

Ruth Padel
 Mother Of Pearl

Come in, signor. Quickly. Let me show you round.
 Bend, please – the gate is four foot three.

We call it The Door of Humility.
 You can interpret this in many ways. Some say
 this little entry, such a mighty structure,

speaks to us today of hope, of other bad times
 the church survived. So – take your breath.

We're safe now, friend. Touch the inside wall
 and you have at your fingers' end
 the start of the Church Herself. The basilica you see
 was built by Emperor Justinian, sixth century AD.

But under is church of Constantine – consecrated in 325
 to Maria Theotokos. We honour Mary-Giving-Birth-
 to-God. Not the Madonna with her Child
 though her lily's our native flower. You're free, monsieur.
 You can go to limesinks of the north and find
 it blooming now. White hands of leathery velvet. Moony, wild.

Stand here, in nave, I'll lift a hatch. There – see caramel
 snakeskin glimmer, lower floor? That's mosaic, cut
 for Constantine in 324. Like carpet, isn't it? Our Church
 is built on that. Mortar shells last week broke many... here –
 but these tesserae, wine-dark waves in parallel,
 amber geometries of seventeen hundred years, survive.

The church above is fortified like praying heart.
 Like castle, this is true. Seigneur, it had to be. You see
 what's happening now. Asylum is safe place (step here,
 round citizens) but Justinian knew asylum's danger, too.
 He built high walls round Bethlehem so church
 could have wide doors. See the outline, triple-arched?

(Sorry the smell. Guns won't be breaking through.)
 Welcoming, wouldn't they be – impressive, those big
 big doors? They were blocked in, smoodged
 up in Ottoman years so Turkish giaours
 couldn't gallop in on war stallions, full fig.
 Did you bring water? Medicine? Food?

Well... come among the rows – a forest, isn't it? –
 of shadow-columns. Run your fingers down them.
 Local sandstone, khaki-ginger, quarried from our hills
 where fruit trees of the Bible are (must be) in bloom.
 Pomegranate blossom, scarlet fizz against gloss leaves.
 Mulberry, almond, purple cream of Judas trees

in flower just this season, when he hung himself.
 See the flicker, when I open door a crack? Or
 that brachiating goldfish shimmer, over shelf
 of Corinth-petal capital, every pillar? They'd glisten
 like moonrise if we lit the hanging lamps between.
 Have you seen mother-of-pearl on column-heads before?

Our town is famous, sir, for mother-of-pearl.
 We understand its vulnerability. How to incise curls
 on brittle mucus cloud without it breaking. Other time,
 I take you to my brother's shop, down steep crusader stairs
 behind the church. We sell drop-earrings like milk air.
 Translucent buttons, carved like roses, carved like birds.

In the Bible, it's a stable where He's born. Round here they say
 it was a cave. Take my hand for steps to crypt. Let me go first.
 Dark, narrow, yes, but Greek Orthodox run this part –
 even now, there'll be a candle. In 135, Emperor Hadrian
 made this cave sacred to pagan god, Adonis. It became
 criminal act for Christians, telling stories of rebirth.

Dictator's nightmare, isn't it, signor – you write it,
in your paper – the appeal of vulnerability?

So – the Manger! Touch, that's OK. Like Helena,
Roman Empress – she crept here, scooped her hand
in wall of living rock and found a secret basin
made of clay. Her son built his basilica above.

They were late-comers to our faith. The Bible says
it's never too late to remake who you are. To reconsider.

In next cave, here, Saint Jerome worked Bible into Latin.
Next cave, these too-short tombs commemorate
the Innocents. King Herod told soldiers to exterminate
little sons of Bethlehem. Did you see *Schindler's List*?

That guy on horse above some town, watching men
enter ghetto, bayonet doors, drag children
out of wardrobes, out from under beds?

That happened here also – in Manger Square
where you came in. All the mothers of Bethlehem
one by one, their mouths torn open, screaming for their sons.

In this cave, the One that got away was born.
But real stuff's covered. You can't see... Helena
sleeved the clay manger in silver. Justinian
plastered marble on these walls, roof, floor.
You like this outer curtain round the manger,
orange-flame brocade? My mother stitched the fringe.

The inner curtain, sky-blue silk like cupola of heaven
with racy-lacy angels, came from the Isle of Cos.

But the spot beneath, my friend (I may say,
“friend?”), is where He first touched earth.
In 1717, they cut this silver star in floor below,
with fourteen flaming points. Marble's stained

where cracks round screws have let in water.
 Looks like waving starfish, tamped into the marble,
 flat-lit from above by fourteen silver lamps
 to represent communities all over world
 who worship here. For our church is sustained
 by every heart upon the planet. Even in Africa.

That's why you've come sir, isn't it? Millions dream
 these altars, facing across the cave. Altar of the Manger –
 and Altar of the Magi, look, behind. Wise Men
 from the East stood here before Him in their starry,
 complicated robes, where you're standing now.
 Have you seen Shepherds' Field, outside the town?

That's where the sky lit up. Christmas cards in West
 provide you snow, running deer, green shards of fir
 and holly. I have seen. But it happened here,
 with twisted-toffee gnarls of olive trees, shining
 in angel glow. And *our* flowers dormant in the ground –
 sparrow-wort, broomrape and Yeruham iris, logo

of Society for Protection (I belong) of Nature.
 In our shop we sell, also, figures carved in olive wood.
 Three different kings. A donkey, ox and camel,
 very beautiful. A shepherd boy, carrying justborn
 lamb on back, running to tell about the angel.
 The church is part of Bethlehem. Convents cluster near

like satellite snowdrop bulbs around original.
 They say it looks in air like ivory
 carved from a single tusk. Our town must be
 most captured, most destroyed, in history.
 Persians sacked, in 614, but left the church alone.
 They saw the Wise Men's clothes on Byzantine mosaic –

they recognized the holiness. In 634
 Arabs captured church; made shrine for Muslim prayer.
 In 747, the town was dust again. In earthquake –
 but sir, the same thing happened. Church remained
 unharmed. In eleventh century, with Crusaders in the West,
 was feeling against Christians here. Of course there was.

But Al-Hakim didn't danger church because of Muslim
 shrine. Everything played its part. Before Western invasion,
 capture of Jerusalem, Tancredi rode to Bethlehem
 with Baldwin of le Bourg. They took our church
 (we've seen a lot of "taking", sir) in 1099. Baldwin
 was crowned Christmas Day 1101, First High Crusader King.

In 1187, his kingdom came to end. Nothing here lasts long
 that's from outside. The Latins left. But in 1192,
 Salah al-Din allowed priests back to tend
 the altar. Khwarizmian Turks took the town
 in 1244, but left basilica alone... Am I boring you?
 Each time, so far, our white small town

was crushed to powder-stone, the church survived.
 That's all I meant to say. Everyone's let it be.
 Yet it looked, by 1350, as you see it now –
 a citadel. All the West, all Christendom
 gave money to protect. To fortify. Philip of Burgundy
 gave pinewood, Edward IV sent roofing lead

from England. We'll get help from America, you'll see,
 any day. Is Christian land. We have two hundred citizens here
 who fled inside. No food.... You're leaving, sir? If you think
 my voice is wrong, I'm not myself today. I would have
 taken you to the garden shown you flowers of the Bible
 that belongs to everyone. Blue alkanet, white asphodel...

YOU CAME A LONG WAY

This is your story, too. I thought you were a friend.
What happens to the man who has betrayed
his moral anchor or its earthly image, glances at the crafts
of holiness, then looks away? Bend, please. Take care –
they've mounted cranes around the church, with snipers
Maybe you know them; and they know you.

Other time, if you come back, it may be all you see
is tinsel among rubble, mother-of-pearl
dust, heaven rolled back
like bolt of mourning cloth on a market stall –
and under, all the darnels of the Bible. Spiny zilla,
holy thistle, Syrian acanthus, grey nightshade, Christ Thorn.

Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem, Easter 2002