

PAGE-TURNER

A FORGOTTEN BOOK OF CHRISTMAS POEMS

“American Christmas,” first published in 1965, includes both classic and nearly unknown works, and widens a reader’s sense of what the holiday might mean.

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What makes a Christmas poem? It could be a drift of snow or some evergreen trees, a box of candy canes or the baby Jesus. The best-

known poem attending to the holiday is probably “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” also known as “’Twas the Night Before Christmas,” with characters such as quiet mice, clattering reindeer, and toy-toting Santa Claus. My favorite poem of the season is the prologue to the Gospel of John, although it lacks stables and mangers and swaddled babes. “Christmas poem” is a capacious category, occupied by a wide range of poems and populated by a startling variety of poets.

I was reminded of this when I finally tracked down a copy of a book I’d long heard about but never read. “American Christmas” was first published in 1965; I now own a copy of the second edition of the anthology, published two years later, with some additional poems. The book is not only a what’s what of Christmas—its weather, rituals, trimmings, origins, and meanings—but a who’s who of poetry: W. H. Auden, Gwendolyn Brooks, Emily Dickinson, T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Langston Hughes, and dozens more. Christmas turns out to be an excellent subject for a collection of poems: as a theme, it is more specific than “spring” and less obvious than “grief,” but like those two it is widely shared and regularly recurring, and seems to call for something more than prose.

The writers in “American Christmas” range from the devoutly Christian—there’s a “Carol” by the Trappist monk Thomas Merton—to the decidedly not, including the Jewish poet Howard Nemerov, who casts a cold eye on Santa Claus, calling him an “overstuffed confidence man.” And the poems themselves, though all written by Americans, roam all around the world, from expected towns like Bethlehem and Nazareth to unexpected cities like Oaxaca and Ulm, and traverse large swaths of the country, too, from Alabama to Michigan, across the fields of New England and the streets of Manhattan.

But perhaps the most surprising thing about “American Christmas” is its publisher: Hallmark. The Hall brothers, sons of a Methodist minister, got their start selling postcards in the early twentieth century, before branching

out into greeting cards and wrapping paper, and eventually manufacturing gifts such as puzzles and books. Even as Hallmark developed a reputation for the corny and the commercial—especially when it came to Christmas—it sometimes dabbled in poetry of a different sort, whether anthologies like this one or, more recently, an arrangement with Maya Angelou that reproduced lines of her work on cards, bookmarks, journals, and candleholders.

Angelou made millions off that partnership; correspondence saved by Thomas Merton suggests that the poets in “American Christmas” made just a hundred dollars or so for each poem Hallmark published. Most of the poems had appeared elsewhere, including Randall Jarrell’s “The Augsburg Adoration,” which ran first in this magazine, but the poem by Gwendolyn Brooks is not one I’ve seen anywhere else. Called “Christmas at Church,” it begins with the sound of an organ, whose notes build an architecture of noise that protects parishioners from the worries outside: “No more the troubles of the day or dusk / When music is a leaning wall of peace.” The speaker is moved by the religious space more than the sermon delivered in it. “We abide in beauty,” she says, adding that, for some, “the Christmas message is a Medicine,” but, for her, the booming music and the high ceilings are more healing and soothing. In the poem’s final stanza, the speaker picks up some of the preacher’s language, drawing on hallowed words for the Lord, including “refuge” and “Strengthened,” resolving them into a sense of agency about the world beyond the sanctuary. “To gird us, spur us back into the flame / And steam,” Brooks writes. “Our forces, faith and confidence. / Our guide, the superstructure of a Name.”

Those last three lines seem perfectly ambiguous about whether the speaker has surrendered to religious faith or exceeded it in some way: the “Name” she refers to in the final syllable is the super-est structure of them all, everything from the tetragrammaton to the Trinity, the unspeakable and often spoken names of God, but there’s also a sense in which the old language becomes a foundation for new meaning. “Christmas at Church” could be a conversion or a renunciation.

“American Christmas” includes other poems that wrestle with the relevance of religious belief in a bustling, commercial, and largely secular age. Langston Hughes’s brief “Christmas Eve: Nearly Midnight in New York” is like a Burl Ives special, with street sellers “almost” done with their tree sales and skyscrapers “almost” dimmed and New York City “almost” as silent “as Bethlehem must have been.” The speaker knows about the angels who sang “PEACE ON EARTH!” and “GOOD WILL TO MEN!” But he doesn’t see any angels in Manhattan, only the Statue of Liberty. In each of his four stanzas, Hughes looks for the ancient peace and quiet of faith, but is always only on the verge of finding it. Maybe that’s because it’s still the eve of Christmas, not yet Christmas Day, or maybe that’s because we are a little less able to hear any angelic chorus, no matter the hour, more than two thousand Christmases later.

Sometimes, though, it is enough just to remember twenty Christmases ago, when your children were still children, or you yourself were still a child. “Little Tree” by E. E. Cummings, which is widely known beyond this anthology, including as an illustrated book for young readers, can bring to mind such memories. In it, two children fall in love with their family’s “little silent Christmas tree,” kissing its bark, hugging its limbs, decorating its every branch with “the spangles / that sleep all the year in a dark box / dreaming of being taken out and allowed to shine.” Although Cummings’s children ask the tree “who found you in the green forest / and were you very sorry to come away,” their concern for its grief and relocation is fleeting, overwhelmed by their own desire to console and comfort. Cummings lets the tree live forever and the children stay young forever; even the poem seems to go on forever, ending as it does with “Noël Noël,” so that we readers supply the other two “Noël”s and keep singing after the last line.

But we do grow up, of course, and with adulthood come ideas like trespass, theft, and death. The Robert Frost poem in “American Christmas” is about a Christmas tree, too, but its wearied tone is announced in the title: “To A

Young Wretch.” The wretch in question has cut down one of the speaker’s spruce trees without his permission. “It is your Christmases against my woods,” he says of the young boy’s desires, echoing Frost’s more famous woods and snowy evenings, pitting them against the pristine wilds of the New England forests. “I could have bought you just as good a tree,” he argues, but then reasons “tree by charity is not the same / As tree by enterprise and expedition” and concludes, “I must not spoil your Christmas with contrition.”

That chastening rhyme is so subtly theological you might read right past it if it were not for the philosophical parenthetical of the poem’s subtitle:

“(Boethian).” The exercise of making sense of such a theft and forgiving such a transgression was not theoretical for Frost, and at least one “wretch” came forward over the years to say that as a young man in Shaftsbury, Vermont, he chopped down one of the poet’s evergreens during the Great Depression and dragged it home for his family’s Christmas celebration. Apparently, Frost called the town constable, though he doesn’t mention any civil authorities in the poem’s compact theodicy—he takes only a few iambs to transform the easy, soft “E”s of the words for adventure and pleasure into the hard, cacophonous “C”s of the language for grace and forgiveness.

Beauty may repair what’s broken, as when “tinsel chain and popcorn rope” adorn the poet’s cut-down tree, but the tree is still “a captive in your window bay,” and the poetry we make in captivity is effortful. Frost’s final stanza makes good on that modal verb “must,” since the speaker is still trying to make his peace with what has happened, not only to him but to the spruce tree itself, which has lost its view of heaven but gained a halo: “The symbol star it lifts against your ceiling / Help me accept its fate with Christmas feeling.”

Christmas feeling these days is so often reduced to the purely commercial, with endless shopping lists compiled from endless shopping guides, but two of the best poems in “American Christmas” evoke

the wisdom of the holiday's original gift givers. "Journey of the Magi," written by T. S. Eliot after his return to the Christian faith, opens with one of the wise men grumbling about how cold and how lengthy their trip had been to meet the Son of God. "Just the worst time of the year / For a journey, and such a long journey," he says, recalling how at the time he wished for "The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces / And the silken girls bringing sherbet" of earlier journeys. Like an unhappy tourist, he complains about "the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters, / And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly / And the villages dirty and charging high prices."

But, in the second stanza, morning breaks, and Eliot's grumpy Magus remembers the *locus amoenus* that was Bethlehem. Snow has stopped falling; fresh water and warmth are waiting. Symbolism abounds, with the apocalypse's white horse appearing and three trees prefiguring the Cross; still, meaning remains elusive. Eliot not only restores the humanity of these old men riding their camels for many sore miles, he also revives what must have been their cold confusion about what they found at their journey's end. There are no angels for the Magi, no servant of the Lord proclaiming glad tidings or offering a reassuring word. The three travellers are left wondering "were we led all that way for / Birth or Death?"

Suddenly, the speaker is in his own mind, and the last stanza gives up on the road-tripping to puzzle over what it all meant. Yes, they found a baby, and the Magus senses that the birth he witnessed was different than any he had seen before; still, remembering the Nativity years later, he hasn't sorted out that difference. The poet knows what the speaker doesn't, but it is a compassionate act of imagination to consider the old men returning to their faraway kingdoms, having seen only the birth of Jesus, not the miraculous ministry of Christ nor his suffering death, much less the resurrection of the incarnate God they met in infancy. All the speaker of Eliot's poem can say for certain is that his journey left him uneasy, and—as if he was speaking for

the poet himself, who had left the United States and recently been baptized in the Anglican Church—that his uneasiness separates himself from his neighbors and his countrymen. Although “Journey of the Magi” first appeared on a Christmas card sent out by Eliot’s British publisher, there’s a reason Hallmark printed it in their anthology and not on one of their paper greetings: there is more fear than joy in it, and readers understand from the Magus that direct encounters with God may leave us more anxious in the world, not less so.

Happily, it isn’t the only poem in the collection about the Magi. William Carlos Williams knew one of the editors of the anthology, Webster Schott, and he contributed a poem called “The Gift,” which responds generally to the gospel stories of the birth of Jesus, and specifically to “an old print” of a painting by Sandro Botticelli, “The Mystical Nativity.” It’s a stunning and strange painting, created by Botticelli while under the spell of the apocalyptic preacher Girolamo Savonarola, who turned some Florentines into weeping hysterics and convinced others to burn their books and art, vanities bonfired willingly to save their city from God’s judgment.

In the painting, angels dance in the heavens above the manger, the Holy Family, and the Magi that we associate with the Nativity, but below that conventional scene another set of angels do a different dance, embracing three human beings as demons sink down to hell under their feet. Williams seems to have liked those demons, and I can see why—they’re grotesque, but in a Maurice Sendak sort of way, smiling churlishly as they flee from the cherubic Christ, who is comically large, almost as big as his father and the ox sitting serenely behind them.

“The Gift” is a little more like the Christmas tale most moderns know. There’s death, but not too much; plenty of gifts; and, most recognizably of all, beauty, glory, and the “hallelujah” kind of love. Part of Williams’s conceit is that the Magi were actually terrible at gift-giving: “The men were old / how could they know / of a mother’s needs / or a child’s / appetite?” The

wise men brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh, none of which were probably of immediate use to the postpartum Mary or her infant. Williams makes their ridiculous, radiant extravagance clearer than it is in the Biblical text; his Magi appear like doting uncles who show up with priceless porcelain instead of Pampers, or elderly neighbors who bring fine jewelry instead of Fisher Price.

Impracticality may well be the point, as many a sermon, not only on Christmas but on any given Sunday, has pointed out: extravagant gifts are one of the most common metaphors for grace. As Williams writes, these three gifts “stood for all that love can bring,” the fulfillment of which is “The Gift” itself, the Christ child. Whereas Eliot ends his poem with his Magus welcoming “another death,” Williams refutes our fearful mortality with a brave question: “What is death, / beside this?”

I find that question a rousing statement of faith even if I don't think the speaker or the poet shares mine. In an earlier stanza, the secular Williams places the story of Christ's birth in the context of all stories, writing that the imagination “knows the truth of this one / past all defection.” He means, I gather, that even those with no religious faith, who see only flaw and fancy in the story of the Nativity, can still find meaning in the miracle of love, natural if not supernatural. It is that love, I think, that's the essence of the Christmas story and of any Christmas poem. ♦