
“IN A BLEAK MIDWINTER” (1872) BY CHRISTINA ROSSETTI (1830- 1894)

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Christina Rossetti, in 1872, wrote these words in response to a request from the magazine *Scribner's Monthly* for a Christmas poem.

The music is “Cranham” by Gustav T. Holst (1906).

Musical performances: The Queen's Six with Richard Pinel, *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming* (2017); Sarah McLachlan, *Wintersong* (2006); Poella, *In the Bleak Midwinter (Piano & Poetry)*, (2019); **James Taylor, *James Taylor at Christmas* (2006)**; Voces8, *Winter* (2016).

“Christina Rossetti wrote huge volumes of religious and secular poetry. It is helpful to remember that she wrote poems on Classical subjects as well as Christian; her vision was shaped by Italian masters like Dante, as much as by emergent Anglican pieties, and she wrote in Italian as well as in English. She lived through the emergent heights of the Victorian Empire (dying in 1894) as part of one of the most prominent artistic families in the land; if by 1872, when ‘In the Bleak Midwinter’ was published, her poetic attentions were increasingly and firmly fixed on devotional verse and subjects, she also had a rich cultural and personal grasp of life’s realities. Not only had she experienced the limits of being a middle-class woman in a patriarchal culture, she had experienced significant personal ill-health and familial loss.” [Rachel Mann. *In the Bleak Midwinter: Advent and Christmas with Christina Rossetti* (pp. 8-9). Canterbury Press Norwich. Kindle Edition.]

TEXT

In the¹ bleak² midwinter,³
Frosty wind made moan,⁴

¹ “**the**” – Notice this use of the definite article, where we might have expected “In *a* bleak midwinter....” In other words, Rossetti makes it clear that she means one very specific year and its particular midwinter time.

² “**bleak**” – The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**bleak**” – “Pale, pallid, wan; deficient in colour, esp. deficient in the ruddy bloom of health, or the full green of vegetation; of a sickly hue: also used like *pale* to modify other colours (see 1b).” This first meaning suggests illness, or the approach of death upon a living thing. And so for Rossetti using this adjective here could mean something more than what the wintry vegetation looks like; it could refer to a particularly death-saturated time in the human community: sickness of soul, heart-sickness, hopelessness. But it also means, “Cold, chilly; usually of wind or weather.” And thus its figurative use meaning “cheerless, dreary.”

³ See: https://www.bible-history.com/geography/seasons_months_israel.html - In Israel the yearly cycle with its four seasons are not as clearly marked as the lands to the north of it. But to the Jew every season was a special time and a reminder of the promises of God, as He said to Noah "seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter" (Genesis 8: 22). Though the Bible specifically mentions summer, winter, spring and autumn, it may come as a surprise to know that the Bible never mentions four seasons, but only two. The Hebrew word "*stav*", translated today as **autumn**, is mentioned only once in the Bible in the Song of Solomon: "for lo, the winter is passed, the rain is over and gone..." (Song 2:11), "*stav*" really speaks of the time of the winter rains. The Hebrew word "*aviv*", translated today as spring is mentioned twice in the Bible, both referring to a stage in the ripening of barley rather than a season. The month of Aviv (*hodesh ha'aviv*) is the time when this ripening of barley takes place, this is of course the Hebrew month of Nissan. **There is no mention of a season called spring anywhere in the Bible. Therefore we must conclude that the Bible only recognizes two seasons, summer and winter, or as the writers of the Talmud put it, "the days of sun" and "the days of rain."** And later in this article: "**January** - This is the coldest month, which brings with it dark and gloomy days and heavy rainfalls." Then see: <http://blog.adw.org/2014/07/what-was-the-climate-and-weather-of-israel-like-at-the-time-of-jesus/> - "The climate in Palestine both today and at the time of Jesus has *two distinct seasons*. **The wet or rainy season is from the middle of October to the middle of April. The dry or summer season lasts from the middle of June until the middle of September.** It is quite dry in these months and rainfall is very unusual."

⁴ “**made moan**” – The sense is that “the midwinter made the frosty wind moan”. And so, “**to moan**” is used intransitively, which means the *Oxford English Dictionary* at the verb “to moan” – “*intransitive*. **To lament, grieve**. Frequently with *of, for, over*. Now chiefly *Scottish* and *poetic*.” But “to moan” also means: “*transitive*. To complain of, **lament**; to bemoan, bewail. Now *rare*.”

Earth stood⁵ hard as iron,⁶
Water like a stone;⁷
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,
Snow on snow,⁸
In the bleak midwinter,
Long ago.⁹

⁵ “**stood**” – We do not expect the Earth “to stand”. So, what I think Rossetti has in mind is how winter freezes things in place – “to stand” – whereas in a warmer season those things might lean over, bend, be flexible. But, I think it could also mean “stand” as in the statement “Here I stand!”, which means **I will not move or be persuaded**. *In other words, “bleakness” of soul can cause people, otherwise flexible of spirit, to freeze into obstinacy*. I think we are close to what Rossetti seeks to say: “bleak”, “frosty”, “stood”, “hard as iron” are not only descriptions of a wintry landscape but also a way of characterizing people who have become obstinate.

⁶ “**iron**” – She could have said hard as ice or stone. But by using iron, she evokes the kind of person that comes into existence through the **Industrial Revolution (1760-1820)**: a mechanizing and mechanized man and woman, who serve **the iron hearts** of the machines they work. *Wikipedia - The Industrial Revolution*, now also known as the First Industrial Revolution, was the transition to new manufacturing processes in Europe and the United States, in the period from about 1760 to sometime between 1820 and 1840. **This transition included going from hand production methods to machines**, new chemical manufacturing and iron production processes, the increasing use of steam power and water power, the development of machine tools and the rise of the mechanized factory system. The Industrial Revolution also led to an unprecedented rise in the rate of population growth.”

⁷ “**water like a stone**” – A simile – “a figure of speech comparing two unlike things that is often introduced by ‘like’ or ‘as’.” Yet, when water freezes it shares the property of hardness with stone. **But at this point in the poem, “water like a stone” is recalling how we, human beings, can become stuck or lifeless or unbending or untouchable through trials, persistent trials, that threaten or harm us**. We say of a person, “He or she became hardened” or “He or she is hard” (i.e., you get bruised if you run into him or her).

⁸ “**snow on snow**” – Such a beautiful poetic repetition, both within the line and in relation to the next line. Only someone who lives in a part of the world where it regularly snows in winter understands how snow piles on snow, as each successive snow fall arrives. But “snow on snow” also describes a winter during which the cold never lets go – the only circumstance when snow can pile on snow. Spokane used to be like that when I was a boy, but then the climate pattern changed and winter started to become “snow and melt; snow and melt.”

⁹ “**long ago**” – When Rossetti deploys this phrase, she adds to the poem the enchantment of a Great Story that we love to hear: “Once upon a time....”

Our God,¹⁰ heaven cannot hold Him,¹¹
Nor earth sustain;¹²
Heaven and earth shall¹³ flee away¹⁴
When He comes to reign:¹⁵
In the bleak midwinter
A stable-place sufficed¹⁶

¹⁰ “**Our God**” – I am quite certain that there is nothing of possessiveness in this phrase, as if “our God” is, well, *ours* ... not yours. What she means is what Jesus meant when He taught His disciples to pray saying “Our Father...” “Our God” here expresses universality, *the* God of gods, the God for everyone, or as the Hebrews put it, “God with us - Emmanuel.”

¹¹ “**cannot hold Him**” – This *encompassing* image, an *enfolding* image, has a distinctly womb-like sound to it. But also, as a result, it evokes the image of the womb of Mary who *can* hold Him for a time, His mother who *will* hold Him and care for Him as a defenseless baby. Who ever thought of God the Son “held” by Heaven, by Heaven which proved unable to hold Him because of the impelling power of His mission on Earth ... as it is in Heaven? The use of “cannot” captures so beautifully the unstoppable divine Purpose of the divine Son.

¹² The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**to sustain**” – Who would ever think of us human beings – of us and of everything of the Earth – as needing or imagining it our role “to sustain” God?! The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**to sustain**” – “*transitive*. To keep in existence, maintain; *spec.* to cause to continue in a certain state for an extended period or without interruption; to keep or maintain at the proper level, standard, or rate; to preserve the status of.” But in contemporary times, the idea that human beings are good at sustaining anything very well, such as the natural world, is becoming more preposterous. Human beings demonstrate too often an enormous and creative capacity to destroy both the human and the natural worlds. And so the idea that we can or could “sustain” God come into this world makes all the clearer why God came to be with us: we have gotten so way out of our depth!

¹³ “**shall**” – This does not mean futurity, but deliberate intention – “they *shall* flee....” Futurity would be expressed “Heaven and earth *will* flee away.”

¹⁴ “flee away” – Such an unexpected verb! I am reminded of Matthew 24: 35 – “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” [*New American Bible, Revised Edition*. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Mt 24:35.]

¹⁵ “**when He comes to reign**” – This is not referring to the Incarnation – what we might expect in a Christmas Carol – but to the Second Coming, when “on earth as it is in heaven” will finally come to be in Christ the King. I think of 1 **Corinthians 15:28** – “When everything is subjected to him, then the Son himself will [also] be subjected to the one who subjected everything to him, so that God may be all in all.” [*New American Bible, Revised Edition*. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), 1 Co 15:28.]

¹⁶ The *Oxford English Dictionary* “**to suffice**” – “*intransitive*. To be enough, sufficient, or adequate for a purpose or the end in view.” This captures something so characteristic of God; namely, God knows how to measure what He requires – *enough, but not more than enough*: to suffice. It is we human beings who think that if enough is OK, then adding to that is better. *Enough is never enough for us*. And we have an entire materialistic culture dedicated to making sure that we never feel that we have what we need, to

The Lord God Almighty,
Jesus Christ.

Enough for Him,¹⁷ whom cherubim,¹⁸
Worship night and day,
A breastful of milk,
And a mangerful of hay;
Enough for Him¹⁹ whom angels
Fall down before,
The ox and ass and camel
Which adore.²⁰

Angels and archangels
May have²¹ gathered there,²²

make us feel sure that we still lack something that we need. For God, “a stable-place sufficed.” We hear how God measures in the Lord’s Prayer: “give us

¹⁷ “**Enough for him**” – Here again is the idea of sufficiency – **what is necessary, but not more than necessary.**

¹⁸ “**cherubim**” (plural of “cherub”) – The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**cherub**” – “One of the **second order of angels of the Dionysian hierarchy, reputed to excel specially in knowledge (as the seraphim in love)**; a conventional representation of such an angelic being in painting or sculpture. As the Christian notion was simply super-imposed as a kind of gloss upon the Hebrew, the two are not usually separable in medieval Latin or English. Milton completely blends them, as did e.g. Durandus in his *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* (1286). **In early Christian art, cherubim were apparently coloured red, but according to some, blue, the seraphim being red. In modern art, a cherub is usually represented as a beautiful winged child, or as consisting of a child's head with wings but no body.**” And, further, in the *Dictionary of Christian Art* by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (Continuum, 1994) at “cherubim” – “The second Order of the first Hierarchy of the Angels. Led by the Archangel Jophiel, **they guarded the Tree of Knowledge and the Garden of Eden, and protected the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple of Solomon.... As symbols of God’s wisdom, cherubim held or read books.**”

¹⁹ “Enough for him” – The repetition creates emphasis on this point, this characteristic of God.

²⁰ This stanza contrasts the created and the uncreated world, and how God in the divine Son, in the God-Man, **becomes equally at home in both realms.** Rossetti, instead of entering the fray of the great arguments of the early Church about how it is that God can become human, without losing either identity in the process, or “confusing” one nature in another, etc., simply states with poetic power how God has what God needs in this world.

²¹ “**may have**” – I love that Rossetti’s contemplation causes her to wonder whether the “angels and Archangels” were also visitors at the Bethlehem crib.

²² “The *Celestial Hierarchy* [written by Dionysius the Areopagite, c 500 CE] ushered into Christian spirituality a notion that had a transforming effect, namely that of *angelic hierarchy*. **The term means a holy principle, but in reference to the angels, it meant an organizational pattern in which**

Cherubim and seraphim
Thronged²³ the air;
But only His mother,
In her maiden²⁴ bliss²⁵
Worshipped the Beloved²⁶
With a kiss.²⁷

groups of angels were arranged in a descending or ascending order in accordance to one's perspective, for example, seraphim (love), cherubim (knowledge), thrones (forever in the divine presence), dominions (benevolent rule), powers (courage), authorities (lift up inferior angels), principalities (manifest transcendent principles), archangels (interpreters of divine enlightenment), and angels (revelation to the world). **These nine levels provide the framework of the human spiritual journey.** *Angelic spirituality, then, consists largely in the awakening of these levels in the human person and in the movement of the soul to greater union with God. This is accomplished through the direct ministry of angels and through the correspondences latent in the soul that can be awakened in the spiritual journey.*" [Ewert H. Cousins, "Preface," in *Angelic Spirituality: Medieval Perspectives on the Ways of Angels*, ed. Bernard McGinn, trans. Steven Chase, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002), the Preface, xx.]

²³ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the verb "**to throng**" – "*transitive*. To crowd round and press against; to press or push against as in a crowd, to jostle. Also *figurative*."

²⁴ "**maiden**" – She cannot be a "maiden" if she has conceived and born a child! And so we are meant to feel again the wonder of "the virgin birth". The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the noun "**maiden**" – "**A virgin; spec. the Virgin Mary.**"

²⁵ "**bliss**" – This noun refers more to the way a person experiences the other person than it does to the way the other person experiences herself. The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**bliss**" – "Blitheness of aspect toward others, **kindness of manner; 'light of one's countenance,' 'smile.'** (Only in Old English)."

²⁶ "the Beloved" – When she uses the capital "B" for "Beloved", she is referring to the Father's special way of speaking to and about His Son.

²⁷ "**with a kiss**" – One of the most astonishing, beautiful lines in the poem. The point is that the higher-order beings are not *corporeal*, not *embodied* beings, and so they neither have lips or means to interact with the Baby in this bodily way. The poem gives the impression that the Angels and Archangels (to refer to the two lowest Orders in the celestial hierarchy), not to mention the two highest Orders – the seraphim and cherubim – wish that they also could worship the Son with a kiss.

What can I give Him,²⁸
 Poor as I am?²⁹
If I were³⁰ 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.

²⁸ “**What can I give Him**” – That the poet finds in herself an exigence to *respond* to this that she is contemplating – that first Christmas in Bethlehem – expresses something true about a good soul. It always feels within itself the need to respond when given a gift – an exchange of gifts. But then it dawns on her that there is no gift that she could give Him that is *sufficient*. This then brings us round at the end of the poem to the theme we have noticed from the beginning of it: What is sufficient for God to act, to be present.

²⁹ “**Poor as I am**” – The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**poor**” – “Of a person or people: having few, or no, material possessions; lacking the means to procure the comforts or necessities of life, or to live at a standard considered comfortable or normal in society; needy, necessitous, indigent, destitute. Sometimes: *spec.* so destitute as to be dependent upon gifts or allowances for subsistence. Opposed to *rich*.”

³⁰ “**If I were...**” – This is a hypothesis contrary to fact Subjunctive form, meaning that “if I were a shepherd ... but I’m not.” However, **the gift of contemplation** – and it is a gift effected by the Holy Spirit – which *gives a person the ability to be present within a biblical scene* (it is something that the Spirit does in the imagination especially), rather than just imagining what it would be like to be present therein – does allow the poet to become a shepherd in this very specific way. And so it is from this contemplative presence to the biblical scene that the poet “knows” what it would be that she must give to the Babe and His family