

Gretchen Holstein Schoff February 1992



### **high holy days**

Stand back  
On high holy days.

What is high  
Cannot be made low,  
Eroded, worn away,  
Or levelled to plateau.

What is holy  
Cannot be dumbed-down,  
Translated to the banal,  
Or fully known.

God, in His mercy,  
Refuses, when we ask  
To see behind the mask.  
The mask he wears  
Protects us from the sight  
We could not bear.

Stand back,  
In a thousand ways,  
In reverence and praise  
On high holy days.



advent

Waiting  
For good news,  
For the bell at the door,  
The unexpected gift;

Being quiet, quiet enough  
To hear footfalls, muffled,  
To catch secret messages  
And whispered words.

Keeping calm, holding steady,  
Taming the nerves,  
Half in hope,  
And half in fear.

Cock the head skyward!  
Listen, and be ready.  
One legend tells how God  
Entered Mary through the ear.

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## nativity

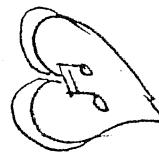
What happened on Christmas morn?  
Don't ask Joseph or a passing king.  
Ask a woman, holding her first born.  
She will tell you it began  
With an embrace, a rhythm,  
Flashes of godly fire,  
A flood of something hotly Other,  
Mysterious, never known before.

Day by day, she carried  
The secret, small and strangely burning,  
Felt it uncurling, slowly turning,  
'Til it could be hid no more.

The secret grew, declared itself,  
Kicked at the doors of her heart.  
Swept along, she lost her shape,  
Took on a magic double form.  
She felt how the secret lived upon her,  
Filled her, made her body warm.

Then toward the last hour,  
Heavy as lead, it slowed her steps.  
Immensity took hold--no turning back,  
No way but forward, into it.  
She lost herself,  
Squeezed, torn, split  
By lightning in her depths.

And then she heard a cry,  
A voice of someone new,  
Who never was before,  
And never could have been  
Without her. Such ecstasy!  
What music! What lightness!  
Glory. Alleluia.



## epiphany

Unknown roads, endless nights.  
How like the kings we seem,  
Wandering by our own lights,  
Over-dressed, full of ourselves,  
Driven by some dream  
Of the entrance we will make.

Arriving at the low door, we find  
That we must bend to enter.  
The angels have left; the singing is over.  
We discover that open-mouthed shepherds  
Have already been there,  
Carrying lambs with crooked knees.

We have brought gifts all wrong  
For such a child  
And we are late, so late, so long  
In coming. High above, only a star,  
Glowing, showing how wild,  
How improbable this birth.  
In heaven and earth, this one bright star  
To show us who He is  
And what we are.



Your clean eyes  
Burn like lasers,  
Lay us open,  
Melt away disguises,  
Layers of lies.

We are hauled before you,  
Magnificent,  
Calm, young Jew.  
We have been caught,  
Like the woman of old,  
Rouged, greedily hot  
In the midst of our whoring.

And you say nothing.  
Refusing to judge or scold,  
You write with your stick in the sands.  
You know our cruelties,  
Our secret dreads,  
And bless us with warm hands,  
Gentle on our lowered heads.

Knowing us, in our slowness,  
Our fumbling and false starts,  
You wait for shame to work  
As it must, if it be just,  
In silence, in our hearts.

Doomed and beautiful  
Quiet Jew!  
Yours is mercy true.  
In the revealing  
Comes the healing.

### palm sunday

The prophecy must be fulfilled:  
"There will come a king, a savior."  
No way to argue, no escape  
From what was expected.

No details neglected--  
All the trappings of parade  
In place--a long slow ride,  
Adoring throngs, the ticker tape  
Of palms.  
All the ways to whip up tempo--  
Trumpets' blare, hosannas, songs.

In wonderment,  
He rode the lowly beast.  
Was ever before a savior  
Like this, so reluctant,  
So willing to be least?

Head bowed, he rode,  
Pondering the oldest of urges,  
The itch to be king,  
The itch to be ruled.

Master and slave,  
Savior and saved--  
No one was fooled  
On either side.

Both sides knew  
How heroes are made,  
And how betrayed.

### lent

Let every day  
Have one lean hour,  
One hour, at least,  
In which we set aside  
Bad temper, ego, hurry,  
Money-grubbing, swollen pride,  
Gluttony and worry.

Let us keep one hour,  
Every day, year in, year out,  
In which we love the lean-ness  
Of Lent, the stripping down.  
Those hours of "Less is more,"  
Of races backward run  
Would ready us for Easter,  
Whenever it should come.



Tired, famished, with crowds on either side,  
He stood upon a hill, then gave commands  
And watched the loaves divide, the baskets fill.  
With loving touch, at Cana's celebration,  
He saw the guests with downturned cups  
And turned the water into wine.  
From town to town,  
Love ran with Him along the dusty roads.  
Outcasts were invited in  
And prodigals found open arms.  
His presence was abundance; banquets were prepared,  
Calves slain for the occasion.



### holy thursday

The last bittersweet meal,  
When everything is laid out  
Upon the table. The wandering family  
Comes home, draws close around the board.  
The settling down seems good.  
Busy all day in a dozen ways, they feel  
How the sun is sinking,  
Find comfort in the drinking  
Of the common wine, the taste of honest bread.

The host presides. In daintiness,  
The rule of love is taught.  
How often he has fed them.  
Food and drink have ever been  
His potent instrument,  
His declaration of intent.  
When all seemed lost, he threw the net  
Miraculous. A teeming silver draught was caught.  
In each outstretched hand, He saw a plea for bread;  
In every empty bowl, some craving of the soul.

Now at the table of the last great sharing,  
The host regards his company.  
Darkness falls. He moves about the room  
In sorrow, with lavish hospitality  
And perfect caring.  
And as He pours the wine and breaks the bread,  
Unearthly light begins to grow.  
By its warm glow, the simple table is transformed  
To golden sacrificial altar.  
Every thirst and hunger is disclosed,  
And treacherous, greedy Judas is exposed.

## good friday

Business as usual in the Empire--  
People had seen it before--  
Just one of the many Roman specialties  
For hanging on to power.  
Somewhere in the Empire  
At almost any hour--  
Beatings, crude atrocities,  
Hideous parades of criminals,  
Public nuisances, and thieves.

Those who thrive on such displays  
Expect a somewhat bigger crowd today.  
For the morbidly curious,  
There will be three for the price of one.  
Expect the crying women, of course,  
And the usual hangers-on,  
Pickpockets, petty gamblers, no-goods,  
Hardened soldiers, used to blood.

These crucified three, such stubborn cases,  
Each in his own fashion.  
Read it in their bodies, their faces.  
The left one, glowering, twisting,  
Resisting, unrepentant.  
The right one, wavering, lowering  
His head, finally caving in.  
The middle one, arms stretched wide,  
Offering solace to those on either side.

That odd middle one, hardest to fathom,  
So filled with passion,  
So battered, yet so undiminished.  
His glazed eyes seem fixed, his ears attuned  
To visions and voices beyond the reach of Rome.

Three hours. Dying takes so long.  
Crying out, thirst, delirium.  
The soldiers grow uneasy, wishing it were finished.  
At last, an end to violence.  
Silence.



Then comes soft rain,  
Falling on the three.  
One forever lost, one forgiven,  
One  
Whose like will never come again.

Clouds crack open;  
A veil is torn away, revealing a new thing--  
Strangest of princes, highest of thrones,  
A king above all kings,  
His Empire more than Rome.

Look up! Fall down before a different royalty,  
Crowned with tearing thorn,  
Robed in scarlet blood,  
Born in a cowshed,  
Hung on a tree.



## holy saturday

Of the time after, among his friends,  
We are left to guess at everything.

At first, the weak, sad way that morning  
Dawned without Him.  
The momentary grace of finding a place  
To lay Him, all because a friend had come  
And offered a tomb.

Then the tearing memories  
Of the bestial un-nailing, the paleness  
Of his limp form, heavy, awkward, sliding  
Slow onto the winding sheet;  
The nightmare outline of the cross,  
Empty, soaked with blood and rain.

Then, the Saturday reality,  
The dulling of sensation,  
Confusion, guilt, suspended animation,  
The flat misery of loss,  
Stupor, automatic feet,  
The closing of the doors,  
The going into hiding.

## easter

Gray light, sand, a breeze,  
Dew, like tears,  
On silver olive trees.  
Brave, bewildered women found  
The flattened burial rags  
Abandoned, empty on the ground.

Beside the cave, a guardian  
Stood sentinel-feathered, spooky,  
A magisterial thing  
With hooded eyes and folded wings.

"Where is He, where?" the women cried.  
"He is risen. He is not here,"  
Was all the sentinel replied.

How shall we find Him  
When logic is defied?  
The question nags,  
Will not be set aside  
By lame resort to myth.

We look for signs,  
Searching through the aftermath,  
His eating of the meal of fish,  
Appearance on Emmaus' path,  
The doubting finger in His side.

Still locked, the mystery.  
Resisting every key,  
It will not let us cheapen  
What happened.

Nothing in the record tells  
What flashed along the dark.  
No one saw the fiery spark  
That flamed, transformed, exploded cells  
In terrifying fission,  
Reversing slow decay.  
Yet everything depends  
Upon that hidden hour  
Of trembling transition,  
Upon the cataclysmic power  
That blew the stone away.

### **ascension**

"And God created man in His own image,  
In His image, created He him."

Then why is it

That looking in the mirror

Brings on the double twinge?

Is it that the glass gives back

The same familiar face

And shape, caught in the daily acts--

Soothing the hair, shaving, putting in place

Appearances at best, it seems,

For small deeds, small loves, and smaller dreams?

This day, the image is perfected.  
Christ stands diamond, bright upon the hill,  
Transfigured, incredibly light,  
Crystalline in purity,  
His robes flowing, streaming, white  
As pearl.

Blowing clouds and winds awhirl  
Carry Him to heaven.  
He finds the door ajar,  
As though in anxious waiting.  
He steps across the sill  
And finds warm arms,  
A velvet cushion on the chair,  
Sweet rooms filled with flowers,  
And welcome home.

Or is it that we stare in the glass and cringe,  
Taunted by all we might have been?  
Does transfiguration haunt us,  
That memory of Him, of Him alone  
Who understood the world beyond the mirror?  
Only He showed how Father and Son  
Study each other through the glass,  
Reflect each other, and at last  
Become One.



*me*  
*low*

### holy ghost

When it comes,  
We will know it,  
Not as some twittering  
Flurry of soft white  
Or mild cooing,  
Or settling on a roost.

It will come  
On wings, strong and wide  
As eagles', wheeling  
On cold winds.

And, oh, the roughness  
Of its wooing,  
The pinpoint and the dazzle  
Of its hypnotic golden eye.  
We will feel  
The bony crescent pierce,  
The feathered muscle pound.

We will be gripped by talons,  
Taken utterly--  
Supine, astonished, breathless--  
Staring at the sky.