

Swaddling

by [Madeleine Mysko](#) in the [December 2023](#) issue

*And she gave birth to her firstborn son  
and wrapped him in bands of cloth (Luke 2:7)*

Advent, and I'm down on my knees  
under the rafters, dragging out  
the manger scene my mother

mailed to me in 1969, all the way out  
to San Antonio, the first year  
of my marriage, when I was so sick

with the crushing loneliness that came  
of telling no one in the world  
how really miserable I was.

Advent, and I'm taking them one  
by one from inside the crumbling  
cardboard stable, unwrapping them:

the chipped plaster Mary and Joseph,  
the shepherds and sheep, the one cow.  
Last of all, the baby in the manger:

as plump as he's represented in paintings  
by Raphael, but so small I can close  
my fingers over him, make him disappear.

His eyes are closed, his mouth a dot of  
red paint. He's lying naked on the sculpted  
straw, except for one stroke of white

across his middle—perfunctory, not like  
real swaddling, but think of the loincloths  
artists provide, depicting the crucifixion.

Arms outstretched, one chubby foot  
fixed to the other at the ankle:  
so dear, but also so exposed.