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Anno Domini

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ANNO DOMINI

The provinces are celebrating Christmas.
The Governor-general's mansion is bedecked
with mistletoe, torches smoke by the entrance.
In the lanes the people press and lark around.
A merry, idle, dirty, boisterous
throng crowds in the rear of the mansion.

The Governor-general is ill. He lies
on a couch, wrapped in a shawl from Alkazar
where he once served, and his thoughts turn
on his wife and on his secretary
receiving guests downstairs in the hall.
He is not really jealous. At this moment

it's more important to him to retire
into his shell of illness, dreams, the deferment of
his transfer to the capital. And since
he knows that freedom is not needed
by the crowd at all to make a public holiday—
for this same reason he allows

even his wife to be unfaithful. What would
he think of if ennui attacks
did not plague him? If he loved?
A chilly tremor runs through his shoulders,
he chases these alarming thoughts away.
. . . In the hall the merrymaking subsides,

but does not end. Muddled with drink
the leaders of the tribes stare glassily
into a distance now devoid of enemies.
Their teeth, expressive of their rage,
set in a smile that's like a wheel
held fast by brakes—and a servant

furnishes them with food. In his sleep
a merchant cries out. Snatches of song are heard.
The Governor-general's wife and secretary
slip out into the garden. And on the wall
the imperial eagle, like a bat, stares down,
having gorged on the Governor-general's liver.

And I, a writer who has seen the world,
who has crossed the equator on an ass,
look out of the window at the sleeping hills
and think about the identity of our woes:
his that the Emperor will not see him, mine
that my son and Cynthia will not . . . And we,

we here shall perish. Arrogance will not raise
our bitter fate to the level of proof
that we are made in the Creator's image.
The grave will render all alike.
So, if only in our lifetime, let us be various!
For what reason should we rush from the mansion,

we cannot judge our homeland. The sword of justice
will stick fast in our personal disgrace:
the heirs, the power, are in foreign hands . . .
How good that vessels are not sailing!
How good that the sea is freezing!
How good that the birds in the clouds

are too frail for such cumbrous frames!
For that, nobody is to blame.
But perhaps our weights will be
proportionate exactly to their voices.
Therefore, let them fly to our homeland.
Therefore, let them yell out to us.

My country . . . foreign gentlemen,
visiting Cynthia, are leaning
over the crib like latter-day magi.
The infant slumbers. A star glimmers
like a coal under a cold font.
And the visitors, not touching his head,

replace the halo by an aureole of lies,
and the Immaculate Conception by gossip,
by the passing over of the father in silence . . .
The mansion empties. The lights on each floor die.
First one, then another. Finally, the last.
And only two windows in the whole palace

are alight: mine, where, with my back to the torchlight,
I watch the moon's disk glide
over the sparsely growing trees, and see
Cynthia, the snow; the Governor-general's, where
he struggles silently all night with his illness,
and keeps the fire in, to make out his enemy.

The enemy withdraws. The faint light of day
barely breaking in the world's East,
creeps through the window, straining
to see what is happening within,
and, coming across the remnants of the feast,
falters. But continues on its way.

(January 1968)

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