

SHEPHERD

It was a foul night:
Sharp, whetted cold,
Fog as thick as fleeces.
We sent the dogs demented
With our reek of sheep
As we stumbled into Bethlehem

No messengers there to show us.
They only came once;
Left us the mystery.
But they had said truth:
It was the cave.
We had argued the child indoors
On our journey.
Such a night
Seemed too raw, too harsh
For childing in straw.

Long searching it took
To find the inn
We visited by day.
The streets were different in that fog.

But we knew it was the place
When the cave loomed
And we heard that cry
Pierce the dark.

We all remembered it as light
Because of the joy
That burst us all asunder in that cave,
But in truth
It was a foul night.

EPIPHANY AT THE BAY OF BENGAL

Words won't take you very near, my love,
But somehow I would have you know
How I have been transfigured.

Rapt and speechless on the seashore
I've sat many times before,
but this was otherwise.

Time melted:
I can't place when the world split open
And I fell inside.
One moment I was, as you know me,
Vague and moony and alone.
Then suddenly I saw, and knew
What I had only read before
That all's one
And ripeness is all.

Hurt with awe
I loved and sang
And mutely cried
As the waves washed my feet in moonlight.

In that persistent moment
The whole world hung against my heart.
Sharp and beautiful,
It drove home deep inside me.
Once pierced, there's no forgetting.

Over and gone now,
But still the buried ache
Coaxes out a prayer
Not to be healed of that wound,
Never to relent from offering
The hard love that suffers into flower.

CANDLEMAS CHILD

Church hall: children's liturgy group.
The pretty girl in the Alice-band,
With *terribly cute?* printed on her top
 Above a querulous Tweetie Pie,
Holds a candle, tight in her hands.

Surfed above the tide of our discourse,
She worships the blue core of flame,
Intently wondering at the wick;
And how the yellow licks the wax away.

She's so absorbed her eyes are crossed;
One hand's fingers play a dextrous game,
Tickling the flame with delicate respect:
Wax sticks to skin; her flexing cracks the shell.

This moment is beyond words, out of time.
Rapt, she is giving me the candle, fresh;
Something Simeon and Anna could grasp.

Then she caught my eye, and shrank into
An older girl, maimed with shame and poise
And all our rancid consciousness of self

Her candle sagged; wax drained, uncelebrated.
The abandoned flame nearly set her sleeve
On fire. I had blundered on her innocence,
And mourned to think what other deaths
She must, like all of us, endure.