

Swaddling

by [Madeleine Mysko](#) in the [December 2023](#) issue

*And she gave birth to her firstborn son
and wrapped him in bands of cloth (Luke 2:7)*

Advent, and I'm down on my knees
under the rafters, dragging out
the manger scene my mother

mailed to me in 1969, all the way out
to San Antonio, the first year
of my marriage, when I was so sick

with the crushing loneliness that came
of telling no one in the world
how really miserable I was.

Advent, and I'm taking them one
by one from inside the crumbling
cardboard stable, unwrapping them:

the chipped plaster Mary and Joseph,
the shepherds and sheep, the one cow.
Last of all, the baby in the manger:

as plump as he's represented in paintings
by Raphael, but so small I can close
my fingers over him, make him disappear.

His eyes are closed, his mouth a dot of
red paint. He's lying naked on the sculpted
straw, except for one stroke of white

across his middle—perfunctory, not like
real swaddling, but think of the loincloths
artists provide, depicting the crucifixion.

Arms outstretched, one chubby foot
fixed to the other at the ankle:
so dear, but also so exposed.