

# Stillborn

by [Suzanne Hamilton Free](#) in the [December 13, 2005](#) issue

When I was young,  
Christmas wasn't very much—  
a balsam culled from the edge of a field,  
colored balls in a tattered box,  
durable strings of colored lights,  
glorious music in local churches,  
long, slow winter hours.

Now that I am four fifths old,  
Christmas is so very much,  
so bought and sold in Christian bulk,  
    carols slammed down secular streets—  
    bad or worse in slipshod churches.  
What sea or landfill's deep enough  
to hold the glitter-smash  
of all these broken ornaments?

. . . Who are you again?

*I was a wise man,  
literate in stars.*

—and now—?

*Ancient and uneasy in America,  
wrapped in swaddling robes,  
wheel-chaired, parked*

*beneath denatured swags  
of falsely berried evergreen,  
I miss austerity.  
I miss desert travel.*

I miss the naive Christmases  
when, four fifths young  
in my frugal father's house,  
I wrote my hopes on a battered desk  
in a shadowy hall upstairs—  
the ceiling high and cold with draft  
on dragging winter evenings  
when there was no entertainment  
but my mind unentertained,  
    yet knowledge of approaching holiday.  
Once I dreamed that I worked all night, forgetting—  
then woke in the downstairs room  
as warm as womb: the tree of light.

But most of all,  
I miss how every modest Christmas morning,  
disappointment in the presents  
faded quietly and wisely, gone by breakfast  
even for us children.

. . . but—who are you again?

*Melchior,  
come back  
in another searching time.*

Searching for what?

*The light from the star  
that just now is arriving.*

The astrologer? One of the three?  
Why here?

*Too much room at the Christian Inn.  
And who would look for a Magus here  
among this wreckage of untreasured age  
and unmined memory?  
Herod is alive and well  
and killing babes for no reason at all.  
This is the manger of 2005  
and the hay is eating the oxen.*

I do not understand you.

*What is it in this saturated, satiated  
anti-Midas age of yours  
that everything you touch,  
once gold, turns lead!  
Even the holy babe we found  
is new-born, yes! again this year,  
but four fifths dead.*

Wait! Don't wheel away—!

Listen—

Listen.

I'll tell you what I still can see  
on late-in-Advent evenings  
in my clearest memory: the true Nativity—

my faithful father's glowing tree  
reflected in the tall black window panes of living room,  
the colored lights imposed  
on bare and frozen trees outside,  
and that was it—the lead-to-golden bough,  
like Gabriel's who imposed on Mary's how.

*Like Christmas then on Christmas now.*

Believe I do reject the artificial tree  
and heart of modern Christmas “season” —

*Are there any more like you?*

Two or three in beds and halls  
and cattle stalls  
on every floor.

*Will you take back one Christmas night,  
one Christmas morning, only, for your use?  
Will you refuse cartoonish “power” pointed  
songs of praise (follow the bouncing ball)  
projected in what used to be a sacred space,  
and wait for writing by the hand on temple wall  
Can we agree?*

Joyfully!

*Will you come with me?  
Though I seem to nod in this cushioned chair  
in the cushioned space of used-to-mean,*

*let word go forth in Herod's time again:  
we are at odds with the even powers  
and will report to no one what we've seen.*

We'll secret the strains of ancient songs  
of love bereft and hope long gone,  
safe in heart, secure in mind,  
singing the news between mourn and morn:  
—for two or three of us old kings  
    he is *still* born.