

Wyatt Prunty

A Child's Christmas in Georgia, 1953

Marching through Georgia to bed, he stopped, listened,
And heard, "While shepherds washed their socks by night."
Later, he sang the same skewed line off key,
And his parents howled; until getting it wrong,
He decided, beat getting it right.

But Christmas Eve they read about killing
The first-born, fleeing the land, and returning
By another country, till he couldn't sleep
And had to check so slipped from bed to stare
The darkened height by which the wise men steered.

Downstairs there were his mother's stacks of albums
And, mantle-high, her unblinking gallery
Of gold-framed graybeards gazing, and matriarchs
In black, scowling the generations back
Into place; and then there were the others,

His infant older brother who never
Came home, two cousins lost in war, an uncle
Who captained his ship over the flat world's edge,
And one fleece-lined pilot lost years now inside
The stilled weather of a relative's box camera.

And then there were the lines he'd heard in church,
"Pray that your flight may not be in winter,"
So that was how the pilot disappeared?
And "Woe to the pregnant and nursing," so
That explained his brother, or their mother?

There was one thing he knew by heart by now:
Rubella cooked, cleaned, and scolded her way

Through the house tuning the news and talking back,
Though she didn't vote, and said her baby
Died because he wouldn't come out in Georgia.

Still standing there and staring up, he pressed
His face till the cold glass fogged and hurt his nose,
Though there was only the street light yellowing
The side yard and his father's dormant garden
And the Talmadge's coiled drive and empty house.

So what were they singing about, the records
And radio? And why all these presents
When over drinks his parents grieved those missing?
What was given if you had to go away
And wound up framed like a silent question?

In the morning Rubella would light the stove;
The paper boy would whistle up Milledge,
Tossing the new day high over one hedge
Into another by the porch for parents
Who ignored their food and read to themselves.

So, still at the window, he studied the sky,
Figuring Pontius Pilate flew for Delta
And that the two parts to the Bible were
The Old and New Estimates, which like Christmas
You read out of the names of those missing.