

A Few Words

from Jan Carroll

Winter 2022-23

Wishing you a joyful holiday season and a healthy new year!

What You Make It (Christmas Is)

Evergreen garlanding strung along a downtown awning,
red velvet bows evenly spaced wired onto it, smile
after pine-bough smile, a kiss planted on each of them.

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Usually, I'm so late, Target's stocking stuffer section is  
pathetically picked over. This year I'm so early they're  
cutting open stacks of boxes, scrambling to get stock out.

No gold-foil-wrapped chocolate coins yet. Family tradition.  
Will have to come back, hope I can score some.

Instead, I buy a trio of five-inch-tall stuffed ornaments:  
a raccoon stylishly dressed for winter, arms flung open,  
ready to give or receive a hug, a giraffe with wild hair,  
bright scarf tied around the neck against the cold, a human girl  
with matching Christmas-pattern dress and hat looking a lot like  
Pippi Longstocking, upturned mouth painted on her wooden face,  
eyes in perpetual wonder or surprise. I imagine them cheering  
each other, conversing, joking. At home I line them up on a shelf,  
the stub of a candle and a matchbook next to them, laugh  
a little to myself every time I pass by.

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At Festival Foods, a clerk dressed as an elf banters, chatters, wears
a mischievous grin, despite long lines, despite grumpy shoppers.



Christmas Present

His six-foot-three frame bent over a bit,
he sits at the kitchen table at dusk
with a Q-tip he dips in a bowl of warm water
gently cleaning each figure of the manger scene:
cow, donkey, three magi, Joseph, Mary, Jesus.

Ours doesn't have shepherds or angels, no drummer boy,
but there is pasted to the back wall of the stable
to make it look like another opening, a picture
of a desert landscape with a palm tree, the sun
just coming up, and a giant star presiding above.

This grown man my first-born son. This manger scene not
the one he grew up with but the one from my childhood
that came to me after my mother's death. This year
seemed a good time to set it out, to place a tea candle
like memory burning bright on the bare shelf before it.

Love, at times, shines where we can see it, in the least expected
ways, amidst the troubles, when we don't necessarily know
now *what* we believe, but when somehow even one quiet act
becomes a gift both to the given and the giver, this humble
stable scene, his tender care for it, a refuge, a shelter.

EVENTS

Talk on My Poems for Symphony Event: One of four talks associated with the Chippewa Valley Symphony Orchestra's performance of Holst's *The Planets*, mine will be February 23, 2023, 6:30, in the Eau Claire public library's Riverview Room. Free.

Collaboration with Chippewa Valley Symphony Orchestra: March 4, 2023. Holst's *The Planets* will be featured, and two additional choral pieces for which I have written the lyrics. With music by composer Jerry Hui, the two new pieces will be on the Voyager probe and Pluto. See <https://cvsymphony.org/>.

BLOG

A new piece posted each mid-month. <https://www.jancarrollpoetryetc.net/blog>

NEW BOOK(S)

The new traditional-format book is ready to go to the printer! I continue to work on the new unconventional-format "book" and am tentatively planning on a joint launch sometime in the spring.

WHAT I'M READING LATELY

A poignant and succinct look at the new year ahead by Richard Hoffman, writer-in-residence at Emerson College in Boston. He also teaches for the University of Southern Maine's Stonecoast low-residency MFA program. <https://richardhoffman.org/>

December 31st

All my undone actions wander
naked across the calendar,

a band of skinny hunter-gatherers,
blown snow scattered here and there,

stumbling toward a future
folded in the New Year I secure

with a pushpin: January's picture
a painting from the 17th century,

a still life: Skull and mirror,
spilled coin purse and a flower.



The winter holiday season comes with rituals that can delight us or destroy us. Pondering this one recent morning, I began weighing each of my Christmas and New Years traditions for its effect on me and others. Does it heal? Bring joy? Inspire? Reconcile? Does it help me or others involved to be better human beings? I came across these words by Elizabeth Gilbert. I offer them today as my gift to you, to help you in your own taking stock and ritual revitalizing.

"We do spiritual ceremonies as human beings in order to create a safe resting place for our most complicated feelings of joy or trauma, so that we don't have to haul those feelings around with us forever, weighing us down. We all need such places of ritual safekeeping. And I do believe that if your culture or tradition doesn't have the specific ritual you are craving, then you are absolutely permitted to make up a ceremony of your own devising, fixing your own broken-down emotional systems with all the do-it-yourself resourcefulness of a generous plumber/poet."

Some readers have asked how they can support my creative work, besides buying a book when they come out.

First of all, the newsletter **remains FREE of charge.**

But, if you would like to donate something to the cause, you can do so via Paypal

(use my email, jan.carroll333@gmail.com).

All donations will be much appreciated and will go to sharing my poetry. THANK YOU!