

Henry Shukman

HORSES AT CHRISTMAS

In our little house Creedence were singing
about the old cotton fields, the baby
was flat on his back in front of the fire,
eyes swimming with flame.
Christmas morning, and you were at church.
I thought of going to join you late,
but instead took the baby up to the horses.
Out in the field he started crying.
Maybe I should have taken him to the bath
of stone, the discipline of a saviour, the sanctuary
of hymns—

The horses saved us.
To be close to them, so tough and nothing
to do with us, and they breathing all over him,
and the flaking mud on their necks
where they had rolled, and the sucking of hoofs
as they walked the sodden field.
The horses with their long heads,
underwater eyes, watched us watch them.
Then they turned, drumming the field,
leaving us alone (the damp morning
all about, the soaked grass under foot,
the baby's diaphanous ears going pink in the cold)
as silence bowed back to earth.