

Classic Poetry Series

Thomas Edward Brown
- poems -

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Thomas Edward Brown(1830-1897)

Disguises

High stretched upon the swinging yard,
I gather in the sheet;
But it is hard
And stiff, and one cries haste.
Then He that is most dear in my regard
Of all the crew gives aidance meet;
But from His hands, and from His feet,
A glory spreads wherewith the night is starred:
Moreover of a cup most bitter-sweet
With fragrance as of nard,
And myrrh, and cassia spiced,
He proffers me to taste.
Then I to Him:—'Art Thou the Christ?'
He saith—'Thou say'st.'

Like to an ox
That staggers 'neath the mortal blow,
She grinds upon the rocks:—
Then straight and low
Leaps forth the levelled line, and in our quarter locks
The cradle's rigged; with swerving of the blast
We go,
Our Captain last—
Demands
'Who fired that shot?' Each silent stands—
Ah, sweet perplexity!
This too was He.

I have an arbour wherein came a toad
Most hideous to see—
Immediate, seizing staff or goad,
I smote it cruelly.
Then all the place with subtle radiance glowed—
I looked, and it was He!

Thomas Edward Brown

I Bended Unto Me A Bough

I bended unto me a bough of May,
That I might see and smell:
It bore it in a sort of way,
It bore it very well.
But, when I let it backward sway,
Then it were hard to tell
With what a toss, with what a swing,
The dainty thing
Resumed its proper level,
And sent me to the devil.
I know it did--you doubt it?
I turned, and saw them whispering about it.

Thomas Edward Brown

Ibant Obscuræ

To-night I saw three maidens on the beach,
Dark-robed descending to the sea,
So slow, so silent of all speech,
And visible to me
Only by that strange drift-light, dim, forlorn,
Of the sun's wreck and clashing surges born.

Each after other went,
And they were gathered to his breast--
It seemed to me a sacrament
Of some stern creed unblest:
As when to rocks, that cheerless girt the bay,
They bound thy holy limbs, Andromeda.

Thomas Edward Brown

Land, Ho!

I know 'tis but a loom of land,
Yet is it land, and so I will rejoice,
I know I cannot hear His voice
Upon the shore, nor see Him stand;
Yet is it land, ho! land.

The land! the land! the lovely land!
'Far off,' dost say? Far off—ah, blessèd home!
Farewell! farewell! thou salt sea-foam!
Ah, keel upon the silver sand—
Land, ho! land.

You cannot see the land, my land,
You cannot see, and yet the land is there—
My land, my land, through murky air—
I did not say 'twas close at hand—
But—land, ho! land.

Dost hear the bells of my sweet land,
Dost hear the kine, dost hear the merry birds?
No voice, 'tis true, no spoken words,
No tongue that thou may'st understand—
Yet is it land, ho! land.

It's clad in purple mist, my land,
In regal robe it is apparellèd,
A crown is set upon its head,
And on its breast a golden band—
Land, ho! land.

Dost wonder that I long for land?
My land is not a land as others are—
Upon its crest there beams a star,
And lilies grow upon the strand—
Land, ho! land.

Give me the helm! there is the land!
Ha! lusty mariners, she takes the breeze!
And what my spirit sees it sees—

Leap, bark, as leaps the thunderbrand—
Land, ho! land.

Thomas Edward Brown

Lynton Verses

Sweet breeze that sett'st the summer birds a swaying,
Dear lambs amid the primrose meadows playing
Let me not think!
O floods, upon whose brink
The merry birds are maying,
Dream, softly dream! O blessed mother lead me
Unsevered from thy girdle — lead me! feed me!
I have no will but shine;
I need not but the juice
Of elemental wine—
Perish remoter use
Of strength reserved for conflict yet to come!
Let me be dumb,
As long as I may feel thy hand—
This, this is all—do ye not understand
How the great Mother mixes all our bloods ?
O breeze! O swaying buds!
O lambs, O primroses, O floods!

Thomas Edward Brown

My Garden

A garden is a lovesome thing, God wot!
Rose plot,
Fringed pool,
Ferned grot--
The veriest school
Of peace; and yet the fool
Contends that God is not--
Not God! in gardens! when the eve is cool?
Nay, but I have a sign;
'Tis very sure God walks in mine.

Thomas Edward Brown

Opifex

As I was carving images from clouds,
And tinting them with soft ethereal dyes
Pressed from the pulp of dreams, one comes, and cries:--
"Forbear!" and all my heaven with gloom enshrouds.

"Forbear!" Thou hast no tools wherewith to essay
The delicate waves of that elusive grain:
Wouldst have due recompense of vulgar pain?
The potter's wheel for thee, and some coarse clay!

"So work, if work thou must, O humbly skilled!
Thou hast not known the Master; in thy soul
His spirit moves not with a sweet control;
Thou art outside, and art not of the guild."

Thereat I rose, and from his presence passed,
But, going, murmured:--"To the God above,
Who holds my heart, and knows its store of love,
I turn from thee, thou proud iconoclast."

Then on the shore God stooped to me, and said:--
"He spake the truth: even so the springs are set
That move thy life, nor will they suffer let,
Nor change their scope; else, living, thou wert dead.

"This is thy life: indulge its natural flow,
And carve these forms. They yet may find a place
On shelves for them reserved. In any case,
I bid thee carve them, knowing what I know."

Thomas Edward Brown

Pain

The Man that hath great griefs I pity not;
'Tis something to be great
In any wise, and hint the larger state,
Though but in shadow of a shade, God wot!

Moreover, while we wait the possible,
This man has touched the fact,
And probed till he has felt the core, where, packed
In pulpy folds, resides the ironic ill.

And while we others sip the obvious sweet—
Lip-licking after-taste
Of glutinous rind, lo! this man hath made haste,
And pressed the sting that holds the central seat.

For thus it is God stings us into life,
Provoking actual souls
From bodily systems, giving us the poles
That are His own, not merely balanced strife.

Nay, the great passions are His veriest thought,
Which whoso can absorb,
Nor, querulous halting, violate their orb,
In him the mind of God is fullest wrought.

Thrice happy such an one! Far other he
Who dallies on the edge
Of the great vortex, clinging to a sedge
Of patent good, a timorous Manichee;

Who takes the impact of a long-breathed force,
And fritters it away
In eddies of disgust, that else might stay
His nerveless heart, and fix it to the course.

For there is threefold oneness with the One;
And he is one, who keeps
The homely laws of life; who, if he sleeps,
Or wakes, in his true flesh God's will is done.

And he is one, who takes the deathless forms,
Who schools himself to think
With the All-thinking, holding fast the link,
God-riveted, that bridges casual storms.

But tenfold one is he, who feels all pains
Not partial, knowing them
As ripples parted from the gold-beaked stem,
Wherewith God's galley onward ever strains.

To him the sorrows are the tension-thrills
Of that serene endeavour,
Which yields to God for ever and for ever
The joy that is more ancient than the hills.

Thomas Edward Brown

Præsto

Expecting Him, my door was open wide:
Then I looked round
If any lack of service might be found,
And saw Him at my side:
How entered, by what secret stair,
I know not, knowing only He was there.

Thomas Edward Brown

Risus Dei

Methinks in Him there dwells alway
A sea of laughter very deep,
Where the leviathans leap,
And little children play,
Their white feet twinkling on its crisped edge;
But in the outer bay
The strong man drives the wedge
Of polished limbs,
And swims.
Yet there is one will say:--
'It is but shallow, neither is it broad'--
And so he frowns; but is he nearer God?

One saith that God is in the note of bird,
And piping wind, and brook,
And all the joyful things that speak no word:
Then if from sunny nook
Or shade a fair child's laugh
Is heard,
Is not God half?
And if a strong man gird
His loins for laughter, stirred
By trick of ape or calf--
Is he no better than a cawing rook?

Nay 'tis a Godlike function; laugh thy fill!
Mirth comes to thee unsought;
Mirth sweeps before it like a flood the mill
Of languaged logic; thought
Hath not its source so high;
The will
Must let it by:
For though the heavens are still,
God sits upon His hill,
And sees the shadows fly;
And if He laughs at fools, why should He not?

'Yet hath a fool a laugh'--Yea, of a sort;
God careth for the fools;

The chemic tools
Of laughter He hath given them, and some toys
Of sense, as 'twere a small retort
Wherein they may collect the joys
Of natural giggling, as becomes their state:
The fool is not inhuman, making sport
For such as would not gladly be without
That old familiar noise:
Since, though he laugh not, he can cachinnate--
This also is of God, we may not doubt.

'Is there an empty laugh?' Best called a shell
From which a laugh has flown,
A mask, a well
That hath no water of its own,
Part echo of a groan,
Which, if it hide a cheat,
Is a base counterfeit;
But if one borrow
A cloak to wrap a sorrow
That it may pass unknown,
Then can it not be empty. God doth dwell
Behind the feigned gladness,
Inhabiting a sacred core of sadness.

'Yet is there not an evil laugh?' Content--
What follows?
When Satan fills the hollows
Of his bolt-riven heart
With spasms of unrest,
And calls it laughter; if it give relief
To his great grief,
Grudge not the dreadful jest.
But if the laugh be aimed
At any good thing that it be ashamed,
And blush thereafter,
Then it is evil, and it is not laughter.

There are who laugh, but know not why:
Whether the force
Of simple health and vigour seek a course
Extravagant, as when a wave runs high,
And tips with crest of foam the incontinent curve,

Or if it be reserve
Of power collected for a goal, which had,
Behold! the man is fresh. So when strung nerve,
Stout heart, pent breath, have brought you to the source
Of a great river, on the topmost stie
Of cliff, then have you bad
All heaven to laugh with you; yet somewhere nigh
A shepherd lad
Has wondering looked, and deemed that you were mad.

Thomas Edward Brown

Specula

When He appoints to meet thee, go thou forth—
It matters not
If south or north,
Bleak waste or sunny plot.
Nor think, if haply He thou seek'st be late,
He does thee wrong.
To stile or gate
Lean thou thy head, and long!
It may be that to spy thee He is mounting
Upon a tower,
Or in thy counting
Thou hast mista'en the hour.
But, if He comes not, neither do thou go
Till Vesper chime.
Belike thou then shalt know
He hath been with thee all the time.

Thomas Edward Brown

Vespers

O blackbird, what a boy you are!
How you do go it!
Blowing your bugle to that one sweet star -
How you do blow it!
And does she hear you, blackbird boy, so far?
or is it wasted breath?
'good Lord! she is so bright
To-night!
The blackbird saith.

Thomas Edward Brown