

V.B. Price

## FIVE

## COMPLICITIES

Christmas 1999

*for my mother, Edith Barrett Price*

I.

She felt like a great, exotic, dry leaf in my arms.  
I carried her up our steep back steps on the last Christmas day of her life.  
Homesick again, sleet in my bones, my mother's been dead for twenty two years.  
I savor her life, but I don't feel safe, until  
she sets the softest trap to find me  
in a place inside me I'd forgotten was still there,  
a place where the past is never over and the future never runs out.  
I see her, but I cannot reach her. I hurry slowly  
to catch up with her smile  
down in the warmest ring of my heart  
where I open out onto the sky.

And there I feel her all around me in the night, her fathomless,  
intimate cool hand on my brow, her smile  
an epiphany of kind overlooking,  
of vast forgiving beyond any ending.  
Sipping champaign, kissing dark chocolates,  
a Cheshire moon in winter skies, she hands me one  
nylon stocking  
drooping with candies, toy soldiers,  
dreams of all kinds and surprises,  
and welcomes me into her boudoir of stars, no brighter  
than her eyes, an accomplice again  
in homely joys, comfortably far and wise.

## II.

What a Christmas it would be  
if, as we fight off dying down the road,  
with all our mysterious affections still in place,  
we unaccountably succumb to feeling

quite gleefully safe, relieved, with a dire joy,  
of all our worries, panics, paranoias,  
of grim world history itself,  
its infinite morgue of horrors,

relieved of the weight of everything,  
the whole cosmos vanishing  
like a film across our eyes,  
everything, for us, all over. Gone.

Is that the same wild peace you felt  
the morning you surprised us with your leaving?  
Did you suddenly fall in love with your death,  
was it like the scent of roses is to lovers,

or the sight of waists with red ribbons draped might be,  
an inspiration to surrender up  
the false safety of despair,  
the voodoo of your nihilistic highs,

to live at last just edgewise for an instant more,  
slipping through to happiness  
under cover of darkness,  
an accomplice in the sweet escape?

## III.

Our lives are not problems we cannot solve.  
Even making peace with the dread  
tangles of child life, and all its sly oppressions,  
is a craft to be learned. I remember my mother's  
first frown at me when I wailed at tipping over  
a cup of milk when I was five  
and the redemption of her smile  
and her advice: "Don't cry over spilt milk,"  
she said, dropping a whole bottle of it  
on the floor with a crashing splat.  
What was that  
miracle all about?

Is it that our friendliness with our flaws,  
our unexpected patterns, our mad surprises,  
teach us that love's complicity  
is everything we want with the night,  
with the hundred billion stars in the Milky Way,  
with the forces that conceived us  
in the endless blossoming of light?  
We want to be as intimate  
with the source of all our wonder,  
as babbling toddlers are  
bashfully stunned by being comprehended  
when the source of all their pleasure

gives them what they want  
because they asked for it.

IV.

When you died, it hurt so bad  
the space you left became my anesthetic.  
All that room's still left for you  
and no one but you will know it.  
I won't call it sobering. But it did  
cause a mortal thrill in me  
to think this Christmas, this most  
intimate and simple fun, could be my last,  
or one of the last four or five that I have,  
not that I have an intuition that it will,  
or any impending sense,

it's just that the math is working out that way.  
These days are all more and more  
like a intimate, dreamy warmth  
too sweet to ever end  
ending right before my eyes.  
That's why time's the great authority on joy;  
and why we measure it.  
Death caught you so fast.  
No one wants to be a spendthrift  
and forget to notice  
the ride is always about to end.

V.

*For Lou Andreas-Salomé*

I've had this strange and dangerous urge  
to confess my desire  
to rehabilitate ol' St. Nick.

So I confess it.  
Just like the Christ baby is  
all babies,

the infant spirit of the Golden Rule,  
of you equal me and I equal you,  
and not the infant Hitler of the Inquisition,

the sneering clerk inspecting all  
the documents of the naughty and nice,  
ol' St. Nick is not

the greedy giver of stock tics  
in Profits R Us, stuffing our stockings  
till our credit cards burst

with famine and the wealth of nations.  
He's just a symbol for  
everything friendly in our lives,

the happy comforter, the giver of surprises,  
the imp of satisfaction and all hopes met,  
the spirit of daddy warmth,

bay rum, starched shirts, and big hands  
in the small of your back  
soothing all distress

– an imp, however, nonetheless.  
Santa's not a god.  
Even our culture's happiest thought

couldn't make such sweet  
justice, such friendly  
pleasure the holy gifts they surely are.