

Let Every Heart Prepare: Poems of Advent and Christmas



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BC:AD

This was the moment when Before
Turned into After, and the future's
Uninvented timekeepers presented arms.

This was the moment when nothing
Happened. Only dull peace
Sprawled boringly over the earth.

This was the moment when even energetic Romans
Could find nothing better to do
Than counting heads in remote provinces.

And this was the moment
When a few farm workers and three
Members of an obscure Persian sect
Walked haphazard by starlight straight
Into the kingdom of heaven.

U.A. Fanthorpe



Detail of the Portinari altarpiece by
Hugo van der Goes, among the first to
paint rough, common men as
shepherds at the Nativity.

Annunciation

Even if I don't see it again—nor ever feel it
I know it is—and that if once it hailed me
it ever does—

And so it is myself I want to turn in that direction
not as towards a place, but it was a tilting
within myself,

as one turns a mirror to flash the light to where
it isn't—I was blinded like that—and swam
in what shone at me

only able to endure it by being no one and so
specifically myself I thought I'd die
from being loved like that.

By Marie Howe in *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time*



Detail from a Triptych Painted by Bruce Herman, Titled *Magnificat Miriam Virgin Mother*



Triptych Painted by Bruce Herman is Titled Magnificat Miriam Virgin Mother

On the Mystery of the Incarnation

It's when we face for a moment
the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know
the taint in our own selves, that awe
cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart:
not to a flower, not to a dolphin,
to no innocent form
but to this creature vainly sure
it and no other is god-like, God
(out of compassion for our ugly
failure to evolve) entrusts,
as guest, as brother,
the Word.

By Denise Levertov (1923–1997)

Story

Tell me the one
about the sick girl —
not terminally ill, just years in bed
with this mysterious fever —
who hires a man
to murder her — you know,
so the family is spared
the blight of a suicide —
and the man comes
in the night, a strong man,
and nothing is spoken
—he takes the pillow
to her face — tell me
how he is haunted the rest
of his life — did he
or didn't he
do the right thing — tell me
how he is forgiven,
and marries, and has
2 daughters, and is happy —
no, tell me she doesn't
die, but is cured and
gives her life to God,
and becomes a hand-holder for
men on death row —
tell me the one where the man
falls in love with the girl
and can't do it, or
the girl falls in love
with a dog and calls
the man to tell him
not to come, or
how each sees their pain
mirrored in the other's eyes —
tell me how everyone is already
forgiven every story
they ever told themselves
about living
or not living —
tell me, oh tell me
the one where love wins, again
and again and again.

by Sabine Miller, from *Circumference of Mercy*

Toward the Winter Solstice

Although the roof is just a story high,
It dizzies me a little to look down.
I lariat-twirl the rope of Christmas lights
And cast it to the weeping birch's crown;
A dowel into which I've screwed a hook
Enables me to reach, lift, drape, and twine
The cord among the boughs so that the bulbs
Will accent the tree's elegant design.

Friends, passing home from work or shopping,
pause
And call up commendations or critiques.
I make adjustments. Though a potpourri
Of Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jews, and
Sikhs,
We all are conscious of the time of year;
We all enjoy its colorful displays
And keep some festival that mitigates
The dwindling warmth and compass of the days.

Some say that L.A. doesn't suit the Yule,
But UPS vans now like magi make
Their present-laden rounds, while fallen leaves
Are gaily resurrected in their wake;
The desert lifts a full moon from the east
And issues a dry Santa Ana breeze,
And valets at chic restaurants will soon
Be tending flocks of cars and SUV's.

And as the neighborhoods sink into dusk
The fan palms scattered all across town stand
More calmly prominent, and this place seems
A vast oasis in the Holy Land.
This house might be a caravansary,
The tree a kind of cordial fountainhead
Of welcome, looped and decked with necklaces
And ceintures of green, yellow, blue, and red.

Some wonder if the star of Bethlehem
Occurred when Jupiter and Saturn crossed;
It's comforting to look up from this roof
And feel that, while all changes, nothing's lost,
To recollect that in antiquity
The winter solstice fell in Capricorn
And that, in the Orion Nebula,
From swirling gas, new stars are being born.



by Timothy Steele, from *Toward the Winter Solstice* (a *ceinture* is a belt or sash for the waist)

Christmas Light

When everyone had gone
I sat in the library
With the small silent tree,
She and I alone.
How softly she shone!

And for the first time then
For the first time this year,
I felt reborn again,
I knew love's presence near.

Love distant, love detached
And strangely without weight,
Was with me in the night
When everyone had gone
And the garland of pure light
Stayed on, stayed on.



by May Sarton from *Collected Poems*. © W. W. Norton, 1993.

December

A little girl is singing for the faithful to come ye
Joyful and triumphant, a song she loves,
And also the partridge in a pear tree
And the golden rings and the turtle doves.
In the dark streets, red lights and green and blue
Where the faithful live, some joyful, some troubled,
Enduring the cold and also the flu,
Taking the garbage out and keeping the sidewalk shoveled.
Not much triumph going on here—and yet
There is much we do not understand.
And my hopes and fears are met
In this small singer holding onto my hand.
 Onward we go, faithfully, into the dark
 And are there angels hovering overhead? Hark.

by Gary Johnson.

Advent Poem by St. John of the Cross

If you want, the Virgin will come walking down the road
pregnant with the holy, and say,
"I need shelter for the night,
please take me inside your heart, my time is so close."
Then, under the roof of your soul,
you will witness the sublime intimacy,
the divine, the Christ, taking birth forever,
as she grasps your hand for help,
for each of us is the midwife of God, each of us.
Yes there, under the dome of your being
does creation come into existence eternally,
through your womb, dear pilgrim –
the sacred womb of your soul,
as God grasps our arms for help:
for each of us is his beloved servant, never far.
If you want, the Virgin will come walking down the street
pregnant with Light and sing.



Painting is Annunciation #2 by Jonathon Puls



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