

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Edwin Muir**

**- poems -**

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## Abraham

The rivulet-loving wanderer Abraham  
Through waterless wastes tracing his fields of pasture  
Led his Chaldean herds and fattening flocks  
With the meandering art of wavering water  
That seeks and finds, yet does not know its way.  
He came, rested and prospered, and went on,  
Scattering behind him little pastoral kingdoms,  
And over each one its own particular sky,  
Not the great rounded sky through which he journeyed,  
That went with him but when he rested changed.  
His mind was full of names  
Learned from strange peoples speaking alien tongues,  
And all that was theirs one day he would inherit.  
He died content and full of years, though still  
The Promise had not come, and left his bones,  
Far from his father's house, in alien Canaan.

Edwin Muir

## Circle and Square

'I give you half of me;  
No more, lest I should make  
A ground for perjury.  
For your sake, for my sake,  
Half will you take?'

'Half I'll not take nor give,  
For he who gives gives all.  
By halves you cannot live;  
Then let the barrier fall,  
In one circle have all.'

"A wise and ancient scorners  
Said to me once: Beware  
The road that has no corner  
Where you can linger and stare.  
Choose the square.

'And let the circle run  
Its dull and fevered race.  
You, my dear, are one;  
Show your soul in your face;  
Maintain your place.

'Give, but have something to give.  
No man can want you all.  
Live, and learn to live.  
When all the barriers fall  
You are nothing at all.'

Edwin Muir

## **In Love For Long**

I've been in love for long  
With what I cannot tell  
And will contrive a song  
For the intangible  
That has no mould or shape,  
From which there's no escape.

It is not even a name,  
Yet is all constancy;  
Tried or untried, the same,  
It cannot part from me;  
A breath, yet as still  
As the established hill.

It is not any thing,  
And yet all being is;  
Being, being, being,  
Its burden and its bliss.  
How can I ever prove  
What it is I love?

This happy happy love  
Is sieged with crying sorrows,  
Crushed beneath and above  
Between todays and morrows;  
A little paradise  
Held in the world's vice.

And there it is content  
And careless as a child,  
And in imprisonment  
Flourishes sweet and wild;  
In wrong, beyond wrong,  
All the world's day long.

This love a moment known  
For what I do not know  
And in a moment gone  
Is like the happy doe  
That keeps its perfect laws  
Between the tiger's paws  
And vindicates its cause.

Edwin Muir

## Merlin

O Merlin in your crystal cave  
Deep in the diamond of the day,  
Will there ever be a singer  
Whose music will smooth away  
The furrow drawn by Adam's finger  
Across the memory and the wave?  
Or a runner who'll outrun  
Man's long shadow driving on,  
Break through the gate of memory  
And hang the apple on the tree?  
Will your magic ever show  
The sleeping bride shut in her bower,  
The day wreathed in its mound of snow  
and Time locked in his tower?

Edwin Muir

## Scotland 1941

We were a tribe, a family, a people.  
Wallace and Bruce guard now a painted field,  
And all may read the folio of our fable,  
Peruse the sword, the sceptre and the shield.  
A simple sky roofed in that rustic day,  
The busy corn-fields and the haunted holms,  
The green road winding up the ferny brae.  
But Knox and Melville clapped their preaching palms  
And bundled all the harvesters away,  
Hoodicrow Peden in the blighted corn  
Hacked with his rusty beak the starving haulms.  
Out of that desolation we were born.

Courage beyond the point and obdurate pride  
Made us a nation, robbed us of a nation.  
Defiance absolute and myriad-eyed  
That could not pluck the palm plucked our damnation.  
We with such courage and the bitter wit  
To fell the ancient oak of loyalty,  
And strip the peopled hill and altar bare,  
And crush the poet with an iron text,  
How could we read our souls and learn to be?  
Here a dull drove of faces harsh and vexed,  
We watch our cities burning in their pit,  
To salve our souls grinding dull lucre out,  
We, fanatics of the frustrate and the half,  
Who once set Purgatory Hill in doubt.

Now smoke and dearth and money everywhere,  
Mean heirlooms of each fainter generation,  
And mummied housegods in their musty niches,  
Burns and Scott, sham bards of a sham nation,  
And spiritual defeat wrapped warm in riches,  
No pride but pride of pelf. Long since the young  
Fought in great bloody battles to carve out  
This towering pulpit of the Golden Calf,  
Montrose, Mackail, Argyle, perverse and brave,  
Twisted the stream, unhooped the ancestral hill.  
Never had Dee or Don or Yarrow or Till  
Huddled such thriftless honour in a grave.  
Such wasted bravery idle as a song,  
Such hard-won ill might prove Time's verdict wrong,  
And melt to pity the annalist's iron tongue.

Edwin Muir

## Scotland's Winter

Now the ice lays its smooth claws on the sill,  
The sun looks from the hill  
Helmed in his winter casket,  
And sweeps his arctic sword across the sky.  
The water at the mill  
Sounds more hoarse and dull.  
The miller's daughter walking by  
With frozen fingers soldered to her basket  
Seems to be knocking  
Upon a hundred leagues of floor  
With her light heels, and mocking  
Percy and Douglas dead,  
And Bruce on his burial bed,  
Where he lies white as may  
With wars and leprosy,  
And all the kings before  
This land was kingless,  
And all the singers before  
This land was songless,  
This land that with its dead and living waits the Judgement Day.  
But they, the powerless dead,  
Listening can hear no more  
Than a hard tapping on the floor  
A little overhead  
Of common heels that do not know  
Whence they come or where they go  
And are content  
With their poor frozen life and shallow banishment.

Edwin Muir

## **The Animals**

They do not live in the world,  
Are not in time and space.  
From birth to death hurled  
No word do they have, not one  
To plant a foot upon,  
Were never in any place.

For with names the world was called  
Out of the empty air,  
With names was built and walled,  
Line and circle and square,  
Dust and emerald;  
Snatched from deceiving death  
By the articulate breath.

But these have never trod  
Twice the familiar track,  
Never never turned back  
Into the memoried day.  
All is new and near  
In the unchanging Here  
Of the fifth great day of God,  
That shall remain the same,  
Never shall pass away.

Edwin Muir

## The Castle

All through that summer at ease we lay,  
And daily from the turret wall  
We watched the mowers in the hay  
And the enemy half a mile away  
They seemed no threat to us at all.

For what, we thought, had we to fear  
With our arms and provender, load on load,  
Our towering battlements, tier on tier,  
And friendly allies drawing near  
On every leafy summer road.

Our gates were strong, our walls were thick,  
So smooth and high, no man could win  
A foothold there, no clever trick  
Could take us, have us dead or quick.  
Only a bird could have got in.

What could they offer us for bait?  
Our captain was brave and we were true....  
There was a little private gate,  
A little wicked wicket gate.  
The wizened warder let them through.

Oh then our maze of tunneled stone  
Grew thin and treacherous as air.  
The cause was lost without a groan,  
The famous citadel overthrown,  
And all its secret galleries bare.

How can this shameful tale be told?  
I will maintain until my death  
We could do nothing, being sold;  
Our only enemy was gold,  
And we had no arms to fight it with.

Edwin Muir

## **The Child Dying**

Unfriendly friendly universe,  
I pack your stars into my purse,  
And bid you so farewell.  
That I can leave you, quite go out,  
Go out, go out beyond all doubt,  
My father says, is the miracle.

You are so great, and I so small:  
I am nothing, you are all:  
Being nothing, I can take this way.  
Oh I need neither rise nor fall,  
For when I do not move at all  
I shall be out of all your day.

It's said some memory will remain  
In the other place, grass in the rain,  
Light on the land, sun on the sea,  
A flitting grace, a phantom face,  
But the world is out. There is not place  
Where it and its ghost can ever be.

Father, father, I dread this air  
Blown from the far side of despair  
The cold cold corner. What house, what hold,  
What hand is there? I look and see  
Nothing-filled eternity,  
And the great round world grows weak and old.

Hold my hand, oh hold it fast-  
I am changing! - until at last  
My hand in yours no more will change,  
Though yours change on. You here, I there,  
So hand in hand, twin-leaved despair -  
I did not know death was so strange.

Edwin Muir

## The Combat

It was not meant for human eyes,  
That combat on the shabby patch  
Of clods and trampled turf that lies  
Somewhere beneath the sodden skies  
For eye of toad or adder to catch.

And having seen it I accuse  
The crested animal in his pride,  
Arrayed in all the royal hues  
Which hide the claws he well can use  
To tear the heart out of the side.

Body of leopard, eagle's head  
And whetted beak, and lion's mane,  
And frost-grey hedge of feathers spread  
Behind -- he seemed of all things bred.  
I shall not see his like again.

As for his enemy there came in  
A soft round beast as brown as clay;  
All rent and patched his wretched skin;  
A battered bag he might have been,  
Some old used thing to throw away.

Yet he awaited face to face  
The furious beast and the swift attack.  
Soon over and done. That was no place  
Or time for chivalry or for grace.  
The fury had him on his back.

And two small paws like hands flew out  
To right and left as the trees stood by.  
One would have said beyond a doubt  
That was the very end of the bout,  
But that the creature would not die.

For ere the death-stroke he was gone,  
Writhed, whirled, into his den,  
Safe somehow there. The fight was done,  
And he had lost who had all but won.  
But oh his deadly fury then.

A while the place lay blank, forlorn,  
Drowsing as in relief from pain.  
The cricket chirped, the grating thorn  
Stirred, and a little sound was born.  
The champions took their posts again.

And all began. The stealthy paw  
Slashed out and in. Could nothing save  
These rags and tatters from the claw?  
Nothing. And yet I never saw

A beast so helpless and so brave.

And now, while the trees stand watching, still  
The unequal battle rages there.  
The killing beast that cannot kill  
Swells and swells in his fury till  
You'd almost think it was despair.

Edwin Muir

## The Fathers

Our fathers all were poor,  
Poorer our fathers' fathers;  
Beyond, we dare not look.  
We, the sons, keep store  
Of tarnished gold that gathers  
Around us from the night,  
Record it in this book  
That, when the line is drawn,  
Credit and creditor gone,  
Column and figure flown,  
Will open into light.

Archaic fevers shake  
Our healthy flesh and blood  
Plumped in the passing day  
And fed with pleasant food.  
The fathers' anger and ache  
Will not, will not away  
And leave the living alone,  
But on our careless brows  
Faintly their furrows engrave  
Like veinings in a stone,  
Breathe in the sunny house  
Nightmare of blackened bone,  
Cellar and choking cave.

Panics and furies fly  
Through our unhurried veins,  
Heavenly lights and rains  
Purify heart and eye,  
Past agonies purify  
And lay the sullen dust.  
The angers will not away.  
We hold our fathers' trust,  
Wrong, riches, sorrow and all  
Until they topple and fall,  
And fallen let in the day.

Edwin Muir

## **The Good Man in Hell**

If a good man were ever housed in Hell  
By needful error of the qualities,  
Perhaps to prove the rule or shame the devil,  
Or speak the truth only a stranger sees,

Would he, surrendering quick to obvious hate,  
Fill half eternity with cries and tears,  
Or watch beside Hell's little wicket gate  
In patience for the first ten thousand years,

Feeling the curse climb slowly to his throat  
That, uttered, dooms him to rescindless ill,  
Forcing his praying tongue to run by rote,  
Eternity entire before him still?

Would he at last, grown faithful in his station,  
Kindle a little hope in hopeless Hell,  
And sow among the damned doubts of damnation,  
Since here someone could live, and live well?

One doubt of evil would bring down such a grace,  
Open such a gate, and Eden could enter in,  
Hell be a place like any other place,  
And love and hate and life and death begin.

Edwin Muir

## The Horses

Barely a twelvemonth after  
The seven days war that put the world to sleep,  
Late in the evening the strange horses came.  
By then we had made our covenant with silence,  
But in the first few days it was so still  
We listened to our breathing and were afraid.  
On the second day  
The radios failed; we turned the knobs; no answer.  
On the third day a warship passed us, heading north,  
Dead bodies piled on the deck. On the sixth day  
A plane plunged over us into the sea. Thereafter  
Nothing. The radios dumb;  
And still they stand in corners of our kitchens,  
And stand, perhaps, turned on, in a million rooms  
All over the world. But now if they should speak,  
If on a sudden they should speak again,  
If on the stroke of noon a voice should speak,  
We would not listn, we would not let it bring  
That old bad world that swallowed its children quick  
At one great gulp. We would not have it again.  
Sometimes we think of the nations lying asleep,  
Curled blindly in impenetrable sorrow,  
And then the thought confounds us with its strangeness.  
The tractors lie about our fields; at evening  
They look like dank sea-monsters couched and waiting.  
We leave them where they are and let them rust:  
"They'll molder away and be like other loam."  
We make our oxen drag our rusty plows,  
Long laid aside. We have gone back  
Far past our fathers' land.  
And then, that evening  
Late in the summer the strange horses came.  
We heard a distant tapping on the road,  
A deepening drumming; it stopped, went on again  
And at the corner changed to hollow thunder.  
We saw the heads  
Like a wild wave charging and were afraid.  
We had sold our horses in our fathers' time  
To buy new tractors. Now they were strange to us  
As fabulous steeds set on an ancient shield.  
Or illustrations in a book of knights.  
We did not dare go near them. Yet they waited,  
Stubborn and shy, as if they had been sent  
By an old command to find our whereabouts  
And that long-lost archaic companionship.  
In the first moment we had never a thought  
That they were creatures to be owned and used.  
Among them were some half a dozen colts  
Dropped in some wilderness of the broken world,  
Yet new as if they had come from their own Eden.  
Since then they have pulled our plows and borne our loads,  
But that free servitude still can pierce our hearts.

Our life is changed; their coming our beginning.

Edwin Muir

## The Incarnate One

The windless northern surge, the sea-gull's scream,  
And Calvin's kirk crowning the barren brae.  
I think of Giotto the Tuscan shepherd's dream,  
Christ, man and creature in their inner day.  
How could our race betray  
The Image, and the Incarnate One unmake  
Who chose this form and fashion for our sake?

The Word made flesh here is made word again  
A word made word in flourish and arrogant crook.  
See there King Calvin with his iron pen,  
And God three angry letters in a book,  
And there the logical hook  
On which the Mystery is impaled and bent  
Into an ideological argument.

There's better gospel in man's natural tongue,  
And truer sight was theirs outside the Law  
Who saw the far side of the Cross among  
The archaic peoples in their ancient awe,  
In ignorant wonder saw  
The wooden cross-tree on the bare hillside,  
Not knowing that there a God suffered and died.

The fleshless word, growing, will bring us down,  
Pagan and Christian man alike will fall,  
The auguries say, the white and black and brown,  
The merry and the sad, theorist, lover, all  
Invisibly will fall:  
Abstract calamity, save for those who can  
Build their cold empire on the abstract man.

A soft breeze stirs and all my thoughts are blown  
Far out to sea and lost. Yet I know well  
The bloodless word will battle for its own  
Invisibly in brain and nerve and cell.  
The generations tell  
Their personal tale: the One has far to go  
Past the mirages and the murdering snow.

Edwin Muir