

## Winter and Christmas poetry

Shakespeare:

Blow, blow, thou winter wind. Thou art not so unkind  
As man's ingratitude;  
Thy tooth is not so keen, Because thou art not seen,  
Although thy breath be rude.  
Heigh-ho! sing, heigh-ho! unto the green holly:  
Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly:  
Then, heigh-ho, the holly! This life is most jolly.  
Freeze, freeze, thou bitter sky, That dost not bite so nigh  
As benefits forgot:  
Though thou the waters warp, Thy sting is not so sharp  
As friend remember'd not.  
Heigh-ho!

Douglas Florian:

Look at winter With winter eyes  
As smoke curls from rooftops To clear cobalt skies.  
Breathe in winter Past winter nose:  
The sweet scent of black birch Where velvet moss grows.  
Walk through winter With winter feet  
On crackling ice Or sloshy wet sleet.  
Look at winter With winter eyes:  
The rustling of oak leaves  
As spring slowly nears.

### ***TO KNOW THE DARK*** by WENDELL BERRY

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.  
To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,  
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,  
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.

**White-Eyes** by MARY OLIVER

In winter

all the singing is in  
the tops of the trees  
where the wind-bird

with its white eyes  
shoves and pushes  
among the branches.

Like any of us  
he wants to go to sleep,  
but he's restless –

he has an idea,  
and slowly it unfolds  
from under his beating wings  
as long as he stays awake.  
But his big, round music, after all  
is too breathy to last.

So, it's over.  
In the pine-crown  
he makes his nest  
he's done all he can.

I don't know the name of this bird,  
I only imagine his glittering beak  
tucked in a white wing  
while the clouds—

which he has summoned  
from the north—  
which he has taught  
to be mild, and silent—

thicken, and begin to fall  
into the world below  
like stars, or the feathers  
of some unimaginable bird

that loves us,  
that is asleep now, and silent – that has turned itself into snow.

From “**For the Time Being**” by  
W.H. Auden

**Well, so that is that.** Now we must dismantle the tree,  
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes –  
Some have got broken – and carrying them up to the attic.  
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,  
And the children got ready for school. There are enough  
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week –  
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,  
Stayed up so late, attempted – quite unsuccessfully –  
To love all of our relatives, and in general  
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again  
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed  
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable  
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,  
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,  
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.  
The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,  
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware  
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought  
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now  
Be very far off. But, for the time being, here we all are,

Back in the moderate Aristotelian city  
Of darning and the Eight-Fifteen, where Euclid's geometry  
And Newton's mechanics would account for our experience,  
And the kitchen table exists because I scrub it.  
It seems to have shrunk during the holidays. The streets  
Are much narrower than we remembered; we had forgotten  
The office was as depressing as this. To those who have seen  
The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,  
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.  
For the innocent children who whispered so excitedly  
Outside the locked door where they knew the presents to be  
Grew up when it opened. Now, recollecting that moment  
We can repress the joy, but the guilt remains conscious;  
Remembering the stable where for once in our lives  
Everything became a You and nothing was an It.

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This selection is excerpted from Auden's long poem "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio" (1942).

(This is probably my favorite Christmas poem. I like what *New York Times* critic Peter Steinfels wrote about it: "With its metaphysical musings and theological underpinnings, the poem will never replace 'The Night Before Christmas' or the seasonal pageant at Radio City Music Hall. But Auden's is a Christmas that can glimpse redemption even in the trivialization of Christmas, in the frantic shopping, distracted gaiety, and unsuccessful attempts, as he says, to love all of our relatives. This is a Christmas for grown-ups." Suellen)