

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Edwin Brock**  
**- poems -**

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# Edwin Brock(19 October 1927 – 7 September 1997)

Edwin Brock was a British poet. Brock wrote two of the best-known poems of the last century, *Five Ways to Kill a Man* and *Song of the Battery Hen*.

## <b>Early Life</b>

Brock was born in Dulwich, London, in 1927. He grew up in a turbulent working class family with no literary aspirations. He won a scholarship to a local grammar school but his formal education ended after he gained his School Certificate. Brock's interest in poetry was inspired by a paperback anthology of modern verse which he picked up idly as a bored 18-year old, waiting to be de-mobbed from the Royal Navy at the end of the Second World War. This chance encounter in Hong Kong was to prove revelatory and from then on Brock, completely self-taught, began to write his own poems.

## <b>Literary Career</b>

Gradually Brock started to be published, firstly in the smaller magazines and eventually in the *Times Literary Supplement*. During this period, Brock served as a police officer in the Metropolitan force, the unusual combination of policeman and poet giving rise to a brief period of fame when a tabloid journalist published an interview with Brock under the banner headline: "THE THINGS HE THINKS UP AS HE POUNDS THE PECKHAM BEAT".

Brock was embarrassed by the sudden attention, but he continued to pursue his writing with serious intent. His efforts bore fruit when his first collection was accepted by the small but prestigious Scorpion Press in 1959. Its title, *An Attempt at Exorcism*, touches on the essentially personal nature of Brock's work, the frankness of which connects him to the Confessional Movement which at that time was in the ascendancy in the United States. Indeed, Brock is one of the few British poets of this period to be known in America, with *New Directions* publishing several of his collections.

Brock left the police to become an advertising copywriter, a profession which he claimed to despise, but in which he became very successful creating the famous strapline for the UK *Financial Times* newspaper of 'No FT. No comment'. Brock resented the way work distracted him from his real creative life in poetry, but he continued to write alongside his career, publishing over a dozen collections and becoming increasingly prolific toward the end of his life.

He was also editor of the poetry magazine, *Ambit*, for almost four decades. In 1966 his status was recognised by his inclusion in the influential Penguin Modern Poets series together with Geoffrey Hill and Stevie Smith

Brock authored over a dozen poetry collections, a novel and an autobiography.

Amongst many works he wrote two of the best-known poems of the last century, *Five Ways to Kill a Man* and *Song of the Battery Hen*, but his work deserves wider recognition beyond these anthology favourites.

Brock's poems amply demonstrate the virtues of his "intensely felt, supple, direct and memorable work." *Five Ways to Kill a Man* is chilling in its deliberately emotionless tone as it uses the language of a practical manual to explore humanity's cruelty. Progress is reduced to the way in which mankind has "improved" its methods of killing. Inspired by a performance of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* and written quickly, the poem has an air of authority which Brock's reading emphasises.

*Song of the Battery Hen* is similarly suited to being spoken aloud. Though written as a dramatic monologue, in his introduction Brock makes it clear the poem has autobiographical resonance. As such it is a good example of his belief that "most activity is an attempt to define oneself in one way or another: for me poetry, and only poetry, has provided this self-defining act."

### **<b>Personal Life</b>**

Brock married Patricia Weller (Nellie V Weller, born 1930, still living,) in 1949, with whom he had a son and daughter. The marriage proved to be an unhappy one and was dissolved in 1964. The traumatic experience of marital conflict and divorce permeated his poetry at the time, for instance in the bitter and powerful *An Arrangement for Seeing Children*.

Brock died in 1997 following a contented retirement alongside his second wife, Elizabeth Skilton, with whom he had shared thirty happy years.

# Five Ways To Kill A Man

There are many cumbersome ways to kill a man. You can make him carry a plank of wood to the top of a hill and nail him to it. To do this properly you require a crowd of people wearing sandals, a cock that crows, a cloak to dissect, a sponge, some vinegar and one man to hammer the nails home.

Or you can take a length of steel, shaped and chased in a traditional way, and attempt to pierce the metal cage he wears. But for this you need white horses, English trees, men with bows and arrows, at least two flags, a prince, and a castle to hold your banquet in.

Dispensing with nobility, you may, if the wind allows, blow gas at him. But then you need a mile of mud sliced through with ditches, not to mention black boots, bomb craters, more mud, a plague of rats, a dozen songs and some round hats made of steel.

In an age of aeroplanes, you may fly miles above your victim and dispose of him by pressing one small switch. All you then require is an ocean to separate you, two systems of government, a nation's scientists, several factories, a psychopath and land that no-one needs for several years.

These are, as I began, cumbersome ways to kill a man. Simpler, direct, and much more neat is to see that he is living somewhere in the middle of the twentieth century, and leave him there.

Edwin Brock

# Morston Marshes

Into this muddy coastline  
the North Sea seeps silently  
twice a day  
under the kestrel's weather eye  
in the growing puddles  
gulls drill the marsh  
for nothing we can see  
or screech their territory  
like fishwives  
from the tops of poles

even in August  
the sky drowns us  
in small drops  
settling on hair and eyes  
wanting us flying in it  
or grovelling in the ooze  
at the water's edge

I died in this country  
and came back  
to pay my debts  
to its wetlands

something fishes me  
all the way  
back to where it began

and is beginning again  
down the years  
with a million denials.

Edwin Brock

# Tas In March

White on dark water, so stark  
I leave my binoculars behind  
and watch with bare red eyes  
two swans, taut with sexuality,  
stretching their necks  
alternately side by side.

They are early: colour is  
still to come to bone-dry rushes  
and trees bank black strangling

their green. It is a hard wedding:  
sharp brambles and ivy-covered  
stumps hunch and hug;

sleet pokes the surface from  
a blank neutrality, to come back  
spitting with all its mouths.

Roused, the spread wings  
beat their own storm towards  
the north, wind against wind.

Somewhere in all this a small  
heat is held, like the hope  
of a cold man drowning.

Edwin Brock

# The Ghost Dancer

It is surprising to be here, now,  
among these people at the end.  
Far way, or so it seems, from  
anywhere where anything happened.  
The tiny river Tas drags its heels  
past our windows, barely able  
to push aside the willowherb and reeds.  
The swans have flown to deeper water  
and one pike has cleared the pond.  
Yet it has happened to someone,  
as surely as the ghost we saw  
that wild autumn evening  
dancing downhill beside  
my father's grave. It was more real  
than any question or belief,  
more substantial.  
I can still feel the wind in the trees  
and the unaccountable silence  
waving us away.

None of us wants less than this:  
looking over the strands  
of history  
to one moment of memory  
recalled in love.

Edwin Brock

# The Sea, The Sea

In a house  
at the edge of a cliff  
you can hear the sea  
even with the windows closed  
but at night  
in your small bedroom  
with the green and brown leaves  
rustling the wallpaper  
you leave the window open  
to the wind  
and even in your sleep  
hear the sea slap and suck  
and the pebbles running back  
to where they were made

but the edge of the world  
is crumbling  
and houses with both closed and open windows  
fall into the sea  
with shops and churches  
which according to legend  
still sound their bells in storms

and in those smug houses  
which are safe from erosion  
the sea  
even with its windows open  
and the wind at its back  
whispers so far away  
it is lost in the conversation of dreams

until now  
with so little time left  
almost any empty house will do  
near or far from the sea  
even if you have to change the wallpaper.

Edwin Brock

# These Old Songs

grow in the mind,  
their rhymes chiming endlessly  
with the sound of feet walking  
or rain falling or being taken up  
by garden birds, one line at a time.

Landmarks, favourite stones,  
reminders of moments  
that only history makes important,  
we hum them down to immortality

so that now they fence us in  
with the faces of lost opportunities,  
and all the moons and Junes that ever were  
are meadow-larking above England.

Edwin Brock

# Winterton

It is a sinking  
into sand; marram grass  
too sharp to lie on; eyes  
stinging in the wind, and  
a nerve in the cheek jumping  
like an actor playing Dostoevsky.  
A few memories remain:  
the seal pup  
dragging its wound up the beach  
showing a ripped belly  
and crying for help;  
terns dive-bombing  
the air above their nests;  
the flotsam fox  
bitten and chewed  
scourged and scraped  
but still recognisable

and always the grey North Sea  
disappearing into a grey sky.

Beachcombing between the season's  
limbs to discover  
loneliness

or coming off the frost-crisp dunes  
rejoicing in ownership.

Sixty-eight years should burst  
the walls of a skull with this;  
but mostly it drifts  
like fine sand, or bangs  
against the groynes whenever  
the wind blows towards the land.

Edwin Brock