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# Midwinter

A Christmas Poetry Anthology



We are delighted to present *Midwinter* a collection of Christmas poems. Thank you for being a subscriber to the magazine.

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## A Visit From St. Nicolas

Clement Clarke Moore

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house  
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;  
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,  
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there;  
The children were nestled all snug in their beds;  
While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads;  
And mamma in her 'kerchief and I in my cap,  
Had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap,  
When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,  
I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter.  
Away to the window I flew like a flash,  
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.  
The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow,  
Gave a lustre of midday to objects below,  
When what to my wondering eyes did appear,  
But a miniature sleigh and eight tiny reindeer,  
With a little old driver so lively and quick,  
I knew in a moment he must be St. Nick.  
More rapid than eagles his coursers they came,  
And he whistled, and shouted, and called them by name:  
"Now, Dasher! now, Dancer! now Prancer and Vixen!  
On, Comet! on, Cupid! on, Donner and Blitzen!  
To the top of the porch! to the top of the wall!  
Now dash away! dash away! dash away all!"  
As leaves that before the wild hurricane fly,  
When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky;  
So up to the housetop the coursers they flew  
With the sleigh full of toys, and St. Nicholas too -  
And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the roof  
The prancing and pawing of each little hoof.  
As I drew in my head, and was turning around,  
Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound.  
He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,  
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot;  
A bundle of toys he had flung on his back,  
And he looked like a pedlar just opening his pack.  
His eyes, how they twinkled! his dimples, how merry!  
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!  
His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,  
And the beard on his chin was as white as the snow;  
The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,  
And the smoke, it encircled his head like a wreath;  
He had a broad face and a little round belly  
That shook when he laughed, like a bowl full of jelly.  
He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf,  
And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself;  
A wink of his eye and a twist of his head  
Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread;  
He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work,  
And filled all the stockings; then turned with a jerk,  
And laying his finger aside of his nose,  
And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose;  
He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle,  
And away they all flew like the down of a thistle.  
But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight -  
*"Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!"*

## **Campos de Soria**

### **Antonio Machado**

#### **I**

Es la tierra de Soria árida y fría.  
Por las colinas y las sierras calvas,  
verdes pradillos, cerros cenicientos,  
la primavera pasa,  
dejando entre las hierbas olorosas  
sus diminutas margaritas blancas.

La tierra no revive, el campo sueña.  
Al empezar abril está nevada  
la espalda del Moncayo;  
el caminante lleva en su bufanda  
envueltos cuello y boca, y los pastores  
pasan cubiertos con sus luengas capas.

#### **II**

Las tierras labrantías,  
como retazos de estameñas pardas,  
el huertecillo, el abejar, los trozos  
de verde oscuro en que el merino pasta,  
entre plumizos peñascales, siembran  
el sueño alegre de infantil Arcadia.

En los chopos lejanos del camino,  
parecen humear las yertas ramas  
como un glauco vapor - las nuevas hojas - ,  
y en las quiebras de valles y barrancas  
blanquean los zarzales florecidos  
y brotan las violetas perfumadas.

#### **III**

Es el campo ondulado, y los caminos  
ya ocultan los viajeros que cabalgan  
en pardos borriquillos,  
ya al fondo de la tarde arrebolada  
elevan las plebeyas figurillas  
que el lienzo de oro del ocaso manchan.

Mas si trepáis a un cerro y veis el campo  
desde los picos donde habita el águila,  
son tornasoles de carmín y acero,  
llanos plumizos, lomas plateadas,  
circuidos por montes de violeta,  
con las cumbres de nieve sonrosada.

#### IV

¡Las figuras del campo sobre el cielo!

Dos lentos bueyes aran  
en un alcor, cuando el otoño empieza,  
y entre las negras testas doblegadas  
bajo el pesado yugo,  
pende un cesto de juncos y retama,  
que es la cuna de un niño;

y tras la yunta marcha  
un hombre que se inclina hacia la tierra,  
y una mujer que en las abiertas zanjás  
arroja la semilla.

Bajo una nube de carmín y llama,  
en el oro fluido y verdinoso  
del poniente las sombras se agigantan.

#### V

La nieve. En el mesón al campo abierto,  
se ve el hogar donde la leña humea,  
y la olla al hervir borbollonea.

El cierzo corre por el campo yerto,  
alborotando en blancos torbellinos  
la nieve silenciosa.

La nieve sobre el campo y las caminos,  
cayendo está como sobre una fosa.

Un viejo acurrucado tiembla y tose  
cerca del fuego; su mechón de lana  
la vieja hila, y una niña cose  
verde ribete a su estameña grana.

Padres los viejos son de un arriero  
que caminó sobre la blanca tierra,  
y una noche perdió ruta y sendero,  
y se enterró en las nieves de la sierra.

En torno al fuego hay un lugar vacío,  
y en la frente del viejo, de hosco ceño,  
como un tachón sombrío  
- tal el golpe de un hacha sobre un leño -

La vieja mira al campo, cual si oyera  
pasos sobre la nieve. Nadie pasa.

Desierta la vecina carretera,  
desierto el campo en torno de la casa.

La niña piensa que en los verdes prados  
ha de correr con otras doncellitas  
en los días azules y dorados,  
cuando crecen las blancas margaritas.

## VI

¡Soria fría, Soria pura,  
"cabeza de Extremadura",  
con su castillo guerrero  
arruinado, sobre el Duero;  
con sus murallas roídas  
y sus casas denegridas!

Muerta ciudad de señores,  
soldados o cazadores;  
de portales con escudos  
de cien linajes hidalgos,  
y de famélicos galgos,  
de galgos flacos y agudos,  
que pululan  
por las sórdidas callejas  
y a la medianoche ululan,  
cuando graznan las cornejas!

¡Soria fría! La campana  
de la Audiencia da la una.  
Soria, ciudad castellana,  
¡tan bella! bajo la luna.

## VII

¡Colinas plateadas,  
grises alcores, cárdenas roquedas  
por donde traza el Duero  
su curva de ballesta  
en torno a Soria, oscuros encinares,  
ariscos pedregales, calvas sierras,  
caminos blancos y álamos del río,  
tardes de Soria, mística y guerrera,  
hoy siento por vosotros, en el fondo  
del corazón, tristeza,  
tristeza que es amor! ¡Campos de Soria  
donde parece que las rocas sueñan,  
conmigo vais! ¡Colinas plateadas,  
grises alcores, cárdenas roquedas!...



## VIII

He vuelto a ver los álamos dorados,  
álamos del camino en la ribera  
del Duero, entre San Polo y San Saturio,  
tras las murallas viejas  
de Soria ¿barbacana  
hacia Aragón, en castellana tierra?.

Estos chopos del río, que acompañan  
con el sonido de sus hojas secas  
el son del agua, cuando el viento sopla,  
tienen en sus cortezas  
grabadas iniciales que son nombres  
de enamorados, cifras que son fechas.

¡Álamos del amor que ayer tuvisteis  
de ruiseñores vuestras ramas llenas;  
álamos que seréis mañana liras  
del viento perfumado en primavera;  
álamos del amor cerca del agua  
que corre y pasa y sueña,  
álamos de las márgenes del Duero,  
conmigo vais, mi corazón os lleva!

## IX

¡Oh, sí! Conmigo vais, campos de Soria,  
tardes tranquilas, montes de violeta,  
alamedas del río, verde sueño  
del suelo gris y de la parda tierra,  
agria melancolía  
de la ciudad decrépita.

Me habéis llegado al alma,  
¿o acaso estabais en el fondo de ella?

¡Gentes del alto llano numantino  
que a Dios guardáis como cristianas viejas,  
que el sol de España os llene  
de alegría, de luz y de riqueza!

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por donde traza el Duero  
su curva de ballesta  
en torno a Soria, oscuros encinares,  
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que a Dios guardáis como cristianas viejas,  
que el sol de España os llene  
de alegría, de luz y de riqueza!

**There's A Certain Slant Of Light**  
**Emily Dickinson**

There's a certain Slant of light,  
Winter Afternoons -  
That oppresses, like the Heft  
Of Cathedral Tunes -

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us -  
We can find no scar,  
But internal difference -  
Where the Meanings, are -

None may teach it - Any -  
'Tis the seal Despair -  
An imperial affliction  
Sent us of the Air -

When it comes, the Landscape listens -  
Shadows - hold their breath -  
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance  
On the look of Death -

**Karácsony**  
**Sándor Petőfi**

The winter wind is wandering  
across the silent land;  
but in the little cottage  
a candle makes its stand.

The mother holds her baby,  
the father kneels in prayer;  
Peace, a white-winged angel,  
hovers in the air.

And though the world is weary  
with sorrow, toil and strife,  
on this gentle Christmas night  
Each soul recalls new life.

## **Ring Out, Wild Bells**

**Alfred, Lord Tennyson**

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,  
The flying cloud, the frosty light:  
The year is dying in the night;  
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,  
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:  
The year is going, let him go;  
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind  
For those that here we see no more;  
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,  
Ring in redress to all mankind.

Ring out a slowly dying cause,  
And ancient forms of party strife;  
Ring in the nobler modes of life,  
With sweeter manners, purer laws.

Ring out the want, the care, the sin,  
The faithless coldness of the times;  
Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes  
But ring the fuller minstrel in.

Ring out false pride in place and blood,  
The civic slander and the spite;  
Ring in the love of truth and right,  
Ring in the common love of good.

Ring out old shapes of foul disease;  
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;  
Ring out the thousand wars of old,  
Ring in the thousand years of peace.

Ring in the valiant man and free,  
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;  
Ring out the darkness of the land,  
Ring in the Christ that is to be.

**The Oxen**  
Thomas Hardy

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.  
"Now they are all on their knees,"  
An elder said as we sat in a flock  
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where  
They dwelt in their strawy pen,  
Nor did it occur to one of us there  
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave  
In these years! Yet, I feel,  
If someone said on Christmas Eve,  
"Come; see the oxen kneel,

"In the lonely barton by yonder coomb  
Our childhood used to know,"  
I should go with him in the gloom,  
Hoping it might be so.

## Campanitas de Belén

### Lope de Vega

Campanitas de Belén,  
tocad al Alba, que sale  
vertiendo divino aljófaro  
sobre el Sol que de ella nace,  
que los ángeles tocan,  
tocan y tañen,  
que es Dios hombre el Sol  
y el Alba su madre.

*Din, din, din, que vino en fin,  
don, don, don, San Salvador,  
dan, dan, dan, que hoy nos le dan,  
tocan y tañen a gloria en el Cielo,  
y en la tierra tocan a paz.  
En Belén tocan al Alba  
casi al primer arrebol  
porque de ella sale el Sol,  
que de la noche nos salva.  
Si las aves hacen salva  
al Alba del Sol que ven,  
campanitas de Belén,  
tocad al Alba, que sale  
vertiendo divino aljófaro  
sobre el Sol que de ella nace,  
que los ángeles tocan,  
tocan y tañen,  
que es Dios hombre el Sol  
y el Alba su madre.*

*Este Sol se hiela y arde  
de amor y frío en su Oriente,  
para que la humana gente  
el Cielo sereno aguarde,  
y aunque dicen que una tarde  
se pondrá en Jerusalén,  
campanitas de Belén,  
tocad al Alba, que sale  
vertiendo divino aljófaro  
sobre el Sol que de ella nace,  
que los ángeles tocan,  
tocan y tañen,  
que es Dios hombre el Sol  
y el Alba su madre*

## Christmas Bells

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

I heard the bells on Christmas Day  
Their old, familiar carols play,  
And wild and sweet  
The words repeat  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,  
The belfries of all Christendom  
Had rolled along  
The unbroken song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!  
Till ringing, singing on its way,  
The world revolved from night to day,  
A voice, a chime,  
A chant sublime  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth  
The cannon thundered in the South,  
And with the sound  
The carols drowned  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!  
It was as if an earthquake rent  
The hearth-stones of a continent,  
And made forlorn  
The households born  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;  
"There is no peace on earth," I said;  
"For hate is strong,  
And mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"  
Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;  
The Wrong shall fail,  
The Right prevail,  
With peace on earth, good-will to men."



**The Magi**  
**William Butler Yeats**

Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye,  
In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones  
Appear and disappear in the blue depths of the sky  
With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,  
And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,  
And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,  
Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,  
The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.

## The House of Christmas

G.K. Chesterton

There fared a mother driven forth  
Out of an inn to roam;  
In the place where she was homeless  
All men are at home.  
The crazy stable close at hand,  
With shaking timber and shifting sand,  
Grew a stronger thing to abide and stand  
Than the square stones of Rome.

For men are homesick in their homes,  
And strangers under the sun,  
And they lay on their heads in a foreign land  
Whenever the day is done.  
Here we have battle and blazing eyes,  
And chance and honour and high surprise,  
But our homes are under miraculous skies  
Where the yule tale was begun.

A Child in a foul stable,  
Where the beasts feed and foam;  
Only where He was homeless  
Are you and I at home;  
We have hands that fashion and heads that know,  
But our hearts we lost - how long ago!  
In a place no chart nor ship can show  
Under the sky's dome.

This world is wild as an old wives' tale,  
And strange the plain things are,  
The earth is enough and the air is enough  
For our wonder and our war;  
But our rest is as far as the fire-drake swings  
And our peace is put in impossible things  
Where clashed and thundered unthinkable wings  
Round an incredible star.

To an open house in the evening  
Home shall men come,  
To an older place than Eden  
And a taller town than Rome.  
To the end of the way of the wandering star,  
To the things that cannot be and that are,  
To the place where God was homeless  
And all men are at home.

**A Christmas Carol**  
**Christina Rossetti**

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,  
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;  
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,  
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Our God, Heaven cannot hold Him, nor earth sustain;  
Heaven and earth shall flee away when He comes to reign.  
In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed  
The Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

Enough for Him, whom cherubim, worship night and day,  
Breastful of milk, and a mangerful of hay;  
Enough for Him, whom angels fall before,  
The ox and ass and camel which adore.

Angels and archangels may have gathered there,  
Cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;  
But His mother only, in her maiden bliss,  
Worshipped the beloved with a kiss.

What can I give Him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;  
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.

**The Snow Man**  
**Wallace Stevens**

One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time  
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think  
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,  
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land  
Full of the same wind  
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

**Soneto A Cristo Crucificado**  
**Francisco de Quevedo**

No me mueve, mi Dios, para quererte  
el cielo que me tienes prometido,  
ni me mueve el infierno tan temido  
para dejar por eso de ofenderte.

Tú me mueves, Señor, muéveme el verte  
clavado en una cruz y escarnecido,  
muéveme ver tu cuerpo tan herido,  
muévenme tus afrentas y tu muerte.

Muéveme, en fin, tu amor, y en tal manera,  
que aunque no hubiera cielo, yo te amara,  
y aunque no hubiera infierno, te temiera.

No me tienes que dar porque te quiera,  
pues aunque lo que espero no esperara,  
lo mismo que te quiero te quisiera.

**The Shepherd**  
**William Blake**

How sweet is the shepherd's sweet lot!  
From the morn to the evening he strays;  
He shall follow his sheep all the day,  
And his tongue shall be filled with praise.

For he hears the lambs' innocent call,  
And he hears the ewes' tender reply;  
He is watchful while they are in peace,  
For they know when their shepherd is nigh.

## Old Christmastide

Sir Walter Scott

Heap on more wood! the wind is chill;  
But let it whistle as it will,  
We'll keep our Christmas merry still.  
Each age has deem'd the new-born year  
The fittest time for festal cheer:  
Even, heathen yet, the savage Dane  
At lol more deep the mead did drain;  
High on the beach his galleys drew,  
And feasted all his pirate crew;  
Then in his low and pine-built hall  
Where shields and axes deck'd the wall  
They gorged upon the half-dress'd steer;  
Caroused in seas of sable beer;  
While round, in brutal jest, were thrown  
The half-gnaw'd rib, and marrow-bone:  
Or listen'd all, in grim delight,  
While Scalds yell'd out the joys of fight.  
Then forth, in frenzy, would they hie,  
While wildly loose their red locks fly,  
And dancing round the blazing pile,  
They make such barbarous mirth the while,  
As best might to the mind recall  
The boisterous joys of Odin's hall.

And well our Christian sires of old  
Loved when the year its course had roll'd,  
And brought blithe Christmas back again,  
With all his hospitable train.  
Domestic and religious rite  
Gave honour to the holy night;  
On Christmas Eve the bells were rung;  
On Christmas Eve the mass was sung:  
That only night in all the year,  
Saw the stoled priest the chalice rear.  
The damsel donn'd her kirtle sheen;  
The hall was dress'd with holly green;  
Forth to the wood did merry-men go,  
To gather in the mistletoe.  
Then open'd wide the Baron's hall  
To vassal, tenant, serf and all;  
Power laid his rod of rule aside  
And Ceremony doff'd his pride.  
The heir, with roses in his shoes,  
That night might village partner choose;  
The Lord, underogating, share  
The vulgar game of 'post and pair'.  
All hail'd, with uncontroll'd delight,  
And general voice, the happy night,  
That to the cottage, as the crown,  
Brought tidings of salvation down.

The fire, with well-dried logs supplied,  
Went roaring up the chimney wide;  
The huge hall-table's oaken face,  
Scrubb'd till it shone, the day to grace,  
Bore then upon its massive board  
No mark to part the squire and lord.  
Then was brought in the lusty brawn,  
By old blue-coated serving-man;  
Then the grim boar's head frown'd on high,  
Crested with bays and rosemary.  
Well can the green-garb'd ranger tell,  
How, when, and where, the monster fell;  
What dogs before his death to tore,  
And all the baiting of the boar.  
The wassel round, in good brown bowls,  
Garnish'd with ribbons, blithely trowls.  
There the huge sirloin reek'd; hard by  
Plum-porridge stood, and Christmas pie;  
Nor fail'd old Scotland to produce,  
At such high tide, her savoury goose.  
Then came the merry makers in,  
And carols roar'd with blithesome din;  
If unmelodious was the song,  
It was a hearty note, and strong.  
Who lists may in their mumming see  
Traces of ancient mystery;  
White shirts supplied the masquerade,  
And smutted cheeks the visors made;  
But, O! what maskers, richly dight,  
Can boast of bosoms half so light!  
England was merry England, when  
Old Christmas brought his sports again.  
'Twas Christmas broach'd the mightiest ale;  
'Twas Christmas told the merriest tale;  
A Christmas gambol oft could cheer  
The poor man's heart through half the year.

**Minstrels**  
**William Wordsworth**

The minstrels played their Christmas tune  
To-night beneath my cottage-eaves;  
While, smitten by a lofty moon,  
The encircling laurels, thick with leaves,  
Gave back a rich and dazzling sheen,  
That overpowered their natural green.

Through hill and valley every breeze  
Had sunk to rest with folded wings:  
Keen was the air, but could not freeze,  
Nor check, the music of the strings;  
So stout and hardy were the band  
That scraped the chords with strenuous hand.

And who but listened?---till was paid  
Respect to every inmate's claim,  
The greeting given, the music played  
In honour of each household name,  
Duly pronounced with lusty call,  
And "Merry Christmas" wished to all.



## Christmas In The Year Of War

Katharine Tynan

Nevertheless this Year of Grief  
The Tree of God's in leaf.

The stem, the branch quickeneth  
With sap, this year of Death.

For in the time of the flowering thorn  
The Babe, the Babe, is born!

Christ's folk, look up, be not dismayed,  
The Lord's in the cattle shed.

He comes, a little trembling One,  
To a world else lost, undone.

With His poor folk He wills to stay  
In this their difficult day.

Poor war-worn world, you shall have ease!  
He signs your lasting peace.

He hath given His people rest from wars,  
By the cold light of stars.

The charter of their peace shall stand  
Writ by His hour-old hand.

The Tree of Paradise quickeneth.  
Be still - there is no death!

## Christmas Carol

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Ring out, ye bells!  
All Nature swells  
With gladness at the wondrous story, —  
The world was at lorn,  
But Christ is born  
To change our sadness into glory.

Sing, earthlings, sing!  
To-night a King  
Hath come from heaven's high throne to bless us.  
The outstretched hand  
O'er all the land  
Is raised in pity to caress us.

Come at His call;  
Be joyful all;  
Away with mourning and with sadness!  
The heavenly choir  
With holy fire  
Their voices raise in songs of gladness.

The darkness breaks  
And Dawn awakes,  
Her cheeks suffused with youthful blushes.  
The rocks and stones  
In holy tones  
Are singing sweeter than the thrushes.

Then why should we  
In silence be,  
When Nature lends her voice to praises;  
When heaven and earth  
Proclaim the truth  
Of Him for whom that lone star blazes?

No, be not still,  
But with a will  
Strike all your harps and set them ringing;  
On hill and heath  
Let every breath  
Throw all its power into singing!

## Noël

Paul Verlaine

All the bells ring soft and low -  
Snow is falling, falling white -  
And upon the humble manger  
Shines a pale and trembling light.

Through the quiet streets of evening  
Moves a breath of ancient song;  
Love has stooped to walk among us,  
Gentle, holy, meek and strong.

O, the darkness, how it listens!  
O the cold, how warm it seems!  
For the Child has come to waken  
Every heart from winter dreams.



Some of these poems were born in newspapers and little magazines, some in private notebooks. Together they invite the reader not merely into the festivity of the season but into its deeper atmosphere - its shadows, reflections and transformations.

One of the most famous seasonal poems in English, Clement Clarke Moore's *A Visit From St. Nicholas*, began its life anonymously in the *Troy Sentinel* on a December day in 1823. Written, according to family tradition, to amuse his children, it escaped the household almost instantly and released the modern image of Santa Claus upon the world: the reindeer, the sleigh, the midnight visitation and all the trimmings. That a playful domestic verse became a cornerstone of today's Christmas myth speaks to the peculiar readiness of this season to welcome stories that fuse innocence with imagination.

Emily Dickinson's gorgeous *There's a Certain Slant of Light* surfaced only after her death, in the 1890 volume of her poems. If Christmas often gathers families, reunites friends and brightens windows, Dickinson answers with the solitary intensity of an interior season. Her winter afternoon refuses consolation and instead articulates that sharply angled light which can pierce the quietest hearts. Winter is inescapably a part of Christmas; its history, the light it casts in the dark season; the metaphors, the celebration of life in the depths of cold darkness.

Antonio Machado's *Campos de Soria*, written during his years in the city where he served as a schoolteacher, first appeared in the 1912 edition of *Campos de Castilla*. It's not a Christmas poem in the conventional sense and Machado's landscape is the opposite of decorative festivity, but the poem holds the dignity and stillness of winter and captures much of its magic which stuns and stills us year upon year.

Alfred Tennyson's *Ring Out, Wild Bells*, part of his great elegy *In Memoriam* (1850), also crosses the boundary between the seasonal and the spiritual. Written out of mourning for a friend, it turns the year end into a moral and emotional summons: the bells must ring out grief, falsehood and weariness and ring in truth and renewal. George Harrison, among many others, would parrot its sentiments, in his case on *Ding Dong, Ding Dong on Dark Horse*.

Thomas Hardy published *The Oxen* on Christmas Eve of 1915, during the First World War. Here the poet, who'd long set aside the faith of his youth, remembers a childhood legend telling how farm animals would kneel in reverence at midnight. In a time of unprecedented loss, Hardy lets the old superstition flicker again with a wistful glow - half-hope, half-resigned tenderness - (and if that isn't the Spirit of Christmas - what is?) If the poem is nostalgic, it is a nostalgia aware of its own fragility: a Christmas Eve of yearning, not certainty. And again, it's an attempt to catch that weird magic of this time of year, which is in the light and tastes of the cold wind; in the way it infects the soul.

Longfellow's *Christmas Bells* was composed during the American Civil War, when the poet's own son had been gravely wounded in battle. Though it opens with the familiar tolling of holiday bells, its middle stanzas turn toward the violent divisions of the nation before returning, at the last, to an insistence that peace may prevail. A century later, its mixture of sorrow and defiant hope remains pertinent. And there's sorrow, too, in Christmas - one of the times when we most vividly miss those no longer with us.

Many of the poems in this volume were born not of catastrophe but of the quieter rhythms of literary life. Yeats's *The Magi*, short and enigmatic, first appeared in *Responsibilities* in 1914 and presents the wise men not as gentle figures of nativity scenes but as stern, almost mythic presences, gazing toward some revelation that eludes the merely festive. G. K. Chesterton's *The House of Christmas*, by contrast, offers a warm and paradoxical hospitality: the God who receives all wanderers is born not in a palace but in a stable. The homeliness of that scene becomes an invitation to all who have known exile of spirit, or, as anyone parted from loved ones at this time will have experienced, literal exile, made sharper by the season.

My own personal favourite lyric, Christina Rossetti's *A Christmas Carol*, first printed in the 1870s and later beloved as the hymn *In the Bleak Midwinter*, gives the season a devotional simplicity - snow, silence, and a heart that seeks a proper offering. Again, there's the capturing of a yearning here; a smallness of humanity; an awe, which is part of the times too. Christmas, for all its boozing and feasting, is a curiously introverted period, a time for thought and meditation (so writerly!) and the best kind of sentimentality.

Wallace Stevens's *The Snow Man*, published in 1921, strips winter to its philosophical essence: to behold the season truly, one must be as 'nothing' oneself, perceiving the cold world without the consolations of imagination. William Blake's *The Shepherd* returns us to the pastoral innocence of his *Songs of Innocence* (1789), a world where shepherd and flock share a harmony untroubled by modern life.

Some poems come from even earlier traditions. Lope de Vega's *Campanitas de Belén*, from the Spanish Golden Age, carries the music and theatricality of the *villancico*, the Christmas song that blends devotion with folk celebration. Francisco de Quevedo's *Soneto a Cristo Crucificado*, though not explicitly seasonal, is a devotional poem of such intensity and humility that it naturally finds a place alongside Christmas meditations.

Sir Walter Scott's *Old Christmastide*, Wordsworth's *Minstrels*, Dunbar's *Christmas Carol* and Verlaine's *Noël* each reflect the characteristic voice of their age: romantic nostalgia, ballad-like cheer, African-American lyric resilience and French symbolist delicacy. Katharine Tynan's *Christmas in the Year of War*, written during the First World War, joins Hardy and Longfellow in reminding us that Christmas has often been observed in years when the world felt cold, wounded, or uncertain.

Taken together, these poems trace not a single story of Christmas but a spectrum. They show the holiday and the winter season as times of memory, of domestic joy, of spiritual searching, of loss and renewal and of landscape transformed by weather and imagination. All partake, in their own ways, of the sense that winter is a threshold, a place where the ordinary is briefly altered; where we and the world change.

Yes, something changes at Christmas; without and within us. We reconnect with the past that's always there. We let ourselves become a part of something bigger than ourselves.

Whoever you are and wherever you are - Merry Christmas!

James Hartley  
Madrid. December 2025.



