

Classic Poetry Series

Thomas Blackburn
- poems -

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Thomas Blackburn(1916-1977)

An Invitation

Holding with shaking hands a letter from some
Official – high up he says in the Ministry,
I note that I am invited to Birmingham,
There pedagogues to address for a decent fee.
'We like to meet,' he goes on, 'men eminent
In the field of letters each year,' and that's well put,
Though I find his words not wholly relevant
To this red-eyed fellow whose mouth tastes rank as soot.
No doubt what he's thinking of is poetry
When 'Thomas Blackburn' he writes, and not the fuss
A life makes when it has no symmetry,
Though the term 'a poet' being mainly posthumous,
Since I'm no stiff, is inappropriate.
What I can confirm is the struggle that never lets up
Between the horses of Plato beneath my yoke,
One after Light, and for Hell not giving a rap,
The other only keen on infernal smoke.
And poems...? From time to time they commemorate
Some particularly dirty battle between these two;
I put the letter down – what's the right note?
'Dear Sir,' I type, 'how nice to speak to you!'

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

Thomas Blackburn

Café; Talk

'Of course,' I said, 'we cannot hope to find
What we are looking for in anyone;
They glitter, maybe, but are not the sun,
This pebble here, that bit of apple rind.
Still, it's the Alpine sun that makes them burn,
And what we're looking for, some indirect
Glint of itself each of us may reflect,
And so shed light about us as we turn.'
Sideways she looked and said, 'How you go on!'
And was the stone and rind, their shinings gone.

'It is some hard dry scale we must break through,
A deadness round the life. I cannot make
That pebble shine. Its clarity must take
Sunlight unto itself and prove it true.
It is our childishness that clutters up
With scales out of the past a present speech,
So that the sun's white finger cannot reach
An adult prism.'

 'Will they never stop,
Your words?' she said and settled to the dark.

'But we use words, we cannot grunt or bark,
Use any surer means to make that first
Sharp glare of origin again appear
Through the marred glass,' I cried, 'but can you hear?'
'Quite well, you needn't shout.' I felt the thirst
Coil back into my body till it shook,
And, 'Are you cold?' she said, then ceased to look
And picked a bit of cotton from her dress.
Out in the square a child began to cry,
What was not said buzzed round us like a fly.

I knew quite well that silence was my cue,
But jabbered out, 'This meeting place we need,
If we can't find it, still the desire may feed
And strengthen on the acts it cannot do.
By suffered depredations we may grow
To bear our energies just strong enough,

And at the last through perdurable stuff
A little of their radiance may show:
I f we keep still.' Then she, 'It's getting late.'
A waiter came and took away a plate.

Then from the darkness an accordion;
'These pauses, love, perhaps in them, made free,
Life slips out of its gross machinery,
And turns upon itself in unison.'
It was quite dark now you must understand
And something of a red mouth on a wall
Joined with the music and the alcohol
And pushed me to the fingers of her hand.
Well, there it was, itself and quite complete,
Accountable, small bones there were and meat.

It did not press on mine or shrink away,
And, since no outgone need can long invest
Oblivion with a living interest,
I drew back and had no more words to say.
Outside the streets were like us and quite dead.
Yet anything more suited to my will,
I can't imagine, than our very still
Return to no place;
As the darkness shed
Increasing whiteness on the far icefall,
A growth of light there was; and that is all.

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Hospital For Defectives

By your unnumbered charities
A miracle disclose,
Lord of the Images, whose love
The eyelids and the rose
Takes for a language, and today
Tell to me what is said
By these men in a turnip field
And their unleavened bread.

For all things seem to figure out
The stirrings of your heart,
And two men pick the turnips up
And two men pull the cart;
And yet between the four of them
No word is ever said
Because the yeast was not put in
Which makes the human bread.
But three men stare on vacancy
And one man strokes his knees;
What is the meaning to be found
In such dark vowels as these?

Lord of the Images, whose love
The eyelid and the rose
Takes for a metaphor, today,
Beneath the warder's blows,
The unleavened man did not cry out
Or turn his face away;
Through such men in a turnip field
What is it that you say?

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

Thomas Blackburn