

Here are some of the submissions from our fifth Invite to Write inspired by the following work of Pieter Bruegel, *The Census at Bethlehem* painted in 1566:



### **Death & Taxes**

But where are the dogs?

The place is like a movie set  
before they bring in  
the rented oxen  
or like a retro family

amusement park – a way  
to play a winter's day  
like peasants. In this reality –  
the oxen steam and low  
inside drafty

buildings, eat and sleep  
with humans

and the cats  
are in there too,  
calico queens nursing

babies behind mangers,  
or hunting rats;  
one donkey  
bears Mary and Jesus,  
the other brays;

three hens and  
a rooster don't see  
the axe,  
peck at their last supper  
The crowd's hungry. But where

are the dogs? They should be yelping  
and frisky, ice  
sliding with kids, rolling tailed  
angels in snow banks. Or is it so cold  
they've whined, begged

to let stay by the fireplace,  
claimed spots close to the spit?

- E.E. Nobbs

### **Census & Sense at Bethlehem**

Old Bethlehem New Bethlehem  
Where are you now?  
In your amalgamations of life  
We entered in our high heels & coats

The phones were ringing  
The ink, the pen, the writing pad  
Census began  
As we walked the streets of Bethlehem.

Marvelous milieu at Bethlehem  
The season had begun  
The smell of the trees  
The spices for the season  
The cooking, the toasting, the drinking  
We caught the spark in their eyes  
As we shared life with the people in Bethlehem

We walked into a tree lot called Crazy Rudolph  
We took a tree home, as we were collecting  
the census in Bethlehem

The numbers began adding  
As we observed the gatherings  
There was the mystery of life  
That was roaming with us  
As we walked the streets of Bethlehem

The collective mourning  
Strange times ending  
As life is renewing  
In Bethlehem

- Lera Welch

### **Fourteen Ways of Being in Bethlehem**

A slate-blue sky clutched the sharp air on census day in Bethlehem,

Calling all to account.

2

Snow had drifted into town the night before,  
placing itself across the steep roofs and already frozen fields.

3

As if hiding, the orange-eyed orb peeps through the crackled crown of a leafless tree.

4

Caught in the grip of the iced-over river,  
a wooden ferry must wait for the hardened crust to melt.

5

Once, the shadow of a blackbird sped low over the mottled white ground.

6

Rubbed remains of aged towers cluster in the distance  
like gossipy old women sharing a fresh secret.

7

Atop tall trees, bare, black branches  
stand mute amidst the cacaphony  
that rises and falls around them.

8

Shivering against the bitter air, villagers fill their jugs from womb-like casks on tilted  
carts.

9

A crowd presses forward, stamping cold feet  
through the taxman's timbered doorway.

10

Nearby two women bend into cooking over a tiny fire, while far-off, solitary men trundle  
their dark burdens on husky shoulders and backs.

11

Festive children hop about, sliding, skating, chasing,  
and pounding each other with snowy balls.

12

How does one account for a woman on horseback, wincing and weaving a path into  
Bethlehem on this precise day?

13

Bundled in thick wool against the chattering chill,  
she arrives, bearing an inner grace.

14

Silent, the empty trees withstand the fervent chill,  
anticipating the return of a sun-filled spring.

- Karen D. Benson

I too am taking the census at Bethlehem,  
A record whimmed into necessity with the first breath in Eden.  
And like the will of  
    That Than Which Nothing Greater Can Be Conceived,  
My task, in fact, is centered everywhere—  
    and bounded no place much at all.

Man, woman, child, the soul I note  
    in geometric filigree—  
        and all a snow flake's singularity.  
I mark each (eon upon eon),  
    their tribute paid  
        in love and loss and wonderment,  
Bound to Bethlehem—and slouching on to Katmandu or the steppes of Titan,  
    the plains of Uranus or some farther outpost of salvation.  
Wherever they go thence, their souls in metaphor remain,  
    pressed onto the page of Divine memory  
        with all the distinction and silent grace of snowfall.

- Rev. Meredith Lisagor, M Div, BCC

## **The coming of the Messiah**

No one looked up that day.  
Hunched over, the whole town  
of Bethlehem striving against  
the cold. With pick axes, carts  
and blanket of stars, hidden  
in their midst a new arrival.  
On the outskirts, coming home.  
No one looked out that day.  
Little wonder, the marking of  
the census with the frenzy  
to be numbered, to belong.

- Carolina Read

## **Perky Fowls and a Quaint Cottage: Pieter Breughel's *The Census at Bethlehem***

- for Gisela

1.

Amid the hardships of the peasant winter  
they arrive: the censors lugging with them  
their burdensome paraphernalia  
of procedures and forms, the bureaucratic  
juggernaut herding folks into unruly queues.  
The unscrupulous few - foreigners perhaps  
or felons dodging taxes - mingle discreetly  
with those grappling the inclement weather.

2.

But something is amiss here:

the biblical census-takers have sauntered  
through a time-warp and disembarked  
in Holland umpteen centuries later;

and yet Mary is still on a donkey and still pregnant.

So be it.

3.

Besides, two details in the painting engross me:

Those three roosters quite unruffled  
by the shuffle and clamour of officialdom,  
knowing they fall outside the census-takers' brief,  
cocky in their tax-exempt existence.

And over there that ramshackle shack,  
none of its angles right,  
its roof slouching toward the snow.

You see, I'm not enthralled by census takers, tax  
collectors, village life, broken carts, or even snow  
but perky fowls and a quaint cottage are another matter.

- Tony Ulliyatt

In our rush  
to be named  
to be numbered  
to be substantiated  
in A Book....

we might miss the spark  
in the shed, the barn,  
the outhouse.  
A glimmer of white stone  
lying in the road,  
or the yolk of an egg  
now become: a sun.

- Judy Capurso

### **One of the Crowd**

*(after Breugel – Census at Bethlehem)*

He was right to hide them in that queue  
among peasants  
lined up to register their existence;

right to camouflage them in the leaden white  
of a harsh winter  
surrounded by villagers huddling

round fires, or trudging their loads across ice –  
shuffling like today's refugees  
fleeing from torture, death and disease,

with all they own piled on sledges or carts.  
He was right to turn  
the eye away towards children bombing

each other with snowballs or skating  
on frozen ponds where women try to sweep a path  
through freshly fallen snow.

There's the smell of fear and the squealing

sound of dying pigs.  
their blood staining the ground red as the sun

that sets on the ruined castle of a failed rebellion.  
There is no guiding star –  
no snow in Bethlehem.

- Valerie Morton

### ***Resurrection***

A Reflection on Pieter Breugel the Elder's Homage to Aesop  
in *Census at Bethlehem, 1566*

After all, there's just one art, the storyteller's,  
prose or paint just different guises, Merlins all,  
their uncanny gift a knowing of the life  
that lives beneath the surface of things.

A skater's river outside its banks,  
a frozen Red Sea for lines of men  
like dark ants carrying plunder,  
some coming, some going,  
snaking their way around a wheel,  
a lone wheel from a ruined wain,  
centered afield in pure white snow,  
like an eye, awen, the artist is present.  
An Advent scene, Mary and wreath  
its meager signs, firewood scarce,  
branchless trees, no place for bees  
atop a shack and poor cross, fallen, grave.  
That distant mass, dark garrison it is

with long lances and Dividers huddled,  
bonfire-ready Roman crucifiers  
born again in this brooding chronicle.  
The fortune-teller reappears,  
his monkey inside the tavern maybe  
with the pigs and tax men  
seeking the warm hearth, gathering coins.  
Then I see it, a treasure easy to overlook  
in snow as familiar players costumed  
now as ox and woodcutters are  
resurrected for this account,  
politically correct, to speak of suffering.  
From St. Luke and Aesop, stories joined  
by the artist's brush, the woodsaw sign  
that St. Simon the Zealot leads the ass.  
Simon hears, he points, we listen,  
the Axle-tree is speaking to the Ox.  
Holy cow, a talking tree, Luke's sign  
replies, and wow this long dead artist,  
a literary man, speaks out of time.  
Now that's a miracle of a Christmas card.

*Aesop's Fable, The Oxen and the Axle-trees:*

A heavy wagon was being dragged along a country lane by a team of oxen. The Axle-trees groaned and creaked terribly; whereupon the oxen, turning round, addressed the wheels:

“Ho there! Why do you make so much noise? We bear all the labor, and we, not you, ought to cry out.” Those who suffer most cry out the least.

Mary kept all these things in her heart. Luke 2:19.

Jesus' brother comes, full circle, first  
a martyr split in two, shattered next  
by former fans, St. Luke's vandals now,  
yet Art lives. Love won't die like that.  
Split the babe in two, boys, yet the  
old wisdom reveals the yielding one

loves most. But the Iron Duke against  
William of Orange will ride, and none escape.  
Joseph with the barefoot shepherd pay.  
The shining ones are crucified, people,  
places, things, the public deaf to lament.  
It's someone's child who dies too soon,  
like Icarus, like Jesus, like trees cut down.  
Burdened by genius life goes on, while  
somewhere, or everywhere in war,  
a mother's heart is broken, and Joseph,  
a craftsman, like Daedalus, like Nature,  
finds no use for skilled hands to ease this grief.

Quiet witness to a world still needing  
training wheels to read this skewering,  
irony, even gallows humor, is here as well  
for the Jews of Brabant have long since been  
killed or run off. Now Mary may have  
pork and brandy for Hanukkah, with luck.  
There's still no room at the inn, and this  
resurrection will take a century of birthpain.  
It was no Year of Miracles after all.

Aesop says in *The Oak and the Woodcutters*:

The Woodcutter cut down a Mountain Oak and split it in pieces, making wedges of its own branches for dividing the trunk. The Oak said with a sigh, "I do not care about the blows of the axe aimed at my roots, but I do grieve at being torn in pieces by these wedges made from my own branches." Misfortunes springing from ourselves are the hardest to bear.

Wisdom, changeless, the Joiner,  
with us since the beginning, when  
even then trees had the last word  
and life resurrected itself from ashes.

**There's always hope.  
The beauty of the world whispers this.**

**- Kathryn Devereaux**