

**Classic Poetry Series**

**R.S. Thomas**

**- poems -**

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## **A Blackbird Singing**

It seems wrong that out of this bird,  
Black, bold, a suggestion of dark  
Places about it, there yet should come  
Such rich music, as though the notes'  
Ore were changed to a rare metal  
At one touch of that bright bill.

You have heard it often, alone at your desk  
In a green April, your mind drawn  
Away from its work by sweet disturbance  
Of the mild evening outside your room.

A slow singer, but loading each phrase  
With history's overtones, love, joy  
And grief learned by his dark tribe  
In other orchards and passed on  
Instinctively as they are now,  
But fresh always with new tears.

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

R.S. Thomas

## **A Peasant**

Iago Prytherch his name, though, be it allowed,  
Just an ordinary man of the bald Welsh hills,  
Who pens a few sheep in a gap of cloud.  
Docking mangels, chipping the green skin  
From the yellow bones with a half-witted grin  
Of satisfaction, or churning the crude earth  
To a stiff sea of clods that glint in the wind&mdash;  
So are his days spent, his spittled mirth  
Rarer than the sun that cracks the cheeks  
Of the gaunt sky perhaps once in a week.  
And then at night see him fixed in his chair  
Motionless, except when he leans to gob in the fire.  
There is something frightening in the vacancy of his mind.  
His clothes, sour with years of sweat  
And animal contact, shock the refined,  
But affected, sense with their stark naturalness.  
Yet this is your prototype, who, season by season  
Against siege of rain and the wind's attrition,  
Preserves his stock, an impregnable fortress  
Not to be stormed, even in death's confusion.  
Remember him, then, for he, too, is a winner of wars,  
Enduring like a tree under the curious stars.

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

R.S. Thomas

## A Welsh Testament

All right, I was Welsh. Does it matter?  
I spoke a tongue that was passed on  
To me in the place I happened to be,  
A place huddled between grey walls  
Of cloud for at least half the year.  
My word for heaven was not yours.  
The word for hell had a sharp edge  
Put on it by the hand of the wind  
Honing, honing with a shrill sound  
Day and night. Nothing that Glyn Dwr  
Knew was armour against the rain's  
Missiles. What was descent from him?

Even God had a Welsh name:  
He spoke to him in the old language;  
He was to have a peculiar care  
For the Welsh people. History showed us  
He was too big to be nailed to the wall  
Of a stone chapel, yet still we crammed him  
Between the boards of a black book.

Yet men sought us despite this.  
My high cheek-bones, my length of skull  
Drew them as to a rare portrait  
By a dead master. I saw them stare  
From their long cars, as I passed knee-deep  
In ewes and wethers. I saw them stand  
By the thorn hedges, watching me string  
The far flocks on a shrill whistle.  
And always there was their eyes; strong  
Pressure on me: You are Welsh, they said;  
Speak to us so; keep your fields free  
Of the smell of petrol, the loud roar  
Of hot tractors; we must have peace  
And quietness.

Is a museum  
Peace? I asked. Am I the keeper  
Of the heart's relics, blowing the dust  
In my own eyes? I am a man;  
I never wanted the drab role  
Life assigned me, an actor playing  
To the past's audience upon a stage  
Of earth and stone; the absurd label  
Of birth, of race hanging askew  
About my shoulders. I was in prison  
Until you came; your voice was a key  
Turning in the enormous lock  
Of hopelessness. Did the door open  
To let me out or yourselves in?

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

R.S. Thomas

## **A Welshman to any Tourist**

We've nothing vast to offer you, no deserts  
Except the waste of thought  
Forming from mind erosion;  
No canyons where the pterodactyl's wing  
Falls like a shadow.  
the hills are fine, of course,  
Bearded with water to suggest age  
And pocked with caverns,  
One being Arthur's dormitory;  
He and his knights are the bright ore  
That seams our history,  
But shame has kept them late in bed.

R.S. Thomas

## Album

My father is dead.  
I who am look at him  
who is not, as once he  
went looking for me  
in the woman who was.

There are pictures  
of the two of them, no  
need of a third, hand  
in hand, hearts willing  
to be one but not three.

What does it mean  
life? I am here I am  
there. Look! Suddenly  
the young tool in their hands  
for hurting one another.

And the camera says:  
Smile; there is no wound  
time gives that is not bandaged  
by time. And so they do the  
three of them at me who weep.

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

R.S. Thomas

## **An Old Man**

Looking upon this tree with its quaint pretension  
Of holding the earth, a leveret, in its claws,  
Or marking the texture of its living bark,  
A grey sea wrinkled by the winds of years,  
I understand whence this man's body comes,  
In veins and fibres, the bare boughs of bone,  
The trellised thicket, where the heart, that robin,  
Greets with a song the seasons of the blood.

But where in meadow or mountain shall I match  
The individual accent of the speech  
That is the ear's familiar? To what sun attribute  
The honeyed warmness of his smile?  
To which of the deciduous brood is german  
The angel peeping from the latticed eye?

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

R.S. Thomas

## Chapel Deacon

Who put that crease in your soul,  
Davies, ready this fine morning  
For the staid chapel, where the Book's frown  
Sobers the sunlight? Who taught you to pray  
And scheme at once, your eyes turning  
Skyward, while your swift mind weighs  
Your heifer's chances in the next town's  
Fair on Thursday? Are your heart's coals  
Kindled for God, or is the burning  
Of your lean cheeks because you sit  
Too near that girl's smouldering gaze?  
Tell me, Davies, for the faint breeze  
From heaven freshens and I roll in it,  
Who taught you your deft poise?

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

R.S. Thomas

## **Children's Song**

We live in our own world,  
A world that is too small  
For you to stoop and enter  
Even on hands and knees,  
The adult subterfuge.  
And though you probe and pry  
With analytic eye,  
And eavesdrop all our talk  
With an amused look,  
You cannot find the centre  
Where we dance, where we play,  
Where life is still asleep  
Under the closed flower,  
Under the smooth shell  
Of eggs in the cupped nest  
That mock the faded blue  
Of your remoter heaven.

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

R.S. Thomas

## Death Of A Poet

Laid now on his smooth bed  
For the last time, watching dully  
Through heavy eyelids the day's colour  
Widow the sky, what can he say  
Worthy of record, the books all open,  
Pens ready, the faces, sad,  
Waiting gravely for the tired lips  
To move once -- what can he say?

His tongue wrestles to force one word  
Past the thick phlegm; no speech, no phrases  
For the day's news, just the one word 'sorry';  
Sorry for the lies, for the long failure  
In the poet's war; that he preferred  
The easier rhythms of the heart  
To the mind's scansion; that now he dies  
Intestate, having nothing to leave  
But a few songs, cold as stones  
In the thin hands that asked for bread.

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

R.S. Thomas

## Evans

Evans? Yes, many a time  
I came down his bare flight  
Of stairs into the gaunt kitchen  
With its wood fire, where crickets sang  
Accompaniment to the black kettle's  
Whine, and so into the cold  
Dark to smother in the thick tide  
Of night that drifted about the walls  
Of his stark farm on the hill ridge.

It was not the dark filling my eyes  
And mouth appalled me; not even the drip  
Of rain like blood from the one tree  
Weather-tortured. It was the dark  
Silting the veins of that sick man  
I left stranded upon the vast  
And lonely shore of his bleak bed.

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

R.S. Thomas

## **Good**

The old man comes out on the hill  
and looks down to recall earlier days  
in the valley. He sees the stream shine,  
the church stand, hears the litter of  
children's voices. A chill in the flesh  
tells him that death is not far off  
now: it is the shadow under the great boughs  
of life. His garden has herbs growing.  
The kestrel goes by with fresh prey  
in its claws. The wind scatters the scent  
of wild beans. The tractor operates  
on the earth's body. His grandson is there  
ploughing; his young wife fetches him  
cakes and tea and a dark smile. It is well.

R.S. Thomas

## Here

I am a man now.  
Pass your hand over my brow.  
You can feel the place where the brains grow.

I am like a tree,  
From my top boughs I can see  
The footprints that led up to me.

There is blood in my veins  
That has run clear of the stain  
Contracted in so many loins.

Why, then, are my hands red  
With the blood of so many dead?  
Is this where I was misled?

Why are my hands this way  
That they will not do as I say?  
Does no God hear when I pray?

I have no where to go  
The swift satellites show  
The clock of my whole being is slow,

It is too late to start  
For destinations not of the heart.  
I must stay here with my hurt.

R.S. Thomas

## **Night and Morning**

One night of tempest I arose and went  
Along the Menai shore on dreaming bent;  
The wind was strong, and savage swung the tide,  
And the waves blustered on Caernarfon side.

But on the morrow, when I passed that way,  
On Menai shore the hush of heaven lay;  
The wind was gentle and the sea a flower  
And the sun slumbered on Caernarfon tower.

R.S. Thomas

## **Ninetieth Birthday**

You go up the long track  
That will take a car, but is best walked  
On slow foot, noting the lichen  
That writes history on the page  
Of the grey rock. Trees are about you  
At first, but yield to the green bracken,  
The nightjars house: you can hear it spin  
On warm evenings; it is still now  
In the noonday heat, only the lesser  
Voices sound, blue-fly and gnat  
And the stream's whisper. As the road climbs,  
You will pause for breath and the far sea's  
Signal will flash, till you turn again  
To the steep track, buttressed with cloud.

And there at the top that old woman,  
Born almost a century back  
In that stone farm, awaits your coming;  
Waits for the news of the lost village  
She thinks she knows, a place that exists  
In her memory only.

    You bring her greeting  
And praise for having lasted so long  
With time's knife shaving the bone.  
Yet no bridge joins her own  
World with yours, all you can do  
Is lean kindly across the abyss  
To hear words that were once wise.

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

R.S. Thomas

## **On The Farm**

There was Dai Puw. He was no good.  
They put him in the fields to dock swedes,  
And took the knife from him, when he came home  
At late evening with a grin  
Like the slash of a knife on his face.

There was Llew Puw, and he was no good.  
Every evening after the ploughing  
With the big tractor he would sit in his chair,  
And stare into the tangled fire garden,  
Opening his slow lips like a snail.

There was Huw Puw, too. What shall I say?  
I have heard him whistling in the hedges  
On and on, as though winter  
Would never again leave those fields,  
And all the trees were deformed.

And lastly there was the girl:  
Beauty under some spell of the beast.  
Her pale face was the lantern  
By which they read in life's dark book  
The shrill sentence: God is love.

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

R.S. Thomas

## **Pisces**

Who said to the trout,  
You shall die on Good Friday  
To be food for a man  
And his pretty lady?

It was I, said God,  
Who formed the roses  
In the delicate flesh  
And the tooth that bruises.

R.S. Thomas

## Poetry For Supper

'Listen, now, verse should be as natural  
As the small tuber that feeds on muck  
And grows slowly from obtuse soil  
To the white flower of immortal beauty.'

'Natural, hell! What was it Chaucer  
Said once about the long toil  
That goes like blood to the poem's making?  
Leave it to nature and the verse sprawls,  
Limp as bindweed, if it break at all  
Life's iron crust. Man, you must sweat  
And rhyme your guts taut, if you'd build  
Your verse a ladder.'  
'You speak as though  
No sunlight ever surprised the mind  
Groping on its cloudy path.'

'Sunlight's a thing that needs a window  
Before it enter a dark room.  
Windows don't happen.'  
So two old poets,  
Hunched at their beer in the low haze  
Of an inn parlour, while the talk ran  
Noisily by them, glib with prose.

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

R.S. Thomas

## **Praise**

I praise you because  
you are artist and scientist  
in one. When I am somewhat  
fearful of your power,  
your ability to work miracles  
with a set-square, I hear  
you murmuring to yourself  
in a notation Beethoven  
dreamed of but never achieved.  
You run off your scales of  
rain water and sea water, play  
the chords of the morning  
and evening light, sculpture  
with shadow, join together leaf  
by leaf, when spring  
comes, the stanzas of  
an immense poem. You speak  
all languages and none,  
answering our most complex  
prayers with the simplicity  
of a flower, confronting  
us, when we would domesticate you  
to our uses, with the rioting  
viruses under our lens.

R.S. Thomas

## **Ruins**

And this was a civilization  
That came to nothing--he spurned with his toe  
The slave-coloured dust. We breathed it in  
Thankfully, oxygen to our culture.

Somebody found a curved bone  
In the ruins. A kings probably,  
He said. Imperfect courtiers  
We eyed it, the dropped kerchief of time.

R.S. Thomas

## Sorry

Dear parents,  
I forgive you my life,  
Begotten in a drab town,  
The intention was good;  
Passing the street now,  
I see still the remains of sunlight.

It was not the bone buckled;  
You gave me enough food  
To renew myself.  
It was the mind's weight  
Kept me bent, as I grew tall.

It was not your fault.  
What should have gone on,  
Arrow aimed from a tried bow  
At a tried target, has turned back,  
Wounding itself  
With questions you had not asked.

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

R.S. Thomas

## Taliesin

I have been all men known to history,  
Wondering at the world and at time passing;  
I have seen evil, and the light blessing  
Innocent love under a spring sky.

I have been Merlin wandering in the woods  
Of a far country, where the winds waken  
Unnatural voices, my mind broken  
By a sudden acquaintance with man's rage.

I have been Glyn Dwr set in the vast night,  
Scanning the stars for the propitious omen,  
A leader of men, yet cursed by the crazed women  
Mourning their dead under the same stars.

I have been Goronwy, forced from my own land  
To taste the bitterness of the salt ocean;  
I have known exile and a wild passion  
Of longing changing to a cold ache.

King, beggar and fool, I have been all by turns,  
Knowing the body's sweetness, the mind's treason;  
Taliesin still, I show you a new world, risen,  
Stubborn with beauty, out of the heart's need.

R.S. Thomas

## **The Ancients of the World**

The salmon lying in the depths of Llyn Llifon  
Secretly as a thought in a dark mind,  
Is not so old as the owl of Cwm Cowlyd  
Who tells her sorrow nightly on the wind.

The ousel singing in the woods of Cilgwri,  
Tirelessly as a stream over the mossed stones,  
Is not so old as the toad of Cors Fochno  
Who feels the cold skin sagging round his bones.

The toad and the ousel and the stag of Rhedynfre,  
That has cropped each leaf from the tree of life,  
Are not so old as the owl of Cwm Cowlyd,  
That the proud eagle would have to wife.

R.S. Thomas

## **The Cat and the Sea**

It is a matter of a black cat  
On a bare cliff top in March  
Whose eyes anticipate  
The gorse petals;

The formal equation of  
A domestic purr  
With the cold interiors  
Of the sea's mirror.

R.S. Thomas

## **The Dark Well**

They see you as they see you,  
A poor farmer with no name,  
Ploughing cloudward, sowing the wind  
With squalls of gulls at the day's end.  
To me you are Prytherch, the man  
Who more than all directed my slow  
Charity where there was need.  
There are two hungers, hunger for bread  
And hunger of the uncouth soul  
For the light's grace. I have seen both,  
And chosen for an indulgent world's  
Ear the story of one whose hands  
Have bruised themselves on the locked doors  
Of life; whose heart, fuller than mine  
Of gulped tears, is the dark well  
From which to draw, drop after drop,  
The terrible poetry of his kind.

R.S. Thomas

## **The Old Language**

England, what have you done to make the speech  
My fathers used a stranger to my lips,  
An offence to the ear, a shackle on the tongue  
That would fit new thoughts to an abiding tune?  
Answer me now. The workshop where they wrought  
Stands idle, and thick dust covers their tools.  
The blue metal of streams, the copper and gold  
Seams in the wood are all unquarried; the leaves'  
Intricate filigree falls, and who shall renew  
Its brisk pattern? When spring wakens the hearts  
Of the young children to sing, what song shall be theirs?

R.S. Thomas

## **The Village**

Scarcely a street, too few houses  
To merit the title; just a way between  
The one tavern and the one shop  
That leads nowhere and fails at the top  
Of the short hill, eaten away  
By long erosion of the green tide  
Of grass creeping perpetually nearer  
This last outpost of time past.

So little happens; the black dog  
Cracking his fleas in the hot sun  
Is history. Yet the girl who crosses  
From door to door moves to a scale  
Beyond the bland day's two dimensions.

Stay, then, village, for round you spins  
On a slow axis a world as vast  
And meaningful as any posed  
By great Plato's solitary mind.

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

R.S. Thomas

## **The Way of It**

With her fingers she turns paint  
into flowers, with her body  
flowers into a remembrance  
of herself. She is at work  
always, mending the garment  
of our marriage, foraging  
like a bird for something  
for us to eat. If there are thorns  
in my life, it is she who  
will press her breast to them and sing.

Her words, when she would scold,  
are too sharp. She is busy  
after for hours rubbing smiles  
into the wounds. I saw her,  
when young, and spread the panoply  
of my feathers instinctively  
to engage her. She was not deceived,  
but accepted me as a girl  
will under a thin moon  
in love's absence as someone  
she could build a home with  
for her imagined child.

R.S. Thomas

## **The Woman**

So beautiful--God himself quailed  
at her approach: the long body curved  
like the horizon. Why had he made  
her so? How would it be, she said,  
leaning towards him, if instead of  
quarreling over it, we divided it  
between us? You can have all the credit  
for its invention, if you will leave the ordering  
of it to me. He looked into her  
eyes and saw far down the bones  
of the generations that would navigate  
by those great stars, but the pull of it  
was too much. Yes, he thought, give me their minds'  
tribute, and what they do with their bodies  
is not my concern. He put his hand in his side  
and drew out the thorn for the letting  
of the ordained blood and touched her with  
it. Go, he said. They shall come to you for ever  
with their desire, and you shall bleed for them in return.

Submitted by Gnute

R.S. Thomas

## Thirteen Blackbirds Looking at a Man

I

It is calm.  
It is as though  
we lived in a garden  
that had not yet arrived  
at the knowledge of  
good and evil.  
But there is a man in it.

II

There will be  
rain falling vertically  
from an indifferent  
sky. There will stare out  
from behind its  
bars the face of the man  
who is not enjoying it.

III

Nothing higher  
than a blackberry  
bush. As the sun comes up  
fresh, what is the darkness  
stretching from horizon  
to horizon? It is the shadow  
here of the forked man.

IV

We have eaten  
the blackberries and spat out  
the seeds, but they lie  
glittering like the eyes of a man.

V

After we have stopped  
singing, the garden is disturbed  
by echoes. It is  
the man whistling, expecting  
everything to come to him.

VI

We wipe our beaks  
on the branches  
wasting the dawn's  
jewellery to get rid  
of the taste of a man.

VII

Nevertheless,  
which is not the case  
with a man, our  
bills give us no trouble.

VIII

Who said the  
number was unlucky?  
It was a man, who,  
trying to pass us,  
had his licence endorsed  
thirteen times.

IX

In the cool  
of the day the garden  
seems given over  
to blackbirds. Yet  
we know also that somewhere  
there is a man in hiding.

X

To us there are  
eggs and there are  
blackbirds. But there is the man,  
too, trying without feathers  
to incubate a solution.

XI

We spread our  
wings, reticulating  
our air space. A man stands  
under us and worries  
at his ability to do the same.

XII

When night comes  
like a visitor  
from outer space  
we stop our ears  
lest we should hear tell  
of the man in the moon.

XIII

Summer is  
at an end. The migrants  
depart. When they return  
in spring to the garden,  
will there be a man among them?

R.S. Thomas

## Welsh History

We were a people taut for war; the hills  
Were no harder, the thin grass  
Clothed them more warmly than the coarse  
Shirts our small bones.  
We fought, and were always in retreat,  
Like snow thawing upon the slopes  
Of Mynydd Mawr; and yet the stranger  
Never found our ultimate stand  
In the thick woods, declaiming verse  
To the sharp prompting of the harp.  
Our kings died, or they were slain  
By the old treachery at the ford.  
Our bards perished, driven from the halls  
Of nobles by the thorn and bramble.  
We were a people bred on legends,  
Warming our hands at the red past.  
The great were ashamed of our loose rags  
Clinging stubbornly to the proud tree  
Of blood and birth, our lean bellies  
And mud houses were a proof  
Of our ineptitude for life.  
We were a people wasting ourselves  
In fruitless battles for our masters,  
In lands to which we had no claim,  
With men for whom we felt no hatred.  
We were a people, and are so yet.  
When we have finished quarrelling for crumbs  
Under the table, or gnawing the bones  
Of a dead culture, we will arise  
And greet each other in a new dawn.

R.S. Thomas

## Welsh Landscape

To live in Wales is to be conscious  
At dusk of the spilled blood  
That went into the making of the wild sky,  
Dyeing the immaculate rivers  
In all their courses.  
It is to be aware,  
Above the noisy tractor  
And hum of the machine  
Of strife in the strung woods,  
Vibrant with sped arrows.  
You cannot live in the present,  
At least not in Wales.  
There is the language for instance,  
The soft consonants  
Strange to the ear.  
There are cries in the dark at night  
As owls answer the moon,  
And thick ambush of shadows,  
Hushed at the fields' corners.  
There is no present in Wales,  
And no future;  
There is only the past,  
Brittle with relics,  
Wind-bitten towers and castles  
With sham ghosts;  
Mouldering quarries and mines;  
And an impotent people,  
Sick with inbreeding,  
Worrying the carcass of an old song. To live in Wales is to be conscious  
At dusk of the spilled blood  
That went into the making of the wild sky,  
Dyeing the immaculate rivers  
In all their courses.  
It is to be aware,  
Above the noisy tractor  
And hum of the machine  
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With sham ghosts;  
Mouldering quarries and mines;  
And an impotent people,  
Sick with inbreeding,  
Worrying the carcase of an old song.

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

R.S. Thomas