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opening extract from

# **The Oxford Book of Christmas Poems**

edited by

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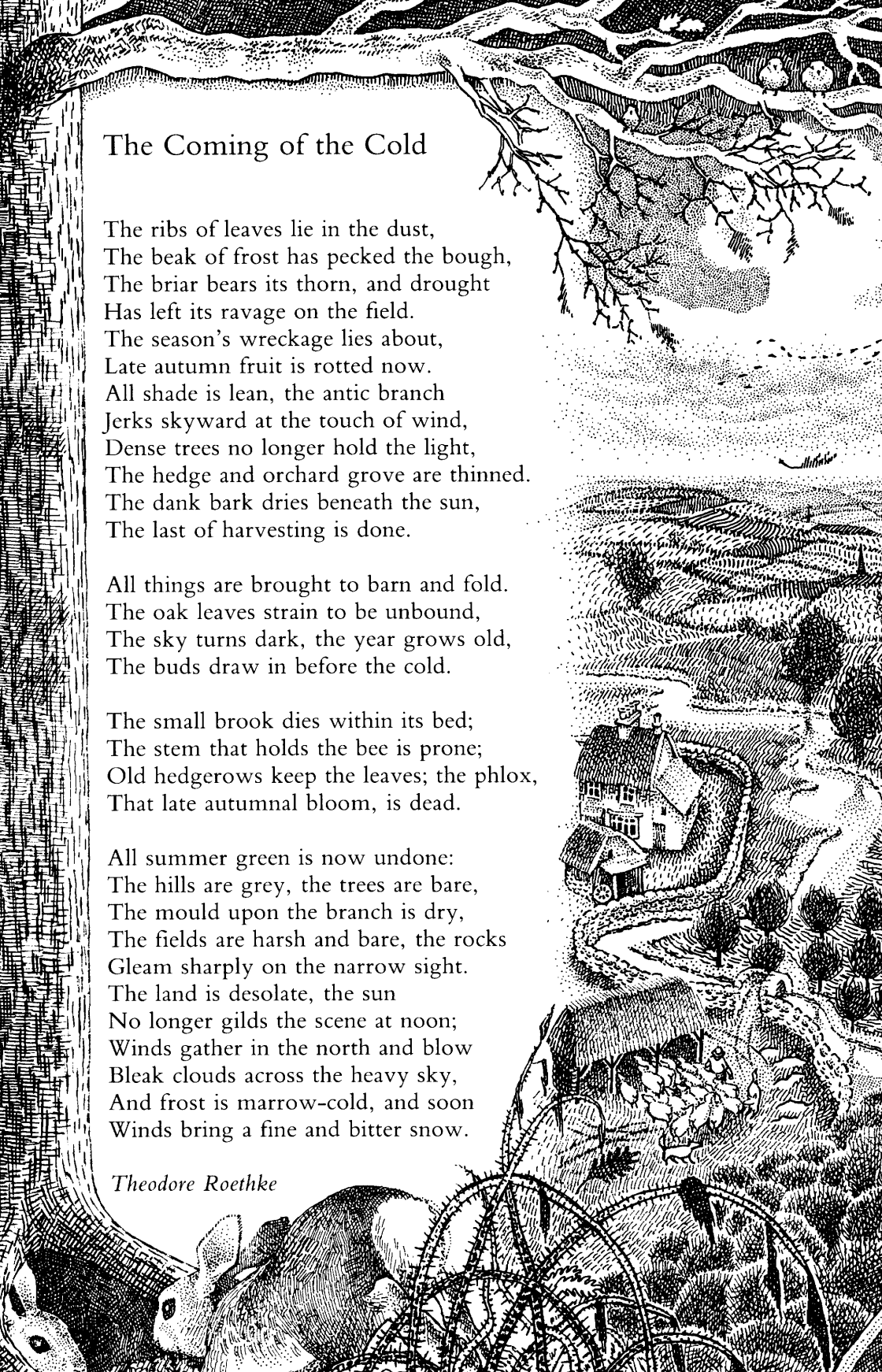
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‘Open you the East door  
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*The sky turns dark,  
the year grows old . . .*





## The Coming of the Cold

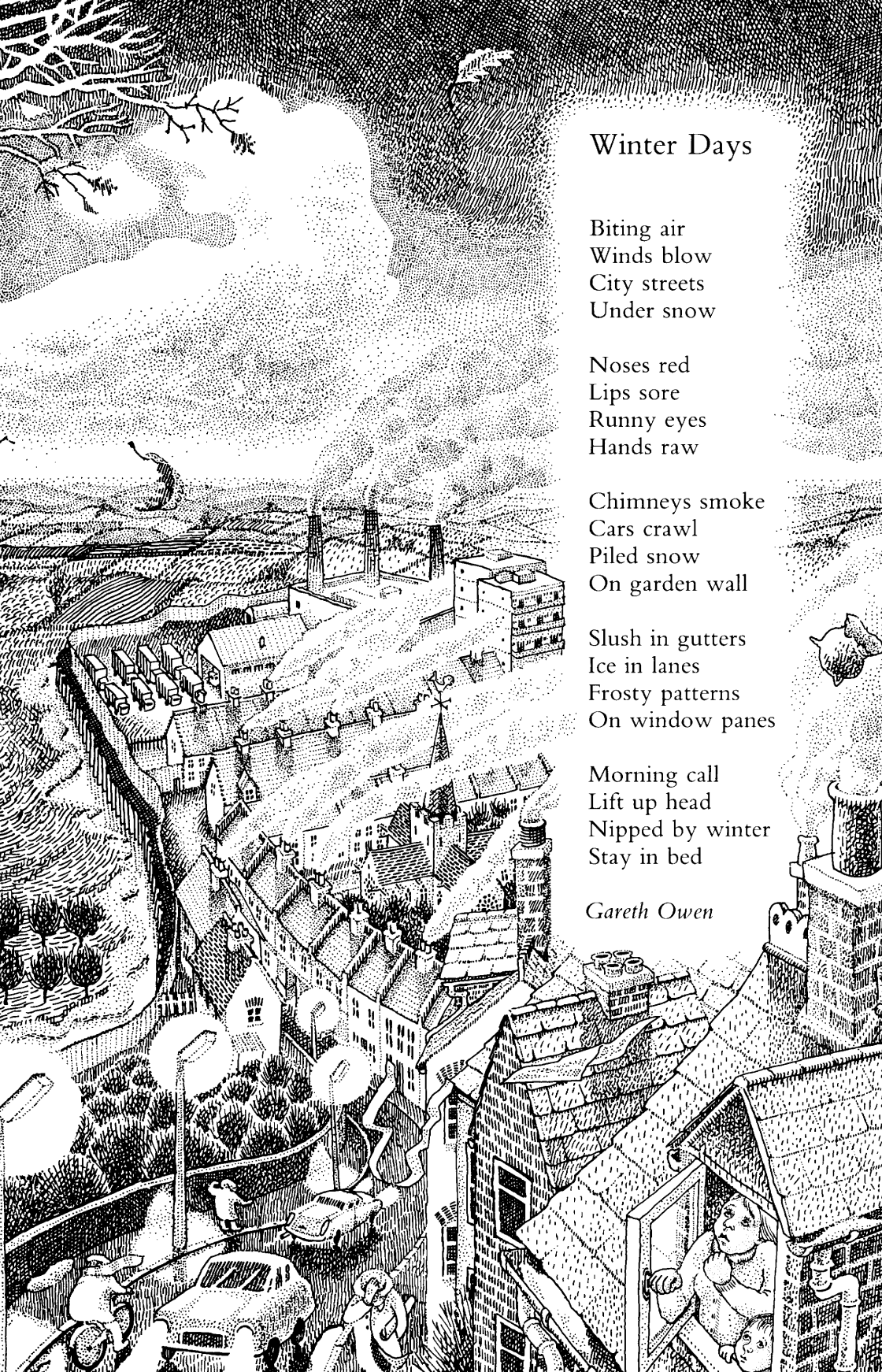
The ribs of leaves lie in the dust,  
The beak of frost has pecked the bough,  
The briar bears its thorn, and drought  
Has left its ravage on the field.  
The season's wreckage lies about,  
Late autumn fruit is rotted now.  
All shade is lean, the antic branch  
Jerks skyward at the touch of wind,  
Dense trees no longer hold the light,  
The hedge and orchard grove are thinned.  
The dank bark dries beneath the sun,  
The last of harvesting is done.

All things are brought to barn and fold.  
The oak leaves strain to be unbound,  
The sky turns dark, the year grows old,  
The buds draw in before the cold.

The small brook dies within its bed;  
The stem that holds the bee is prone;  
Old hedgerows keep the leaves; the phlox,  
That late autumnal bloom, is dead.

All summer green is now undone:  
The hills are grey, the trees are bare,  
The mould upon the branch is dry,  
The fields are harsh and bare, the rocks  
Gleam sharply on the narrow sight.  
The land is desolate, the sun  
No longer gilds the scene at noon;  
Winds gather in the north and blow  
Bleak clouds across the heavy sky,  
And frost is marrow-cold, and soon  
Winds bring a fine and bitter snow.

*Theodore Roethke*



## Winter Days

Biting air  
Winds blow  
City streets  
Under snow

Noses red  
Lips sore  
Runny eyes  
Hands raw

Chimneys smoke  
Cars crawl  
Piled snow  
On garden wall

Slush in gutters  
Ice in lanes  
Frosty patterns  
On window panes

Morning call  
Lift up head  
Nipped by winter  
Stay in bed

*Gareth Owen*



## Advent: A Carol

What did you hear?  
Said stone to echo:  
All that you told me,  
Said echo to stone.

Tidings, said echo,  
Tidings, said stone,  
Tidings of wonder  
Said echo to stone.

Who then shall hear them?  
Said stone to echo:  
All people on earth,  
Said echo to stone.

Turned into one,  
Echo and stone,  
The word for all coming  
Turned into one.

*Patric Dickinson*

## December

*Prayer to St Nicholas*

Patron of all those who do good by stealth –  
Slipping three bags of gold in through the window  
To save three desperate girls, restoring  
Dead boys to life out of the pickling tub  
Of an Anatolian Sweeney Todd –  
Teach us to give with simplicity, and not with an eye  
To the main chance: it's less than  
Three weeks' shopping time to Christmas.

*John Heath-Stubbs*

## Advent 1955

The Advent wind begins to stir  
With sea-like sounds in our Scotch fir,  
It's dark at breakfast, dark at tea,  
And in between we only see  
Clouds hurrying across the sky  
And rain-wet roads the wind blows dry  
And branches bending to the gale  
Against great skies all silver-pale.  
The world seems travelling into space,  
And travelling at a faster pace  
Than in the leisured summer weather  
When we and it sit out together,  
For now we feel the world spin round  
On some momentous journey bound –  
Journey to what? to whom? to where?  
The Advent bells call out 'Prepare,  
Your world is journeying to the birth  
Of God made Man for us on earth.'


And how, in fact, do we prepare  
For the great day that waits us there –  
The twenty-fifth day of December,  
The birth of Christ? For some it means  
An interchange of hunting scenes  
On coloured cards. And I remember  
Last year I sent out twenty yards,  
Laid end to end, of Christmas cards  
To people that I scarcely know –  
They'd sent a card to me, and so  
I had to send one back. Oh dear!  
Is this a form of Christmas cheer?  
Or is it, which is less surprising,  
My pride gone in for advertising?  
The only cards that really count  
Are that extremely small amount  
From real friends who keep in touch  
And are not rich but love us much.  
Some ways indeed are very odd  
By which we hail the birth of God.

We raise the price of things in shops,  
We give plain boxes fancy tops  
And lines which traders cannot sell  
Thus parcell'd go extremely well.  
We dole out bribes we call a present  
To those to whom we must be pleasant  
For business reasons. Our defence is  
These bribes are charged against expenses  
And bring relief in Income Tax.  
Enough of these unworthy cracks!  
'The time draws near the birth of Christ',  
A present that cannot be priced  
Given two thousand years ago.  
Yet if God had not given so  
He still would be a distant stranger  
And not the Baby in the manger.

*John Betjeman*

*This was the moment when Before  
Turned into After . . .*





## Christmas Morn

Shall I tell you what will come  
to Bethlehem on Christmas morn,  
who will kneel them gently down  
before the Lord new-born?

One small fish from the river,  
with scales of red, red gold,  
one wild bee from the heather,  
one grey lamb from the fold,  
one ox from the high pasture,  
one black bull from the herd,  
one goatling from the far hills,  
one white, white bird.

And many children – God give them grace,  
bringing tall candles to light Mary's face.


*Ruth Sawyer*


## Joseph was an Old Man

Joseph was an old man,  
and an old man was he,  
When he wedded Mary,  
in the land of Galilee.

Joseph and Mary walked  
through the orchard good,  
Where was cherries and berries,  
so red as any blood.

Joseph and Mary walked  
through an orchard green,  
Where was berries and cherries,  
as thick as might be seen.





O then bespoke Mary,  
so meek and so mild:  
'Pluck me one cherry, Joseph,  
for I am with child.'

O then bespoke Joseph,  
with words most unkind:  
'Let him pluck thee a cherry  
that brought thee with child.'

O then bespoke the babe  
within his mother's womb:  
'Bow down then the tallest tree,  
for my mother to have some.'

Then bowed down the highest tree  
unto his mother's hand;  
Then she cried, 'See, Joseph,  
I have cherries at command.'

O then bespoke Joseph:  
'I have done Mary wrong;  
But cheer up, my dearest,  
and be not cast down.'

Then Mary plucked a cherry,  
as red as the blood,  
Then Mary went home  
with her heavy load.

Then Mary took her babe,  
and sat him on her knee,  
Saying, 'My dear son, tell me,  
what this world will be.'

