

Usual Gift – Unusual Places

*There is a gift as common as a blade of grass
and every other precious gift is wrapped in it:
A gift as usual as the smiles it draws on many faces
yet often found in most unusual places*

I found it in the cinema;
not on the big, wide screen
encumbered with those lurid scenes
of violent excitement, tenderness and lust:
but in the doorway opening to the high street.
I saw the little boy
waiting patiently for his carton of popcorn
– it take an age to blow up grain.
The little lad was not for waiting longer
while Mum collected hers and paid the bill.
Ignoring mother's warning words,
he made straight for the entrance.
Not that way! she called to him, but he was gone.
She caught him up
– her scold snuffed out before exploding.
Her boy had seen what she had missed
– the old man – maybe not so old
– lying in the doorway all wrapped up
ready for a long cold night alone.
Mum watched as little lad tipped half his popcorn
into the man's open, hopeful begging bag.
Satisfied, he grabbed her hand
and led her, with her welling tears,
upstairs to Disneyland.

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I saw the gift – the common gift
– wrapped in a war-soiled handkerchief.
An infant wailing – lost in the street
beside the rubble of her simple home.
A soldier on patrol, slung his weapon
on his shoulder, out of sight,
knelt down and took the child on to his knee.
The magic of his gift quietened her,
especially as it came wrapped up
in his last two squares of chocolate.
With the scrap of rag pulled from his trouser pocket
he gently wiped the little one's deep eyes,
then stood again
to give her to her anxious mother
watching from the corner of the street.

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Another memory – but the same common gift.
A darkened corner
of a thatched and mud-walled hut.
Just a bed there - a few pots
scattered across the floor.
Two children sitting quiet close by
watching their mother
pass through the cruel end-days
– and the silent spectre of AIDS seizing
one more innocent victim.
An older woman enters with another child,
hands her a coloured plastic beaker and watches
while she gently lifts it to her mother's lips.
There are no tears – not yet
– but in the oppressive heat of that single room
there is the stuff of heaven
- a common gift in an unusual place.

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The pictures still crowd in – gift on gift
– scattered wrappings everywhere.
Another steadies into focus:
The hungry, sad prisoner seated in his cell,
staring at me across an open drain,
holding bread and Bible in his hands
and offering up a prayer
for me and all my wealthy family

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This ordinary gift
is given a billion times a day,
and so often in the most unusual places.
But none so wonderful
as when three visitors of royal wisdom
knelt together with humble hill-folk
in a poorly-lit stable
and knelt to take the gift of God to their hearts.
The gift – the child – the Saviour of the world
– all the love of God
– the commonest – most usual gift
in a most unusual place.
And when that child, grown to a man,
hung on a cross,
his body mind and spirit,
wide open to the thunderous skies,
he held out his arms to wrap the world
in the most common gift of all
- the gift of love - in the most unusual place