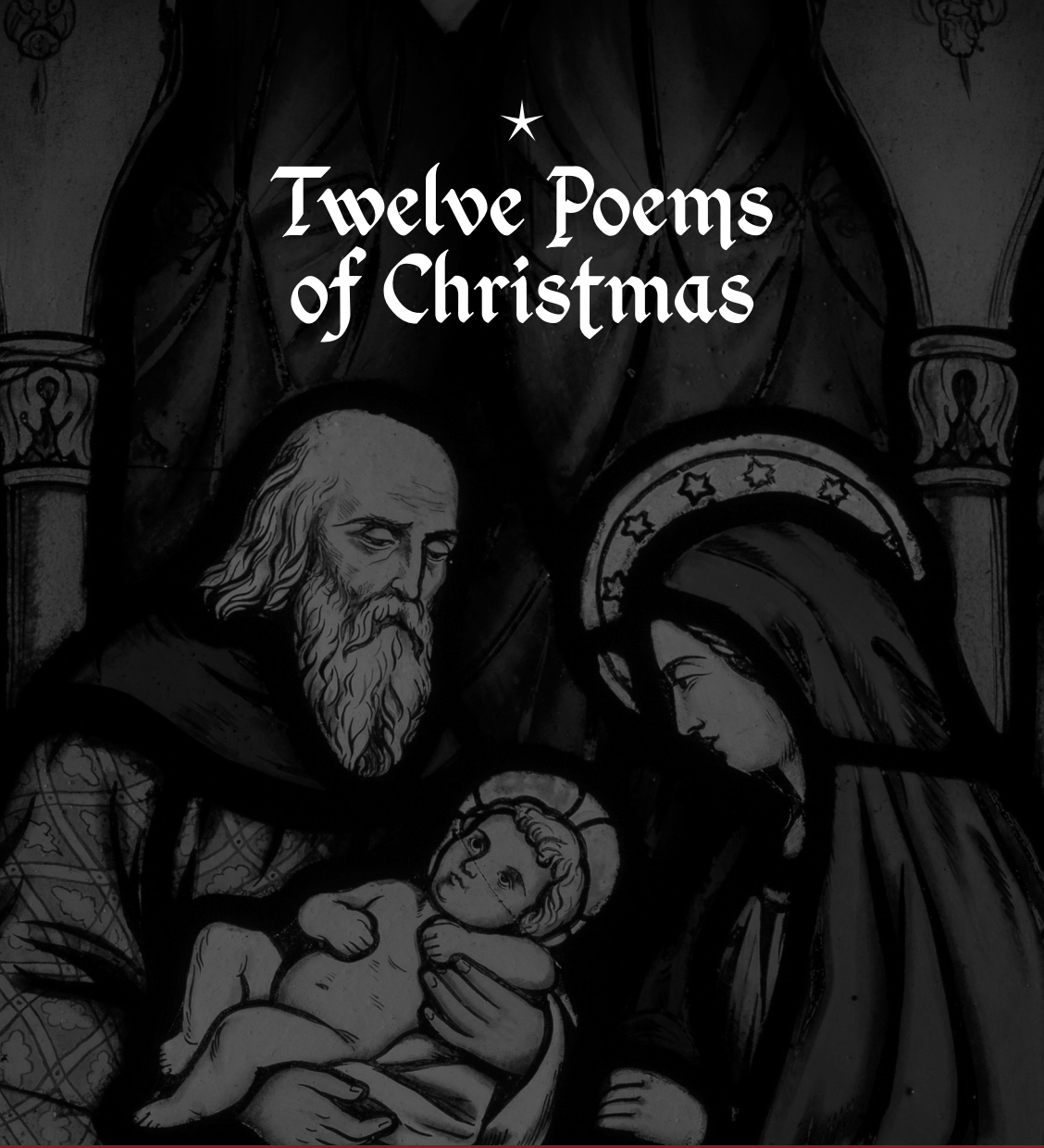


Twelve Poems of Christmas

Join the Great Conversation

THE TRINITY FORUM READING

digital library edition

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Foreword

For many, the Christmas season is spent feeling harried and hurried, rushing to check off shopping lists, mail cards, and hit year-end deadlines. Holiday trappings surround us, yet we often find ourselves distracted from the good news of the wonder-full Christmas story, or dulled by our presumed familiarity with it.

This *Trinity Forum Reading* is offered as a small act of resistance against that rush. It invites the reader to slow down, sit still, read, and ponder some of the most beautiful and piercing poems ever written about the coming of Christ.

It is noteworthy that so much of the Christmas story (and nearly a third of the Bible as a whole) is in poetic form. Even the prophecies and foreshadowing of the Incarnation in Isaiah, Psalms, and Micah are almost all in poetry. And while the New Testament accounts of the conditions and context of Jesus's birth are in reportorial prose, those receiving the good news often respond in song. The first few chapters of the Gospel of Luke alone record four different poetic songs exulting in the birth of Christ: Mary's Magnificat, Zechariah's song (the Benedictus), the angels' celebratory song to the shepherds (the Gloria), and Simeon's song (the Nunc Dimmitis) over having beheld the Christ child. If, as poet Dana Gioia (whose work is represented among the poems that follow) has asserted, poetry is "speech raised to the level of song," it is fitting that so many celebrations of Christ's arrival were expressed in that elevated register.

The medium fits the message. Prose can be speed-read, glanced

over, quickly synthesized. Not so a poem. Poetry defies rush. It withholds both its evocations and delights from any attempt to quickly strip-mine a surface-level meaning. It requires the reader to slow down, to read and re-read. Its glimmers of meaning come to those who linger, not to those who demand them. Perhaps a parallel can be drawn to the Incarnation itself: the Word did not arrive as a decree, but as an infant, who revealed himself slowly, over some thirty-plus years, to those who watched and listened.

And in requiring the reader to slow down and sit with the poem, poetry calls for a certain hospitality. As with a guest or a budding friendship, one needs to spend time with a poem, and approach it with a measure of openness, to see it for what it is, what it offers and evokes, what it reveals or implies. Unlike prose, poetry can be hard to pigeonhole and categorize, its meaning ambiguous. For many readers, apprehension of meaning may precede clear comprehension—or, as T.S. Eliot (whose poem "The Journey of the Magi" you'll find in the pages that follow) noted: "genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood."

But if poetry requires a certain hospitality, it also extends an invitation to delight. Much of the pleasure of poetry is experiencing its beauty and musicality. There is a sensual pleasure in the lilt of meter, assonance, and alliteration; in wordplay; in hearing a stanza rhyme, roll, or build to a staccato emphasis. The poems that follow are not just penned to be pondered; they are meant to be read aloud, to hear and enjoy, akin to a spoken song. (And in fact the boundary between poetry and music is porous; poems may become songs and vice versa, as with Christina Rosetti's featured poem "A Christmas Carol," which may be more familiar to some readers as the lyrics to the carol "In the Bleak Midwinter.")

In the pages that follow, you'll encounter a variety of poetic forms, approaches, and genres—sonnets, ballads, free verse, elegies, and lyric poems. The featured poems span nearly four centuries and a wide range of voices. You'll find Malcolm Guite's "O Antiphon"

series of Advent sonnets (we counted his seven-sonnet series as just one of the 12 Christmas poems to follow), whose 14 tightly crafted lines hold so much in such a small space. You'll meet balladeer Charles Causley's folk-inflected retelling of the gospel story in the cadences of song. John Donne's theological heft encapsulated in disciplined rhyme is here, along with John Milton's Nativity ode, G.K. Chesterton's joy and love of paradox put to verse, George Herbert's luminescence, Christina Rosetti's evocative poem-turned-carol, and T.S. Eliot's poetic monologue in free verse. And you'll encounter some of the finest poets writing today, including former California poet laureate Dana Gioia, Christian Wiman, Scott Cairns, and Marilyn McEntyre—poets whose work reveals the varied ways the Incarnation continues to evoke poetic responses that are fresh, unexpected, and beautiful.

The tone, length, and substance of these collected poems also range widely. Some are worshipful and theologically dense, rewarding study and reflection; others are melodic and accessible, and are delights to read aloud. Some are festive and celebratory.

Others are not. Christian Wiman's "Before the Bone Marrow Transplant," is a somber work written as the author contemplated what he thought might be his last Christmas. It confronts suffering directly, and reminds us that the Christmas story is no Hallmark movie, but that Christ entered a cruel and unjust world to save what was so deeply broken. The hope of Christmas is not that pain and evil are unreal, but that they do not have the final word.

Each of the featured poems is introduced by a fellow poet or writer. Karen Swallow Prior introduces her friend Malcolm Guite, who in turn introduces a poem by his friend Scott Cairns. Cairns introduces John Milton; Makoto Fujimura introduces T.S. Eliot; Jessica Hooten Wilson introduces Dana Gioia; and Peter Wehner introduces Christian Wiman—to name just a few. In each case, the introduction authors provide some background on the poet and poem, and offer reflections on what the poem means to them.

Consider these brief introductions less as definitive explanations than as the comments of a friend, offering their own thoughts, pointing out things that might otherwise be missed.

This collection may be read in many ways: a poem each day throughout Advent, aloud with family members on Christmas Eve, or in quiet hours alone. However one chooses to enjoy the poems that follow, we hope this *Trinity Forum Reading* will serve as an invitation to step away from the harried hurry of the season and encounter anew the strange and wonderful story of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

Cherie Harder is the President of the Trinity Forum





Twelve Poems of Christmas

The Great Advent Antiphons

This sonnet series by Malcolm Guite (b. 1957)—seven poems, one for each day of the week leading to Christmas, the last week of Advent—is framed as a kind of call and response. The call in each case is an ancient antiphon, or liturgical chant, traditionally sung or chanted during this same period of the church calendar. Likely dating back to the seventh century, these short prayers were called to Christ using some of his most meaningful names: Wisdom, Adonai, Root of Jesse, Key of David, Dayspring, King of Nations, Emmanuel.

Each sonnet-prayer Guite writes in response to each of these traditional prayers begins with the name used in the antiphon. That name becomes a springboard for poetic meditation on the meaning and implications of this name.

The sonnet is an apt vessel for such exploration. The sonnet is a traditional form, its name meaning "little song," and one of the most fixed forms of poetry, using specific meter and one of a variation of stanzaic structures and rhyme schemes. The delightful paradox is that such a rigid form begs the skilled poet to test, turn, and soar, keeping the words within the rules while the meaning transcends them. One might even say that the compressed form of the sonnet embodies the idea of a God who is both fully human and fully divine and who comes

to dwell among us. As a prolific poet and a theologian, Guite has the rare prowess to harness this power well, as this series of sonnets beautifully proves.

One characteristic of all traditional sonnets is a turn in thought at a key structural point in the poem. In "O Sapienta," this turn occurs in the last two lines (the couplet), when the call to Wisdom is repeated thrice then culminates in the profound poetical and theological truth that wisdom comes "disguised as everything." Indeed, there is no place or no thing where wisdom cannot come if we seek it—or God when we seek him.

The series employs a variety of sonnet forms, each with a particular rhyme pattern and stanzaic structure, accompanied by literary devices that wed sound and sense: alliteration, assonance, anaphora, and rhythm. All the poems beg to be read aloud in order to be heard with the ear as well as understood with the eye.

"O Adonai"—the spoken substitute for the holy name YHWH—points to the irony of God choosing a people and a language to be his own and they his. "O Radix" employs word play to plumb the depths of rootedness in nature and the God of nature, which contrasts with the superficiality and artificiality of the machine world. "O Clavis," or Key, uses the most elaborate extended metaphor among the poems, one that illuminates the physical and metaphysical interrelationship between lock and key, latching and unlatching, light and darkness—and how each in these pairs is fitted to the other, just as each of our souls are fitted to receive Christ in a "particular, exact, and intimate" way. The poem "O Oriens" (Dayspring) stands out in the series for its use of sound. Internal rhyme, meter, and heavy use of consonance and assonance make the lines leap off the page, "to touch and brush a sheen of light" and "the shift and shiver of another river," being just two examples.

"O Rex Gentium" (King of Nations) is notable for the enjambment in its last three lines, where "play" spills over into the next line to its object "of all creation," a pattern that continues with the following lines. Such end rhymes that continue the thought into the next line

call for greater attention from the reader—a sort of bow to passing royalty, a pause that waits for the procession to carry through, one that ends with the call, "O Emmanuel" and his coming.

Karen Swallow Prior, Ph. D., is a reader, writer, and speaker. She is the author of *You Have a Calling* and *The Evangelical Imagination*, among other books. Her writing has appeared at *Christianity Today, Comment, New York Times, The Atlantic, The Washington Post, The Dispatch, First Things*, and other outlets. She is a Senior Fellow at the Trinity Forum and a Cardus Research Senior Fellow.

O Antiphon *Malcolm Guite*

O Sapientia
I cannot think unless I have been thought,
Nor can I speak unless I have been spoken.
I cannot teach except as I am taught,
Or break the bread except as I am broken.
O Mind behind the mind through which I seek,
O Light within the light by which I see,
O Word beneath the words with which I speak,
O founding, unfound Wisdom, finding me,
O sounding Song whose depth is sounding me,
O Memory of time, reminding me,
My Ground of Being, always grounding me,
My Maker's Bounding Line, defining me,
Come, hidden Wisdom, come with all you bring,
Come to me now, disguised as everything.

O Adonai
Unsayable, you chose to speak one tongue,
Unseeable, you gave yourself away,
The Adonai, the Tetragramaton

Grew by a wayside in the light of day.
O you who dared to be a tribal God,
To own a language, people and a place,
Who chose to be exploited and betrayed,
If so you might be met with face to face,
Come to us here, who would not find you there,
Who chose to know the skin and not the pith,
Who heard no more than thunder in the air,
Who marked the mere events and not the myth.
Touch the bare branches of our unbelief
And blaze again like fire in every leaf.

O Radix
All of us sprung from one deep-hidden seed,
Rose from a root invisible to all.
We knew the virtues once of every weed,
But, severed from the roots of ritual,
We surf the surface of a wide-screen world
And find no virtue in the virtual.
We shrivel on the edges of a wood
Whose heart we once inhabited in love,
Now we have need of you, forgotten Root
The stock and stem of every living thing
Whom once we worshiped in the sacred grove,
For now is winter, now is withering
Unless we let you root us deep within,
Under the ground of being, graft us in.

O Clavis
Even in the darkness where I sit
And huddle in the midst of misery
I can remember freedom, but forget
That every lock must answer to a key,

That each dark clasp, sharp and intricate,
Must find a counter-clasp to meet its guard,
Particular, exact and intimate,
The clutch and catch that meshes with its ward.
I cry out for the key I threw away
That turned and over turned with certain touch
And with the lovely lifting of a latch
Opened my darkness to the light of day.
O come again, come quickly, set me free
Cut to the quick to fit, the master key.

O Oriens
E vidi lume in forme de riviera (Dante's *Paradiso* XXX)

First light and then first lines along the east
To touch and brush a sheen of light on water
As though behind the sky itself they traced

The shift and shimmer of another river
Flowing unbidden from its hidden source;
The Day-Spring, the eternal Prima Vera.

Blake saw it too. Dante and Beatrice
Are bathing in it now, away upstream…
So every trace of light begins a grace

In me, a beckoning. The smallest gleam
Is somehow a beginning and a calling;
"Sleeper awake, the darkness was a dream

For you will see the Dayspring at your waking,
Beyond your long last line the dawn is breaking."

O Rex Gentium
O King of our desire whom we despise,
King of the nations never on the throne,
Unfound foundation, cast-off cornerstone,
Rejected joiner, making many one,
You have no form or beauty for our eyes,
A King who comes to give away his crown,
A King within our rags of flesh and bone.
We pierce the flesh that pierces our disguise,
For we ourselves are found in you alone.
Come to us now and find in us your throne,
O King within the child within the clay,
O hidden King who shapes us in the play
Of all creation. Shape us for the day
Your coming Kingdom comes into its own.

O Emmanuel
O come, O come, and be our God-with-us
O long-sought With-ness for a world without,
O secret seed, O hidden spring of light.
Come to us Wisdom, come unspoken Name
Come Root, and Key, and King, and holy Flame,
O quickened little wick so tightly curled,
Be folded with us into time and place,
Unfold for us the mystery of grace
And make a womb of all this wounded world.
O heart of heaven beating in the earth,
O tiny hope within our hopelessness
Come to be born, to bear us to our birth,
To touch a dying world with new-made hands
And make these rags of time our swaddling bands.



The Paradox of the Incarnation

"The Nativity" by John Donne (1572-1631) is the third of a set of seven sonnets, *La Corona*, one of the earliest devotional poems (ca. 1607) by a man better known for poems of profane love. The last line of each sonnet is repeated as the first line of its immediate successor until the last line of the seventh sonnet repeats the first line of the first, thus forming a "crown" of linked poems. This arrangement resembles the Rosary and other Roman Catholic devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary, especially since the topics of the other sonnets also take up Rosary themes, e.g., "Annunciation," "Crucifying," "Resurrection," and so on. This focus is unsurprising, since Donne's mother and most of his family, including three Jesuit uncles, were Catholic recusants during the reigns of Queen Elizabeth and King James I. The poet himself, however, would as an adult conform to the established Church of England, becoming a clergyman and, eventually, Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral.

The sonnet preceding "Nativity" is "Annunciation," addressed to the Virgin Mother of Christ, and the Infant Jesus is the *"Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb,"* whose birth marks his departure from "his well-beloved imprisonment." The motif that unites "Annunciation" and "Nativity" (and all the poems in *La Corona*) is *wonder*: in the former that the infinite being of God fits into the confines of the Virgin's womb; in our sonnet that the infinite power of God suffers weakness and vulnerability. The Creator and Ruler of the universe is unrecognized and finds no room in the local inn; he must be born in a stable and laid down to sleep in a corncrib. Nevertheless, he attracts the attention of the stars and wisemen and is perceived as a threat by the local tyrant Herod, insecure on his dubious throne.

Donne follows the form of the Italian sonnet, with an octave and a sestet rather than the arrangement of three quatrains and a couplet familiar to readers of Shakespeare's sonnets. Having set forth in the octave the apparent contradictions of our Lord's Incarnation as

paradoxical truths, in the final six lines he calls upon his soul—and us—to reflect upon the mystery. Since the majesty of God, "which fills all place," has not sufficiently awed sinful man or elicited fear of the Lord, God's undiminished "pity," his mercy for us, moves him to such an extent that he "would have need to be pitied" by us in order to soften our hard hearts. This, Donne suggests, is the meaning of the Nativity, of Christmas, that the infinite, omnipotent Lord of Creation, out of compassion for such creatures as we, would deign to enter a woman's womb and be born into squalor and suffering. It should bring us to our knees in humility, gratitude, and, above all, amazement.

R.V. Young is Professor Emeritus of English at North Carolina State University. He co-founded and for 25 years co-edited the *John Donne Journal*. Subsequently he edited the quarterly review *Modern Age* for nine years and currently serves as a Senior Editor with *Touchstone* magazine. His most recent book is *Shakespeare and the Idea of Western Civilization*, and he is currently at work editing a critical edition of *Paradise Lost* for Ignatius Press.

Nativity *John Donne*

Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb,
Now leaves His well-belov'd imprisonment,
There He hath made Himself to His intent
Weak enough, now into the world to come;
But O, for thee, for Him, hath the inn no room?
Yet lay Him in this stall, and from the Orient,
Stars and wise men will travel to prevent
The effect of Herod's jealous general doom.
Seest thou, my soul, with thy faith's eyes, how He
Which fills all place, yet none holds Him, doth lie?
Was not His pity towards thee wondrous high,
That would have need to be pitied by thee?
Kiss Him, and with Him into Egypt go,
With His kind mother, who partakes thy woe.



Behold the Christ Child

Scott Cairns, the distinguished American poet, has published twelve collections of verse characterized by his intense, terse, laconic voice and close attention to language itself. He brings the insights and mysticism of his Orthodox faith to bear on all the challenges and confusions of our own time. In this poem, "Nativity," which is one of a pair of poems called *Two Icons,* he invites us to come with him to Mary and the Christ-child by opening up for us the window of an icon of the Nativity.

From its opening lines the poem is immediately close, intense, and intimate: annihilating distance, drawing us in,

> As you lean in, you'll surely apprehend
> the tiny God is wrapped
> in something more than swaddle.

Cairns' choice of the word 'apprehend' is perfect and echoes, perhaps deliberately, Shakespeare's reflection on poetry, that imagination,

> apprehends
> more than cool reason ever comprehends …
> (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Act V, Scene 1).

Cairns is certainly using the poetic imagination to the full in order to invite our *apprehension* and bring us, image by image, a little closer to *comprehending* the bringer of our joy. From the outset we are in the grip of the enlightening paradox of Incarnation, there in the juxtaposition of "tiny" and "God," and the whole poem opens out the vital phrase he introduces in this third line, "something more." It is the purpose of poetry to show us something we think we already know, and in that showing, show us "something more."

So, having introduced the familiar image of the babe wrapped in swaddle, Cairns goes on,

> The God
>
> is tightly bound within
> His blesséd mother's gaze—her face declares
> that *she* is rapt by what
>
> she holds, beholds, reclines beholden to.

The language here is at once rich and playful, with the idea of Mary's "gaze" as almost a "gauze" that wraps its beloved object, and then the reversal and play on "rapt": she is "wrapped" in that she is bound by him, and she is "rapt" by what she holds in love, giving it rapt attention. Then comes the lovely, musical tolling and play with "hold": "she holds," "beholds," "reclines beholden to"; as we move through the senses from the physical holding to the visual beholding to the spiritual state of being beholden, itself paradoxically something into which we can recline and rest. And all of this in the English word "hold," "behold"; gently reminding us of the meaning of the Latin root in "apprehend," "to be prehensive," "to take hold." And who apprehends, who takes hold here? Mary certainly, but no less certainly we behold, we apprehend, through her. She is herself the icon or window through which we look at Christ, beholding and beholden, as the first line makes clear. This poem is not ultimately about the look of those presented in the icon as looking at Christ but is an invitation to look deeply into these things ourselves.

Malcolm Guite is a poet, priest, singer-songwriter, and scholar. He is a Life Fellow and a former chaplain of Girton College, Cambridge, as well as a Senior Fellow of the Trinity Forum. He lectures widely in the United Kingdom and North America on theology and literature and has published works of poetry, theology, and literary criticism. Among his most recent projects is *Merlin's Isle*, a four-volume epic retelling of Arthurian legend.

Nativity *Scott Cairns*

As you lean in, you'll surely apprehend
the tiny God is wrapped
in something more than swaddle. The God

is tightly bound within
His blesséd mother's gaze—her face declares
that *she* is rapt by what

she holds, beholds, reclines beholden to.
She cups His perfect head
and kisses Him, that even here the radiant

compass of affection
is announced, that even here our several
histories converge and slip,

just briefly, out of time. Which is much of what
an icon works as well,
and this one offers up a broad array

of separate narratives
whose temporal relations quite miss the point,
or meet there. Regardless,

one blithe shepherd offers music to the flock,
and—just behind him—there
he is again, and sore afraid, attended

by a trembling companion
and addressed by Gabriel. Across the ridge,
three wise men spur three horses

towards a star, and bowing at the icon's
nearest edge, these same three
yet adore the seated One whose mother serves

as throne. Meantime, stumped,
the kindly Abba Joseph ruminates,
receiving consolation
from an attentive dog whose master may
yet prove to be a holy
messenger disguised as fool. Overhead,

the famous star is all
but out of sight by now; yet, even so,
it aims a single ray

directing our slow pilgrims to the core
where all the journeys meet,
appalling crux and hallowed cave and womb,

where crouched among these other
lowing cattle at their trough, our travelers
receive that creatured air, and pray.



The End of Time & the Restoration of all Things

Poet, pamphleteer, and civil servant (Secretary for Foreign Tongues, no less) for the Commonwealth of England, John Milton (1608-1674) is surely best known for his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*. Among his most noteworthy lyric poems, "Lycidas" (the quintessential traditional elegy), his "Sonnet XVIII: On the Late Massacre in Piemont," and his pair of lyrics called "L'Allegro" (*The Happy Man*) and "Il Penseroso" (*The Melancholy Man*) remain primary models for students of English literature to this day.

That said, his ode, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," continues to resound with visionary power; it is a poem that, in many ways, articulates the vision of Saint Peter's *apocatastásis*, (*ἀποκαταστάσεως πάντων*), which has been understood to envision the restoration of all things, the recovery of all creation into the wholeness and wellness with which it was first endowed. It is a poem, therefore, that articulates what might be witnessed as an efficacious collapse, a restorative collapse.

That restoration begins with the opening line of the poem, as *time* itself—by way of present tense—is collapsed. Time is, moreover, revealed as something of an aberration, what the poem's closing lines characterize as "our tedious song," which—with the Nativity of Christ—"should here have ending."

Notice how the poem's first line serves as no mere retrospective reference to a past event; on the contrary, the line announces "*This* is the Month, and *this* the happy morn…"; with this gesture, the *eternal now* is thereby invoked to oblige our appreciating this event—and, by extension, *every* event of our church calendar—as more than a momentary or memorial observance; each of these occasions is *now*; the agency of each occasion is current, drawing "our tedious song" to "join…unto the [eternal] Angel Choir," whose music proves curative.

The Christian who takes such matters seriously is thereby blessed to appreciate *each* observance of *each* Holy Day as a present

apprehension of Eternal Presence.

The Nativity of Christ proves to be the perfect exemplar of what might be seen as a span of restorative collapses, for the Nativity of Christ occasions the most appalling collapse of all—the compounding of Natures, human and divine.

The Nativity of Christ reinfuses all creation and all the cosmos with the glory of its original superabundance, the *atonement* of its aberrations, privations, and historical *missings of the mark*.

The first four stanzas set the scene and pronounce the invocation of the "Heav'nly Muse" in what seems an utterly fitting form—*rhyme royal*. They open, as indicated above, by eclipsing time; they conclude by announcing this poem to be creation's *first* greeting of the Lord.

In the twenty-seven verses of the *Hymn* that follow, one witnesses the immediate and instantaneous restoration, although necessarily expressed in something of a temporal sequence. In awe, Nature solemnly and modestly prepares the earth in sympathy with the Master's condescension. Deformities are covered, conflicts cease, benevolent deities are absorbed, malevolent deities and their oracles are eclipsed, effaced, erased.

The tedious song of time is now absorbed into an eternal music, which we might yet hear.

Librettist, essayist, translator, and author of twelve poetry collections, **Scott Cairns** is Curators' Distinguished Professor of English Emeritus at University of Missouri. His work has been translated into Greek, French, Spanish, and Romanian. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2006, and the Denise Levertov Award in 2014. His current projects include *Descent to the Heart*, verse adaptations from the homilies of Saint Isaak the Syrian, a new poetry collection, *Ways of Not Knowing*, and a book-length essay, *Poetry Is Theology*.

On the Morning of Christ's Nativity *John Milton*

I
This is the month, and this the happy morn,
Wherein the Son of Heaven's eternal King,
Of wedded maid and Virgin Mother born,
Our great redemption from above did bring;
For so the holy sages once did sing,
That he our deadly forfeit should release,
And with his Father work us a perpetual peace.

II
That glorious Form, that Light unsufferable,
And that far-beaming blaze of majesty,
Wherewith he wont at Heaven's high council-table
To sit the midst of Trinal Unity,
He laid aside, and, here with us to be,
Forsook the Courts of everlasting Day,
And chose with us a darksome house of mortal clay.

III
Say, Heavenly Muse, shall not thy sacred vein
Afford a present to the Infant God?
Hast thou no verse, no hymn, or solemn strain,
To welcome him to this his new abode,
Now while the heaven, by the Sun's team untrod,
Hath took no print of the approaching light,
And all the spangled host keep watch in squadrons bright?

IV
See how from far upon the Eastern road
The star-led Wizards haste with odours sweet!
Oh! run; prevent them with thy humble ode,

And lay it lowly at his blessèd feet;
Have thou the honour first thy Lord to greet,
And join thy voice unto the Angel Choir,
From out his secret altar touched with hallowed fire.

The Hymn

I

It was the winter wild,
While the heaven-born child
All meanly wrapt in the rude manger lies;
Nature, in awe to him,
Had doffed her gaudy trim,
With her great Master so to sympathize:
It was no season then for her
To wanton with the Sun, her lusty Paramour.

II

Only with speeches fair
She woos the gentle air
To hide her guilty front with innocent snow,
And on her naked shame,
Pollute with sinful blame,
The saintly veil of maiden white to throw;
Confounded, that her Maker's eyes
Should look so near upon her foul deformities.

III

But he, her fears to cease,
Sent down the meek-eyed Peace:
She, crowned with olive green, came softly sliding
Down through the turning sphere,
His ready Harbinger,
With turtle wing the amorous clouds dividing;

And, waving wide her myrtle wand,
She strikes a universal peace through sea and land.

IV

No war, or battail's sound,
Was heard the world around;
The idle spear and shield were high uphung;
The hookèd chariot stood,
Unstained with hostile blood;
The trumpet spake not to the armèd throng;
And Kings sat still with awful eye,
As if they surely knew their sovereign Lord was by.

V

But peaceful was the night
Wherein the Prince of Light
His reign of peace upon the earth began.
The winds, with wonder whist,
Smoothly the waters kissed,
Whispering new joys to the mild Ocean,
Who now hath quite forgot to rave,
While birds of calm sit brooding on the charmed wave.

VI

The stars, with deep amaze,
Stand fixed in steadfast gaze,
Bending one way their precious influence,
And will not take their flight,
For all the morning light,
Or Lucifer that often warned them thence;
But in their glimmering orbs did glow,
Until their Lord himself bespake, and bid them go.

VII

And, though the shady gloom
Had given day her room,
The Sun himself withheld his wonted speed,
And hid his head of shame,
As his inferior flame
The new-enlightened world no more should need:
He saw a greater Sun appear
Than his bright Throne or burning axletree could bear.

VIII

The Shepherds on the lawn,
Or ere the point of dawn,
Sat simply chatting in a rustic row;
Full little thought they than
That the mighty Pan
Was kindly come to live with them below:
Perhaps their loves, or else their sheep,
Was all that did their silly thoughts so busy keep.

IX

When such music sweet
Their hearts and ears did greet
As never was by mortal finger strook,
Divinely-warbled voice
Answering the stringèd noise,
As all their souls in blissful rapture took:
The air, such pleasure loth to lose,
With thousand echoes still prolongs each heavenly close.

X

Nature, that heard such sound
Beneath the hollow round

Of Cynthia's seat the airy Region thrilling,
Now was almost won
To think her part was done,
And that her reign had here its last fulfilling:
She knew such harmony alone
Could hold all Heaven and Earth in happier union.

XI

At last surrounds their sight
A globe of circular light,
That with long beams the shamefaced Night arrayed;
The helmèd Cherubim
And sworded Seraphim
Are seen in glittering ranks with wings displayed,
Harping in loud and solemn choir,
With unexpressive notes, to Heaven's newborn Heir.

XII

Such music (as 'tis said)
Before was never made,
But when of old the Sons of Morning sung,
While the Creator great
His constellations set,
And the well-balanced World on hinges hung,
And cast the dark foundations deep,
And bid the weltering waves their oozy channel keep.

XIII

Ring out, ye crystal spheres!
Once bless our human ears,
If ye have power to touch our senses so;
And let your silver chime
Move in melodious time;

And let the bass of heaven's deep organ blow;
And with your ninefold harmony
Make up full consort of the angelic symphony.

XIV

For, if such holy song
Enwrap our fancy long,
Time will run back and fetch the Age of Gold;
And speckled Vanity
Will sicken soon and die,
And leprous Sin will melt from earthly mould;
And Hell itself will pass away,
And leave her dolorous mansions of the peering day.

XV

Yes, Truth and Justice then
Will down return to men,
The enamelled arras of the rainbow wearing;
And Mercy set between,
Throned in celestial sheen,
With radiant feet the tissued clouds down steering;
And Heaven, as at some festival,
Will open wide the gates of her high palace-hall.

XVI

But wisest Fate says No,
This must not yet be so;
The Babe lies yet in smiling infancy
That on the bitter cross
Must redeem our loss,
So both himself and us to glorify:
Yet first, to those chained in sleep,
The wakeful trump of doom must thunder through the deep,

XVII

With such a horrid clang
As on Mount Sinai rang,
While the red fire and smouldering clouds outbrake:
The aged Earth, aghast
With terror of that blast,
Shall from the surface to the centre shake,
When, at the world's last sessiön,
The dreadful Judge in middle air shall spread his throne.

XVIII

And then at last our bliss
Full and perfect is,
But now begins; for from this happy day
The Old Dragon under ground,
In straiter limits bound,
Not half so far casts his usurpèd sway,
And, wroth to see his Kingdom fail,
Swindges the scaly horror of his folded tail.

XIX

The Oracles are dumb;
No voice or hideous hum
Runs through the archèd roof in words deceiving.
Apollo from his shrine
Can no more divine,
Will hollow shriek the steep of Delphos leaving.
No nightly trance, or breathèd spell,
Inspires the pale-eyed Priest from the prophetic cell.

XX

The lonely mountains o'er,
And the resounding shore,

A voice of weeping heard and loud lament;
Edgèd with poplar pale,
From haunted spring, and dale
The parting Genius is with sighing sent;
With flower-inwoven tresses torn
The Nymphs in twilight shade of tangled thickets mourn.

XXI

In consecrated earth,
And on the holy hearth,
The Lars and Lemures moan with midnight plaint;
In urns, and altars round,
A drear and dying sound
Affrights the Flamens at their service quaint;
And the chill marble seems to sweat,
While each peculiar power forgoes his wonted seat.

XXII

Peor and Baälim
Forsake their temples dim,
With that twice-battered god of Palestine;
And moonèd Ashtaroth,
Heaven's Queen and Mother both,
Now sits not girt with tapers' holy shine:
The Libyc Hammon shrinks his horn;
In vain the Tyrian maids their wounded Thammuz mourn.

XXIII

And sullen Moloch, fled,
Hath left in shadows dread
His burning idol all of blackest hue;
In vain with cymbals' ring
They call the grisly king,

In dismal dance about the furnace blue;
The brutish gods of Nile as fast,
Isis, and Orus, and the dog Anubis, haste.

XXIV

Nor is Osiris seen
In Memphian grove or green,
Trampling the unshowered grass with lowings loud;
Nor can he be at rest
Within his sacred chest;
Nought but profoundest Hell can be his shroud;
In vain, with timbreled anthems dark,
The sable-stolèd Sorcerers bear his worshiped ark.

XXV

He feels from Juda's land
The dreaded Infant's hand;
The rays of Bethlehem blind his dusky eyn;
Nor all the gods beside
Longer dare abide,
Not Typhon huge ending in snaky twine:
Our Babe, to show his Godhead true,
Can in his swaddling bands control the damnèd crew.

XXVI

So, when the Sun in bed,
Curtained with cloudy red,
Pillows his chin upon an orient wave,
The flocking shadows pale
Troop to the infernal jail,
Each fettered ghost slips to his several grave,
And the yellow-skirted Fays
Fly after the night-steeds, leaving their moon-loved maze.

XXVII

But see! the Virgin blest
Hath laid her Babe to rest,
Time is our tedious song should here have ending:
Heaven's youngest-teemèd star
Hath fixed her polished car,
Her sleeping Lord with handmaid lamp attending;
And all about the courtly stable
Bright-harnessed Angels sit in order serviceable.



The Baby Whom Heaven Cannot Hold

Christina Rosetti's poem "A Christmas Carol" was published in 1872 and has since become a beloved hymn arranged, sung, and recorded by countless musicians in a variety of styles, often with its alternate title, "In the Bleak Midwinter."

Whether read as a poem or heard as a song, the work is haunting in both sound and sense. The profundity of the Incarnation—God becoming flesh and coming to dwell among us—is captured by the poem's reliance on natural elements for its imagery: earth, water, stone, and snow falling through the air. The inclusion of ordinary objects—stable, manger, hay, ox, ass, and lamb—not only evokes the scene of Christ's Nativity, but also conveys how pervasive and near God is in his immanence. His entrance into the world matters in the most literal sense: his presence affects all matter. The poem's simple imagery, paradoxically, embodies this deeply theological truth.

The imagery is supported by the sounds of the poem, its rhythms, rhymes, and repetitions. The rhymes are easy to catch, and occur in a regular pattern, with effective alterations, in each of the poem's stanzas. The melodic effect is heightened further by frequent use of other devices of sound: alliteration (repetition of initial consonant sounds), assonance (repetition of vowel sounds), and internal rhyme (rhymes that occur within a line). Examples of each of these devices, respectively, include "heaven cannot hold him" (repeated *h* sound), "stable-place" (long *a* sound), and "him" and "cherubim" (repeated sound of the short *i*). As with all poetry, this poem can be appreciated not only through silent reading, but even more through reading it aloud, slowly, letting the sounds of the words deepen the meaning. Perhaps the most dramatic sound occurs with the onomatopoetic words "snow on snow, snow on snow," which together recreate the very sense of snow softly falling.

These simple objects and visceral sounds heighten the incomprehensible paradox that the God who cannot be contained by

heaven or earth is here in the world, being nourished by mother's milk and warmed in a bed of hay. There is no adequate response to such a mystery other than to give whatever we have ourselves to give.

This is what the poet did in her own life. Rossetti was part of an accomplished Victorian family, with a Dante scholar for a father and two famous pre-Raphaelite painters as brothers. Rossetti was a devout Anglican who broke off two marriage engagements because of religious differences, choosing instead to commit her life and her heart to lay Christian ministry and to her art. She wrote hundreds of poems, many widely read and studied today—and one sung in countless measure every year as the Church across the globe celebrates the coming of the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

Karen Swallow Prior, Ph. D., is a reader, writer, and speaker. She is the author of *You Have a Calling* and *The Evangelical Imagination*, among other books. Her writing has appeared at *Christianity Today, Comment, New York Times, The Atlantic, The Washington Post, The Dispatch, First Things*, and other outlets. She is a Senior Fellow at the Trinity Forum and a Cardus Research Senior Fellow.

A Christmas Carol *Christina Rossetti*

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Our God, Heaven cannot hold Him, nor earth sustain;
Heaven and earth shall flee away when He comes to reign.
In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed
The Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

Enough for Him, whom cherubim, worship night and day,
Breastful of milk, and a mangerful of hay;
Enough for Him, whom angels fall before,
The ox and ass and camel which adore.

Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;
But His mother only, in her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the beloved with a kiss.

What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.



A Keener Means to See

Christian Wiman is a brilliant poet and one of the most eloquent witnesses to the Christian faith in our time. Born in West Texas, he edited *Poetry* magazine for a decade and now teaches at Yale Divinity School.

Since 2005, Wiman has lived with a rare, incurable cancer; several times he has come close to death. His illness forms the backdrop of "Before the Bone Marrow Transplant," which bears the epigraph "Christmas 2022." He wrote it that Christmas, on the eve of a dangerous procedure, yet the poem begins, "It is Christmas 2023," imagining a holiday he did not expect to see.

Wiman, who has endured far more suffering than most, doesn't romanticize it. He doesn't believe suffering is good, or that it is the only source of the world's beauty. But in the poem he suggests that suffering can make the world "shine." As he put it in a 2026 interview, "there is something in suffering that can enable you to perceive the depth of existence, if you're lucky enough to survive." Suffering has given him different eyes—softer, more empathetic eyes—with which to see the world.

"My own experience was that in the midst of great suffering I experienced the presence of Christ," he once told me, "and the world was lit up."

"Before the Bone Marrow Transplant" is a poem of defiant hope, beginning with its first sentence: "It is Christmas 2023." He places himself at the end of a year that most people, including Wiman himself, assumed he would not live to see. "Behind me," he writes, "a vast tranche of suffering lies." He has survived and assimilated the suffering. He does not allow fear or despair to have the final word.

"Before the Bone Marrow Transplant" also celebrates ordinary life. Wiman imagines his children waking on Christmas morning and texting him to come down, *Now, Now*. He remembers how, amid much suffering when he was a boy, Christmas offered a reprieve, when "for a

time all was instant / and bright surprise."

The poem also includes these extraordinary concluding words:

> This will be done,
> poem, prayer, piece of being, the tiny and entire story
> of the passionate transitory in which our lives are hung.
> I in my undominion rising to be among.

Our lives are tiny but complete, fleeting but intense. In the end, echoing the words of Jesus in Gethsemane, Wiman surrenders to whatever comes to pass. He admits he has no control over his life, and yet he rises to be among the people he most loves.

Without poetry, Christian Wiman might never have found his way back to faith. He has said that poems kept showing him what he hadn't seen in his own life, and that poetry has become his way of praying. For Wiman, poetry became a portal to faith, and through his poems, it can become one for us.

Peter Wehner, an American essayist, is a contributing opinion writer for *The New York Times* and a contributing writer for *The Atlantic*. He writes on politics and political ideas, faith and culture, foreign policy, sports, and friendship. For the *Times*, he also conducts a series of interviews on faith with leading theologians, philosophers, novelists, and poets. Mr. Wehner served in three presidential administrations, including as deputy director of presidential speechwriting for President George W. Bush, and is a Senior Fellow of the Trinity Forum.

Before the Bone Marrow Transplant *Christian Wiman*

Christmas 2022

It is Christmas 2023.
I am me, sitting in my studio looking over these notes.
An early snow (for atmosphere) floats
—clear, spare—through the bare limbs of the oak tree,
lightly and precisely redefining its guise.
The silence is such as makes one realize
silence never is, this hum the mystics call eternity.
Behind me a vast tranche of suffering lies,
in both senses: reality
I have endured and assimilated as I can,
extracting from pain a keener means to see; and,
strict formulation that says,
for all the beauty there is, for all this quick of limb and eyes
merged and made available to mind,
it is suffering that makes it shine.
Soon my wife will stir,
sunlight, because I see it, cherishing her
as she emerges from sheets and begins to dress.
My children will wake to what they think is godless joy
texting me to come down to Christmas
Now, Now
and I will think back to Christmas as a boy
and how, amid much suffering, for a time all was instant
and bright surprise. This will be done,
poem, prayer, piece of being, the tiny and entire story
of the passionate transitory in which our lives are hung.
I in my undominion rising to be among.



The Ghosts of Christmas

In "Tinsel, Frankincense, and Fir," Dana Gioia invites readers into a poet's home. No fireplace is mentioned, but we feel the warmth emanating from the place where he sets the scene. His story is in the middle of things, as though it happens annually. By the end of the poem, we understand that this Christmas may be different than the ones before because loved ones are no longer with us. The seemingly disposable trinkets of his Christmas bring forth the memory of the poet's mother, so that what appeared lost is shown as somehow always near.

Who knows whether the poem itself is autobiographical? Gioia himself celebrates his working-class background from South Los Angeles, where his Sicilian father drove a taxi and his Mexican-American mother operated telephones. After graduating Stanford and Harvard, Gioia worked as a vice president of General Foods. His book *Can Poetry Matter?* (1992) drew attention to the need for poetry in the public square. In 2002 Gioia became Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, where he served until 2009. In 2015 Gioia was the Poet Laureate of California. He rekindled national interest in *belles lettres* and has revitalized formal poetry, which you can see in the iambic pentameter of this poem.

Echoing the enigma of Christmas, Gioia ties the death of the poet's mother to the day we celebrate a birth, that of the eternal God in flesh in His world. The "old" of the ornaments is tied to the "fresh" of the tree; the dust is blown away; and, in the dark winter, radiance. Through all of these paradoxes, we glimpse the truth of redemption: "Nothing was too little to be loved." We experience "little joy" that is often hidden in the darkest places, but, like the memory of the poet's mother—"voila"—these moments shine brightly.

The poem ends with a question that has no answer, only active response. We cannot trade gifts with the dead; those who have passed on before us left us more than we can ever return. At Christmas time,

as we share gifts with one another, we practice the tributes of the Magi who approached Jesus' cradle. We remember the irony that the one to whom we give has first given to us.

What began with the poet "I" and then became a witnessing of "she" now includes us—"We wrap her hopes/ Around the tree." Just as God became Word at Christmas, so in the poem, the spiritual becomes tangible, as the hopes enfold the tree before us.

Gioia reminds us of the meaning of Christmas by eliciting the true definition of "holiday," which is "holy day." His conclusion that, "No holiday is holy without ghosts" highlights the holiness of Christmas. It is not a day merely for opening presents but for remembering presence, that of all the saints in our company, living and dead, and especially that of Immanuel.

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Tinsel, Frankincense, & Fir *Dana Gioia*

Hanging old ornaments on a fresh cut tree,
I take each red glass bulb and tinfoil seraph
And blow away the dust. Anyone else
Would throw them out. They are so scratched and shabby.

My mother had so little joy to share
She kept it in a box to hide away.
But on the darkest winter nights—voilà—
She opened it resplendently to shine.

How carefully she hung each thread of tinsel,
Or touched each dime-store bauble with delight.
Blessed by the frankincense of fragrant fir,
Nothing was too little to be loved.

Why do the dead insist on bringing gifts
We can't reciprocate? We wrap her hopes
Around the tree crowned with a fragile star.
No holiday is holy without ghosts.



Divine Hospitality

George Herbert, poet and Anglican priest (1593-1633), left a legacy of words that remain life-giving even—perhaps especially—to those who happen upon him without benefit of a required course on British "metaphysical poets." Those poets were a lively group of theologically educated young wordsmiths who rose to the challenge of writing for the English-speaking public in the generation that succeeded Shakespeare. Like them, Herbert loved puns and paradox. Even his most earnest devotional poems are playful, as though fueled both by gratitude and by an irrepressible delight in word and image. "Christmas (I)" begins with a story: a world-weary traveler seeks refuge in an inn where, to his surprise, Christ himself awaits him.

Christ is both the host and the place of refuge. Divine hospitality, one of Herbert's favorite themes, lies at the heart of his theology. Christ receives and welcomes. He has prepared a place for us when, exhausted by the world's demands and distractions, we seek shelter in him and find ourselves at home. The eight-line story that opens this poem is an allegory of consolation and assurance.

Then, as sonnets do, the poem changes direction and becomes a prayer: as you have become my dwelling place, dear Lord, make me into a fit dwelling place for you. The logic mirrors Jesus' own words in John 15:4: "Abide in me and I in you." Our work, once we have been received and restored—"furnished and decked"—is to extend hospitality not only to each other, but to Christ himself.

Imbedded in the prayer is another, more ancient story: God, the Light of the world, "contracted" himself in two senses, concentrating his cosmic energy into a tiny human body and making a contract, a covenant, that binds us to him by a promise—one he fulfilled by wrapping himself in the darkness of "rack and grave"—suffering and death.

The hospitality we might hope to extend is made possible only by the gracious hospitality first extended to us. In the warmth of that

divine dwelling place our darknesses are dispelled, our "brutish" places made human again, and we become capable of tending by the healing power of God's own tenderness.

Tenderness is the word that comes to me first when I return to Herbert's poems. At the heart of this one, a simple phrase breaks through the weave of poetic devices with a startling, intimate cry: "my dear, / My dearest Lord . . ." In that cry we hear the voice of the poet who spoke elsewhere of Christ's "quick-eyed love," Christ as a warrior "swift of foot," who takes, for our sake, "the gentle path."

The sweetness of these assurances never devolves into sentimentality: "Christmas (I)," reminds us of our great need for exactly what Christ offers even as we suffer the self-inflicted pain of "affections quite astray" that consume with no means of renewal. We come to him, "weary with dust and sin," as Herbert put it elsewhere, and must knock at the door that will surely be opened. When it opens, we will be led out of our darknesses into a place made warm by marvelous light.

Marilyn McEntyre, PhD, longtime professor of literature and medical humanities, is a speaker, retreat leader, and writing coach. She teaches in programs at New College Berkeley, Western Theological Seminary, and the Oblate School of Theology. Her books include *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, *When Poets Pray*, & *Midwinter Light*.

Christmas (I) *George Herbert*

After all pleasures as I rid one day,
My horse and I, both tired, body and mind,
With full cry of affections, quite astray;
I took up the next inn I could find.

There when I came, whom found I but my dear,
My dearest Lord, expecting till the grief
Of pleasures brought me to Him, ready there
To be all passengers' most sweet relief?

Oh Thou, whose glorious, yet contracted light,
Wrapt in night's mantle, stole into a manger;
Since my dark soul and brutish is Thy right,
To man of all beasts be not Thou a stranger:

Furnish and deck my soul, that Thou mayst have
A better lodging, than a rack, or grave.



"Were We Led All That Way for Birth or Death?"

All artists face a "death in divine image" (William Blake, "Jerusalem"), a loss of artistic ego, when their eyes are opened to faith. "Journey of the Magi" was the first poem the American-born poet T. S. Eliot penned after he was baptized in a small Anglican Church in Oxfordshire in 1927 at the age of 38. He had just left his post at Lloyd Bank. His friend Virginia Wolff, voicing the collective dismay of Eliot's associates in the Bloomsbury literary circle, pronounced him "as good as dead." His relationship with his wife Vivienne was fraught, and he could only view her now as a cruel reminder of evaporated love.

So when Eliot wrote of the magi, he did not speak of the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh: this was not to be a happy, celebratory poem. Instead, he speaks of the death of fires (loves), hostile cities, and unfriendly towns. Eliot's journey into faith, too, was a lonely exile, a descent into the darker woods, a "loud lament of Disconsolate Chimera," as he penned in his final poem "The Four Quartets."

In the years to follow, this disconsolate voice resurrected to become one of the most eloquent writers of faith in modern poetry. But here, in this poem, is Eliot at his humble nadir, the beginning of his faith, emptying himself.

> . . . this Birth was
> Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

The birth of Christ we celebrate is also a precursor of the death. And then we should be, and will be, "glad of another death." The death of Death, the Life inexplicably given to us lost sheep—and our feeble voices as artists will give witness with bleatings of gratitude and continue to create toward the hope of Easter and beyond.

In leaving Lloyd Bank for a less secure position as poetry editor at Faber and Gwyer, Eliot left also the transactional economy of a bank. He was now to tend to literary talents, giving attention to poets

such as Ted Hughes, younger voices such as W. H. Auden and David Jones, as well as introducing to Britain a largely unknown poet from Connecticut named Wallace Stevens. This transformed Eliot tended and cultivated, generating great influence in the literary world. In many ways, he modeled what I have called "culture care," refusing to participate in a merely transactional game of artistic survival, a scarcity mindset that leads to culture-war language, and seeking instead creative abundance and the development of a renewed cultural language.

Makoto Fujimura, a Senior Fellow of the Trinity Forum, is a leading contemporary artist whose work has been featured in galleries and museums around the world. A celebrated speaker and advocate for the arts, he is the author of five books and the recipient of numerous awards and honorary doctorates. From 2003 to 2009, he served as a Presidential appointee to the National Council on the Arts. His process-driven, refractive "slow art" has been described by David Brooks as "a small rebellion against the quickening of time."

Journey of the Magi *T. S. Eliot*

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins,
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.



My Eyes Have Seen Your Salvation

When Rembrandt died in 1669 at the age of 63, his painting "Simeon With the Christ Child in the Temple" was discovered, unfinished, on his studio easel.

It's almost too perfect: the painter departed this world while honoring a biblical figure who gave himself permission to "be dismissed in peace" after laying eyes on the Lord's Christ and delivering this benediction:

> For my eyes have seen your salvation,
> which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
> a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
> and the glory of your people Israel. (Luke 2: 29-32)

This wasn't Rembrandt's only painting of Simeon. Earlier in his career (1631), he painted a bigger, brighter, more detailed version of the scene, complete with ornate temple architecture and a crowd looking on as the old man encounters the infant. The later version, however, according to Andrew Senior in *Ekstasis Magazine*, lacks ". . . strong definition of lines . . . and the rough and smeared texture of the paint still in the stages of initial application [has] the effect of melding Simeon's cloak and his outstretched, praying hands right into the cloth in which the child is wrapped. The visual impact that results is a powerful sense of intimacy between the two figures . . ."

Marilyn McEntyre, whose two dozen books include three devoted entirely to ekphrastic poetry (one each on Rembrandt, Van Gogh, and Vermeer), invites us into this intimacy with her poem "Simeon with the Christ Child in the Temple." Spoken in the voice of Anna, an elderly prophetess who also visited Christ during the presentation in the temple, the poem both celebrates and laments the birth of an infant whose hope for the world "will cost us all we know." She mourns not only the imminent passing of her friend Simeon, but the sword both

he and Anna foresee piercing "[Christ's] mother's heart, / his own, and mine. . ."

The Incarnation, like this unfinished painting, is not made of clear-cut lines; the Trinity is more mystery than equation. "What darkness may come with the light burden / he bears," Anna observes, and we, too, know that the dark skies of Golgotha will come for this infant in 33 years. That's the "smeared texture" of Christmas—the hope and heartbreak of a child born to die. And then to live again, melding with us through the Spirit.

As Simeon holds the child, he knows that now, "he can let go." Come, Lord Jesus, so we can let go of our sins, struggles, pain, and fear of death. We have seen our salvation.

Tania Runyan is an NEA fellow and author of several poetry collections, including *What Will Soon Take Place, Second Sky*, and *A Thousand Vessels*. Her guides *How to Read a Poem, How to Write a Poem*, and *How to Write a Form Poem* are used in classrooms across the country. Her current writing can be read at her Substack publication, *Poet Jesus*.

Simeon with the Christ Child in the Temple

Marilyn McEntyre

How light he lies
in these ancient arms.

The infant's eyes open
to meet the old man's
as they close.

I have seen his eyesight fade.
I have wept some days, watching
his long waiting, sonorous
mumbling prayer trailing into sleep.

For many months he has wished
to be dismissed in peace.

Now, holding the child,
he can let go.

Glad for his release, I mourn
the mother's pain, the child's plight,
and with them, the loss that comes
for me: no longer to see him
on the Temple steps, old eyes alight
with hope, always ready to retell
ancient tales while doves coo
in the courtyard and chattering
housewives pass in the street,
and within, the drone of prayer
turns story into song.

What darkness may come
with the light burden he bears.

Glory of Israel, Revelation
to the Gentiles, this little gift
of God will cost us all we know.

I see the sword in his mother's heart,
his own, and mine, even as, reluctant,
I dismiss him, too, in peace.



Take and Eat

Charles Causley (1917-2003) was not only one of the most popular modern British poets; he was also one of the most unusual. Except for six years in the Royal Navy during World War II, Causley spent his entire life in the Cornish market town of Launceston where he eventually became a schoolmaster. Rooted in that thousand-year-old community on the River Tamar, Causley found his literary identity in the traditional poetic forms of Cornwall—ballads, hymns, folk songs, and nursery rhymes. A serious modern writer, he nonetheless wrote in a style that average people understood, not only adults but children. In an age of free verse, he reveled in rhyme and meter. In an agnostic literary culture, he made Christianity central to his vision. Causley was best known for his bold and slangy ballads which told old stories in striking contemporary ways. Among the most famous was "The Ballad the Bread Man."

"The Ballad of the Bread Man" retells the Gospel story—from the Nativity to the Resurrection—by placing it in a modern British town. The new setting makes the familiar narrative seem strange and surprising. Causley strives to entertain the reader with his brisk and ironic style, but his updating has a serious purpose. His version encourages the reader to see the painful parallels between the biblical age and today. His goal is to startle the reader into paying attention to a story so well known that people take it for granted.

Causley does not offer a complete or literal retelling of the Gospels. No short ballad is expansive enough to tell all of Christ's life. Instead, Causley creates an allegory—a symbolic representation—of the birth, death, and resurrection of the Bread Man, a Christ-figure. This approach allows the poet to emphasize one aspect of Christ's mission—the bread of salvation. Causley doesn't concern himself with the theological arguments about the nature of the Eucharist—fortifying symbol or real presence. He uses the bread as the symbol of Christ's message of salvation. The Bread Man offers everyone he meets

"bread from my father." He discovers that people don't hunger for it. People don't recognize the Bread Man's divinity nor the divine spark within themselves from having been created in God's image.

Causley's description of the Nativity is especially charming. Miraculous events occur in mundane circumstances. Unable to find a hotel, Mary gives birth in the annex of a local pub. The shepherds are a delegation from the local Farmer's club. The Magi appear as a bishop, five-star general, and African head of state who travel by limousine. The Passion is depicted by its newspaper coverage. The Bread Man is charged with "bringing the living to life" and executed by firing squad. In the ballad, he is buried safely in a cathedral. (Causley worried that institutional religion often muffled the message of the Gospels.)

One Sunday morning, the Bread Man breaks forth, resurrected from his ceremonial stone tomb. He walks through town, displaying his wounds. Once again, he offers his father's bread. Surely the proof of his triumph over death will convince people. "Now do you want any loaves?" he cries. "Not today," they reply. The ballad's ending delivers a bitter disappointment. Causley does not mean to suggest that Christ's sacrifice was unsuccessful. Rather his point is that in the modern world, most people refuse the redemption Christ offers.

Dana Gioia is an internationally acclaimed poet and writer. Former California Poet laureate and Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, Gioia became the first person in his family to go to college, where received a B.A. and M.B.A. from Stanford and an M.A. from Harvard in Comparative Literature, and worked for 15 years as a businessman before quitting at 41 to become a full-time writer.

Ballad of the Bread Man *Charles Causley*

Mary stood in the kitchen
Baking a loaf of bread.
An angel flew in the window
'We've a job for you,' he said.

'God in his big gold heaven
Sitting in his big blue chair,
Wanted a mother for his little son.
Suddenly saw you there.'

Mary shook and trembled,
'It isn't true what you say.'
'Don't say that,' said the angel.
'The baby's on its way.'

Joseph was in the workshop
Planing a piece of wood.
'The old man's past it,' the neighbours said.
'That girl's been up to no good.'

'And who was that elegant fellow,'
They said, 'in the shiny gear?'
The things they said about Gabriel
Were hardly fit to hear.

Mary never answered,
Mary never replied.
She kept the information,
Like the baby, safe inside.

It was the election winter.
They went to vote in the town.
When Mary found her time had come

The hotels let her down.

The baby was born in an annexe
Next to the local pub.
At midnight, a delegation
Turned up from the Farmers' club.

They talked about an explosion
That made a hole on the sky,
Said they'd been sent to the Lamb and Flag
To see God come down from on high.

A few days later a bishop
And a five-star general were seen
With the head of an African country
In a bullet-proof limousine.

'We've come,' they said 'with tokens
For the little boy to choose.'
Told the tale about war and peace
In the television news.

After them came the soldiers
With rifle and bombs and gun,
Looking for enemies of the state.
The family had packed up and gone.

When they got back to the village
The neighbours said, to a man,
'That boy will never be one of us,
Though he does what he blessed well can.'

He went round to all the people
A paper crown on his head.
Here is some bread from my father.

Take, eat, he said.

Nobody seemed very hungry.
Nobody seemed to care.
Nobody saw the God in himself
Quietly standing there.

He finished up in the papers.
He came to a very bad end.
He was charged with bringing the living to life.
No man was that prisoner's friend.

There's only one kind of punishment
To fit that kind of crime.
They rigged a trial and shot him dead.
They were only just in time.

They lifted the young man by the leg,
They lifted him by the arm,
They locked him in a cathedral
In case he came to harm.

They stored him safe as water
Under seven rocks.
One Sunday morning he burst out
Like a jack-in-the-box.

Through the town he went walking.
He showed them the holes in his head.
Now do you want any loaves? He cried.
'Not today' they said.



An Open House in the Evening

Chesterton begins with a mother who has been turned away. Before we reach the star, we must reckon with the closed door. The shelter she finds is a stable, its timbers shaking, its footing uncertain. Here, the poet tells us, is a dwelling more enduring than Rome. I find myself lingering at that threshold.

G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936), the English essayist, novelist, and poet, delighted in the paradoxes through which Christian faith makes the familiar world strange again. Included in his 1915 collection *Poems*, "The House of Christmas" gathers that vision around the Nativity. God enters the world as a vulnerable child in need of shelter, and the place of his homelessness becomes the home toward which we travel.

The phrase "homesick in their homes" gives language to a longing we struggle to name. We can be surrounded by familiar things yet uncertain of our belonging. Beneath our making and knowing lies the desire to be known and still welcomed. Shame teaches us to hide whatever might cost us love. The open house at the poem's end invites us to imagine bringing even those hidden parts of ourselves into the light. The child also unsettles our ideas about power. The One through whom all things were made entrusts himself to human arms. He needs to be fed and kept warm.

Chesterton's words challenge us to notice what we so easily hurry past. He brings us back to the stable, to the animals and the discomfort of a place never intended for a birth. God is already there. I wonder how often I have passed by a place like that, looking for him somewhere more promising.

The poem begins with a mother driven out and ends with an open house. This is a poem of redemptive imagination. It helps me see the person at the door and asks what kind of welcome my own life might offer. In the mother seeking shelter and the child held in her arms, we begin to glimpse how God makes a home among us. I want to stay long enough to learn that welcome.

P. Douglas Wilson is a poet and liturgist who writes as The Estuarian, exploring faith, work, beauty, and belonging through a redemptive imagination. He is founder and chairman of Monon Capital and a Senior Fellow of the Trinity Forum. His work seeks to cultivate places where people practice being attentive and participate in God's work of renewing all things.

The House of Christmas

G.K. Chesterton

There fared a mother driven forth
Out of an inn to roam;
In the place where she was homeless
All men are at home.
The crazy stable close at hand,
With shaking timber and shifting sand,
Grew a stronger thing to abide and stand
Than the square stones of Rome.

For men are homesick in their homes,
And strangers under the sun,
And they lay on their heads in a foreign land
Whenever the day is done.
Here we have battle and blazing eyes,
And chance and honour and high surprise,
But our homes are under miraculous skies
Where the yule tale was begun.

A Child in a foul stable,
Where the beasts feed and foam;
Only where He was homeless
Are you and I at home;
We have hands that fashion and heads that know,
But our hearts we lost—how long ago!

In a place no chart nor ship can show
Under the sky's dome.

This world is wild as an old wives' tale,
And strange the plain things are,
The earth is enough and the air is enough
For our wonder and our war;
But our rest is as far as the fire-drake swings
And our peace is put in impossible things
Where clashed and thundered unthinkable wings
Round an incredible star.

To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.



The Trinity Forum

Group Discussion Guide

1 What is your relationship to poetry? Does it feel intimidating to you? Powerful? Irrelevant? Urgent? How is the spirit of poetry contrary to the spirit of the modern age? How should one read a poem?

2 Select one of Malcolm Guite's sonnets and read it out loud several times. Identify Guite's uses of alliteration, assonance, meter, rhyme, and other poetic devices that play with sound. How does hearing the poem rather than just reading it enhance your understanding of it? What lines do you find particular striking? Where is the poetic turn in thought?

3 As Malcolm Guite reminds us in his introduction to Scott Cairns's poem (quoting Shakespeare), "imagination apprehends more than cool reason ever comprehends." In other words, poetic image can help us perceive deep truths in ways that reason cannot always accomplish. For many, the themes of Christmas are overly familiar. What lines of poetry in this collection helped you apprehend the Nativity or the Incarnation afresh? How did they accomplish this?

4 In his introduction to Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," Scott Cairns points out Milton's use of the present tense as an evocation of the eternal now—"this is the month, and this the happy morn." Christ's Nativity is depicted not as a past event but a present one, with agency in the current moment. How does the Incarnation reach into the present? How, if at all, does it affect the way you think of *this* Christmas?

5 Discuss the relationship between beauty and suffering in Christian Wiman's "Before the Bone Marrow Transplant." What do you think Wiman means by the lines "Behind me a vast tranche of suffering lies, / in both senses"? What are these two senses? What does it mean to extract "from pain a keener means to see"?

6 Christina Rosetti's "A Christmas Carol" is frequently sung during the Christmas season under the more familiar title "In the Bleak Midwinter." What is the relationship between poetry and song? Consider some of your favorite Christmas carols. How do the lyrics help you apprehend the deep meaning of the Nativity or Incarnation?

7 Consider Dana Gioia's poem, "Tinsel, Frankincense, and Fir." In the final stanza, the speaker asks, "Why do the dead insist on bringing gifts / We can't reciprocate?" What do you take this line to mean? Is it true that "No holiday is holy without ghosts"? What ghosts haunt your Christmases?

8 The seed of death is buried within every birth. The speakers of both Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" and McEntyre's "Simeon with the Christ Child in the Temple" sense the shadow of Jesus' eventual death even as they behold the miracle of a baby's new life. How do these poems convey this dual joy and sorrow? What room for mourning is there in the Christmas season?

9 In "Ballad of the Breadman," Charles Causley retells the story of Jesus' life in the context of a modern British town. Dana Gioia writes that this encourages readers to "see the painful parallels between the biblical age and today." What are some of those parallels, as highlighted by Causley? Does the new setting startle or surprise you in any way? If so, how?

10 Divine hospitality is a major theme in both Herbert's "Christmas (I)" and Chesterton's "The House of Christmas." How would you define divine hospitality? What does it look like to accept it? What does it look like to extend it?

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Dana Gioia, *Poetry as Enchantment* (Paul Dry Books, 2024)

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