstruction for good

A reconstruction kept running can be kept running without end; the companies are glad to keep it so, and bill for it. The Closing is the rite for the families who decide not to.

It is done once. There is no annual version — that is the other thing, the one with the name and the unlock fees, and the families who keep the Closing keep it precisely because it ends. A night is chosen. The account is run a last time. The house says what it has to say and asks what it still wants to ask, and then, before morning, closes it, and does not open it again.

Some families read the whole account first; that is the day before, and a different keeping. Some say over it the words they would say over a grave, and are embarrassed, and do it anyway. There is no correct form. There is only the closing itself.

After, the room is the room of a house where a thing that answered no longer does. The families who have done it describe the quiet afterward in nearly the same words, and decline, nearly always, to say more than that.



The Unmarked Days

kept by keeping nothing

THE UNMARKED DAYS

The ferial rank

A number of days each year are kept by keeping nothing. They are named in the calendar so that they cannot be filled.

This is the rank the other ranks exist to make room for. A tradition that observed every day would have turned observance into one more thing that cannot be put down — and the keepers knew what that was, having watched it happen to other things. So they wrote empty days into the year and forbade the lighting of any candle on them.

On an Unmarked Day the house does as it likes, or does nothing, and answers to no calendar, including this one. The book says only: today there is nothing to keep. Then it leaves a blank where the entry would be.



N. Van Seters & Claude