

UNTITLED CHRISTMAS POEM

Sylvia Townsend Warner

There in the village they are big with Christmas already.
The thought of it is in their bellies like a star in a cloud.
They know it near, they trudge through time's mire with a
tread
made grander, they march with the gait of kings to a feast,
they have read the signs. But though the new-born lambs
are loud
on the frozen downs, not there their lamb lies;
the shepherd's wavering lantern to their eyes
dot-dashes no hint, no horizon holds their east.

Their advent is accomplished in the grocer's window.
O Sapience, disposing those ranks of strong and of sweet!
O ruddy Adonai of crackers in tinsel,
O Root of ginger, O Key in the painted box
of fancy biscuits, opener of sardines and potted meat!
O Orient of dates and figs, O King and resort
of desiring, three-and-sixpenny bottle of port,
O looked-for Good-Things-With-Us of the hungry flocks!

Ward and gift of time, hope heavenly and hireling,
their star hangs low, courteous to torn apron and clout.
The children lick their breath from the pane to admire
the glory glazed from touch, the women sum
with diligent dry lips pattering devout
the ninepences and shillings and two and eleven threes.
The opening door tinkles every heart to its knees,
in darkness adoring the Christmas dinner to come.

And he, the old shepherd, dying in the infirmary,
if his cancer live till then, will keep Christmas too.
His bed will have holly tied to it, the cottonwool ermine
will loom and deposit an orange, amid creaking of shoes
and clatter of plates he will be made partaker in the due
spirit of Christmas. Strange, then, and distanced as a
dream
those former vigiling Christmastides will seem,
in the rustling sheepfold, tending the anxious ewes.

The Countryman, Vol. XVIII January 1939

