

## What Child

by [John Linstrom](#)

December 19, 2022

The car door clatters open  
with rushing tunnel sounds  
and before it can close, he's begun,  
the subway violin Greensleeves man.

He starts the same as every year,  
arcs his way up those first four notes  
sweetly enough, sweeps the trapped  
passengers to his purpose: *What child is this—*

but, as always, he holds that *this*,  
a menacing fermata: it sours  
in ragged crescendo before the flip  
as he drives back down the scale

and up again, too fast, the same minor-key  
coaster he rides amid these tight-scarved,  
buttoned-up commuters each December. We  
all have noticed him now: hair greased back,

tattooed bulges wrap lean arms and rags  
enfold his punk-rock angled limbs  
as he sways, incessant, hard, wincing,  
meeting no one's gaze. A light pouch dangles

by its drawstrings from his slashing bow's frog;  
each downward jab defies donation  
until he finishes. One year I dropped him a dollar:  
his grimace and "thanks" dripped acid.

He does play well, I've thought, as he traces  
that resinous darkness, descended of Tudor  
plaster and candlelight, with tonal warmth reset  
to his own manic pace. Again, he holds

on *whom angels greet*—and knows  
no angels ride this train. Seraphs  
shield their eyes. It's unclear  
why he does this, curdling a yuletide

tune each year, then marching down  
the train, car doors clattering  
and mothers exhaling in his wake,  
asking us, what child is *this*,

what star have we missed, what  
stable birth, what cattle's low, and who  
will greet, in a midnight sky's bright stillness,  
with peace, goodwill, to him?

*This poem is part of a liturgical poetry cycle he wrote while serving as poet in residence at Trinity Lower East Side Lutheran Parish.*