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opening extract from

The Oxford Book of Christmas Poems

edited by

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Christopher Stuart-Clark**

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Contents

‘The sky turns dark, the year grows old . . .’

The Coming of the Cold	<i>Theodore Roethke</i>	10
Winter Days	<i>Gareth Owen</i>	11
Sleet	<i>Norman MacCaig</i>	12
Snowflakes	<i>Clive Sansom</i>	13
Snow-Bound	<i>John Greenleaf Whittier</i>	14
Safe	<i>James Walker</i>	14
December	<i>John Clare</i>	15
Advent: A Carol	<i>Patric Dickinson</i>	16
December	Prayer to St Nicholas <i>John Heath-Stubbs</i>	16
Advent 1955	<i>John Betjeman</i>	17

‘This was the moment when Before Turned into After . . .’

Christmas Morn	<i>Ruth Sawyer</i>	20
Joseph was an Old Man	<i>Unknown</i>	20
In the Town	<i>Unknown</i>	22
Minstrel’s Song	<i>Ted Hughes</i>	25
The Innkeeper’s Wife	<i>Clive Sansom</i>	26
Christmas Landscape	<i>Laurie Lee</i>	28
BC:AD	<i>U. A. Fanthorpe</i>	29
O Simplicitas	<i>Madeleine L’Engle</i>	30
Carol	<i>Norman Nicholson</i>	31
The Mother’s Song	<i>Eskimo</i>	31
A Cradle Song	<i>William Blake</i>	32
Mary’s Song	<i>Charles Causley</i>	33
A Christmas Hymn	<i>Richard Wilbur</i>	34
A Christmas Carol	<i>G. K. Chesterton</i>	35
‘I saw a Stable’	<i>Mary Elizabeth Coleridge</i>	36
The Oxen	<i>Thomas Hardy</i>	36
The Barn	<i>Elizabeth Coatsworth</i>	37
Mice in the Hay	<i>Leslie Norris</i>	38
Angels’ Song	<i>Charles Causley</i>	39
Carol of Patience	<i>Robert Graves</i>	40
Moonless darkness stands between	<i>Gerard Manley Hopkins</i>	41

The Shepherd's Tale	<i>James Kirkup</i>	42
The Shepherd's Dog	<i>Leslie Norris</i>	44
Shepherds' Carol	<i>Norman Nicholson</i>	45
Christmas Day	<i>Andrew Young</i>	46
Sailor's Carol	<i>Charles Causley</i>	46
The Carol of the Poor Children	<i>Richard Middleton</i>	47
St Stephen's Day	<i>Patric Dickinson</i>	48
The Feast o' Saint Stephen	<i>Ruth Sawyer</i>	49
The Feast of Stephen	<i>Kevin Nichols</i>	49
Kings Came Riding	<i>Charles Williams</i>	50
The Wise Men ask the Children the Way	<i>Heinrich Heine</i>	51
Camels of the Kings	<i>Leslie Norris</i>	52
Journey of the Magi	<i>T. S. Eliot</i>	53
The Adoration of the Magi	<i>Christopher Pilling</i>	55
The Mystic Magi	<i>Robert Stephen Hawker</i>	56
The Huron Carol	<i>J. Edgar Middleton</i>	58
What the Donkey Saw	<i>U. A. Fanthorpe</i>	59
A Ballad of Christmas	<i>Walter de la Mare</i>	60
The Holy Innocents	<i>Robert Lowell</i>	62
Innocent's Song	<i>Charles Causley</i>	63
Clap your Hands for Herod	<i>Joseph Hanzlik</i>	64
Twelfth Night	<i>Peter Scupham</i>	66
On the Thirteenth Day of Christmas	<i>Charles Causley</i>	67
Carol for the Last Christmas Eve	<i>Norman Nicholson</i>	68

'Glad Christmas comes, and every hearth
Makes room to bid him welcome now . . .'

Wassailing Song	<i>Traditional</i>	70
Yule Log	<i>Robert Herrick</i>	70
Heap on More Wood	<i>Walter Scott</i>	71
Christmas Shopping	<i>Louis MacNeice</i>	72
The Crib	<i>Robert Finch</i>	75
Journey Back to Christmas	<i>Gwen Dunn</i>	76
Carol	<i>W. R. Rodgers</i>	83
How to Paint a Perfect Christmas	<i>Miroslav Holub</i>	84
Noel: Christmas Eve, 1913	<i>Robert Bridges</i>	86
Eddi's Service	<i>Rudyard Kipling</i>	88
For the Children or the Grown-ups?	<i>Unknown</i>	90
My Christmas: Mum's Christmas	<i>Sarah Forsyth</i>	90
Christmas is really for the Children	<i>Steve Turner</i>	91

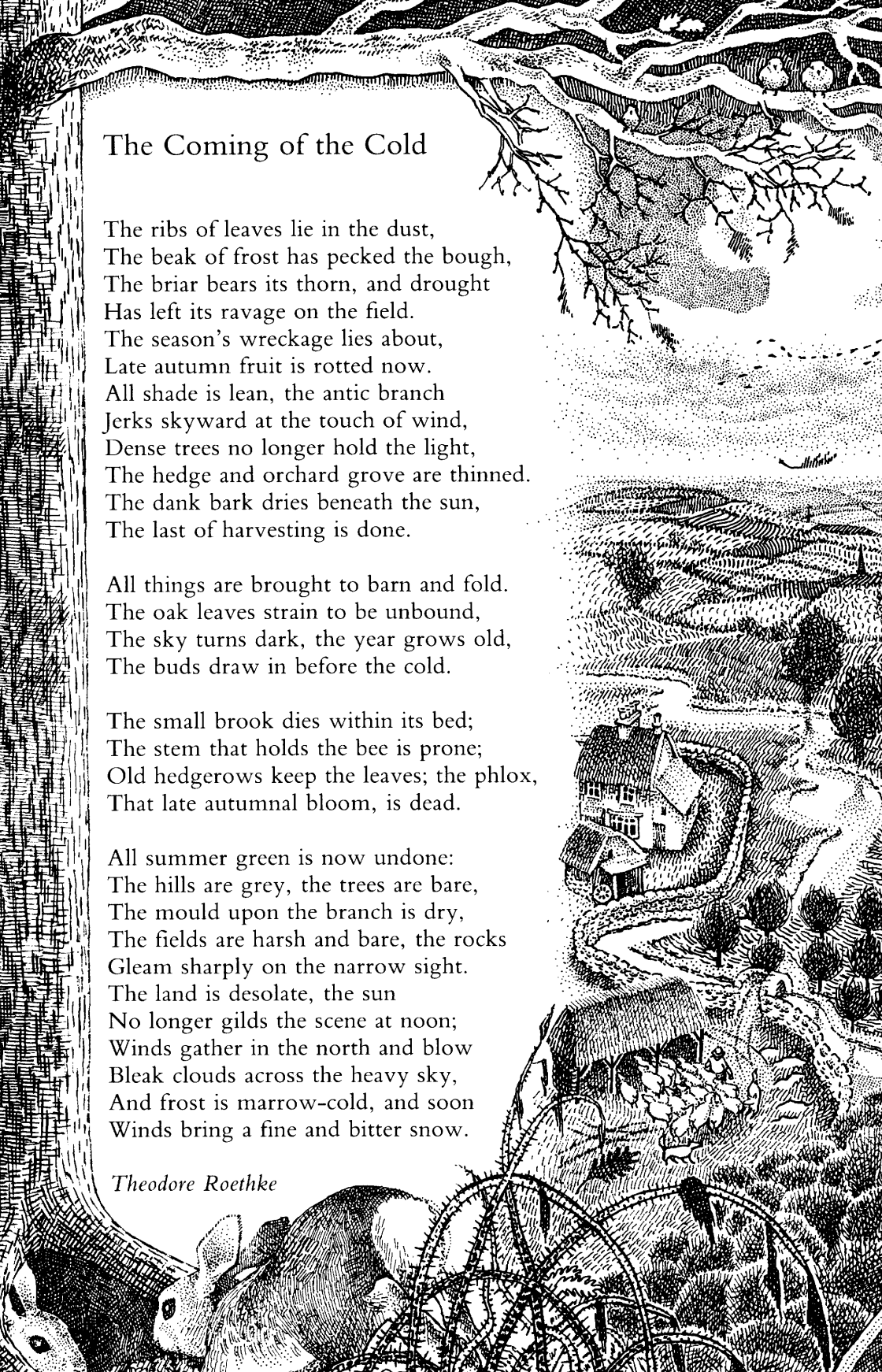
'Hang up the Baby's Stocking!'	<i>Unknown</i>	92
A Visit from St Nicholas	<i>Clement Clark Moore</i>	93
'little tree'	<i>e. e. cummings</i>	95
The Christmas Tree	<i>Patricia Beer</i>	96
Christmas Tree	<i>Stanley Cook</i>	97
Christmas Tree	<i>Laurence Smith</i>	97
Advice from Poor Robin's Almanack		98
Keeping Christmas	<i>Eleanor Farjeon</i>	98
The Reminder	<i>Thomas Hardy</i>	99
Christmas: 1924	<i>Thomas Hardy</i>	99
'Now every man at my request'		100
December	<i>John Clare</i>	101
Christmas Card	<i>Ted Hughes</i>	102
Ghost Story	<i>Dylan Thomas</i>	104
Christmas Eve	<i>Patricia Beer</i>	106
Reindeer Report	<i>U. A. Fanthorpe</i>	106
Christmas Night	<i>Lawrence Sail</i>	107
Good Will to Men	<i>Dorothy Brown Thompson</i>	109
Christmas Bells	<i>Henry Wadsworth Longfellow</i>	110
Christmas Day	<i>Christopher Smart</i>	111
The Burning Babe	<i>Robert Southwell</i>	112
Men may talk of Country-Christmasses		
<i>Philip Massinger</i>		113
A Dish for a Poet	<i>Traditional</i>	114
Christmas Dinner	<i>Michael Rosen</i>	116
The Fire	<i>Walter Scott</i>	117
In the Workhouse	<i>George R. Sims</i>	118
A Summer Christmas in Australia	<i>Douglas Sladen</i>	124
African Christmas	<i>John Press</i>	125
Pilgrims in Mexico	<i>Traditional</i>	126
Roman Presents	<i>Martial</i>	127
Christmas 1970	<i>Spike Milligan</i>	127
Christmas	<i>John Betjeman</i>	128
A Child's Christmas Day	<i>Unknown</i>	130
Afterthought	<i>Elizabeth Jennings</i>	131
Christmas Day	<i>Roy Fuller</i>	132
Grandmother Jackson	<i>David Jackson</i>	133
Christmas Thank You's	<i>Mick Gowar</i>	134
A Roman Thank-you Letter	<i>Martial</i>	136
Christmas Bills	<i>Joseph Hatton</i>	136
Christmas	<i>Leigh Hunt</i>	138
After Christmas	<i>Michael Richards</i>	140

‘Open you the East door
And let the New Year in.’

Well, so that is that	<i>W. H. Auden</i>	142
The Old Year	<i>John Clare</i>	144
The New Year	<i>Unknown</i>	145
New Year Song	<i>Ted Hughes</i>	146
January	<i>Douglas Gibson</i>	148
January	<i>John Heath-Stubbs</i>	148
February	<i>John Heath-Stubbs</i>	149
Ceremony upon Candlemas Eve	<i>Robert Herrick</i>	150
At Candlemas	<i>Charles Causley</i>	151
Winter Cricket	<i>John Heath-Stubbs</i>	152
Snowdrops	<i>George Macbeth</i>	153
The Fight of the Year	<i>Roger McGough</i>	154

*The sky turns dark,
the year grows old . . .*





The Coming of the Cold

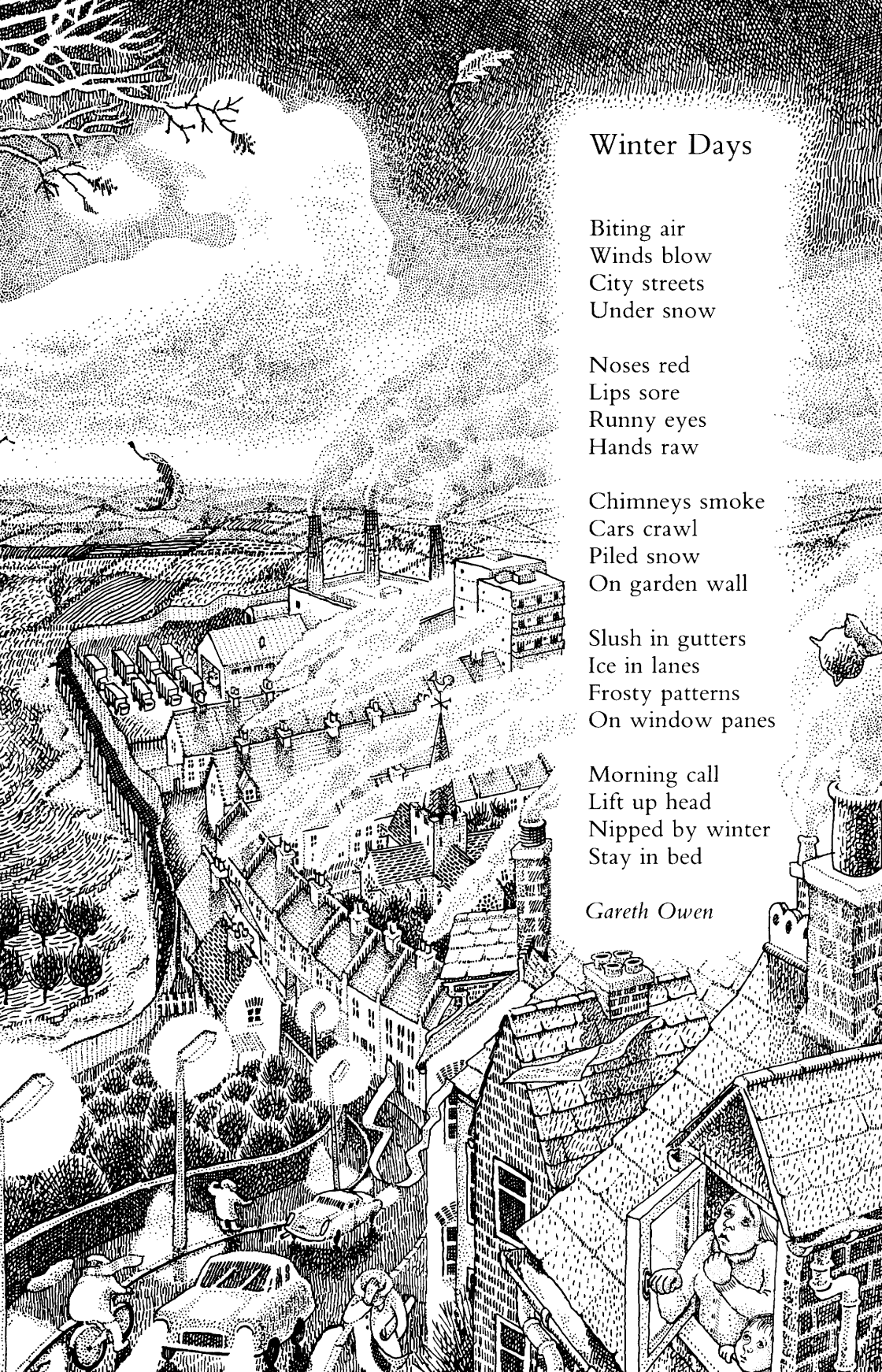
The ribs of leaves lie in the dust,
The beak of frost has pecked the bough,
The briar bears its thorn, and drought
Has left its ravage on the field.
The season's wreckage lies about,
Late autumn fruit is rotted now.
All shade is lean, the antic branch
Jerks skyward at the touch of wind,
Dense trees no longer hold the light,
The hedge and orchard grove are thinned.
The dank bark dries beneath the sun,
The last of harvesting is done.

All things are brought to barn and fold.
The oak leaves strain to be unbound,
The sky turns dark, the year grows old,
The buds draw in before the cold.

The small brook dies within its bed;
The stem that holds the bee is prone;
Old hedgerows keep the leaves; the phlox,
That late autumnal bloom, is dead.

All summer green is now undone:
The hills are grey, the trees are bare,
The mould upon the branch is dry,
The fields are harsh and bare, the rocks
Gleam sharply on the narrow sight.
The land is desolate, the sun
No longer gilds the scene at noon;
Winds gather in the north and blow
Bleak clouds across the heavy sky,
And frost is marrow-cold, and soon
Winds bring a fine and bitter snow.

Theodore Roethke



Winter Days

Biting air
Winds blow
City streets
Under snow

Noses red
Lips sore
Runny eyes
Hands raw

Chimneys smoke
Cars crawl
Piled snow
On garden wall

Slush in gutters
Ice in lanes
Frosty patterns
On window panes

Morning call
Lift up head
Nipped by winter
Stay in bed

Gareth Owen

Advent: A Carol

What did you hear?
Said stone to echo:
All that you told me,
Said echo to stone.

Tidings, said echo,
Tidings, said stone,
Tidings of wonder
Said echo to stone.

Who then shall hear them?
Said stone to echo:
All people on earth,
Said echo to stone.

Turned into one,
Echo and stone,
The word for all coming
Turned into one.

Patric Dickinson

December

Prayer to St Nicholas

Patron of all those who do good by stealth –
Slipping three bags of gold in through the window
To save three desperate girls, restoring
Dead boys to life out of the pickling tub
Of an Anatolian Sweeney Todd –
Teach us to give with simplicity, and not with an eye
To the main chance: it's less than
Three weeks' shopping time to Christmas.

John Heath-Stubbs

Advent 1955

The Advent wind begins to stir
With sea-like sounds in our Scotch fir,
It's dark at breakfast, dark at tea,
And in between we only see
Clouds hurrying across the sky
And rain-wet roads the wind blows dry
And branches bending to the gale
Against great skies all silver-pale.
The world seems travelling into space,
And travelling at a faster pace
Than in the leisured summer weather
When we and it sit out together,
For now we feel the world spin round
On some momentous journey bound –
Journey to what? to whom? to where?
The Advent bells call out 'Prepare,
Your world is journeying to the birth
Of God made Man for us on earth.'

And how, in fact, do we prepare
For the great day that waits us there –
The twenty-fifth day of December,
The birth of Christ? For some it means
An interchange of hunting scenes
On coloured cards. And I remember
Last year I sent out twenty yards,
Laid end to end, of Christmas cards
To people that I scarcely know –
They'd sent a card to me, and so
I had to send one back. Oh dear!
Is this a form of Christmas cheer?
Or is it, which is less surprising,
My pride gone in for advertising?
The only cards that really count
Are that extremely small amount
From real friends who keep in touch
And are not rich but love us much.
Some ways indeed are very odd
By which we hail the birth of God.

We raise the price of things in shops,
We give plain boxes fancy tops
And lines which traders cannot sell
Thus parcell'd go extremely well.
We dole out bribes we call a present
To those to whom we must be pleasant
For business reasons. Our defence is
These bribes are charged against expenses
And bring relief in Income Tax.
Enough of these unworthy cracks!
'The time draws near the birth of Christ',
A present that cannot be priced
Given two thousand years ago.
Yet if God had not given so
He still would be a distant stranger
And not the Baby in the manger.

John Betjeman

*This was the moment when Before
Turned into After . . .*





Christmas Morn

Shall I tell you what will come
to Bethlehem on Christmas morn,
who will kneel them gently down
before the Lord new-born?

One small fish from the river,
with scales of red, red gold,
one wild bee from the heather,
one grey lamb from the fold,
one ox from the high pasture,
one black bull from the herd,
one goatling from the far hills,
one white, white bird.

And many children – God give them grace,
bringing tall candles to light Mary's face.

Ruth Sawyer

Joseph was an Old Man

Joseph was an old man,
and an old man was he,
When he wedded Mary,
in the land of Galilee.

Joseph and Mary walked
through the orchard good,
Where was cherries and berries,
so red as any blood.

Joseph and Mary walked
through an orchard green,
Where was berries and cherries,
as thick as might be seen.



O then bespoke Mary,
so meek and so mild:
'Pluck me one cherry, Joseph,
for I am with child.'

O then bespoke Joseph,
with words most unkind:
'Let him pluck thee a cherry
that brought thee with child.'

O then bespoke the babe
within his mother's womb:
'Bow down then the tallest tree,
for my mother to have some.'

Then bowed down the highest tree
unto his mother's hand;
Then she cried, 'See, Joseph,
I have cherries at command.'

O then bespoke Joseph:
'I have done Mary wrong;
But cheer up, my dearest,
and be not cast down.'

Then Mary plucked a cherry,
as red as the blood,
Then Mary went home
with her heavy load.

Then Mary took her babe,
and sat him on her knee,
Saying, 'My dear son, tell me,
what this world will be.'