

## Leftovers

1996

Thanksgiving has a habit of running out on us. Yes, there are the obligatory Norman Rockwell scenes, crowded with relatives, cranberry sauce, and after-dinner naps, that seem to repeat themselves year after year in dyspeptic spasms throughout the land.

But even the most horrific travel narrative soon begins to lose its frantic shape, dissolving eventually alongside replays of the Dallas Cowboys, Pilgrim hats, and Aunt Dorothy's relentless heartburn. Already by the morning after, Thanksgiving retreats before the Christmas rush. Its Kodak moments fade into forgettable stereotypes.

There is a way, however, to keep yesterday from vanishing completely: simply notice the leftovers. I'm not referring to the debris of turkey and pie. But to the empty spaces created by life's musical chairs.

I learned this early as a boy. Instead of sleeping off the feast I would creep down the stairs and listen through the banister to the muted conversation of my parents and grandmother. Nothing terribly important (like Christmas presents) was ever mentioned.

Except one year, my mother heard a creak and found me on the stairs. That night I had my first leftover sandwich and a cup of tea. That night I entered an enormous world and heard the stories of my ancestors. That night I found that memory leaves a lasting taste.

## Ghost stories

1996

For Christians the days after Christmas are terror-filled. The feast of St. Stephen conjures up a frenzied public stoning, while the memory of Thomas à Becket's bloody murder in the cathedral falls four days after angelic strains of peace on earth.

If you think about it, Dickens may well have captured the spirit of the season's best, since a number of his Christmas tales are mobbed with ghosts. For every Christmas candle there is a lurking shadow, for every glimmer of light, a numbing darkness.

But the most haunting memory of all is that of the innocents. As the legend goes, astrologers from the east unwittingly step on the royal toes of King Herod, alerting him to the possibility of a pretender to his throne. Finding himself duped by those

foreigners, Herod issues a death warrant for all males two years and younger within the vicinity of Bethlehem.

Scholars dryly note that this story and the accompanying flight into Egypt recapitulate both the Exodus and the Babylonian Exile of the people of Israel. But how do you respond to the trembling note of Rachel crying for her children, who are no more?

The only answer for me is another story of stunned innocence. This was told to me by a survivor. One day an old Jew emerging from a boxcar saw his granddaughter being selected for death. Sensing disaster he begged the officer in charge to take him instead. The officer smiled cruelly, "Alright, if you can tell which of my eyes is real, I'll let you take her place." The old man stared into the officer's unmoving eyes and finally declared, "The left one." Upon being asked how he detected this, the old man said, "because the other one looked human."

The old man was led to his death, and, some days later, his granddaughter, reprieved as a plaything, met the same fate.

The horror story of the innocents did not end two thousand years ago, it still stalks our streets. And even as we joyously sing, "What child is this?" Rachel will not be consoled.

## Two Christmas carols

1997

In the spirit of the season, here are two drive time carols:

The theologian and the class conspire  
with shepherds tending flock about the text  
that gives a strange democracy to knees.  
More sudden than a star, the mind ignites,  
while angels sing the footnotes to the lines,  
a thrill to thought, an end to argument,  
a fugal final to the firmament,  
omega couched within the alpha bed.  
Love's tent is set to tease the intellect.  
For, weaving in and out, an innocence  
draws on the untold tapestry of thought,  
a frankincense forgotten by the brain,  
a many-colored melody to clothe  
the heart in nothing other than a song.

The second:

Child star, you only had a one night stand,  
a vaudeville of the lion and the lamb,  
and then the show was on the road again.  
Augustus booked you down at Bethlehem.  
The cast was filled with extras, summer stock,  
a chorus line of kicking ancestors,  
while angels handled the publicity.  
Nostalgia crowds the shepherds in the act  
and plays my heart in that old pantomime.  
The stage (“If only we were young again”)  
is set beyond my orchestrating mind  
where nothing stops the show from going on,  
from flesh’s bringing down your Father’s house—  
O silent entertainment, unsung star!

## **Incense of the season**

2000

Every now and again, our electronic culture breaks down. The static buzz and neon glare are invaded by nothing more than a familiar smell.

Particularly at this time of year when the earth begins to tilt us into the dark, we slow down, take walks, and kick wildly at leaves. That is where the intrusion often occurs. The earthy incense of the season entices us.

Most of the time we are dominated by the visual. Sounds also can occupy us, penetrating to the bone, leaving us fixed upon a word.

But a smell surrounds us, coming in like fog, catching us off-guard, sometimes transporting us through our bodies into a realm beyond ourselves.

When I was young the good and not so good sisters spoke movingly about the odor of sanctity. But what does a fifth-grader know except the leather scent of a baseball glove and the sweet cut of grass?

Actually I did know another smell. Sometimes when I pick up the scent of freshly baked bread, the memory of riding on an early morning train comes back. As the train turns a corner on the trestle tracks, the car is filled with the smell of bread fresh from the bakery below. Through the dreadful shrieks of those turning