

Classic Poetry Series

Edmund Blunden

- poems -

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Tired with dull grief, grown old before my day,
I sit in solitude and only hear
Long silent laughters, murmurings of dismay,
The lost intensities of hope and fear;
In those old marshes yet the rifles lie,
On the thin breastwork flutter the grey rags,
The very books I read are there—and I
Dead as the men I loved, wait while life drags

Its wounded length from those sad streets of war
Into green places here, that were my own;
But now what once was mine is mine no more,
I seek such neighbours here and I find none.
With such strong gentleness and tireless will
Those ruined houses seared themselves in me,
Passionate I look for their dumb story still,
And the charred stub outspeaks the living tree.

I rise up at the singing of a bird
And scarcely knowing slink along the lane,
I dare not give a soul a look or word
Where all have homes and none's at home in vain:
Deep red the rose burned in the grim redoubt,
The self-sown wheat around was like a flood,
In the hot path the lizard lolled time out,
The saints in broken shrines were bright as blood.

Sweet Mary's shrine between the sycamores!
There we would go, my friend of friends and I,
And snatch long moments from the grudging wars,
Whose dark made light intense to see them by.
Shrewd bit the morning fog, the whining shots
Spun from the wrangling wire: then in warm swoon
The sun hushed all but the cool orchard plots,
We crept in the tall grass and slept till noon.

Edmund Blunden

At Senlis Once

how comely it was and how reviving,
When with clay and with death no longer striving
Down firm roads we came to houses
With women chattering and green grass thriving.

Now though rains in a cataract descended,
We could glow, with our tribulation ended--
Count not days, the present only
Was thought of, how could it ever be expended?

Clad so cleanly, this remnant of poor wretches
Picked up life like the hens in orchard ditches,
Gazed on the mill-sails, heard the church-bell,
Found an honest glass all manner of riches.

How they crowded the barn with lusty laughter,
Hailed the pierrots and shook each shadowy rafter,
Even could ridicule their own sufferings,
Sang as though nothing but joy came after!

Edmund Blunden

Forefathers

Here they went with smock and crook,
Toiled in the sun, lolled in the shade,
Here they mudded out the brook
And here their hatchet cleared the glade:
Harvest-supper woke their wit,
Huntsmen's moon their wooings lit.

From this church they led their brides,
From this church themselves were led
Shoulder-high; on these waysides
Sat to take their beer and bread.
Names are gone - what men they were
These their cottages declare.

Names are vanished, save the few
In the old brown Bible scrawled;
These were men of pith and thew,
Whom the city never called;
Scarce could read or hold a quill,
Built the barn, the forge, the mill.

On the green they watched their sons
Playing till too dark to see,
As their fathers watched them once,
As my father once watched me;
While the bat and beetle flew
On the warm air webbed with dew.

Unrecorded, unrenowned,
Men from whom my ways begin,
Here I know you by your ground
But I know you not within -
There is silence, there survives
Not a moment of your lives.

Like the bee that now is blown
Honey-heavy on my hand,
From his toppling tansy-throne
In the green tempestuous land -
I'm in clover now, nor know
Who made honey long ago.

Edmund Blunden

Harvest

So there's my year, the twelvemonth duly told
Since last I climbed this brow and gloated round
Upon the lands heaped with their wheaten gold,
And now again they spread with wealth imbrowned -
And thriftless I meanwhile,
What honeycombs have I to take, what sheaves to pile?

I see some shrivelled fruits upon my tree,
And gladly would self-kindness feign them sweet;
The bloom smelled heavenly, can these stragglers be
The fruit of that bright birth and this wry wheat,
Can this be from those spires
Which I, or fancy, saw leap to the spring sun's fires?

I peer, I count, but anxious is not rich,
My harvest is not come, the weeds run high;
Even poison-berries, ramping from the ditch
Have stormed the undefended ridges by;
What Michaelmas is mine!
The fields I sought to serve, for sturdier tilage pine.

But hush - Earth's valleys sweet in leisure lie;
And I among them wandering up and down
Will taste their berries, like the bird or fly,
And of their gleanings make both feast and crown.
The Sun's eye laughing looks.
And Earth accuses none that goes among her stooks.

Edmund Blunden

Premature Rejoicing

What's that over there?
Thiepval Wood.

Take a steady look at it; it'll do you good.
Here, these glasses will help you. See any flowers?
There sleeps Titania (correct - the Wood is ours);
There sleeps Titania in a deep dugout,
Waking, she wonders what all the din's about,
And smiles through her tears, and looks ahead ten years,
And sees the Wood again, and her usual Grenadiers,

All in green,
Music in the moon;

The burnt rubbish you've just seen
Won't beat the Fairy Queen;

All the same, it's a shade too soon
For you to scribble rhymes
In your army book
About those times;
Take another look;

That's where the difficulty is, over there.

Edmund Blunden

Preparations For Victory

My soul, dread not the pestilence that hags
The valley; flinch not you, my body young.
At these great shouting smokes and snarling jags
Of fiery iron; as yet may not be flung
The dice that claims you. Manly move among
These ruins, and what you must do, do well;
Look, here are gardens, there mossed boughs are hung
With apples who bright cheeks none might excel,
And there's a house as yet unshattered by a shell.

"I'll do my best," the soul makes sad reply,
"And I will mark the yet unmurdered tree,
The tokens of dear homes that court the eye,
And yet I see them not as I would see.
Hovering between, a ghostly enemy.
Sickens the light, and poisoned, withered, wan,
The least defiled turns desperate to me."
The body, poor unpitied Caliban,
Parches and sweats and grunts to win the name of Man.

Days or eternities like swelling waves
Surge on, and still we drudge in this dark maze;
The bombs and coils and cans by strings of slaves
Are borne to serve the coming day of days;
Pale sleep in slimy cellars scarce allays
With its brief blank the burden. Look, we lose;
The sky is gone, the lightless, drenching haze
Of rainstorms chills the bone; earth, air are foes,
The black fiend leaps brick-red as life's last picture goes.

Edmund Blunden

Report on Experience

I have been young, and now am not too old;
And I have seen the righteous forsaken,
His health, his honour and his quality taken.
This is not what we were formerly told.

I have seen a green country, useful to the race,
Knocked silly with guns and mines, its villages vanished,
Even the last rat and the last kestrel banished -
God bless us all, this was peculiar grace.

I knew Seraphina; Nature gave her hue,
Glance, sympathy, note, like one from Eden.
I saw her smile warp, heard her lyric deaden;
She turned to harlotry; - this I took to be new.

Say what you will, our God sees how they run.
These disillusionments are His curious proving
That He loves humanity and will go on loving;
Over there are faith, life, virtue in the sun.

Edmund Blunden

The Midnight Skaters

The hop-poles stand in cones,
The icy pond lurks under,
The pole-tops steeple to the thrones
Of stars, sound gulfs of wonder;
But not the tallest thee, 'tis said,
Could fathom to this pond's black bed.
Then is not death at watch
Within those secret waters?
What wants he but to catch
Earth's heedless sons and daughters?
With but a crystal parapet
Between, he has his engines set.

Then on, blood shouts, on, on,
Twirl, wheel and whip above him,
Dance on this ball-floor thin and wan,
Use him as though you love him;
Court him, elude him, reel and pass,
And let him hate you through the glass.

Edmund Blunden

The Survival

To-day's house makes to-morrow's road;
I knew these heaps of stone
When they were walls of grace and might,
The country's honour, art's delight
That over fountain'd silence show'd
Fame's final bastion.
Inheritance has found fresh work,
Disunion union breeds;
Beauty the strong, its difference lost,
Has matter fit for flood and frost.
Here's the true blood that will not shirk
Life's new-commanding needs.
With curious costly zeal, O man,
Raise orrery and ode;
How shines your tower, the only one
Of that especial site and stone!
And even the dream's confusion can
Sustain to-morrow's road.

Edmund Blunden

To Joy

Is not this enough for moan
To see this babe all motherless -
A babe beloved - thrust out alone
Upon death's wilderness?
Out tears fall, fall, fall - I would weep
My blood away to make her warm,
Who never went on earth one step,
Nor heard the breath of the storm.
How shall you go, my little child,
Alone on that most wintry wild?

Edmund Blunden

Vlamertinghe: Passing the Chateau

And all her silken flanks with garlands drest -
But we are coming to the sacrifice.
Must those flowers who are not yet gone West?
May those flowers who live with death and lice?
This must be the flowerist place
That earth allows; the queenly face
Of the proud mansion borrows grace for grace
Spite of those brute guns lowing at the skies.
Bold great daisies' golden lights,
Bubbling roses' pinks and whites -
Such a gay carpet! poppies by the million;
Such damask! such vermilion!
But if you ask me, mate, the choice of colour
Is scarcely right; this red should have been duller.

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