

## Homeless in Paradise—Foreword:

### *An Angel Singing*

Sean Arthur Joyce

*„the heavenly sound of her hallelujahs  
having awakened their hearts  
to the terrible truth  
before them*

*of one not one of them.*

—Jennifer Lount-Taylor, *An Angel Singing*

There's an angel singing on the streets, holding out her cup for spare change. She's the siren luring men and women to their doom. She's the hand that launched a thousand starships. The man or woman worth billions. Or nothing. A butterfly, hovering on a wing and a prayer. A soul broken on the wheel of the machine we set in motion. She is all of us.

She's Mary Beth Vandermueulen's anonymous homeless woman huddled for warmth by the burning barrel. Her life altered forever in one stroke of fate on a highway that wiped out her family. Yet amongst other homeless people, she is unexceptional. "*My companions tell stories / only the details differ.*" For the great majority of middle class who live paycheque to paycheque, "*it's not your fault, / you just got behind on your bills,*" young Jessica Francisco explains. It can land any one of us in the cold in one mighty, unexpected stroke.

And she is Jennifer Lount-Taylor's elderly, broken down opera star, eaten away by a lifetime of pain and addiction until only a shadow of her former mightiness remains. Yet still able to summon the strength to sing so powerfully "*she awakened their hearts / to the terrible truth / before them.*" She is even Owen Suppes' Squinty Pete in the dank basement laundry of the Kerr block, "*all welfared up / with no rent to pay.*" A young man already having his life potential squinted into the crippling mental strain of poverty, "*smiling big as we pour / him to the fringes...*"

The problem is, we can't see her. Can't see the angel. Can't see the incredible miracle we are. Why not? Because we invented a pyramid system of economics that *depends* on us not seeing. A system based on people preying upon one another. For you to be filthy rich, someone else must be filthy poor.

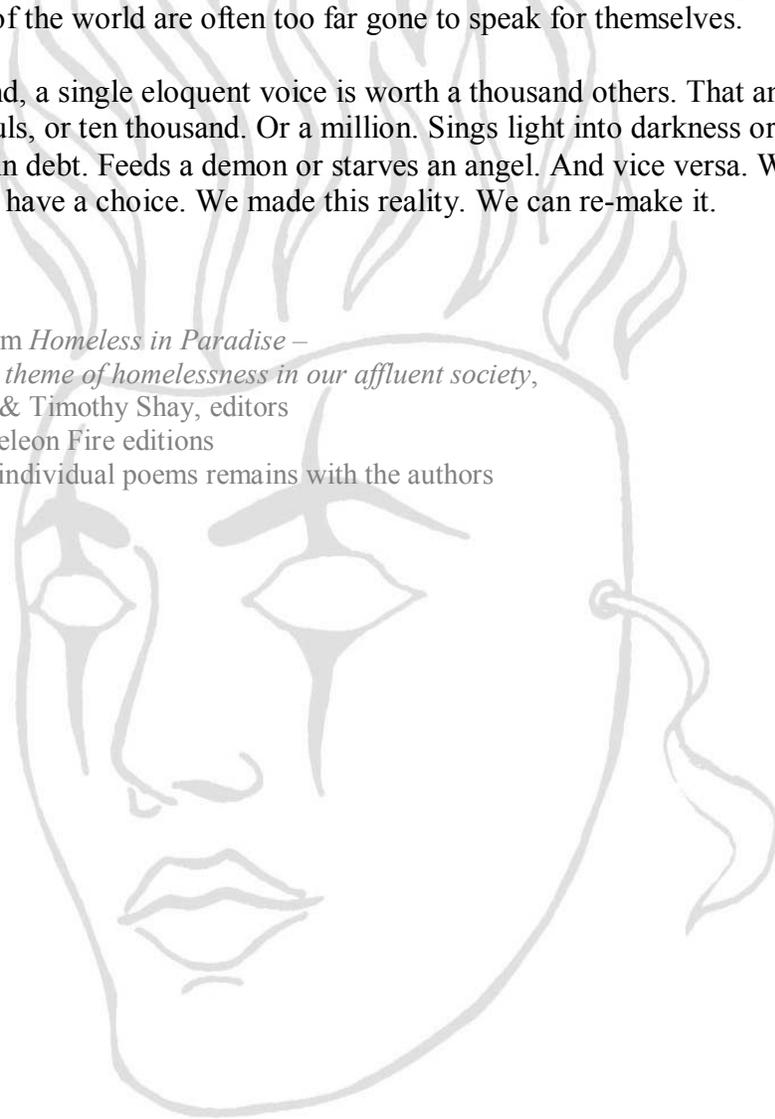
How did we get sucked into such a state? As my friend Dan Nicholson so eloquently puts it, we elevated greed to a virtue. The sleazy financier Gordon Gecko in the film *Wall Street*—originally a satirical figure—has become an ideal to emulate. Already at 18, Celina Silva sees right through the game: "*Stuck inside society / everything's about money.*" Even for the 'haves', many of their children feel stuck, not liberated. Unable—

as Silva tells us—“*to explore our creativity... it all has a price tag.*” Some price tag. A dangerous, self-destructive experiment in social engineering that is toxic to both people and the planet.

The only way to maintain the pyramid is to make a tacit agreement that we will step over the bodies. And pretend no one notices. It’s a societal schism both profoundly complex and utterly simple. It creates both the problem and the solution *and* profits handsomely from both. Kate Powell narrows it down for us: “*You are inside / I am outside.*” There’s an irony in this anthology: most of the poems are written by those comfortably inside, not *outside*, in the wasteland of homelessness. On one hand, this is positive, hopeful: it means there are many inside who *do* care. On the other, it’s sadly symptomatic of the fact that the ‘haves’ have taken away even the voices of the ‘have nots’. The Squinty Petes and Sickly Sals of the world are often too far gone to speak for themselves.

But in the end, a single eloquent voice is worth a thousand others. That angel sings for a thousand souls, or ten thousand. Or a million. Sings light into darkness or plunges the soul deeper in debt. Feeds a demon or starves an angel. And vice versa. With every step we take. We have a choice. We made this reality. We can re-make it.

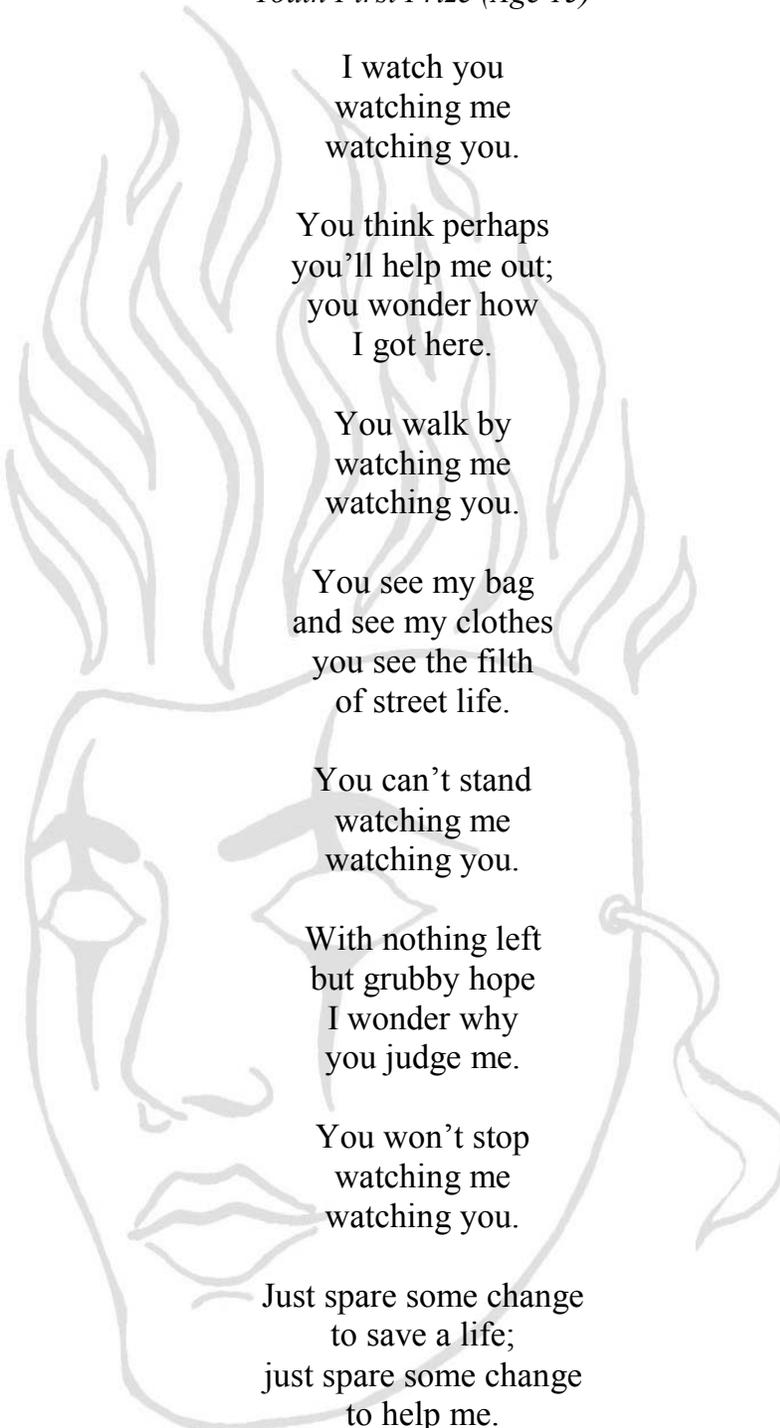
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Arthur Joyce & Timothy Shay, editors  
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## Homeless in Paradise

Nicole Brewer

*Youth First Prize (Age 15)*



I watch you  
watching me  
watching you.

You think perhaps  
you'll help me out;  
you wonder how  
I got here.

You walk by  
watching me  
watching you.

You see my bag  
and see my clothes  
you see the filth  
of street life.

You can't stand  
watching me  
watching you.

With nothing left  
but grubby hope  
I wonder why  
you judge me.

You won't stop  
watching me  
watching you.

Just spare some change  
to save a life;  
just spare some change  
to help me.

Standing there  
watching me  
watching you.

You couldn't know  
what it's like to be me.  
You'll never see  
how it is to be me.

Because as you sit in your recliner  
And watch your flatscreen TV  
I'm here losing hope every day  
As people like you walk by.

You judge me, you label me.  
You don't know my story  
The same as I don't know yours.  
You live in your paradise

And whine about your food  
or the colour of your sheets.  
I'm here, asking for a penny,  
Hoping—maybe, someone will help me.

So take a second.  
So think a minute.  
So lend a hand.

I watch you  
watching me  
watching you.

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## **An Angel Singing**

**Jennifer Lount-Taylor**

*Adult First Prize*

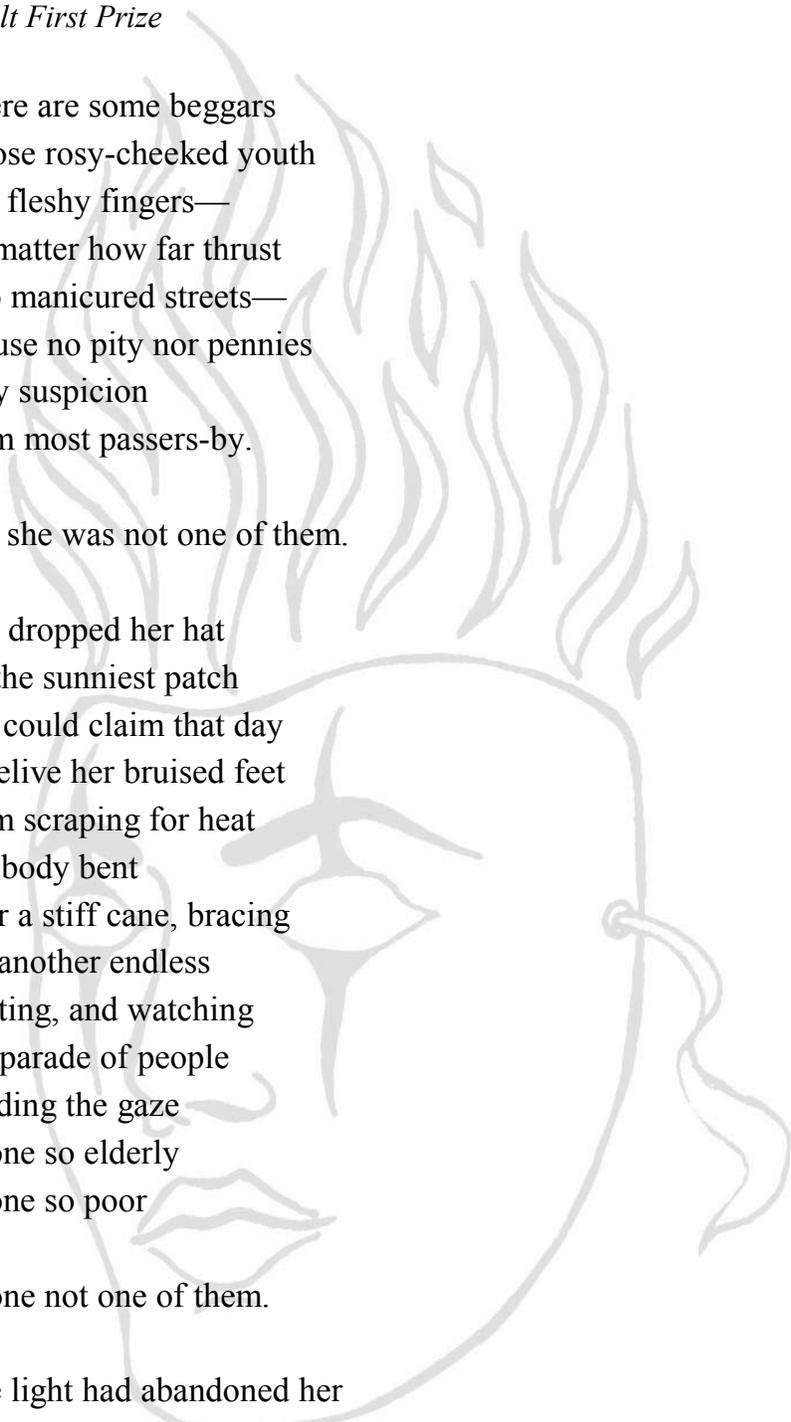
There are some beggars  
whose rosy-cheeked youth  
and fleshy fingers—  
no matter how far thrust  
into manicured streets—  
arouse no pity nor pennies  
only suspicion  
from most passers-by.

But she was not one of them.

She dropped her hat  
on the sunniest patch  
she could claim that day  
to relive her bruised feet  
from scraping for heat  
her body bent  
over a stiff cane, bracing  
for another endless  
waiting, and watching  
the parade of people  
evading the gaze  
of one so elderly  
of one so poor

of one not one of them.

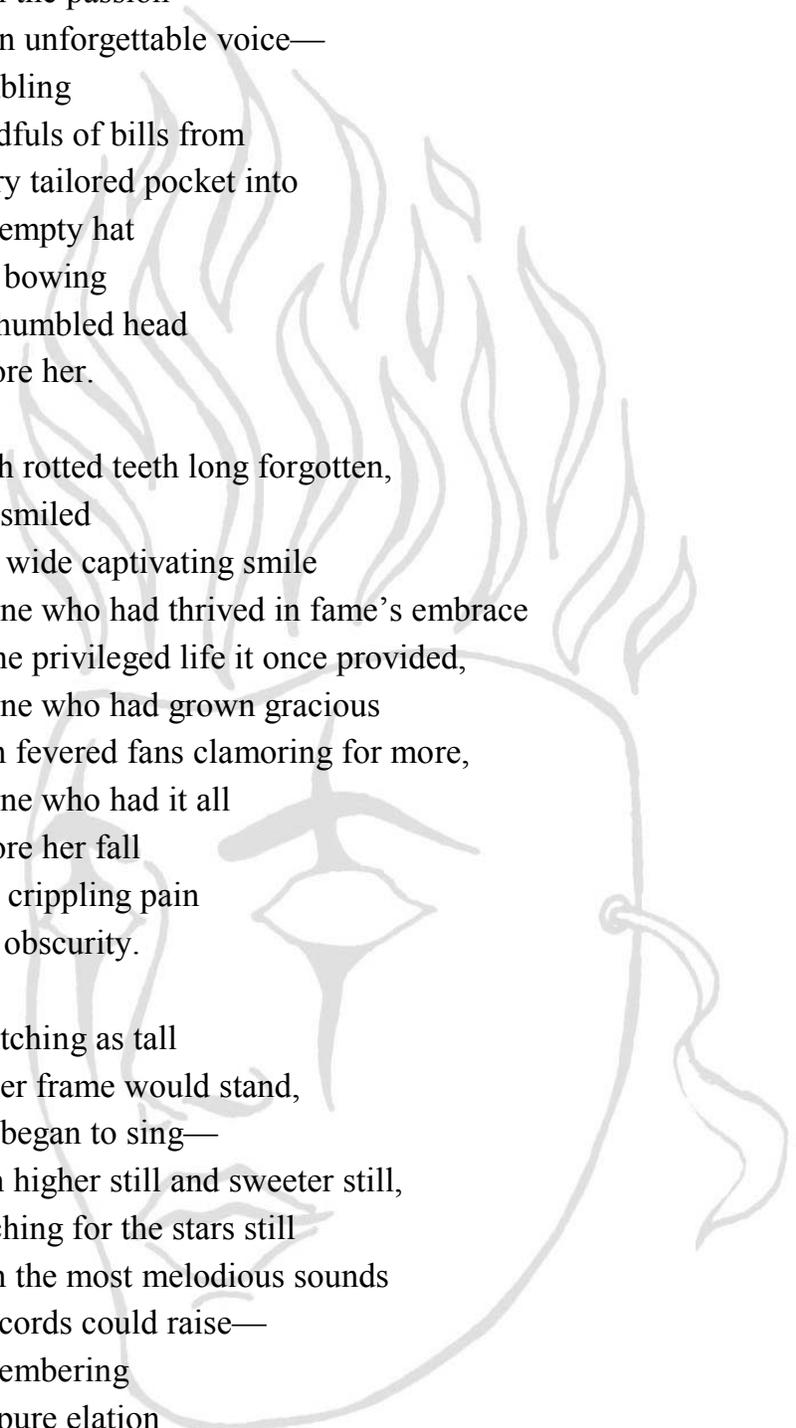
The light had abandoned her  
to the chilled shadows of dusk  
when a man stopped—  
speechless



before this familiar face  
that once emblazoned countless stages  
with the passion  
of an unforgettable voice—  
fumbling  
handfuls of bills from  
every tailored pocket into  
her empty hat  
and bowing  
his humbled head  
before her.

With rotted teeth long forgotten,  
she smiled  
that wide captivating smile  
of one who had thrived in fame's embrace  
in the privileged life it once provided,  
of one who had grown gracious  
with fevered fans clamoring for more,  
of one who had it all  
before her fall  
into crippling pain  
and obscurity.

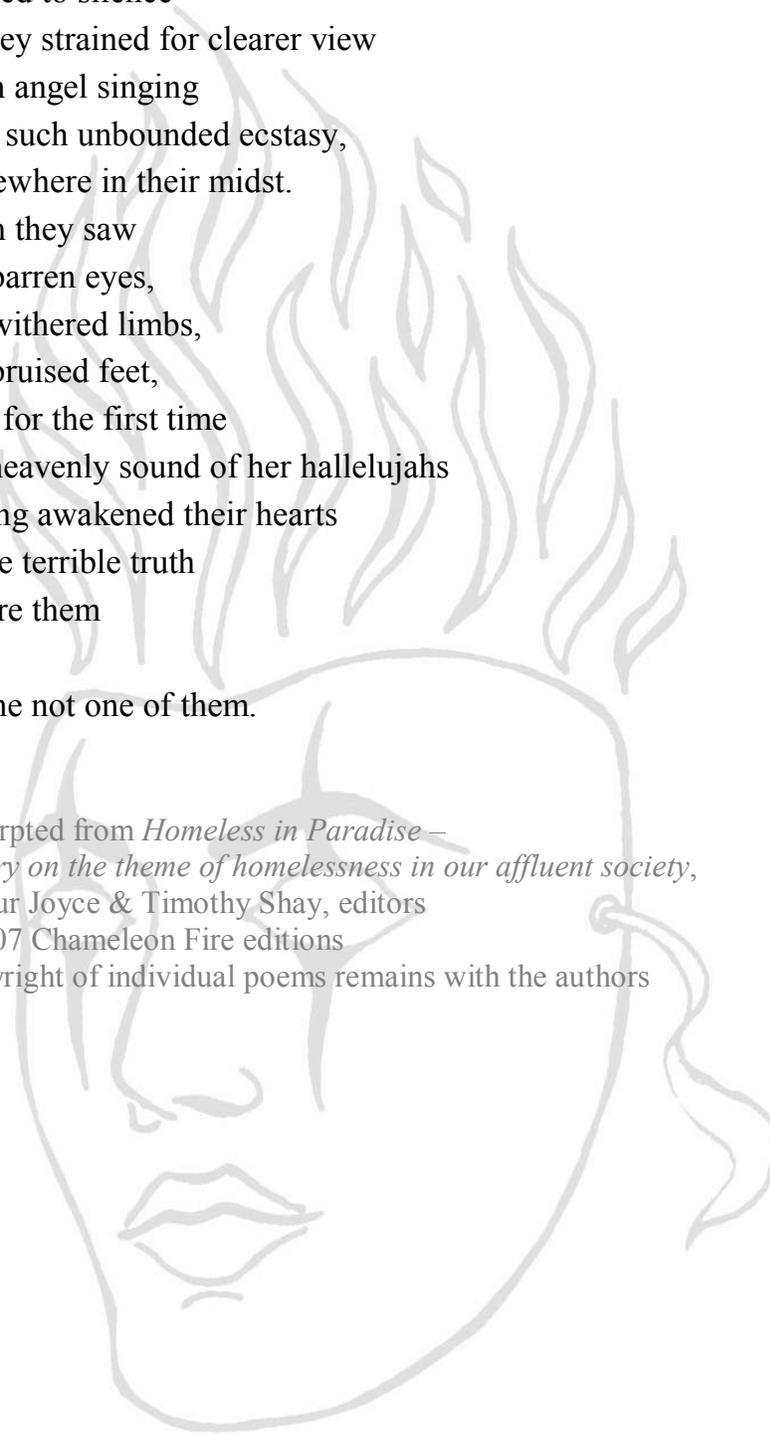
Stretching as tall  
as her frame would stand,  
she began to sing—  
then higher still and sweeter still,  
reaching for the stars still  
with the most melodious sounds  
her cords could raise—  
remembering  
the pure elation  
the liberation  
of a glorious past,  
momentarily reborn.



The crowd  
slowed to silence  
as they strained for clearer view  
of an angel singing  
with such unbounded ecstasy,  
somewhere in their midst.  
Then they saw  
her barren eyes,  
her withered limbs,  
her bruised feet,  
as if for the first time  
the heavenly sound of her hallelujahs  
having awakened their hearts  
to the terrible truth  
before them

of one not one of them.

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## **The Christmas Party**

**Duncan Grady**

*Adult Second Prize*

I went to a Christmas party last night.  
Not something I would normally do,  
but thinking I might see old friends  
off I went without a clue  
of what surprises lay in waiting.

I went to a Christmas party last night.  
The party was across the city.  
Freeways jammed with rush hour workers  
wanting to be anywhere but here.  
Late holiday shoppers wondering why  
they need to buy a gift for someone they barely know.  
And multiple accidents, sirens in the background, even  
as the radio announcer faked a sad voice while stating the obvious  
convinced me to drive the crosstown route through a maze  
of neighbourhoods.

I went to a Christmas party last night.  
Slowing for a red light, five children approach in -2 degree weather.  
No hats, no gloves, two coats among them advertising Nike,  
five pairs of ripped sneakers squeak over the snow.  
One has frozen snot between nose and lip, another's eyes are wide  
with the same fright gripping my stomach in a warm, idling car.  
The oldest, speaking through swollen lips, bruised cheek and forehead  
Says, "*Hey man, these are my brothers and sister. Man,  
we need some money.*"  
The light changes and I accelerate fast to escape the spectacle  
of these ghosts.  
The rear view shows the oldest screaming in my direction  
as the only girl child sits in the middle of the street and cries.

I went to a Christmas party last night.  
One neighbourhood to go, my breath comes more easily.  
In this brief tour I have seen starving children, freezing whores,

broken windows, dealers selling, users using, men fighting  
and police wrestling armed criminals to the frozen ground.  
No partridges, golden geese with golden eggs or maids milking  
in this Christmas scene.

I went to a Christmas party last night.  
I round a corner and my GPS equipped auto says in a mechanical  
female voice that I am 2.1 miles away from my destination.  
I think I hear myself yell, “Shit” as foot stomps brake, steering wheel  
adjusts for sliding and front tires scrape against a curb.  
Didn’t I see someone falling off this curb? Hands appear on the hood  
as I peer down a street lit grey with dirty lights.  
Now I see a head, arms pushing up, now a chest and waist.  
Wobbling, frozen blood stuck to a head with dazed, red eyes,  
his nose drops blood down a tattered shirt.  
His words slur so much I can hardly make them out  
but I’m sure I hear “drunk”, “help”, “call” and “hospital”.  
I am driving away leaving him kneeling on the street  
as the mechanical female voice says I am 1.5 miles from my destination.

I went to a Christmas party last night.  
Drinking my third brandy and still too shaken to speak, I wake up  
and notice where I am. I feel warm rooms, hear music,  
see men and women clothed in the finest fashion, and walk  
among three levels of home built for three people and a dog.  
I follow the multiple scents of food into a dining room  
capable of seating 30 comfortably. My eyes fall on table after table  
of every imaginable appetizer. Distantly I hear someone  
Complain about not enough pâté.

I went to a Christmas party last night.  
Suddenly, like Groundhog Day, I am re-living the drive.  
My head spins, I lose my balance, and my stomach constricts  
as I barely make it to the closest bathroom and puke.  
Some laugh, some turn away, some mumble about drunks  
who can’t hold their booze as others simply glare at the sweating,  
unkempt man stumbling for the door.

I went to a Christmas party last night.

Again, suddenly awake, tears are falling from my chin onto my shirt.  
I see the broken face of the man whose blood falls on his shirt.  
Once, when I was a child, I remember complaining that my father  
wouldn't tell me what the big box under the tree with my name on it was.  
My grandmother—perhaps the first woman that I ever loved—said,  
*"Sometimes the best gifts at Christmas are surprises."*  
Once again, her wisdom proved her right.

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