

# Winter words



**by**  
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# Contents

Introduction	3
Trim	4
Bleak	5
Crib	6
Wrap	7
Receive	8
Give	9
Yule	10
Sprout	11
Tree	12
Low	13
Present	14
Card	15
Frost	16
Needle	17
Scent	18
Silent	19
Stuff	20
Box	21
Snow	22
Celebrate	23
Solstice	24
Holly	25
Tipple	26
Eve	27
Noël	28
Notes	29

# Introduction

Bleak. Low. Frost. Snow. These are words many would associate with Winter: that time of year when both weather and our spirits lie at their undermost. But the month of December ends with the festive season, which may prompt words such as Give, Present, Celebrate, and Tipple. I must warn the reader I was in a right old dudgeon during December 2021 when these poems were conceived, so I did my best to subvert all the uplifting words and sidestep as far as I could mention of festivities, Christmas, or any such religious nonsense.

The poems were created in an online project ably organised by two great friends of mine: Gill Lambert and Mark Connors. They presented us an online Advent Calendar, allowing participants to open one “window” every day and get a word relevant to that time of year, then use it as a prompt to write a daily poem. Our poems were shared in a private Facebook group where we could constructively criticise one another’s work.

My first drafts were rather clunky due to their being knocked out one-a-day, but I’ve spent the past month-and-a-half revising them and incorporating some of the kind suggestions made by other group members, so I hope they are at least readable now. The first thing you will notice is how I’ve arranged stanzas of apparently random length alternatingly left and right justified, but if you appreciate poetic form you will discover all are in fact sonnets. Why have I done this? To experiment with alternative layouts mainly; and because I’ve noticed how off-putting some readers find a block of fourteen unbroken lines. I’m sure my free-verse writing peers slash random line breaks into prose for no reason but to make it look like poetry, so why not chop up a sonnet to make it look like free-verse?

All the poems bar one scan in loose pentameters comprising five stressed syllables per line, but I’ve endeavoured not to repeat a rhyme pattern in any two poems. Should you be unhappy enough to share my obsessive rhyme compulsion, you’ll find a notated description of the rhyme scheme in the Notes section at the end. I use upper case to indicate full rhymes (cat/hat), lower for part rhymes (cat/cut, cat/hut, cat/can), and X for non-rhymes, but I’ve been pushing complexity so far that even this system breaks down in places. I’d advise you not worry about it: just enjoy the poems!

# Trim

Nature wants to see her empire sprawl  
but clients like their privet hedges trim  
and lawns groomed flawless, like pashmina shawls  
- let's introduce our gardener, namely Tim,  
who lops Leylandiis that stand too tall  
and shears the squat Spirea to keep it slim.

You're justified to ask "How does he sleep  
at night? Do blasts of conscience buffet him?"

Nature's bent is bramble briars that creep  
at random, wreaking havoc in the border  
whilst this self-labelled eco-poet keeps  
strict symmetry like some unbending warder.

But everyone must eat, so Tim must reap  
an income pitching fork against disorder.

# Bleak

*after Gerard Manley Hopkins*

Not, I'll not, Pale Word, line with the block  
of poets faking comfort in your clique.

Though Earth is smelted ore reduced by coke  
- its rivers, swamps, and lakes now wastes of rock -  
my black dog since the failure of the COP  
that couldn't prod production from a peak,  
will cower with tucked in tail and not drive back  
the shocking climate crunch and what that wreaks.

To be of use, I need to play a bloke  
who's ever buoyant; feign relish for the seekh  
kebabs of die-back Ash twigs tandoored black;  
not speak you, Word, but tell how this stiff week  
of work I heard a jackdaw by the brook  
jack a cautious Spring-chack from its beak.

# Crib

Bent and bowed to fork between the shrubs,  
myalgia sticks a blade between my ribs.

Accustomed now to such attacks I shrug,  
continuing my task to form a crib  
of loosened soil for bedding plants in June.

With age I've grown desensitised to prick  
of briars opposing brave attempts to prune;  
to crunching knees and finger joints that click.

In thermal layers, or shorts and rolled up sleeves  
I've hedged and drudged this garden many years,  
staking blue Delphiniums like sheaves  
at harvest; setting bulbs; but now I fear  
one winter I shall lay down with the leaves.

Come Spring, a different gardener will serve here.

# Wrap

Wrapped against the drear December dawn  
we board an early bus for our appointments.

Knarborough's rain slopped streets ooze disenchantment;  
the market's stacks of poles and crates; forlorn,  
dishevelled pigeons sulk along a roof-ridge;  
less lucky pheasants drape the butcher's frontage.

We tramp to the Community Hub with leaden  
steps and take the pricks with resignation;  
abide recovery minutes with impatience  
then trot back to the square where cheer is spreading.

We foot-tap to a ukulele band  
cupping hot mulled wine in blueish hands  
and sun breaks through as messenger RNA  
wraps our cells against the next great wave.

# Receive

Lined up with mouths agape, they seem to shout  
for more and more as though each one is jealous  
of what the others get. We're knackered out  
fetching food for this clamouring clutch of bellies.

Back and forth all day to serve their need  
we get no thanks for the nourishment received  
but at least we find enough to quell the greed:  
we pack our boot with sacks of mouldered leaves  
and Arwen's gifts of trees and bust fence panels.

There's stacks of toys and tools cleared out from sheds  
and plastic crap from wasteful consumer channels.

"Cardboard" is stuffed now, full enough to fledge.  
A truck chugs up and another skip has flown,  
winging off and away to the great unknown.



# Give

The cornered politician never gives  
an inch of ground. He thinks he will do fine  
by clinging steadfast to the given line:

“I was not there, nor any friends of mine.”

“Were Christmas parties in the rules then?” drives  
the interviewer. The public smirks. He whines:

“No rules were broken!”, skewered on her tines.

I almost empathise but know his shine  
is gold for which the Opposition sieves.

He thinks we've all sneaked round to friends' to dine,  
walked barefaced into shops, or found divine  
the crush of loved ones' arms around our spines,  
and disbelieves that anybody's lives  
would bow to rules but those of how one lives.

# Yule

Oh no! - this had to come. I try my best  
to sidestep any utterance of the C-word  
until at most a week before. Why should

I waste the year's concluding month obsessed  
with celebrating you-know-who when He served  
no purpose in my life? I have no kids

and no religious feeling in my breast  
but feel the swell rise up whilst yet we're leeward  
of the dreaded day. If I just could

I'd change the name of this consumer fest.  
Of those to choose from, "xmas" is my key word -  
His birthday but His name x-cised. I would

settle though for "Yule", I guess  
- pre-xian root, so yes, I'll let it be heard.

# Sprout

Another day too awful to go out.

Rainfall sheets the street. I sit upstairs,  
complete my tax return and suchlike chores  
grown heavy through neglect. I think about  
my cancelled jobs, the money lost, remember  
using Winter to consolidate  
the Autumn clearance: that routine's in doubt  
now plants remain in flower till late November.

My gardens moulder, pummelled down, unweeded  
of bellbind, dock and wick, the roots I'd rout  
while top-growth sleeps. These Winter days are needed  
but all this frittered time has got me rattled.

I count the days before the bare twigs sprout,  
coarse grass breaks loose, and I go back to battle.

# Tree

It takes the two of us an hour or more -  
I didn't know the box would be so heavy.

We lug it up the tree and make it steady  
with ruthless four-inch screws so it's secure.

I'm sorry Tree - this must sound insincere  
to you who's suffered much abuse already  
from beetles, browsing deer, and suchlike rowdies  
whilst dreaming in this field two hundred years:  
my stabs are not the gravest wounds of yours

and when your leaves unfurl, with luck, you'll proudly  
host a healthy family of portly,  
wide-eyed tawny owls whose pittering claws  
invigorate your lonely nights and partly  
vindicate the pain our work has caused.

# Low

*inspired by Warren Mailley-Smith*

I'd not been to a real piano concert  
before last night's, down at the Wesley Hall.

Rock or folk has always been my thing  
but lately I've been doing classes sponsored  
by the Council. The soloist worked all  
his 88, coaxed each ivory to sing  
and each sang out that there's no hope for me -  
starting late in life, in want of Gift  
and furthermore, my cheap synth sells me short:  
my left hand lands on air below Bass C!

That may be just as well: tunes should uplift  
but hearing doom and gloom in news reports,  
sit me at a concert grand today  
and lows would be the only notes I'd play.

# Present

We go to see the building firm present  
their new proposal for the corner field.

They know how local residents resent  
their plans for yet more houses which would yield  
more cars to jam our packed suburban streets  
and rape the last green space not yet defiled  
by building works. The school hall's decked with sheets  
of photos, maps, and positive aspirations.

On hand to help are several beaming suits,  
smarming hard to soothe our consternation

but when I point out they've not shown the dwellings -  
just belts of green and land for recreation -  
the senior, suavest suit gets narky, smelling  
nimby, saying so... It ends in yelling.

# Card

*Bell Mills garden centre in Drifffield, East Yorkshire*

Taking my old Mum to watch the ducks  
where once (I'm talking yonks) she would take me,  
we find said birds outnumbered by a ruck  
of mottled gulls. I get us take-out tea,  
and tapping contactless my card I'm struck  
by how this has become quite normal now:  
gone the guilty feel of stuff for free.

The garden centre by the River Hull  
beneath the red brick mill does well on chow  
for waterfowl. All's quiet till someone scatters  
bird food on the mill pond and the dull  
reflection of a wintry sky is shattered  
by battling gluttons. The gutsy, gobbling gulls  
don't fret like me at immaterial matters.

# Frost

At least this morning there's no barbs of frost  
to needle through the fabric of my gloves,  
but six white vans already crowd the drive  
of Monday's garden. All is mud. The soft  
brown porridge hugs my work boots with a love  
that's not required. Inside, two painters strive  
to do the kitchen, one man lags the loft,  
and several outdoor tradesmen draw on tact:

I grit my teeth when snowdrop tips get squashed,  
deaf-ear their boom-box beats and hammer clouts,  
while window-fitters try to not react  
when my leaf-blower splats their sealing grout.

What I said before was not exact:  
there IS a touch of air-frost hereabout!



# Needle

Another work-day battling with briars,  
pyracantha, berberis and bramble,  
all with needles vicious as barbed wire,  
intractably twisted in pitiless antagonistic tangles.

I'm practically inured to getting stabbed  
and barely notice now when thorns like sickles  
slash my face. My hands, forever scabbed,  
persist because such dangers are inherent  
in my career, where gardens teem with prickles  
but long ago I learned to grin and bear it.

It's why I've scant compassion for the fear  
of pin-pricks that infests some people's brains:

I've braved so many jabs in this past year  
I'm immunised to minor surface pain.

# Scent

Today I'm told to write a poem on "scent",  
a task which would come easy in the summer  
for me whose every working day is spent  
in gardens, but in winter it's a bummer.

The few anaemic flowers I sniff don't vent  
aromas you'd describe with this day's word:  
"bad odour" is the term that represents  
more aptly whiffs of death, decay, and turd.

So I was losing hope until I went  
to my last job and found a single bloom  
upon a single rose that I had meant  
to prune the week before. It gushed perfume  
you might imagine wafting through the tents  
of Persian kings, or Turkish harem rooms.

# Silent

Silent they are not, Pink-footed geese.

Upside one hundred updale they come storming,  
cackles crackling in the sheepish morning  
as sunshine sparkles gold from rounded vees.

Silent neither are the hours that follow:  
planes buzz past and downdale traffic bellows.  
The rattle-clanks of tractors never cease.

Who believes the countryside is soundless?  
I shut my ears to quadbikes and the mindless  
moo of farm machinery but trees

resound each wind-puff and the river moans,  
till budding from the ridge, a gibbous moon  
asserts its place without a word, and peace

enfolds my being this wintry afternoon.

# Stuff

How did my house stack up with so much stuff?

Back from work, the moment I'm indoors  
a panoply of stuff I ought to slough  
from my sweet home assaults my eyes. The stuff  
encrusts all table tops; engulfs the floors.

I'd stuff it in the loft to gather fluff  
but there's stuff stuffed in there already, stuff  
that may have use though mainly it's just stuff  
I haven't got the heart to chuck away.

Old School economists still flatulate old guff  
that progress means growth, and growth means manufacturing stuff:  
that's why we're vexed with stuff like climate change  
and plastic in the sea. Enough's enough.

We need to say "Stuff that!" before we're stuffed.

# Box

I turn my head whilst cycling past the school  
so I can't see our cherished horse-field bulldozed,  
and not till Claro Road must take the poison  
packed in with the morning fog: the drool  
of petrol forced into my lungs, a full dose  
borne till One Arch where, safe route denied,  
I lock up, take to foot to take avoidance  
of drivers driving round and round the town.

The Advertiser headlines a divide  
between the speedsters and the "slow-it-down"s  
like me, although I feel - I must admit -  
for those who can't see \*\*\*\* for fog inside  
a four wheel jail cell lined with with walnut brown  
upholstery, nor think outside of it.

# Snow

Thick fog envelops fields and lays like snow  
in blankets on the shoulders of the larches  
onlooking Thruscross Reservoir in rows  
to cheer the River Washburn as it marches  
down from Pock Stones Moor to meet the waters  
of the Lower Wharfe. We circuit round,  
trudge bogs of copper grass like lashes rimmed  
with tears of West End's far-flung sons and daughters  
evicted from a life of rural peace  
before their homes surrendered to the dam.

Hearing children's shouts amongst the trees  
I wonder if the sound's a ghostly sham,

or if the cackling of the greylag geese  
is flax mill hands demanding who I am.

# Celebrate

I can't do this! What's there to celebrate?  
Next year no doubt, new variants will spring  
up all around the world; there's rising prices;  
bigotry and war; we face the fate  
of climate chaos and extinction crisis;  
forests fall, their birds no longer sing,  
and international talks have failed to date.

Well...

It's thirty years since I went on a date  
with one whose very voice makes songbirds sing,  
whose every look resolves my every crisis  
and every day I bless that stroke of fate.  
Let's pop the cork and care not what the price is  
for in a few months more it will be Spring.  
Bear up, my Love - we've much to celebrate!

# Solstice

The Winter Solstice never feels a time for joy somehow:  
days have withered short and all of nature grieves.

We fight on, but no matter how we try  
we bear a wretched loss inside  
usurping Summer's cheer.

This is the turning  
point

.

A joint  
in Time; the sturdy  
fulcrum of two years.

The old year sinking down provides  
the force required to raise the new one high,  
the ever longer days unfurling like the leaves  
of some great tree inviting birds to sing amongst its boughs.



# Holly

The Holly and the Ivy, when they're both  
full grown you have to cut the buggers back.

Of all the shrubs us gardeners have to tame  
Ivy's bad, but Holly we just loathe.

The Holly bears a berry, though in fact  
you rarely find one - blackbirds are to blame.

"Holy Mary!" I swore, "Jesus Christ!  
This effin' Holly bears a vicious prickle!"

this morning as I bagged it up. My knuckles  
bore blood, my hands were raw, my wrists were sliced.

As bitter as my gall is at the spears  
of sharpened thorn that do my skin no good,

the rising of the sun still made me glad  
until I saw those bloody running deer!

# Tipple

Name your poison...oops! I mean your tipple.

Anything you want, I'm sure this chap'll  
fix it up. A craft ale or a simple  
lager from the keg? There's all the staples:  
cider, reds and whites, champagne, a couple  
of vintage ports for more discerning people?

Or if you're gagging for an archetypal  
cocktail try his Blue Lagoon: one sip'll  
lift you up, but two - beware! - you'll topple.

Not sure? Quite right - the body is a temple!  
You'd like an orange juice? Or maybe apple?  
Or this blackcurrant cordial that's purple  
as wine Lord Jesus shared with his disciples?

"Neat Scotch" you say? Good choice! Let's have a triple.

# Eve

Barry McGuire in 1965

- the year I was born - roared a caustic song:  
dissent at what it was to be alive  
in turbulent times, and though I was too young  
to chant the refrain, I swear that grisly tune's  
been scratching in the background all along:  
the Eve of Destruction my every afternoon.

Over and over and over again, new dooms -  
climate breakdown, covid, wars - found chinks  
in modern self-assurance. At last immune  
to giddiness through wobbling on the brink  
near three score years, my tentative deduction's  
that people must be smarter than we think,  
so I don't believe we're on the eve of destruction.

# Noël

Thank \*\*\*\* another Yule's back in the box!  
When I unwrap a present and it's socks

I don't these days receive the gift with frost -  
I give my heartfelt thanks, for I'd be lost

without such stuff. I nurse no silent greed  
for cards nor scent, but socks I really need.

This may sound bleak, but I adjudge it folly  
to trim a tree and deck the halls with holly,

or shift the Solstice feast to Christmas Eve  
to accommodate beliefs I don't believe.

I have no love of sprouts nor plastic cribs  
so will not needle you with such low fibs:

I tipple on Twelfth Night, to celebrate  
one more Noël raked snow-cold in the grate.

# Notes

**Trim** ABABABCBCDCDCD

**Bleak** “the COP” - COP26 Climate Summit in Glasgow, November 2021.

Poem adapted from “Carrion Comfort” by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

My rhyme notation system has already hit a difficulty with this poem. All the end words except line 5 finish on a “k” consonant sound so it could be described aaaaXaaaaaaaaa but this would miss that many of the words are full rhymes too, and that COP is a part rhyme with block and rock. If we ignore the repeated “k”, we’ll get: ABCAaBDBCDBDBXB

**Crib** “myalgia” - muscle pain.

ABaBCDCDEFEFEF

**Wrap** AbbAccdeedFFgg

**Receive** “Arwen” - Storm Arwen which hit the UK on 26-27 November 2021.

AbAbCdCdEfEfGG

**Give** ABBBaBBBABBaA

**Yule** ABCAbcABCABCaB

**Sprout** “wick” - another name for the pernicious weed couch grass.

AbbACaACDADEAE

**Tree** This is a difficult one to notate. Lines 1-12 are in a complicated rhyme pattern I’ve been playing with for a few years, the best example being the poem “Wilderness story 2” in my book “Birder in the Bushveld”. Every odd-numbered line is the beginning of a quatrain that would be notated AbbA in my usual system. The best description I can come up with is: A1 B1 B2 A1 A2 B2 B3 A2 A3 B3 B4 A3 B5 A3

**Low** “all his 88” - a full piano keyboard has 88 keys.

ABCABCDEFDEFGG

**Present** ABABCbCDcDEDEE

**Card** ABABACBDCEDEDE

**Frost** aBCABCADaEDED

**Needle** AbAbCDCeDeFGFG

**Scent** ABABACACADADAD

**Silent** A1 b b A2 c c A1 d d A2 e E A1 E

**Stuff** Ar B A Ar B A Ar Ar c A Ar c A Ar where Ar represents the same word repeated.

**Box** “One Arch” - local name of a subway under the railway that provides pedestrian access to Harrogate town centre for people living on the eastern side of the town.

The poem makes reference to controversy over the proposed Harrogate Gateway Project, intended to improve the town centre for pedestrians, cyclists, and bus passengers.

ABcABDcEDEFDEF

**Snow** West End village was flooded in 1966 when the Thruscross Reservoir dam was completed.

ABABCddCDEDeDE

**Celebrate** ABCACBA and second stanza repeats the rhyme words in reverse order.

**Solstice** ABCDeF.FeDCBA with lines decreasing from seven stressed syllables to one, then back again.

**Holly** abCabCDeeDFggF

**Tipple** Ignoring that all the end words part-rhyme, you get ABcaadEAecBdEA (or something like that.)

**Eve** ABAbCACcDCDEDE

**Noël** See what I did here?

AABBCCDDEEFFGG

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