

Fine Though Sometimes Broken: A crown of sonnets after Edward and Helen Thomas

“... the sonnet, with an emotion strong enough to crush mere fancy and observation, could combine rapidly to fine though sometimes broken results.” – Edward Thomas, Keats

“ – these poems sank into my heart like prayers.” – Helen Thomas, World Without End

i. Sun Ghazal

These days of sun and peace are delicious.

These afternoons of wild garlic are delicious,

the fact of liking someone enough to miss them.

I think blue is the most delicious colour –

blue raspberry, this toothless sky, Messenger.

Gershwin's entire delicious rhapsody.

The sun pressed to the car windscreen

like a whole honey-glazed pig is delicious

whilst I wait and enjoy

the delicacy of missing you, how improbable

we are, like blue raspberry,

that delicious alien fruit. I just want to be

the sun at the end of everything, thinking: *I have eaten too much marmalade, honey, jam, treacle etc. and it was delicious.*

ii. Matriarch

Marmalade, honey, jam, treacle etc.

It has a pagan quality, her kitchen –
the apricots soaking their bruised knuckles,
the broken-backed coffee machine's

uphill pilgrimage, steamy
astral projections of lavender
and honey stirred into everything.
She is teaching me such things.

How a woman is forever an alchemist,
always a witch, the yellow-yellow magic
of a shrine of supermarket tulips
on the windowsill behind the sink.

Yet I still don't know what she means when she sings
the cherry orchard was foaming.

iii. camera roll

the blossom is foaming

downloading

the sun's glitchy interface

a distant algorithm –

lapwings

did you mean

is the sky over a field also the field or is it in the field like a sheep or flock of sheep

& doesn't the moon have better places to be at 3pm on a Sunday?????

I take 64 photos of the blossom

falling through the 5G

to show her

the lane heat-sick my shadow

a mistranslation:

my anemone maiden

iv. Guide to Worshipping a Minor Rustic Deity

Tell me I am your anemone maiden,
your entire South, a daughter of the sun, the moon
a shrine to my mouth. Tell me I am a song of many
hidden birds, you have been leaving offerings
of fresh watercress in chaffinch nests again. Tell me
I am about the business of eternity, a perfect example
of a meadow where a church once stood,
I was born to be a great river. Say you believe me –
my name means *light* in one ancient tongue
and an untranslatably vague yearning for freedom
in another. Tell me there is no such thing
as a dead language, I make you hungry for the sky,
you didn't realise until later what you had done,
how your spirit was waiting in the dark.

v. saved to drafts

my spirit waits in the dark

& it doesn't always come when you call you call me

my anemone maiden & that's lovely but do you smile

when you hit send & I know it's thyme you want

growing on your grave &

I can't give you your

self back & I've never understood

what's meant by *God* or *rockrose* love

hold me

like this

the way willow herb holds sunlight

& water

I don't mean it like a poet when I say

the moon is my closest neighbour

vi. Romantics

The moon is my closest neighbour,
she throws extravagant parties when she's heartbroken.

It's a monthly occurrence: her blue apartment,
a batch of minor poets, a crate of muslin-wrapped
desert plums. Our hands overlap often.

She has a thing for taxidermy, her favourite party game
is skinning rabbits on the roof. She expects a tribute
from each guest – the best yet was a jay's wing,
she wore it in her hair for weeks before she lost it.
The following morning I signed for plums; my usual invitation.

When she's in love, we're all agreed, she can't be left alone.
She sits with me on my night-shifts at the laundrette,
watching foam blossom against the humming glass.
Like ghost moths weaving their mysterious dance, she says.

vii. What I have learnt so far

Ghost moths have been weaving my hair again.
Perhaps they can taste the moon on me.

I love the theory that says we are all just
the universe's way of translating itself
into something legible and I am shorthand
for *potential*, a cocoon of metamorphosing light.

Everything is poetry in its mother tongue.

The rain said it first, and better.
The blossom said it first, and better.
The road-signs said it first, and better, and better.

The moon knows I am a flawed medium.

I want to write bright, irrelevant things,
an orchard of misremembered autumns
but the past is the only dead thing that smells sweet.

viii. Cento

The past is the only dead thing that smells sweet,
the only dream that enters the deep sleep of lovers
to unteach what the fox so well expressed –
a soft wind as of ushering voices.

I tasted deep the hour
I first learnt to distinguish trees,
the thick perfume of so many leaves
like a hand opened for giving.

It's the turn of lesser things, I suppose.
Some beautiful effect of clouds or of smoke,
the windmills in the flat meadows by the sea below,
a shallow bowl of white violets –

if it weren't for these things I shouldn't be really alive.
These days of sun and peace are delicious.

'Cento', is made up entirely of found text by the Edward and Helen Thomas – the first line is by Edward, the second by Helen, and so on. The sources are, in order of appearance: 'Early One Morning' by Edward Thomas; As It Was by Helen Thomas; 'Lob' by Edward Thomas; World Without End by Helen Thomas; 'Sowing' by Edward Thomas; As It Was by Helen Thomas; Letter from Edward to Helen, 21st June 1897; As It Was by Helen Thomas; 'The Barn' by Edward Thomas; As It Was by Helen Thomas; Letter from Edward to Helen, New Year's Day 1908; World Without End by Helen Thomas; Letter from Edward to Helen, 17th March 1917; Letter from Helen to Edward, September 1910 (exact date unknown).

Notes

This sequence is a crown of free verse sonnets. In a crown of sonnets, each poem ends with the first line of the next poem in the sequence, creating a chain. For the first and final lines of these poems I have quoted or paraphrased from the works of Edward and Helen Thomas. These are the quotes I have used, in order of appearance –

“these days of sun and peace are delicious.” Helen Thomas, letter to Edward Thomas [September 1910]

“I have eaten too much marmalade, honey, jam, treacle etc” – Edward Thomas, letter to Helen Thomas New Years Day 1908

“The cherry orchard was foaming with blossom” – Helen Thomas, *World Without End*

“my anemone maiden. Goodbye. Do you sleep happy, and are you well?” – Edward Thomas, letter to Helen Thomas 21st June 1897

“I did not know afterwards what I had done while my spirit waited in the dark.” – Helen Thomas, *As It Was*

“The moon is my closest neighbour” – Edward Thomas, ‘Recollections of a November’ (*Rose Acre Papers*)

“watching ghost moths weave their mysterious dance” – Helen Thomas, ‘Preface’, *The South Country*

“The past is the only dead thing that smells sweet” – Edward Thomas, ‘Early One Morning’

Further borrowed quotations and paraphrases are as follows –

‘Matriarch’: “it had a pagan quality, age-old and primitive, which especially appealed to me.” - Helen Thomas, *A Remembered Harvest*

‘Guide to Worshipping a Minor Rustic Deity’: “women have influenced poetry by their profound and mysterious association with Nature [...] in their guise of minor rustic deities or nymphs” – *Feminine Influence on the Poets* by Edward Thomas; “in all her actions a daughter of the sun” – *The South Country* by Edward Thomas; “the song of many hidden birds.” – *The South Country* by Edward Thomas; “he brought me as a present a most beautifully compact, moss-covered nest of a chaffinch” – *As It Was* by Helen Thomas; “That maid walking so proudly is about the business of eternity.” – *The South Country* by Edward Thomas; “I yearned vaguely for freedom, for something more than this” – *As It Was* by Helen Thomas; “Today I want the sky” – ‘The Lofty Sky’ by Edward Thomas.

‘saved to drafts’: “If you ever smile when you think of me well that’s lovely, but do you?” – Helen Thomas, letter to Edward Thomas 10th November 1911; “I would give you back yourself” – ‘Household Poems [4 Helen]’ by Edward Thomas; “I never understood quite what was meant by God.” – Edward Thomas’ war diary, 8th April 1917.

‘Romantics’: “A Circean lady is playing Grieg. She could turn us into swing. [...] she does for the time change into gods some of those who are sitting in the great blue apartment” – ‘Rain’ by Edward Thomas (*Rose Acre Papers*); “a batch of minor poets” – ‘W.H. Davies’ by Helen Thomas; “The farmhouse stood among large orchards in which were grown the choicest of desert plums,

each hanging in its own muslin bag to protect it from wasps” – ‘4th August 1914 – Robert Frost’ by Helen Thomas; “I have my jay’s wing still.” – *As It Was* by Helen Thomas.

‘What I have learnt so far’: “the rain [...] said many things which I have copied.” – ‘Rain’ by Edward Thomas (*Rose Acre Papers*); “I wish, by the way, that I had noted down more of the names on the signboards at the cross-roads. There is a wealth of poetry in them” – *The South Country* by Edward Thomas; “the thrush cock sings / Bright irrelevant things” – ‘Roads’ by Edward Thomas.

These texts are all readily and generously available to read at the Edward Thomas Study Centre, Petersfield Museum.