

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **Edward Thomas**

**- poems -**

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### **Edward Thomas (1878-1917)**

Edward Thomas was born to Welsh parents in London, and educated at St Paul's School and Lincoln College, Oxford. His father expected Edward to enter the Civil Service, but he was determined to make a living as a writer. Most of his time was taken up by journalism and books commissioned by various publishers, who paid him by the number of words he wrote. Much of it was unrewarding work, and Thomas became increasingly prone to depression and ill-health.

His spirits were lifted in 1913 by a meeting with the American poet Robert Frost, who encouraged him to write poetry. Thomas published several poems in journals under the pseudonym Edward Eastaway, and by 1915 when he enlisted to fight in the Great War, he had already made considerable development as a poet. He arrived in France in 1917 and was killed in action at Arras soon afterwards.

Unlike other famous 'war poets' such as Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon, Thomas did not concentrate directly on the experience of war in his poetry. The love of the English countryside which informs much of his work in prose is expressed with great lyrical beauty and subtlety in poems such as 'Celandine', 'Melancholy' and 'Adlestrop'. His close friend Walter de la Mare wrote a foreword for the posthumous *Collected Poems*.

## **A Cat**

She had a name among the children;  
But no one loved though someone owned  
Her, locked her out of doors at bedtime  
And had her kittens duly drowned.

In Spring, nevertheless, this cat  
Ate blackbirds, thrushes, nightingales,  
And birds of bright voice and plume and flight,  
As well as scraps from neighbours' pails.

I loathed and hated her for this;  
One speckle on a thrush's breast  
Was worth a million such; and yet  
She lived long, till God gave her rest.

Edward Thomas

## **A Private**

This ploughman dead in battle slept out of doors  
Many a frozen night, and merrily  
Answered staid drinkers, good bedmen, and all bores:  
"At Mrs Greenland's Hawthorn Bush," said he,  
"I slept." None knew which bush. Above the town,  
Beyond `The Drover', a hundred spot the down  
In Wiltshire. And where now at last he sleeps  
More sound in France -that, too, he secret keeps.

Edward Thomas

## **Adlestrop**

Yes, I remember Adlestrop --  
The name, because one afternoon  
Of heat the express-train drew up there  
Unwontedly. It was late June.

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.  
No one left and no one came  
On the bare platform. What I saw  
Was Adlestrop -- only the name

And willows, willow-herb, and grass,  
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,  
No whit less still and lonely fair  
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang  
Close by, and round him, mistier,  
Farther and farther, all the birds  
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

Edward Thomas

## Aspens

All day and night, save winter, every weather,  
Above the inn, the smithy and the shop,  
The aspens at the cross-roads talk together  
Of rain, until their last leaves fall from the top.

Out of the blacksmith's cavern comes the ringing  
Of hammer, shoe and anvil; out of the inn  
The clink, the hum, the roar, the random singing -  
The sounds that for these fifty years have been.

The whisper of the aspens is not drowned,  
And over lightless pane and footless road,  
Empty as sky, with every other sound  
No ceasing, calls their ghosts from their abode,

A silent smithy, a silent inn, nor fails  
In the bare moonlight or the thick-furred gloom,  
In the tempest or the night of nightingales,  
To turn the cross-roads to a ghostly room.

And it would be the same were no house near.  
Over all sorts of weather, men, and times,  
Aspens must shake their leaves and men may hear  
But need not listen, more than to my rhymes.

Whatever wind blows, while they and I have leaves  
We cannot other than an aspen be  
That ceaselessly, unreasonably grieves,  
Or so men think who like a different tree.

Edward Thomas

## Beauty

WHAT does it mean? Tired, angry, and ill at ease,  
No man, woman, or child alive could please  
Me now. And yet I almost dare to laugh  
Because I sit and frame an epitaph--  
"Here lies all that no one loved of him  
And that loved no one." Then in a trice that whim  
Has wearied. But, though I am like a river  
At fall of evening when it seems that never  
Has the sun lighted it or warmed it, while  
Cross breezes cut the surface to a file,  
This heart, some fraction of me, hapily  
Floats through a window even now to a tree  
Down in the misting, dim-lit, quiet vale;  
Not like a pewit that returns to wail  
For something it has lost, but like a dove  
That slants unanswering to its home and love.  
There I find my rest, and through the dusk air  
Flies what yet lives in me. Beauty is there

Edward Thomas

## **Bob's Lane**

Women he liked, did shovel-bearded Bob,  
Old Farmer Hayward of the Heath, but he  
Loved horses. He himself was like a cob  
And leather-coloured. Also he loved a tree.

For the life in them he loved most living things,  
But a tree chiefly. All along the lane  
He planted elms where now the stormcock sings  
That travellers hear from the slow-climbing train.

Till then the track had never had a name  
For all its thicket and the nightingales  
That should have earned it. No one was to blame  
To name a thing beloved man sometimes fails.

Many years since, Bob Hayward died, and now  
None passes there because the mist and the rain  
Out of the elms have turned the lane to slough  
And gloom, the name alone survives, Bob's Lane.

Edward Thomas

## Celandine

Thinking of her had saddened me at first,  
Until I saw the sun on the celandines lie  
Redoubled, and she stood up like a flame,  
A living thing, not what before I nursed,  
The shadow I was growing to love almost,  
The phantom, not the creature with bright eye  
That I had thought never to see, once lost.

She found the celandines of February  
Always before us all. Her nature and name  
Were like those flowers, and now immediately  
For a short swift eternity back she came,  
Beautiful, happy, simply as when she wore  
Her brightest bloom among the winter hues  
Of all the world; and I was happy too,  
Seeing the blossoms and the maiden who  
Had seen them with me Februarys before,  
Bending to them as in and out she trod  
And laughed, with locks sweeping the mossy sod.

But this was a dream; the flowers were not true,  
Until I stooped to pluck from the grass there  
One of five petals and I smelt the juice  
Which made me sigh, remembering she was no more,  
Gone like a never perfectly recalled air.

Edward Thomas

## **Cock-Crow**

OUT of the wood of thoughts that grows by night  
To be cut down by the sharp ax of light,--  
Out of the night, two cocks together crow,  
Cleaving the darkness with a silver blow:  
And brought before my eyes twin trumpeters stand,  
Heralds of splendor, one at either hand,  
Each facing each as in a coat of arms:--  
The milkers lace their boots up at the farms.

Edward Thomas

## **If I Should Ever By Chance**

IF I should ever by chance grow rich  
I'll buy Codham, Cockridden, and Childerditch,  
Roses, Pyrigo, and Lapwater,  
And let them all to my eldest daughter.  
The rent I shall ask of her will be only  
Each year's first violets, white and lonely,  
The first primroses and orchises--  
She must find them before I do, that is.  
But if she finds a blossom on furze  
Without rent they shall all forever be hers,  
Codham, Cockridden, and Childerditch,  
Roses, Pyrigo, and Lapwater,--  
I shall give them all to my elder daughter.

Edward Thomas

## **In Memoriam**

The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood  
This Eastertide call into mind the men,  
Now far from home, who, with their sweethearts, should  
Have gathered them and will do never again.

Edward Thomas

## Lights Out

I have come to the borders of sleep,  
The unfathomable deep  
Forest where all must lose  
Their way, however straight,  
Or winding, soon or late;  
They cannot choose.

Many a road and track  
That, since the dawn's first crack,  
Up to the forest brink,  
Deceived the travellers,  
Suddenly now blurs,  
And in they sink.

Here love ends,  
Despair, ambition ends,  
All pleasure and all trouble,  
Although most sweet or bitter,  
Here ends in sleep that is sweeter  
Than tasks most noble.

There is not any book  
Or face of dearest look  
That I would not turn from now  
To go into the unknown  
I must enter and leave alone  
I know not how.

The tall forest towers;  
Its cloudy foliage lowers  
Ahead, shelf above shelf;  
Its silence I hear and obey  
That I may lose my way  
And myself.

Edward Thomas

## **Like the Touch of Rain**

Like the touch of rain she was  
On a man's flesh and hair and eyes  
When the joy of walking thus  
Has taken him by surprise:

With the love of the storm he burns,  
He sings, he laughs, well I know how,  
But forgets when he returns  
As I shall not forget her 'Go now'.

Those two words shut a door  
Between me and the blessed rain  
That was never shut before  
And will not open again.

Edward Thomas

## **No One So Much As You**

No one so much as you  
Loves this my clay,  
Or would lament as you  
Its dying day.

You know me through and through  
Though I have not told,  
And though with what you know  
You are not bold.

None ever was so fair  
As I thought you:  
Not a word can I bear  
Spoken against you.

All that I ever did  
For you seemed coarse  
Compared with what I hid  
Nor put in force.

My eyes scarce dare meet you  
Lest they should prove  
I but respond to you  
And do not love.

We look and understand,  
We cannot speak  
Except in trifles and  
Words the most weak.

For I at most accept  
Your love, regretting  
That is all: I have kept  
Only a fretting

That I could not return  
All that you gave  
And could not ever burn  
With the love you have,

Till sometimes it did seem  
Better it were  
Never to see you more  
Than linger here

With only gratitude  
Instead of love -  
A pine in solitude  
Cradling a dove.

Edward Thomas

## October

The green elm with the one great bough of gold  
Lets leaves into the grass slip, one by one, --  
The short hill grass, the mushrooms small milk-white,  
Harebell and scabious and tormentil,  
That blackberry and gorse, in dew and sun,  
Bow down to; and the wind travels too light  
To shake the fallen birch leaves from the fern;  
The gossamers wander at their own will.  
At heavier steps than birds' the squirrels scold.  
The rich scene has grown fresh again and new  
As Spring and to the touch is not more cool  
Than it is warm to the gaze; and now I might  
As happy be as earth is beautiful,  
Were I some other or with earth could turn  
In alternation of violet and rose,  
Harebell and snowdrop, at their season due,  
And gorse that has no time not to be gay.  
But if this be not happiness, -- who knows?  
Some day I shall think this a happy day,  
And this mood by the name of melancholy  
Shall no more blackened and obscured be.

Edward Thomas

## Rain

Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain  
On this bleak hut, and solitude, and me  
Remembering again that I shall die  
And neither hear the rain nor give it thanks  
For washing me cleaner than I have been  
Since I was born into this solitude.  
Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon:  
But here I pray that none whom once I loved  
Is dying to-night or lying still awake  
Solitary, listening to the rain,  
Either in pain or thus in sympathy  
Helpless among the living and the dead,  
Like a cold water among broken reeds,  
Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff,  
Like me who have no love which this wild rain  
Has not dissolved except the love of death,  
If love it be towards what is perfect and  
Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint.

Edward Thomas

## **Snow**

In the gloom of whiteness,  
In the great silence of snow,  
A child was sighing  
And bitterly saying: "Oh,  
They have killed a white bird up there on her nest,  
The down is fluttering from her breast!"  
And still it fell through that dusky brightness  
On the child crying for the bird of the snow.

Edward Thomas

## **Sowing**

IT was a perfect day  
For sowing; just  
As sweet and dry was the ground  
As tobacco-dust.

I tasted deep the hour  
Between the far  
Owl's chuckling first soft cry  
And the first star.

A long stretched hour it was;  
Nothing undone  
Remained; the early seeds  
All safely sown.

And now, hark at the rain,  
Windless and light,  
Half a kiss, half a tear,  
Saying good-night.

Edward Thomas

## **Tall Nettles**

TALL nettles cover up, as they have done  
These many springs, the rusty harrow, the plough  
Long worn out, and the roller made of stone:  
Only the elm butt tops the nettles now.

This corner of the farmyard I like most:  
As well as any bloom upon a flower  
I like the dust on the nettles, never lost  
Except to prove the sweetness of a shower.

Edward Thomas

## **Thaw**

OVER the land half freckled with snow half-thawed  
The speculating rooks at their nests cawed,  
And saw from elm-tops, delicate as a flower of grass,  
What we below could not see, Winter pass.

Edward Thomas

## **The Cherry Trees**

The cherry trees bend over and are shedding,  
On the old road where all that passed are dead,  
Their petals, strewing the grass as for a wedding  
This early May morn when there is none to wed.

Edward Thomas

## **The Dark Forest**

Dark is the forest and deep, and overhead  
Hang stars like seeds of light  
In vain, though not since they were sown was bred  
Anything more bright.

And evermore mighty multitudes ride  
About, nor enter in;  
Of the other multitudes that dwell inside  
Never yet was one seen.

The forest foxglove is purple, the marguerite  
Outside is gold and white,  
Nor can those that pluck either blossom greet  
The others, day or night.

Edward Thomas

## The Glory

The glory of the beauty of the morning, -  
The cuckoo crying over the untouched dew;  
The blackbird that has found it, and the dove  
That tempts me on to something sweeter than love;  
White clouds ranged even and fair as new-mown hay;  
The heat, the stir, the sublime vacancy  
Of sky and meadow and forest and my own heart: -  
The glory invites me, yet it leaves me scorning  
All I can ever do, all I can be,  
Beside the lovely of motion, shape, and hue,  
The happiness I fancy fit to dwell  
In beauty's presence. Shall I now this day  
Begin to seek as far as heaven, as hell,  
Wisdom or strength to match this beauty, start  
And tread the pale dust pitted with small dark drops,  
In hope to find whatever it is I seek,  
Hearkening to short-lived happy-seeming things  
That we know naught of, in the hazel copse?  
Or must I be content with discontent  
As larks and swallows are perhaps with wings?  
And shall I ask at the day's end once more  
What beauty is, and what I can have meant  
By happiness? And shall I let all go,  
Glad, weary, or both? Or shall I perhaps know  
That I was happy oft and oft before,  
Awhile forgetting how I am fast pent,  
How dreary-swift, with naught to travel to,  
Is Time? I cannot bite the day to the core.

Edward Thomas

## The Lane

Some day, I think, there will be people enough  
In Froxfield to pick all the blackberries  
Out of the hedges of Green Lane, the straight  
Broad lane where now September hides herself  
In bracken and blackberry, harebell and dwarf gorse.  
To-day, where yesterday a hundred sheep  
Were nibbling, halcyon bells shake to the sway  
Of waters that no vessel ever sailed ...  
It is a kind of spring: the chaffinch tries  
His song. For heat it is like summer too.  
This might be winter's quiet. While the glint  
Of hollies dark in the swollen hedges lasts -  
One mile - and those bells ring, little I know  
Or heed if time be still the same, until  
The lane ends and once more all is the same.

Edward Thomas

## **The Long Small Room**

THE long small room that showed willows in the west  
Narrowed up to the end the fireplace filled,  
Although not wide. I liked it. No one guessed  
What need or accident made them so build.

Only the moon, the mouse, and the sparrow peeped  
In from the ivy round the casement thick.  
Of all they saw and heard there they shall keep  
The tale for the old ivy and older brick.

When I look back I am like moon, sparrow, and mouse  
That witnessed what they could never understand  
Or alter or prevent in the dark house.  
One thing remains the same--this is my right hand

Crawling crab-like over the clean white page,  
Resting awhile each morning on the pillow,  
Then once more starting to crawl on towards age.  
The hundred last leaves stream upon the willow.

Edward Thomas

## The Manor Farm

THE rock-like mud unfroze a little, and rills  
Ran and sparkled down each side of the road  
Under the catkins wagging in the hedge.  
But earth would have her sleep out, spite of the sun;  
Nor did I value that thin gliding beam  
More than a pretty February thing  
Till I came down to the old manor farm,  
And church and yew-tree opposite, in age  
Its equals and in size. The church and yew  
And farmhouse slept in a Sunday silentness.  
The air raised not a straw. The steep farm roof,  
With tiles duskily glowing, entertained  
The mid-day sun; and up and down the roof  
White pigeons nestled. There was no sound but one.  
Three cart horses were looking over a gate  
Drowsily through their forelocks, swishing their tails  
Against a fly, a solitary fly.  
The winter's cheek flushed as if he had drained  
Spring, summer, and autumn at a draught  
And smiled quietly. But 'twas not winter--  
Rather a season of bliss unchangeable,  
Awakened from farm and church where it had lain  
Safe under tile and latch for ages since  
This England, Old already, was called Merry.

Edward Thomas

## **The New House**

NOW first, as I shut the door,  
I was alone  
In the new house; and the wind  
Began to moan.

Old at once was the house,  
And I was old;  
My ears were teased with the dread  
Of what was foretold,

Nights of storm, days of mist, without end;  
Sad days when the sun  
Shone in vain: old griefs and griefs  
Not yest begun.

All was foretold me; naught  
Could I foresee;  
But I learnt how the wind would sound  
After these things should be

Edward Thomas

## **The Owl**

DOWNHILL I came, hungry, and yet not starved,  
Cold, yet had heat within me that was proof  
Against the north wind; tired, yet so that rest  
Had seemed the sweetest thing under a roof.

Then at the inn I had food, fire, and rest,  
Knowing how hungry, cold, and tired was I.  
All of the night was quite barred out except  
An owl's cry, a most melancholy cry.

Shaken out long and clear upon the hill  
No merry note, nor cause of merriment,  
But one telling me plain what I escaped  
And others could not, that night, as in I went.

And salted was my food, and my repose,  
Salted and sobered too, by the bird's voice  
Speaking for all who lay under the stars,  
Soldiers and poor, unable to rejoice.

Edward Thomas

## The Path

RUNNING along a bank, a parapet  
That saves from the precipitous wood below  
The level road, there is a path. It serves  
Children for looking down the long smooth steep,  
Between the legs of beech and yew, to where  
A fallen tree checks the sight: while men and women  
Content themselves with the road and what they see  
Over the bank, and what the children tell.  
The path, winding like silver, trickles on,  
Bordered and even invaded by thinnest moss  
That tries to cover roots and crumbling chalk  
With gold, olive, and emerald, but in vain.  
The children wear it. They have flattened the bank  
On top, and silvered it between the moss  
With the current of their feet, year after year.  
But the road is houseless, and leads not to school.  
To see a child is rare there, and the eye  
Has but the road, the wood that overhangs  
And underyawns it, and the path that looks  
As if it led on to some legendary  
Or fancied place where men have wished to go  
And stay; till, sudden, it ends where the wood ends.

Edward Thomas

## The Sign-Post

The dim sea glints chill. The white sun is shy,  
And the skeleton weeds and the never-dry,  
Rough, long grasses keep white with frost  
At the hill-top by the finger-post;  
The smoke of the traveller's-joy is puffed  
Over hawthorn berry and hazel tuft.  
I read the sign. Which way shall I go?  
A voice says: "You would not have doubted so  
At twenty." Another voice gentle with scorn  
Says: "At twenty you wished you had never been born."  
One hazel lost a leaf of gold  
From a tuft at the tip, when the first voice told  
The other he wished to know what 'twould be  
To be sixty by this same post. "You shall see,"  
He laughed -and I had to join his laughter -  
"You shall see; but either before or after,  
Whatever happens, it must befall.  
A mouthful of earth to remedy all  
Regrets and wishes shall be freely given;  
And if there be a flaw in that heaven  
'Twill be freedom to wish, and your wish may be  
To be here or anywhere talking to me,  
No matter what the weather, on earth,  
At any age between death and birth, -  
To see what day or night can be,  
The sun and the frost, the land and the sea,  
Summer, Winter, Autumn, Spring, -  
With a poor man of any sort, down to a king,  
Standing upright out in the air  
Wondering where he shall journey, O where?"

Edward Thomas

## **The Trumpet**

Rise up, rise up,  
And, as the trumpet blowing  
Chases the dreams of men,  
As the dawn glowing  
The stars that left unlit  
The land and water,  
Rise up and scatter  
The dew that covers  
The print of last night's lovers -  
Scatter it, scatter it!

While you are listening  
To the clear horn,  
Forget, men, everything  
On this earth newborn,  
Except that it is lovelier  
Than any mysteries.  
Open your eyes to the air  
That has washed the eyes of the stars  
Through all the dewy night:  
Up with the light,  
To the old wars;  
Arise, arise!

Edward Thomas

## The Word

There are so many things I have forgot,  
That once were much to me, or that were not,  
All lost, as is a childless woman's child  
And its child's children, in the undefiled  
Abyss of what can never be again.  
I have forgot, too, names of the mighty men  
That fought and lost or won in the old wars,  
Of kings and fiends and gods, and most of the stars.  
Some things I have forgot that I forget.  
But lesser things there are, remembered yet,  
Than all the others. One name that I have not --  
Though 'tis an empty thingless name -- forgot  
Never can die because Spring after Spring  
Some thrushes learn to say it as they sing.  
There is always one at midday saying it clear  
And tart -- the name, only the name I hear.  
While perhaps I am thinking of the elder scent  
That is like food, or while I am content  
With the wild rose scent that is like memory,  
This name suddenly is cried out to me  
From somewhere in the bushes by a bird  
Over and over again, a pure thrush word.

Edward Thomas

## Unknown

She is most fair,  
And when they see her pass  
The poets' ladies  
Look no more in the glass  
But after her.

On a bleak moor  
Running under the moon  
She lures a poet,  
Once proud or happy, soon  
Far from his door.

Beside a train,  
Because they saw her go,  
Or failed to see her,  
Travellers and watchers know  
Another pain.

The simple lack  
Of her is more to me  
Than others' presence,  
Whether life splendid be  
Or utter black.

I have not seen,  
I have no news of her;  
I can tell only  
She is not here, but there  
She might have been.

She is to be kissed  
Only perhaps by me;  
She may be seeking  
Me and no other; she  
May not exist.

Edward Thomas

## **When First I Came Here**

WHEN first I came here I had hope,  
Hope for I knew not what. Fast beat  
My heart at the sight of the tall slope  
Or grass and yews, as if my feet

Only by scaling its steps of chalk  
Would see something no other hill  
Ever disclosed. And now I walk  
Down it the last time. Never will

My heart beat so again at sight  
Of any hill although as fair  
And loftier. For infinite  
The change, late unperceived, this year,

The twelfth, suddenly, shows me plain.  
Hope now,--not health nor cheerfulness,  
Since they can come and go again,  
As often one brief hour witnesses,--

Just hope has gone forever. Perhaps  
I may love other hills yet more  
Than this: the future and the maps  
Hide something I was waiting for.

One thing I know, that love with chance  
And use and time and necessity  
Will grow, and louder the heart's dance  
At parting than at meeting be.

Edward Thomas

## Words

Out of us all  
That make rhymes  
Will you choose  
Sometimes -  
As the winds use  
A crack in a wall  
Or a drain,  
Their joy or their pain  
To whistle through -  
Choose me,  
You English words?

I know you:  
You are light as dreams,  
Tough as oak,  
Precious as gold,  
As poppies and corn,  
Or an old cloak:  
Sweet as our birds  
To the ear,  
As the burnet rose  
In the heat  
Of Midsummer:  
Strange as the races  
Of dead and unborn:  
Strange and sweet  
Equally,  
And familiar,  
To the eye,  
As the dearest faces  
That a man knows,  
And as lost homes are:  
But though older far  
Than oldest yew, -  
As our hills are, old, -  
Worn new  
Again and again:  
Young as our streams  
After rain:  
And as dear  
As the earth which you prove  
That we love.

Make me content  
With some sweetness  
From Wales  
Whose nightingales  
Have no wings, -  
From Wiltshire and Kent  
And Herefordshire, -  
And the villages there, -  
From the names, and the things

No less.  
Let me sometimes dance  
With you,  
Or climb  
Or stand perchance  
In ecstasy,  
Fixed and free  
In a rhyme,  
As poets do.

Edward Thomas