

Classic Poetry Series

Edwin Morgan
- poems -

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Edwin Morgan(27 April 1920 – 17 August 2010)

Edwin George Morgan was a Scottish poet and translator who was associated with the Scottish Renaissance. He is widely recognised as one of the foremost Scottish poets of the 20th century. In 1999, Morgan was made the first Glasgow Poet Laureate. In 2004, he was named as the first Scottish national poet: The Scots Makar.

Life and Career

Morgan was born in Glasgow and grew up in Rutherglen. His parents were Presbyterian. As a child he was not surrounded by books, nor did he have any literary acquaintances. Schoolmates labelled him a swot. He convinced his parents to finance his membership of several book clubs in Glasgow. The Faber Book of Modern Verse (1936) was a "revelation" to him, he later said.

Morgan entered the University of Glasgow in 1937. It was at university that he studied French and Russian, while self-educating in "a good bit of Italian and German" as well. After interrupting his studies to serve in World War II as a non-combatant conscientious objector with the Royal Army Medical Corps, Morgan graduated in 1947 and became a lecturer at the University. He worked there until his retirement in 1980.

Morgan first outlined his sexuality in *Nothing Not Giving Messages: Reflections on his Work and Life* (1990). He had written many famous love poems, among them "Strawberries" and "The Unspoken", in which the love object was not gendered; this was partly because of legal problems at the time but also out of a desire to universalise them, as he made clear in an interview with Marshall Walker. At the opening of the Glasgow LGBT Centre in 1995, he read a poem he had written for the occasion, and presented it to the Centre as a gift.

In 2002, he became the patron of Our Story Scotland. At the Opening of the Scottish Parliament building in Edinburgh on 9 October 2004, Liz Lochhead read a poem written especially for the occasion by Morgan, titled "Poem for the Opening of the Scottish Parliament". She was announced as Morgan's successor as Scots Makar in January 2011.

Near the end of his life, Morgan reached a new audience after collaborating with the Scottish band Idlewild on their album *The Remote Part*. In the closing moments of the album's final track "In Remote Part/ Scottish Fiction", he recites a poem, "Scottish Fiction", written specifically for the song.

In 2007, Morgan contributed two poems to the compilation *Ballads of the Book*, for which a range of Scottish writers created poems to be made into songs by Scottish musicians. Morgan's songs "The Good Years" and "The Weight of Years" were performed by Karine Polwart and Idlewild respectively.

Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney "[paid] formal homage" during a 2005 visit.

In later life Morgan was cared for at a residential home as his illness worsened. He published a collection in April 2010 titled *Dreams and Other Nightmares*, months before his death, to mark his 90th birthday. Up until his death, he was the last survivor of the canonical 'Big Seven' (the others being Hugh MacDiarmid, Robert Garioch, Norman MacCaig, Iain Crichton Smith, George Mackay Brown, and Sorley MacLean).

On 17 August 2010, Edwin Morgan died of pneumonia in Glasgow, Scotland, at the age of 90 years. The Scottish Poetry Library made the announcement in the morning. Tributes came from, among others, politicians Alex Salmond and Iain Gray, as well as Carol Ann Duffy, the UK Poet Laureate.

Testamentary Provisions

First Minister of Scotland Alex Salmond's leader's speech to the Scottish National Party Conference at Inverness on 22 October 2011 referred to Morgan's bequest of £918,000 to the Party in his Will as "transformational". The next day it was announced that all of the bequest would be used for the party's independence referendum campaign. Morgan also left £45,000 to a number of friends, former colleagues and charity organisations and set aside another £1 million for the creation of an annual award scheme for young poets in Scotland.

Poetry

Morgan worked in a wide range of forms and styles, from the sonnet to concrete poetry. His *Collected Poems* appeared in 1990. He has also translated from a wide range of languages, including Russian, Hungarian, French, Italian, Latin, Spanish, Portuguese, German and Old English (*Beowulf*). Many of these are collected in *Rites of Passage. Selected Translations* (1976). His 1952 translation of *Beowulf* has become a standard translation in America.

Morgan was also influenced by the American beat poets, with their simple, accessible ideas and language being prominent features in his work.

In 1968 Morgan wrote a poem entitled Starlings In George Square. This poem could be read as a comment on society's reluctance to accept the integration of different races. Other people have also considered it to be about the Russian Revolution in which "Starling" could be a reference to "Stalin".

A Little Catechism From The Demon

What is a demon? Study my life.
What is a mountain? Set out now.
What is fire? It is for ever.
What is my life? A fall, a call.
What is the deep? Set out now.
What is thunder? Your power dry.
What is the film? It rolls, it tells.
What is the film? Under the Falls.
Where is the theatre? Under the hill.
Where is the demon? Walking the hills.
Where is the victory? On the high tops.
Where is the fire? Far in the deep.
Where is the deep? Study the demon.
Where is the mountain? Set out now.
Study my life and set out now.

'Demon'; , Glasgow: Mariscat Press, 1999, p. 28.

Edwin Morgan

Absence

My shadow --

I woke to a wind swirling the curtains light and dark
and the birds twittering on the roofs, I lay cold
in the early light in my room high over London.

What fear was it that made the wind sound like a fire
so that I got up and looked out half-asleep
at the calm rows of street-lights fading far below?

Without fire

Only the wind blew.

But in the dream I woke from, you
came running through the traffic, tugging me, clinging
to my elbow, your eyes spoke
what I could not grasp --
Nothing, if you were here!

The wind of the early quiet
merges slowly now with a thousand rolling wheels.
The lights are out, the air is loud.
It is an ordinary January day.
My shadow, do you hear the streets?
Are you at my heels? Are you here?
And I throw back the sheets.

Anonymous Submission

Edwin Morgan

At Eighty

Push the boat out, compañeros,
push the boat out, whatever the sea.
Who says we cannot guide ourselves
through the boiling reefs, black as they are,
the enemy of us all makes sure of it!
Mariners, keep good watch always
for that last passage of blue water
we have heard of and long to reach
(no matter if we cannot, no matter!)
in our eighty-year-old timbers
leaky and patched as they are but sweet
well seasoned with the scent of woods
long perished, serviceable still
in unarrested pungency
of salt and blistering sunlight. Out,
push it all out into the unknown!
Unknown is best, it beckons best,
like distant ships in mist, or bells
clanging ruthless from stormy buoys.

Edwin Morgan

Guten Morgan

Guten Morgan was a limited edition print folio containing the poems

'Less is not better'

'Poetry comes and goes'

'Rainbow'

'Fled'

'Shadows'

'Zoo'

Images of the prints from this folio are viewable below.

Edwin Morgan

James Macfarlan

'A man's a man for a' that' – how does he know?
Traipsing with his plough, the rural hero,
Swaggering down the lea-rigs, talking to mice,
Sweating his sickly verses to entice
Lassies he'd never see again, strutting
Through the salons in his best breeches, rutting
In a cloud of claret, buttonholing
Lord This, sweet-talking Doctor That, bowling
His wit down levees, bosoms, siller quaichs –
D'ye think he's ever heard the groans and skraighs
Of city gutters, or marked the shapes that wrap
Fog and smoke about them as if they could hap
Homelessness or keep hunger at bay? What,
Not heard or seen, but has he even thought
How some, and many, and more than many, survive,
Or don't survive, on factory floors, or thrive
Or fail to thrive by foundry fires, or try
To find the words – sparks scatter and bolts fly –
That's feeble – to show the new age its dark face?
The Carron Ironworks – how he laughed at the place,
Made a joke of our misery, passed on
To window-scratch his diamond-trivia, and swan
Through country-house and customs-post, servile
To the very gods from which he ought to resile!
'Liberty's a glorious feast,' you said.
Is that right? Wouldn't the poor rather have bread?
Burns man, I'm hard on you, I'm sorry for it.
I think such poetry is dangerous, that's all.
Poetry must pierce the filthy wall
With cries that die on country ways. The glow
Of bonhomie will not let the future grow.

Edwin Morgan

One Cigarette

No smoke without you, my fire.
After you left,
your cigarette glowed on in my ashtray
and sent up a long thread of such quiet grey
I smiled to wonder who would believe its signal
of so much love. One cigarette
in the non-smoker's tray.
As the last spire
trembles up, a sudden draught
blows it winding into my face.
Is it smell, is it taste?
You are here again, and I am drunk on your tobacco lips.
Out with the light.
Let the smoke lie back in the dark.
Till I hear the very ash
sigh down among the flowers of brass
I'll breathe, and long past midnight, your last kiss.

Edwin Morgan

Seven Decades

At ten I read Mayakovsky had died,
learned my first word of Russian, lyublyu;
watched my English teacher poke his earwax
with a well-chewed HB and get the class
to join his easy mocking of my essay
where I'd used verdant herbage for green grass.
So he was right? So I hated him!
And he was not really right, the ass.
A writer knows what he needs,
as came to pass.

At twenty I got marching orders, kitbag,
farewell to love, not arms, (though our sole arms
were stretchers), a freezing Glentress winter
where I was coaxing sticks at six to get
a stove hot for the cooks, found myself picked
quartermaster's clerk – 'this one seems a bit
less gormless than the bloody others' – did
gas drill in the stinging tent, met
Tam McSherry who farted at will
a musical set.

At thirty I thought life had passed me by,
translated Beowulf for want of love.
And one night stands in city centre lanes –
they were dark in those days – were wild but bleak.
Sydney Graham in London said, 'you know
I always thought so', kissed me on the cheek.
And I translated Rilke's Loneliness
is like a rain, and week after week after week
strained to unbind myself,
sweated to speak.

At forty I woke up, saw it was day,
found there was love, heard a new beat, heard Beats,
sent airmail solidarity to Saõ
Paulo's poetic-concrete revolution,
knew Glasgow – what? – knew Glasgow new – somehow –
new with me, with John, with cranes, diffusion

of another concrete revolution, not bad,
not good, but new. And new was no illusion:
a spring of words, a sloughing,
an ablution.

At fifty I began to have bad dreams
of Palestine, and saw bad things to come,
began to write my long unwritten war.
I was a hundred-handed Sindbad then,
rolled and unrolled carpets of blood and love,
raised tents of pain, made the dust into men
and laid the dust with men. I supervised
a thesis on Doughty, that great Englishman
who brought all Arabia back
in his hard pen.

At sixty I was standing by a grave.
The winds of Lanarkshire were loud and high.
I knew what I had lost, what I had had.
The East had schooled me about fate, but still
it was the hardest time, oh more, it was
the worst of times in self-reproach, the will
that failed to act, the mass of good not done.
Forgiveness must be like the springs that fill
deserted furrows till they wait
until – until –

At seventy I thought I had come through,
like parting a bead curtain in Port Said,
to something that was shadowy before,
figures and voices of late times that might
be surprising yet. The beads clash faintly
behind me as I go forward. No candle-light
please, keep that for Europe. Switch the whole thing
right on. When I go in I want it bright,
I want to catch whatever is there
in full sight.

Edwin Morgan

Strawberries

There were never strawberries
like the ones we had
that sultry afternoon
sitting on the step
of the open french window
facing each other
your knees held in mine
the blue plates in our laps
the strawberries glistening
in the hot sunlight
we dipped them in sugar
looking at each other
not hurrying the feast
for one to come
the empty plates
laid on the stone together
with the two forks crossed
and I bent towards you
sweet in that air
in my arms
abandoned like a child
from your eager mouth
the taste of strawberries
in my memory
lean back again
let me love you

let the sun beat
on our forgetfulness
one hour of all
the heat intense
and summer lightning
on the Kilpatrick hills

let the storm wash the plates

Edwin Morgan

The First Men On Mercury

– We come in peace from the third planet.
Would you take us to your leader?

– Bawr stretter! Bawr. Bawr. Stretterhawl?

– This is a little plastic model
of the solar system, with working parts.
You are here and we are there and we
are now here with you, is this clear?

– Gawl horrop. Bawr Abawrhannahanna!

– Where we come from is blue and white
with brown, you see we call the brown
here 'land', the blue is 'sea', and the white
is 'clouds' over land and sea, we live
on the surface of the brown land,
all round is sea and clouds. We are 'men'.
Men come –

– Glawp men! Gawrbenner menko. Menhawl?

– Men come in peace from the third planet
which we call 'earth'. We are earthmen.
Take us earthmen to your leader.

– Thmen? Thmen? Bawr. Bawrhossop.
Yuleeda tan hanna. Harrabost yuleeda.

– I am the yuleeda. You see my hands,
we carry no benner, we come in peace.
The spaceways are all stretterhawn.

– Glawn peacemen all horrabhanna tantko!
Tan come at'mstrossop. Glawp yuleeda!

– Atoms are peacegawl in our harraban.
Menbat worrabost from tan hannahanna.

– You men we know bawrhossoptant. Bawr.
We know yuleeda. Go strawg backspetter quick.

– We cantantabawr, tangingko backspetter now!

– Banghapper now! Yes, third planet back.
Yuleeda will go back blue, white, brown
nowhanna! There is no more talk.

– Gawl han fasthapper?

– No. You must go back to your planet.
Go back in peace, take what you have gained
but quickly.

– Stretterworra gawl, gawl...

– Of course, but nothing is ever the same,
now is it? You'll remember Mercury.

Edwin Morgan

The Loch Ness Monster's Song

Sssnnnwhuffffll?

Hnwhuffl hhnwfl hnfl hfl?

Gdroblboblhobngbl gbl gl g g g g glbgl.

Drublhaflablhaflubhafgabhaflhafl fl fl -

gm grawwww grf grawf awfgm graw gm.

Hovoplodok - doplodovok - plovodokot-doplodokosh?

Splgraw fok fok splgrafhatchgabrlgabrl fok splfok!

Zgra kra gka fok!

Grof grawff gahf?

Gombl mbl bl -

blm plm,

blm plm,

blm plm,

blp.

Edwin Morgan