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Opening extract from

# A Poem for Every Night of the Year

Written by

**Allie Esiri**

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# *January*



## **1 January** ✶ New Every Morning ✶ Susan Coolidge

January takes its name from the Roman two-headed god Janus, who had one head looking back to the outgoing year and one facing the year ahead. Here, the American writer of *What Katy Did* reflects on new beginnings.

Every day is a fresh beginning,
Listen my soul to the glad refrain.
And, spite of old sorrows
And older sinning,
Troubles forecasted
And possible pain,
Take heart with the day and begin again.

## **2 January** ✶ The Loch Ness Monster's Song ✶ Edwin Morgan

2 January is a public holiday in Scotland. Edwin Morgan's poem celebrates Scotland's legendary monster in an unusual way. Composed of huge strings of wild sounds, this poem seems to make no sense at all — but when you think about it, there really is no reason that Nessie would speak any language that we could understand.

Sssnnnwhuffffll?
Hnwhuffl hhnnwfl hnfl hfl?
Gdroblboblhobngbl gbl gl g g g g glbgl.
Drublhaflablhaflubhafgabhaflhafl fl fl –
gm grawwwww grf grawf awfgm graw gm.
Hovoplodok – doplodovok – plovodokot-doplodokosh?
Splgraw fok fok splgrafhatchgabrlgabrl fok splfok!
Zgra kra gka fok!
Grof grawff gahf?
Gombl mbl bl –
blm plm,
blm plm,
blm plm,
blp.

## **3 January** ✶ The Months ✶ Sara Coleridge

Sara Coleridge was a writer like her father, the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In this poem she uses rhyming couplets to guide us through the year.

January brings the snow,
Makes our feet and fingers glow.

February brings the rain,
Thaws the frozen lake again.

March brings breezes, loud and shrill,
To stir the dancing daffodil.

April brings the primrose sweet,
Scatters daisies at our feet.

May brings flocks of pretty lambs
Skipping by their fleecy dams.

June brings tulips, lilies, roses,
Fills the children's hands with posies.

Hot July brings cooling showers,
Apricots and gillyflowers.

August brings the sheaves of corn,
Then the harvest home is borne.

Warm September brings the fruit;
Sportsmen then begin to shoot.

Fresh October brings the pheasant;
Then to gather nuts is pleasant.

Dull November brings the blast;
Then the leaves are whirling fast.

Chill December brings the sleet,
Blazing fire, and Christmas treat.



## **4 January** ✶ Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening ✶ Robert Frost

Why has the speaker in this poem by Robert Frost pulled up in the middle of a snowy forest? His horse doesn't know, and seems to be worried. The speaker wants to remain here alone; to give up his cold and weary journey homewards.

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

## **5 January** ✶ Explained ✶ A. A. Milne

A. A. Milne is best known as the creator of Winnie the Pooh. Outside of the world of the Hundred Acre Wood, however, he was an accomplished poet.

Elizabeth Ann
Said to her Nan:
'Please will you tell me how God began?
*Somebody* must have made Him. So
Who could it be, cos I want to know?'
And Nurse said, '*Well!*'
And Ann said, 'Well?
I know you know, and I wish you'd tell.'
And Nurse took pins from her mouth, and said,
'Now then, darling, it's time for bed.'

Elizabeth Ann
Had a wonderful plan:
She would run round the world till she found a man
Who knew *exactly* how God began.

She got up early, she dressed, and ran
Trying to find an Important Man.
She ran to London and knocked at the door
Of the Lord High Doodelum's coach-and-four.
'Please, sir (if there's anyone in),
However-and-ever did God begin?'

The Lord High Doodelum lay in bed
But out of the window, large and red,
Came the Lord High Coachman's face instead.
And the Lord High Coachman laughed and said:
'Well, what put *that* in your quaint little head?'

Elizabeth Ann went home again
And took from the ottoman Jennifer Jane.
'Jenniferjane,' said Elizabeth Ann,
'Tell me at *once* how God began.'
And Jane, who didn't much care for speaking,
Replied in her usual way by squeaking.

What did it mean? Well, to be quite candid,
I don't know, but Elizabeth Ann did.
Elizabeth Ann said softly, 'Oh!
Thank you Jennifer. Now I know.'

## **6 January** ✶ Journey of the Magi ✶ T. S. Eliot

In the Christian calendar, the 6 January is known as the Feast of Epiphany. The date commemorates the visit of three wise men, or kings, to the baby Jesus, who are referred to in this poem as 'Magi' – a word that means 'magicians'. This is one of the most famous stories in the world, but Eliot tells it from the perspective of the Magi themselves, emphasizing the difficulty of the journey.

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
and running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And 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:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation,
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky.
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arriving at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

## **7 January** ✶ Saint Distaff's Day, or The Morrow After Twelfth Day ✶ Robert Herrick

This poem by Robert Herrick describes an old tradition, where men and women used to take the opportunity of 'St Distaff's Day' to play pranks on one another.

Partly work,and partly play
Ye must, on Saint Distaff's day:
From the plough soon free your team;
Then come home, and fodder them:
If the maids a-spinning go;
Burn the flax, and fire the tow,
Scorch their plackets, but beware
That ye singe no maiden hair:
Bring in pails of water, then,
Let the maids bewash the men:
Give Saint Distaff all the right,
Then bid Christmas sport good-night;
And, next morrow, everyone
To his own vocation.

## **8 January** ✶ The more it SNOWS ✶ A. A. Milne

The idea for this poem came to Winnie the Pooh while he was waiting in a snowstorm for Piglet to answer his knock at the door. Jumping up and down in the cold, Pooh found that a 'hum' came into his head: 'a Good Hum, such as is Hummed Hopefully to Others.'

The more it snows
(Tiddely-pom)
The more it goes
(Tiddely-pom)
The more it goes
(Tiddely-pom)
On snowing.

And nobody knows
(Tiddely-pom)
How cold my toes
(Tiddely-pom)
How cold my toes
(Tiddely-pom)
Are growing.

## **9 January** ✶ Nobody Knows ✶ Rachel Rooney

The magic of Jonjo, perhaps, is that it doesn't matter whether he is real or not: the important thing is how wonderful the outside world can be.

Nobody knows what Jonjo knows. Nobody knows but he,
So Jonjo took me for a walk and showed his world to me.

I met him by the garden gate when the sun broke fresh and new.
Jonjo knows that fairies sleep on cobwebs laced with dew.

We strolled along the river's edge. It glistened in the light.
Sailing on a leafy boat, we saw a water sprite.

I followed him to forests and sank down to my knees.
Jonjo knows that wood elves meet in the hollow of old trees.

We climbed an icy mountain. Clouds drifted past our eyes.
There we spotted unicorns play chase across the skies.

I joined him at the ocean, where the mist rolled slowly in.
Jonjo knows a silver splash is the glimpse of a mermaid's fin.

He brought me to a stone cave as the sun began to fall,
to watch a dragon's shadow dance across the entrance wall.

We wandered in the starshine. An orange moon glowed bright.
Jonjo knows the man up there will keep us in his sight.

I got back home at midnight. He walked me to my door.
But as I turned to say goodbye, my Jonjo was no more.

Nobody knows what Jonjo knows. Nobody knows it's true.
So let me take you for a walk and I'll show his world to you.

## **10 January** ✶ Baby Orang-utan ✶ Helen Dunmore

Although January is a cold, wintry month, it is also the start of a new year – days are becoming longer, and before we know it new life will start springing from the earth. This poem is about the beginning of a life.

Bold flare of orange –
a struck match
against his mother's breast

he listens to her heartbeat
going yes yes yes

## **11 January** ✶ Escape at Bedtime ✶ Robert Louis Stevenson

Robert Louis Stevenson is now best known as the author of the adventure novel *Treasure Island*, but he was also a poet. Despite the lack of pirates and treasure maps, this poem describes an adventure, as its speaker manages to escape bedtime.

The lights from the parlour and kitchen shone out
Through the blinds and the windows and bars;
And high overhead and all moving about,
There were thousands of millions of stars.
There ne'er were such thousands of leaves on a tree,
Nor of people in church or the park,
As the crowds of the stars that looked down upon me,
And that glittered and winked in the dark.

The Dog, and the Plough, and the Hunter, and all,
And the star of the sailor, and Mars,
These shone in the sky, and the pail by the wall
Would be half full of water and stars.
They saw me at last, and they chased me with cries,
And they soon had me packed into bed;
But the glory kept shining and bright in my eyes,
And the stars going round in my head.

## **12 January** ✶ A Good Play ✶
Robert Louis Stevenson

This poem continues with the theme of adventure. This time, the narrator is describing 'the very best of plays' that he had with his friend, Tom, when they built a ship on the stairs of the house.

We built a ship upon the stairs
All made of the back-bedroom chairs,
And filled it full of soft pillows
To go a-sailing on the billows.
We took a saw and several nails,
And water in the nursery pails;
And Tom said, 'Let us also take
An apple and a slice of cake;' –
Which was enough for Tom and me
To go a-sailing on, till tea.
We sailed along for days and days,
And had the very best of plays;
But Tom fell out and hurt his knee,
So there was no one left but me.

## **13 January** ✶ The Land of Story Books ✶
Robert Louis Stevenson

This poem celebrates the way the imagination – this time fed by story books – can create a whole world to play in, even in the confines of the house.

At evening when the lamp is lit,
Around the fire my parents sit;
They sit at home and talk and sing,
And do not play at anything.

Now, with my little gun, I crawl
All in the dark along the wall,
And follow round the forest track
Away behind the sofa back.

There, in the night, where none can spy,
All in my hunter's camp I lie,
And play at books that I have read
Till it is time to go to bed.

These are the hills, these are the woods,
These are my starry solitudes;
And there the river by whose brink
The roaring lions come to drink.

I see the others far away
As if in firelit camp they lay,
And I, like an Indian scout,
Around their party prowled about.

So, when my nurse comes in for me,
Home I return across the sea,
And go to bed with backward looks
At my dear land of Story Books.

## **14 January** ✶ Doors ✶ Carl Sandburg

Poetry has the power to change the way we see even the most familiar of objects.

An open door says, ‘Come in.’
A shut door says, ‘Who are you?’
Shadows and ghosts go through shut doors.
If a door is shut and you want it shut,
    why open it?
If a door is open and you want it open,
    why shut it?
Doors forget but only doors know what it is
    doors forget.

## **15 January** ✶ Dream Variations ✶
Langston Hughes

Born on 15 January 1929, Martin Luther King, Jr. was an American Baptist minister and leader in the African-American Civil Rights movement. As an activist he led nonviolent protests against racial inequality. He is remembered each year on the third Monday of January – Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Just as Martin Luther King, Jr. in his often quoted speech, 'I Have a Dream' discussed his vision for a racially equal America in terms of a 'dream', in this poem Hughes depicts freedom as a dream.

To fling my arms wide
In some place of the sun,
To whirl and to dance
Till the white day is done.
Then rest at cool evening
Beneath a tall tree
While night comes on gently,
    Dark like me—
That is my dream!

To fling my arms wide
In the face of the sun,
Dance!  Whirl!  Whirl!
Till the quick day is done.
Rest at pale evening . . .
A tall, slim tree . . .
Night coming tenderly
    Black like me.

## **16 January** ✶ I, Too ✶ Langston Hughes

The African-American poet Langston Hughes wrote many poems on the theme of racial inequality. The table here is a metaphor for the privileged place of white people in American society at the time. Yet the poem also contains a message of hope for the future, where 'the darker brother' will be acknowledged at the table and recognized as an equal part of American society.

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
'Eat in the kitchen,'
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

## **17 January** ✶ Mother to Son ✶ Langston Hughes

In this poem, Hughes likens the struggle of African Americans against oppression to climbing a never-ending staircase. The Civil Rights Movement did not achieve equality overnight: rights were gained incrementally over decades and it is a struggle which is not over, even now in the twenty-first century.

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps.
'Cause you find it kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

## **18 January** ✶ Caged Bird ✶ Maya Angelou

Like Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou was a prominent figure in the American Civil Rights movement. Here Angelou uses the metaphor of a caged bird to explore the oppression suffered by African-American citizens. The poem ends with a message of hope, however, that one day the bird will experience freedom.

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

## **19 January** ✶ To a Snowdrop ✶
William Wordsworth

Snowdrops are the very first flowers to appear each year and they bring the promise of Spring to us in the midst of Winter.

Lone Flower, hemmed in with snows and white as they
But hardier far, once more I see thee bend
Thy forehead, as if fearful to offend,
Like an unbidden guest. Though day by day,
Storms, sallying from the mountain-tops, waylay
The rising sun, and on the plains descend;
Yet art thou welcome, welcome as a friend
Whose zeal outruns his promise! Blue-eyed May
Shall soon behold this border thickly set
With bright jonquils, their odours lavishing
On the soft west-wind and his frolic peers;
Nor will I then thy modest grace forget,
Chaste Snowdrop, venturous harbinger of Spring,
And pensive monitor of fleeting years!