

'Fine Though Sometimes Broken' – An explanatory note by Ellora Sutton

For April, I have written a crown of free verse sonnets responding to the writing of Edward and Helen Thomas. A crown of sonnets uses the closing line of one sonnet as the first line of the next; for these lines I used quotes (sometimes paraphrased quotes) from Edward and Helen, so that they are in a kind of dialogue with each other, reaching across the page to each other, before finally meeting in the closing sonnet, 'Cento', which is made up entirely of direct quotes from their writings. For 'Cento', it might be more accurate to say I 'curated' the poem rather than writing it. Please see the end of the sequence itself for a full list of quotations.

These are not strict/traditional sonnets, but a sort of free verse, contemporary sonnet. The only rules I set myself were that they must have fourteen lines, and they must have a volta/thematic turn. I chose to do this because it signals participation in a tradition whilst still being forward-looking. Edward Thomas admired the sonnets of Keats ("And these last two and several other sonnets [...] prove that the brief disciplinary form of the sonnet, with an emotion strong enough to crush mere fancy and observation, could combine rapidly to fine though sometimes broken results" – *Keats*) whilst being a pioneer of the free verse 'form' himself.

A crown of sonnets traditionally takes the same subject and then examines it from a different perspective or angle in each poem. With 'Fine Though Sometimes Broken', each individual sonnet is a response to a different aspect, theme, or repeated image that particularly spoke to me in the writing of the Thomas'.

'Sun Ghazal' is a celebration of warm days, the spring and bright sunshine that both Helen and Edward so beautifully conjure; for the repeated phrase (known as a *radif* in a traditional ghazal) I chose "delicious" because it jumped out at me as a word both Helen and Edward use repeatedly, usually to describe the weather or landscape.

'Matriarch' started as a response to the repeated mentions of food and food imagery in their writing, and grew to also reflect their interest in gods and mythology – "It had a pagan quality, age-old and primitive, which especially appealed to me" is a quote from Helen Thomas' *A Remembered Harvest*.

Although I think of all of these as nature poems, or at least as poems that contain elements of nature, 'camera roll' started specifically designated as a 'nature poem'. I think it's more specifically about my/the contemporary relationship with nature. I experience nature through my mobile phone, which is often actually a good thing – when I see a bird I can Google search its features and find out what it's called (as I really did with the real lapwings mentioned in the poem), and if I see some particularly pretty blossom I can share it with my friends around the world.

'Guide to Worshipping a Minor Rustic Deity' started as a love poem, but like 'Matriarch' grew to be something more mythic, with a "pagan quality". It quotes from and glances off of many images from Edward and Helen Thomas, from the moon being a shrine ("great clouds [...] like hooded priests [...] to what mysterious shrine were they advancing – to what shrine among the firs of an unseen horizon, with the crow and the bat?" – 'Recollections of a November' by Edward Thomas (*Rose Acre Papers*)) to chaffinch nests ("he brought me as a present a most beautifully compact, moss-covered nest of a chaffinch" – *As It Was* by Helen Thomas).

'saved to drafts' was a response to the themes of loneliness, isolation, and mental ill health found in the work of both Edward and Helen. I think "I would give you back yourself" ('Household Poems [4 Helen]#') is one of the most heartbreaking lines of poetry – to believe so wholly that

you've somehow ruined or taken the life of the person you love most. I called it 'saved to drafts' because I wanted to capture that isolation, that loneliness – of wanting to say something, to reach out, but not feeling able to. It is a message or email or text, typed out and almost sent, unsent, unable to be said, an inability to communicate. Although we are technically more connected than ever, we are still (unfortunately) capable of immense isolation.

'Romantics' is a response to the many, many vivid images of night and the moon in the writing of both of the 'Thomas', whilst also riffing on the popular idea of poets being obsessed with the moon (which is true).

'What I have learnt so far' is a kind of ars poetica influenced by Edward and Helen Thomas.

My aims with this sequence were to map out my own personal, evolving relationship with the writing of Edward and Helen Thomas by picking out the themes that really spoke to me, and to then be able to translate these themes into my own world. These poems glance off of the writing of the 'Thomas', and they glance off of each other too, with repeated images. These are poems of echoes and ghosts.

Although responding to work of the past, these are very much poems of the now. In the spirit of Edward Thomas, who bemoaned poets "trying to write as if there were no such thing as a Tube" (quoted in *The Nature of Modernism* by Elizabeth Black), I am embracing the contemporary world – a world in which blossom and lapwings sit side-by-side with iPhones and 5G. If Edward Thomas were alive today, I daresay 'Adlestrop' would have been written in the backseat of an Uber.

The work of Edward and Helen Thomas is deeply relevant to the contemporary world, with themes of mental health and the importance of the natural world. It was my aim to highlight and draw out, or draw attention to, their ground-breaking work.