

Priest hole

This was the last refuge: a hinged slab
tilted over a passage in the floor
leading to the dark of the human heart
in the thickness of a stone wall.

A desperate man once hid here,
putting the screw to his thoughts,
immured and breathless, helpless,
with no voice but that of prayer.

Unable to move, resigned
to stillness and to keep faith,
he waited in the stagnant air.
His church shrank to this cell.

Then in that unquiet silence
came the whispers of doubts,
the flame of an inquisitor's eye,
a sudden draught in the floor.

Imagine him, gripping a crucifix,
hearing the murmurs and calls
of voices of anger and orders,
the unsheathing of a sword,

and straining for every sound
like a child within the womb
with no escape. Just stillness
on the verge of the world.

Even these four centuries later,
the stones seem burnt to the core
with that defiance. It is a legacy
not of the man but of his soul.

For this, his final refuge,
enshrines our utmost fear:
if a man's faith is his enemy
there is no refuge anywhere.

Greatness

The great crustacean lord,
the king of all king prawns –

the godlike Caesar to whom bowed down
the hundred-billion-strong Dendrobranchiatan Empire –

at whose merest flagellum wave
billions of bulging eyes crossed oceans,

whose armoured thorax caused trillions of eggs
to be dropped by the pinkest ladies of his court,

today was eaten by my ten year-old son.
On brown bread. Reluctantly.

31st December 1999

Pick a year, any year,
and chances are that I cannot remember
where I was on New Year's Eve
except this year. I was in the square
with my family in the crowd,
waiting for the close of the calendar.

I have no doubt that this memory will last.
It is not a matter of what happened
but the collective embrace in coming
to a corner of time. With an hour to go
I woke my son and carried him out
yawning in his nightclothes.
Raining as it was –
one year old as he was –
it was his night most of all.
One day he will be asked
were you there? as if by being born
he is a witness to another world
called 'Long Ago'. Fifty years hence
all dates earlier than this will seem,
by definition, antique,
and nothing else will have the ring of age.
The houses will seem older,
the eighteenth-century pub will seem older;
even school children will seem venerable
like those in dated- football photographs
from the 1890s.

And what did it all amount to at the very
end of the day? Coats and champagne,
scarves, fireworks, and all eyes fixed
on the man on the stage.
Then a crackle on the radio,
and the bronze chimes of history
and nothing else but a great listening
to the most unstoppable heart