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:

![Image of Pieter Bruegel's *The Census at Bethlehem*](image)

**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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How does one account for a woman on horseback, wincing and weaving a path into Bethlehem on this precise day?
Bundled in thick wool against the chattering chill,
she arrives, bearing an inner grace.

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.
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,
it's 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 Ullyatt

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

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**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