

Hey, look at this!

Neil Richardson writes 12 articles about his own poetic work and what people, ideas and influences led him to write some of his poems. The series will last for the twelve months of 2010.

Crisp Christmas

Crisp Christmas,
this one.

Sharp pains as a donkey strains,
frozen feet in a snow bound street.

Feeling compromised by her condition,
Mary longs for somewhere safe and warm.
Feeling inadequate,
Joseph knocks with shame.
"What kind of man am I?
But who else am I to blame?"

Third, not even second best
will have to do.
After this cold start,
God knows what kind of child
this one will grow into.

Joseph quickly scrapes a space
to make it clean.
And then,
the joy of human birth transforms the scene.

A new life, perfected in form and grace,
transfigures all the self-reproach
felt in this make-shift birthing place.

Crisply, the shepherds come
and warm themselves indoors, in tears,
and tell his mother of the sparkling songs
still warming up their frozen ears.

Crisply, hoping and fearing for this boy,
The Magi come and go, and leave
cold boxes telling futures
which no mother could with peace receive.

Crisply, the soldiers come,
mopping up the joy
and wringing out the agony.

Crisp Christmas,
this one.

After snow comes hard and deadly ice.
In the frozen winter,
the innocent will always pay the price.
1996



Bethlehem under snow

I have been to the Holy Land in the winter. It can be cold, very cold.



The cold and the heat are natural enemies of humanity. We need to protect ourselves from them in due season, in order to be happy and even in order to survive in extreme situations.

The feelings of Joseph are what activated my mind for the start of this poem. A man is expected to provide, but he is unable to do so, even in the dangerous time of childbirth on a cold night in Bethlehem.

What we have here is an expression of poverty.

And in the face of poverty, Joseph must have felt a sense of helplessness that was threatening to his self esteem. In that cattle shed, there was no time for Joseph to reflect too much on his failures to provide. He had to act swiftly, and prepare a clean area for the impending delivery of a new baby.

Joseph quickly scrapes a space
to make it clean.
And then,
the joy of human birth transforms the scene.

The story is one which has warmed the heart of many generations of Christians, especially, I should guess, those for whom Christmas is experienced in a cold climate. Despite their poverty and the contrast which their experience of life is to those with wealth and power, the poor of the world have always taken comfort from the birth of Jesus in the cold, in poverty, without ceremony, among the beasts of the stall. This child especially makes things different, but any baby might have done the same?

A new life, perfected in form and grace,
transfigures all the self-reproach
felt in this make-shift birthing place.

And then, after the joy of the shepherds and Kings who arrive to make special greetings and announce the special nature of this birth, all crisply done to keep them warm, we then see something which the poor of the past 2000 years and beyond will also have recognised.

Crisply, the soldiers come,
mopping up the joy
and wringing out the agony.

A moment of joy lasts for a short time before reality returns with a vengeance. Like many before and since, this child, this family will have to move on to escape privations, persecutions and death. The forces of darkness are always alert to the possibility of hope bringing justice and peace and they resist it. If justice and peace reign, to whom will they sell their chariots and swords, and fighter planes and land-mines, and machine guns and cluster bombs? They will try to prevent it if they can, and of course, they can until God's will is done.

Most ordinary people in our world live quite close to the breadline, quite close to the edge of poverty, and all its ills.

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In the frozen winter,
the innocent will always pay the price.