

Poetry Series

**Robert Wylie**  
**- poems -**

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## Robert Wylie(02-11-35 to 06-13-2006)

My father was a working man who wrote poems for many years. The context of these, though often introspective, are concerned with his take on life and the activities of people, and his view of his home country as an exile. He died last year and I thought it fitting, as a mark of respect, and also because I enjoy his poems, that others should have the chance to share them.

# A Reading Of Minus Five

A reading of minus five,  
The first cold of Winter  
Hammers the fishermen  
Into their stools,  
Folding them  
Like badly struck nails, into the mud.

Cars on the road  
Slither more cautiously,  
Like blackened roaches  
Caught in a scrub fire.  
And the usually generous streetlights  
Seem more reluctant  
To illuminate the scene.

A reading of minus five,  
After the late Autumn mildness,  
And the few remaining leaves  
Fall to, finally, herald Winter  
As King-successor  
To the seasonal throne.

The tyrant days are here,  
With brown banners flying  
At the gale's whim.

Robert Wylie

# At Shoeburyness

Down beyond where the scarce sand  
Apologises for dark mud,  
The estuary boats rest keel-fast.

Their blacks, greys, and colours  
Splinter the foreground bleakness  
Like mad dentures in a  
Great river's gums.

Long silent ships  
Ghost away beyond sight,  
Keeping, through human choice,  
To the deep narrows.

Trickling through the minutes  
Of another hour the tide will  
Wash the canvas clean, and the boats,  
In wind-borne freedom,  
Will be sucked away beyond another bank  
Where the tallest stacks of factories grow.

The estuary will live again  
Before the giant, once more  
Inhales a tidal breath,  
Leaving the small boats  
To dry-out in the wind and sun.

Robert Wylie

# Boating

The same thin, parsimonious wind  
Which, now, and then blows against me,  
Blew against the small, wet-sailed boat  
Bobbing on the choppy water.

The gloves I wore,  
Most of the fingers  
Bitten-away in nervous times,  
Were soaked by the beetle-infested pond.  
My father smiled from across the water,  
Coaxing me to take an interest in what  
Was supposed to be my pleasure,  
'I'll do something with the rigging  
When I get the boat in', he cried.

The cold wind blew his heavy sadness  
Towards me, - I could not really see  
His eyes, but I knew  
That they threatened tears.  
The other dabblers in watery mysteries  
Were lifting their dreams from the pond  
And were making their way home.  
Rigging, set to catch the wind, the little  
Boat cocked it's way across the watery grain.  
'Hey, how's that? ' my father called,  
Happier now that he had shown his love  
In his dexterity.

Robert Wylie

# Bowling Green

Don't let them kid you,  
The slow, cardiganed men  
On the bowling green.

The lemonade sippers  
On the sidelines  
Know what is to come.

The persimmon wheels  
End to end,  
Biased by weight,  
And courtesy.

Until!  
The unbeatable bowl  
Lies touching the jack.  
Then the demonwood  
Crashes, panjandrum-like  
Full-tilt into the head.

Don't let them fool you,  
The slow, cardiganed men.  
They fought their wars  
In their youth.  
Only the battlefields have changed.

Robert Wylie

# Camden Lock Market

Waterside stewpot  
Filled brim-full  
With tarnished star-spangle,  
And honest craft.

Haven of poseur, and tourist,  
Week-end freak,  
And hungry vendor.

Friend to me  
When I feel the need  
To sugar-soap  
My jaded paintwork.

A place to watch  
Water buses  
Ply their trade,  
Watch the diners  
On the restaurant  
Float, and eat,  
Pick up silver rings,  
And influenza among  
The crowds,  
Munch a macrobiotic snack,  
And feel more noble,  
Think of one who  
Taught me how to fly.

Robert Wylie

# I Will Spit

A dying sun will  
Finally succumb  
To a night's whittling blade,  
And I, blunt-faced  
On the wind's hand,  
Will wither further  
On my cross of unshed tears,  
Fearing, as ever  
The frail audience  
Of an evening beach.

I will sense, in the Tern's cry  
The recollection  
Of a life's debris  
Deeply stained by my  
Father's quiet sadness.

I will taste in the spume  
How long there has been,  
And how long is still to come  
And I will spit  
To evacuate my fears.

Robert Wylie

# If The Memory

If the memory I have of you  
Were small enough to fill a thimble  
I would fill a thimble,  
And keep it in my sight.

But, since the memory I have of you  
Is battle-size, I will fill a field  
Big enough for armies, and  
Listen to their noise.

Should the memory I have of you  
Diminish, then, through all my years,  
I will find, again, the thimble,  
And keep it filled within my sight.

Robert Wylie

# Letter

He told me that  
He thought he was a letter,  
That he was being written,  
Though being allowed to  
Write something of himself.

He told me that he  
Had been, at last,  
Given a value, a purpose,  
That he was the pen and ink,  
The paper- that he was a message,  
Perhaps more, a story  
To be listened to  
Without comment, response.

He told me this in his  
Quiet, and canny way.

Tears blurred his eyes,  
And he was afraid that  
He would wet the paper.

I enveloped him to stop  
His ink from running.

Robert Wylie

# Magnificent Parasite (The Thames Through London)

This river, a blade  
Which would steal the life  
From my body,  
Prostitutes itself to the scabbard banks.  
This river takes sensation from  
The bodies of boats,  
Trips upon the city's rush,  
The city's energy.

Yet, the river has no rumble, no spark,  
Has little of anything  
Of it's own.

Prostitute, thief divider,  
It drains away to anonymity  
Beneath my bridge.  
It is a grave for dead dogs,  
Last room for the lost outsider.  
Denied the flush of flood  
By human ingenuity, a grandiose, yet,  
Magnificent parasite,  
Sucking upon the splendour, and vulgarity  
Paraded upon it's  
Necklaced shores.

Robert Wylie

# Making The Best Of Things

The train will pass above these gardens  
In the mid-spring evenings  
For many years to come,  
And the downlookers  
Will gauge the fading daffodils  
Against the sound, greening lawns.

They will not fail to see  
The garden tools  
Staked against the Winter-worn sheds,  
Ready for the eager hands.

But who in a thousand thousand  
Will see the man  
At the end of his work  
Standing in the cooling haze,  
Known only in suburban evenings,  
Wondering where the hours have gone,  
Preparing for the hesitating drift  
Indoors to drink tea,  
And end his day in conversation,  
Made dishonest through preoccupation  
With thoughts of repeated refuge  
Among his weeds, and mouldering leaves.  
Only one in a great many will look down  
To, fleetingly, join his eyes in the sadness  
Of making the best of things.

Robert Wylie

# New Tricks Of The Trade

He is still there, the leaf-sweeper,  
But, older now,  
No wiser, but older

He has learned new tricks  
Of the trade,  
Elements of his craft,  
Smaller heaps  
Spread across the garden,  
Punctuating the pathways,  
Piling-up the leaves,  
And spreading thin his time.

The cardiganed days are closer,  
But he will continue, yet, to wear  
The jeans that came late in his life,  
Too tight for his comfort,  
Not the usual gardeners garb,  
But a lifeline  
When the going of  
Making the best of things  
Gets tough.

Robert Wylie

# Onlookers

A struggle!  
From the first  
Attempt at the nipple,  
Until the final gasp,  
And they call it living.  
Mystically, a mixture  
Of actor and onlooker  
With the roles reversed  
To suit the given situation.  
The actors making the best of their way,  
The onlookers as critics of what they  
Themselves do in their turn.  
If a dervish, to whirl  
If a christian, you pray,  
If an addict, you choose your poison.  
But never will you be allowed  
To benefit without guilt.  
The onlooker will make sure  
That he maintains the difference  
Between his security,  
And your vulnerability.  
A struggle!  
From the first attempt at the nipple  
Until the final gasp, and it will  
Take more than heaven to help you.

Robert Wylie

# Saint Martin's Steps

It seemed that there were  
As many cameras as faces  
In the streets around Trafalgar Square.

The pavement below where we sat  
On Saint Martin's steps  
Flooded with tourists  
Each time that traffic lights changed,  
And the visiting folk  
Danced their ritual;  
A photographic Flamenco  
In the city's summer streets.

My son and I,  
Contented enough as spectators,  
Mused about moving up through Soho,  
Or perhaps Covent Garden,  
But langour had blunted  
Our Scottish edginess  
And anchored us to  
The ancient stone.

Talk and minutes  
Passed pleasantly  
Before we cartwheeled away  
Like birds startled by  
Nothing in particular.

Robert Wylie

## Small Scottish Seaside Towns

Small Scottish seaside towns,  
Turning inwards to face the hills;  
As if embarrassed by the unholy  
Juxtaposition of church, and pub,  
Have ceased to charm me.  
I have tired, quickly,  
Of their bright cuteness.  
The big church-Sunday hats  
Marry unhappily with  
The workless men at the street corner-  
Uneasy partners in the seaside gavotte.  
I am reminded, always,  
When I walk the shore-edge streets,  
That even the prettiest petticoats  
Lose their appeal when caked with mud,  
And hypocrisy.

Robert Wylie

# The Rowing Boy

Long, low, black slabs of cloud  
Skim in from where winter hides  
In it's Northern lair.  
Although sitting in this Southern suburb,  
I am pulled across time,  
And the salted grass that  
Dresses Scotland's Western shores,  
I am again rowing a small boat  
In the arms of wooden piers;  
Rowing under like the pier-shooting boy  
In long school socks  
Through long school-less days.

But, for water on water  
This is the likliest of places,  
And, the rain folds in  
Through gaps in the out-riding hills,  
Sending trippers scuttling to Woolworths, Or coffee in cafes.

The clouds continue to skim  
Until they skim beyond my imagination.  
I try to hold to my journey,  
But the rowing boy lies at anchor,  
Looking out at the rain streaming  
At the edge of the weather.

Robert Wylie

# The Turner Prize

They have not, they cannot,  
Will not, dare not  
Invite me to the 'Turner Prize'.

And yet, I have a jacket of leather,  
Corduroy trousers, denim shirt,  
The paraphernalia at the ready,  
And the jargon to match.  
It is all waiting.  
I am a circus  
With nowhere to perform;  
Lacking in sham, unafraid of foolishness  
In a world of fools.

I would dig the truth  
From their landscape of lies,  
And therein lies the reason  
Why I cannot, will not  
Be invited to the Turner Prize,  
-I would fuse their fairylights.

Robert Wylie

# Thirteen Ways Of Praising Dimitri Shostakovitch

All praise to you, Dimitri  
For your love of Mother Russia.  
All praise to you for consigning  
Social Realism to the Dogs of Dogma

Praise again for your defiance  
Of Stalin's will-to-ignorance.  
For your defiance of the tread  
Upon the stairs by terror's emissaries.

For your distillation of Russia's joy  
And suffering in your song.  
All praise for the War Symphonies  
In the name of drums and horror.

Praise too for the threads of dark  
And light woven in your cloak of truth.  
Again praise for the musical jokes  
When the crass Kremlin cried for kitsch.

Congratulation on your posthumous elevation  
To 'Russia's Laureate of Music'.  
And again for your 'Testimony' to a life  
Spent in exile from hypocrisy and cant.

Take praise from a grateful listener  
Who has learned to know who you are.  
But above all Dimitri, praise to you  
For our share in your genius.

For the sharing of Russia's grandeur  
Grief, tragedy, stupidity, and joy.

Robert Wylie

# To Sudbury

With Jean, by coach to Sudbury  
By way of Finchingfield, where  
Village on village (strung on  
a thread of lanes) , leads to  
Where Gainsborough's painterly  
Arm stretches to tint the  
Villas pink; leads to a  
Windmilled otherworld, where  
Cream teas at noon replace  
The urban chickenshack kitsch.

It is all easing-out, easing down,  
Smoothing us down to blend with  
The fenceless, hedgeless parklands,  
Guiding gamebirds from wooded shade.

Then back again through Essex,  
Avoiding odious towns, but  
Unavoidably meeting with  
The roadwork's sprawl at Ponders  
End, through Edmonton, and home.

Robert Wylie

# Tribal Markings

No regrets about throwing  
Cut-throat razors in the air,  
And catching them in my teeth,  
Such has been my life-long remedy  
For the itch of boredom.

True, the risk is there  
To miss, just that once,  
And I would have minutes to reflect.  
But better bleeding swiftly  
As the result of error  
Than plodding the safety road  
Where the grass is the same colour  
On both sides of the dry-stone dyke.

I have the tribal markings  
Denoting my creed;  
A notch on cheek, and jowl  
When I haven't got it quite right,  
Where the blade has missed the throat,  
But has left it's impression  
Nonetheless.

Robert Wylie