

Breath

At Treasures from Sinai,
an eleventh-century icon:
angels and shepherds surrounding
the Christchild and animals
in dumb adoration.

Seeing a small boy stare intently,
I say, "See—the donkey is looking at Jesus."
He examines the painting more closely, then
turns to his father, an Orthodox priest
in a long black cassock, who says,
"When Jesus was born all creation gave him gifts:
heaven gave him stars,
the earth gave him straw,
and all the animals gave him breath."

Lying in the manger, Jesus feels the moist breath, warm
as the light on his face, breathes in the fragrance
of wheat and barley, redolence he will remember
when he multiplies the loaves and when the Devil
tempts stones into bread.

On the many nights when he has no place,
he lies down with the animals, escaping
into sleep on new-cut hay.

Later, riding into Jerusalem over carpets of straw and flowers,
of palms and tree branches, the hosannas ringing, he recalls
from deepest memory,
enfolded in his mother's love,
those first aromas and the nascent friendship of beasts.

As the throngs sing out his name,
he looks toward the great city with its white walls
and golden domes. On the slow path down
the Mount of Olives, he notices for the first time
the black furred cross on the donkey's back, lifts his eyes
to the dark hills beyond, and,
taking a deep breath,
descends.

