

A Christmas Poem by David Hopes

Maybe they shouldn't have asked for a Christmas poem from me, unless what they wanted was some ditty, knowing and ironic, on the theme of "disappointment," or some discourse on the unbridgeable gulf between reality and desire. My mother's creche is in some box in the closet, under some other box with all the streamers and bulbs and precious baby animals which hung upon I've lost count now of how many trees.

I swear to God, somewhere in tissue is the first candy cane my chubby baby fingers hung on a low-hanging branch, saved and preserved, I suppose, against the awful mutability of the world, shattered, inedible, hardened and embittered wherever it was soft and sweet before, held together by packaging, exactly like the rest of us.

I don't put a tree up anymore. I say it's because of the cats, because I travel so much. It's really because I sit in the twinkling light of it and sob, and I don't know why.

If you want THAT kind of poem, I'm your man. Believe me, I know what people mean when they say that Christmas is the worst time of year, what with the stores playing fifteen carols we hate for every one we kind of can endure, what with plastic poinsettias in aisles at Halloween and the churches hoping for a windfall from parishioners who come with liquid checkbook and guilty heart on Christmas Eve, baby Jesus freezing on the porch amid the unresponsive animals, the likes of us going about with hands jammed in our pockets and eyes glued down against the panhandlers and well wishers whom we would with equal fervor strike from our sight above the dirty snow.

If that's what you want to hear, all right. Or that the guns of war have not ceased tonight, and will not, Prince of Peace or no. The Little Match Girl will die in the cold and Tiny Tim will be blocked by his HMO from getting the operation.

When I set up a creche of my own someday, the Child will have as his attendants rhino and buffalo whuffing in the stalls, the rafters heavy with tiger and panther, their lantern eyes bright in the firelight.

The time is done
when shepherds could come out of the fields
and leave their sheep alone even for an hour.
Whatever is encamped in the nearby hills
you don't want to know about.
Sirens wail. Sad boys stand guard with rifles loaded.
I will remember Herod's children tonight,
the Innocents that the world was not content
to slaughter only once.
I will remember Matthew Shepard crucified
under the plate-sized western stars.
I will remember the armed children with their sorrows,
boys and girls led astray to a country from which
there is no road back.

I will remember wild souls, bewildered, raging in the broken streets,
to whom no moderating angel came.
I will remember those sleeping their Christmas sleep,
inches from where shadows cross at midnight,
white teeth, white blades glittering.
I will aim my song at those battalions in the middle of the air,
the choring angels who seem so silly at a time like this,
their good news quaint with many thoughtless repetitions,
their hosannas so far off
we no longer remember how terrible they were,
their listeners, as the text says, sore afraid: those beings
blazing in the midnight air, wings unfurled
like hawks above the plain,
covering as the falcon covers, sharp, mysterious.
I will stand tonight on the front lawn. I will whisper, O,
Come again. Come Down. Hover and cry out. Come to me.
I promise to be sore afraid.
I promise to drop whatever I am doing and find the star you mean,
and follow it. I will leave the lights on. I will leave the doors unlocked.
