

Lent Reflections

R.S. Thomas – following the Carmelite tradition

This selection of forty poems by R.S. Thomas is inspired by 'Frequencies of God', the advent collection made by Carys Walsh. She chose the Carmelite tradition as a backbone for her advent selection.

For this Lent-selection, I have done the same. Week 1, starting Ash-Wednesday, is about penance. The second week treats conversion, week 3 deals with returning to God, followed by weeks on sorrow, redemption, the passion of Jesus Christ and ending in baptism.

All poems are taken from the Collected Poems.

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Week 1 – Penance

Day 1 – Covenant

I feel sometimes
we are his penance
for having made us. He
suffers in us and we partake
of his suffering. What
to do, when it has been done
already? Where
to go, when the arrival
is as the departure? Circularity
is a mental condition, the
animals know nothing of it.

Seven times have passed
over him, and he is still here.

When will he return
from his human exile, and will
peace then be restored
to the flesh?

Often

I think that there is no end
to this torment and that the electricity
that convulses us is the fire
in which a god
burns and is not consumed.

Ash Wednesday is about the price of love. Traditionally Lent is a time of cleansing for Christians, taking stock, looking for ways in which to live a purer life. In Greek, repentance is *metanoia*, a change of heart. In the Carmelite tradition it is a time of joy – for why would it not be joyful to let God change our hearts?

Thomas changes the perspective from us to God: ‘I feel sometimes / we are his penance / for having made us’. 1 John 4 turned around: ‘We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit’. Thomas: ‘We know that we suffer in him and he in us, because he has given us his Son’.

This poem is about God and us. Our true connection – the God who made us, in his image. Penance is about making good, repaying what has gone wrong. But why then are we still suffering, when Christ’s sacrifice has already been made?

Thomas concludes that this suffering is in the mind: ‘circularity is a mental condition, the animals know nothing of it.’ A truly human pain and also a form of madness. Seven times have passed over him – a reference to Nebuchadnezzar’s madness.

Thomas is playing with perspective again here. When will he return from his human exile? This question could be God’s when Christ was on earth, as much as now, when we await the second coming. When will he return from his ‘human exile’, and will peace then be restored to the flesh?

The poem ends with a reference to Moses and the burning bush – electricity does not consume God, but it does convulse us.

Day 2 – Pardon

What pardon for this, Lord?

There was a man ate bread
from your hand and did not snap
at it; but when on his knees
listened to the snivelling sound
of laughter from somewhere inside
himself. He had been taught
that to laugh was an echo
of the divine joy; but this
was the lifting of a dog's leg
in a temple. There is no defence
against laughter issuing
at the wrong time, but is there ever
forgiveness?

He went from his prayers
into a world holding
its sides, but the return
to them was the return
to vomit, thanking where
he did not believe for something
he did not want but could not
refuse.

There is no pardon
for this, only the expedient
of blaming the laughter on someone else.

Thomas has a lovely irreverent streak. In this poem he walks the perimeter of humour. His relentless honesty shines through when he knows he could have taken the excuse of laughter being the an echo of the divine joy – an image which lifts my heart. But there is penance in this poem, for Thomas recognizes this is not that kind of laughter. He recognizes it for being base, the baser as he makes his living of God. Snivelling laughter, in its consonants resembling the snake. 'This was the lifting of a dog's leg in the temple'.

There is no defence against laughter at the wrong time, but is there forgiveness? Then, he chooses another excuse – blaming the laughter on someone else.

Like Adam, and laughing like Sara in disbelief.

Day 3 – There

They are those that life happens to.
They didn't ask to be born
In those bleak farmsteads, but neither
Did they ask not. Life took the seed
And broadcast it upon the poor,
Rush-stricken soil, an experiment
In patience.

What is a man's
Price? For promises of a break
In the clouds; for harvests that are not all
Wasted; for one animal born
Healthy, where seven have died,
He will kneel down and give thanks
In a chapel whose stones are wrenched
From the moorland.

I have watched them bent
For hours over their trade,
Speechless, and have held my tongue
From its question. It was not my part
To show them, like a meddler from the town,
Their picture, nor the audiences
That look at them in pity or pride.

The theme of this week is penance. In this poem Thomas portrays life as a penance – 'what is man's price?'. The labourer gives thanks for the things that have escaped the inevitable failure. A bleak poem.

Thomas puts himself outside of this humanity – he makes himself an audience that looks at them in pity or pride. In this poem – unlike others – he does not move towards their common humanity, how they might have love and laughter, where he has coldness and hauteur. It is not a kind poem.

Is that not a form of penance as well, acknowledging the hardness within?

Day 4 – Absolution

Prytherch, man, can you forgive
From your stone altar on which the light's
Bread is broken at dusk and dawn
One who strafed you with thin scorn
From the cheap gallery of his mind?
It was you who were right the whole time;
Right in this that the day's end
Finds you still in the same field
In which you started, your soul made strong
By the earth's incense, the wind's song.
While I have worn my soul bare
On the world's roads, seeking what lay
Too close for the mind's lenses to see,
And come now with the first stars
Big on my lids westward to find
With the slow lifting up of your hand
No welcome, only forgiveness.

As a follow-up from *There* – where Thomas sees the life of the labourer as a penance, he now turns around and receives absolution from the worker who has worked on, whilst the poet has been dreaming.

From the cheap gallery of his mind – he now sees the soul of the worker made strong by the earth's incense. What he searched was too close to see. Thomas uses his poetry to explore ambiguity of perspective, between men, as between man and God.

Day 5 – Waiting

Young
I pronounced you. Older
I still do, but seldomer
now, leaning far out
over an immense depth, letting
your name go and waiting,
somewhere between faith and doubt,
for the echoes of its arrival.

Then, the relation of God and Man restored, he writes about his parishioners, who in fortune and misfortune relate to God.

He finds that in this respect, he has changed. From the ‘pronouncing’ of God of his youth, to sending out his name, waiting for it not to return empty.

Day 6 – Cones

Simple in your designs,
infinite in your variations
upon them: the leaf's veins,
the shell's helix, the stars themselves
gyring down to a point
in the mind; the mind also
from that same point spiralling
outward to take in space.

Heartening that in our journeys
through time we come round not
to the same place, but recognise it
from a distance. It is the dream
we remember, that makes us say:
'We have been here before.' In
truth we are as far from it
as one side of the cone
from the other, and in between
are the false starts, the failures,
the ruins from which we climbed,
not to look down, but to feel your glance
resting on us at the next angle

Thomas is not really a conversion poet, not
a man of simple answers: 'I found God'.
He wrestles with God, all the time, like
Jacob at the Jabbok. There is no definite
answer for Thomas, either way.

So for this week, focussing on conversion
– this poem talks about reaching for God,
God looking at you as you spiral upwards
aiming for that moment where two minds
are spinning.

Another poem about finding the
reflections of God in living fibre. Simple in
design, infinite in variation. Connecting
fractally the mind with immensity and vice
versa. Heartening, such a lovely word in
this context, 'history repeats itself, but
differently'. This owl's eyes form of
complexity is truth. We feel Gods eyes on
us, as we climb the cone, 'where love
operates on all those frequencies that are
set up by the spinning of two minds, the
one on the other'.

of the gyre.

God, it is not your reflections
we seek, wonderful as they are
in the live fibre; it is the possibility
of your presence at the cone's
point towards which we soar
in hope to arrive at the still
centre, where love operates
on all those frequencies
that are set up by the spinning
of two minds, the one on the other.

Day 7 – The Wood

A wood.
A man entered;
thought he knew the way
through. The old furies
attended. Did he emerge
in his right mind? The same
man? How many years
passed? Aeons? What is
the right mind? What does
'same' mean? No change of clothes
for the furies? Fast
as they are cut down
the trees grow, new
handles for axes.
There is a rumour from the heart
of the wood: brow
furrowed, mind
smooth, somebody huddles

Another searcher, another man. This
one is taken in by the folly of his own
knowing. Thinking he knows the
way through – he loses himself and
has to start over.

Why is he in the wood, where the
trees grow as fast as they are cut
down, only to provide new handles
to axes? The wood is an image of a
labyrinth, in the middle of which sits
man, contemplating.

Without a sense of self, there is no
way open to God. 'Pure being
waiting to be come at'. Without this,
man is doomed to start again, over
and over again.

in wide contemplation – Buddha,
Plato, Blake, Jung –
the name changes, identity
remains, pure being waiting
to be come at. Is it the self
that he mislaid? Is it why
he entered, ignoring
the warning of the labyrinth
without end? How many times
over must he begin again?

Day 8 – A Thicket in Lleyrn

I was no tree walking.

I was still. They ignored me,
the birds, the migrants
on their way south. They re-leafed
the trees, budding them
with their notes. They filtered through
the boughs like sunlight,
looked at me from three feet
off, their eyes blackberry bright,
not seeing me, not detaching me
from the withies, where I was
caged and they free.

They would have perched
on me, had I had nourishment
in my fissures. As it was,
they netted me in their shadows,
brushed me with sound, feathering the arrows
of their own bows, and were gone,

leaving me to reflect on the answer
to a question I had not asked.

‘A repetition in time of the eternal
I AM.’ Say it. Don’t be shy.

Escape from your mortal cage
in thought. Your migrations will never
be over. Between two truths
there is only the mind to fly with.

Navigate by such stars as are not
leaves falling from life’s
deciduous tree, but spray from the fountain
of the imagination, endlessly
replenishing itself out of its own waters.

‘Say it. Don’t be shy.’ Isn’t that the essence of
conversion. To say it. To not be shy? The birds
ignored the poet – they budded the trees, re-
leafing them. If he had nourishment, they
would have perched on him. But this not being
forthcoming, they left. They were free, he
caged.

They left him to contemplate the eternal I AM.
His migration will never be over but thought
provides an escape, ‘only the mind to fly with’.
And as navigation: imagination:

‘Navigate by such stars as are not leaves falling
from life’s deciduous tree, but spray from the
fountain of the imagination, endlessly
replenishing itself out of its own waters.’

Day 9 – Correspondence

You ask why I don't write.
But what is there to say?
The salt current swings in and out
of the bay, as it has done
time out of mind. How does that help?
It leaves illegible writing
on the shore. If you were here,
we would quarrel about it.
People file past this seascape
as ignorantly as through a gallery
of great art. I keep searching for meaning.
The waves are a moving staircase
to climb, but in thought only.
The fall from the top is as sheer
as ever. Younger I deemed truth
was to come at beyond the horizon.
Older I stay still and am
as far off as before. These nail-parings
bore you? They explain my silence.
I wish there were as simple
an explanation for the silence of God.

King James famously quipped about Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum* that it was 'like the peace of God, which passeth all understanding.' Thomas here wished the silence of God was as easily explained as his own reluctance to write.

The salt current swings in and out of the bay, as it has done time out of mind. 'People file past this seascape as ignorantly as through a gallery of great art.'

He still searches for meaning – the waves are like a Jacob's ladder, but in thought only. And now he does not believe he will come any closer.

INDOORS

**It was easier to come out with you
Into the fields, where birds made no claim
On my poor knowledge and flowers grew
With no thought but to declare God.**

**Within I had the old problems
To cope with: turning from the Book's
Comfortable words, I came face to face
With the proud priests and their intolerant look.**

It was easier to believe in God outside. Like Candide – Thomas realises that a change of scenery will not make a true difference, as you take yourself with you. 'Within I had the old problems to cope with'. And priesthood is more of a challenge to face than a comfort, like the Bible. But still, outside, the flowers needed only to declare God. They need no conversion to celebrate their maker.

Week 3 - Returning to God

Day 11 – In Church

Often I try
To analyse the quality
Of its silences. Is this where God hides
From my searching? I have stopped to listen,
After the few people have gone,
To the air recomposing itself
For vigil. It has waited like this
Since the stones grouped themselves about it.
These are the hard ribs
Of a body that our prayers have failed
To animate. Shadows advance
From their corners to take possession
Of places the light held
For an hour. The bats resume
Their business. The uneasiness of the pews
Ceases. There is no other sound
In the darkness but the sound of a man
Breathing, testing his faith
On emptiness, nailing his questions
One by one to an untenanted cross.

After Penance and conversion – both acts of contrition and filling a need for healing, we now turn to God. For Thomas, God was often absent. Deus absconditus. Always just out of sight, like Father Christmas in children's dreams.

In church, Thomas tries to analyse the silence. These parish churches in Wales have a particular peace in them. Thomas describes 'the air recomposing itself for vigil'. He often uses the image of stones grouped around a vacuum – the air, normally seen as volatile, more stable than the ribs surrounding them. The ribs our prayers haven't animated.

In that emptiness, the breath of a man mingles with the waiting air. In the emptiness, he nails his questions to a cross, untenanted.

Day 12 – Threshold

I emerge from the mind's
cave into the worse darkness
outside, where things pass and
the Lord is in none of them.

I have heard the still, small voice
and it was that of the bacteria
demolishing my cosmos. I
have lingered too long on

this threshold, but where can I go?
To look back is to lose the soul
I was leading upwards towards
the light. To look forward? Ah,
what balance is needed at
the edges of such an abyss.
I am alone on the surface
of a turning planet. What

to do but, like Michelangelo's
Adam, put my hand
out into unknown space,
hoping for the reciprocating touch?

The mind's cave – echoing Plato. But emerging
from it there is worse darkness outside – things
passing, and the Lord is in none of them. This
reflects Kings 1:19 – where Elia waits on the
mountain, whilst a great and powerful wind, an
earthquake and a fire pass by, but the Lord was
not in them. 'And after the fire came a gentle
whisper' – a still, small voice, but it was not as
with Elijah God's voice. With Thomas it were
the bacteria demolishing his cosmos. He lingered
on the threshold – to look back is to lose the
soul I was leading upwards (like Orpheus). But
to look forward is too fearful – the edges of such
an abyss.

What to do but, like Michelangelo's Adam, put
my hand out into unknown space, hoping for
the reciprocating touch?

Day 13 – Suddenly

As I had always known
he would come, unannounced,
remarkable merely for the absence
of clamour. So truth must appear
to the thinker; so, at a stage
of the experiment, the answer
must quietly emerge. I looked
at him, not with the eye
only, but with the whole
of my being, overflowing with
him as a chalice would
with the sea. Yet was he
no more there than before,
his area occupied
by the unhaloed presences.
You could put your hand
in him without consciousness
of his wounds. The gamblers
at the foot of the unnoticed
cross went on with
their dicing; yet the invisible
garment for which they played
was no longer at stake, but worn
by him in this risen existence.

Like a thief in the night – unannounced, but
with amazing clarity. So truth must appear to
the thinker. The answer emerges from the
experiment.

And the poet looks at him – not with the eye,
but with his whole being. Psalm 146 says ‘Let
my whole being (or soul) praise the Lord’.

I love the next ‘overflowing with him as a
chalice would with the sea’. The classic image
of a chalice, associated with the Grail – and
then to imagine the sea to fill it. In fact, the
chalice would be submerged – its scale so
fantastically wrong for what is coming. But
overflowing – like Stendhal.

But though the poet looks, with his whole
being, yet he still is not there – he is not
tangible. Like Thomas, his namesake wishes to
feel the wounds, though he realises that he is
missing the point. Like the gamblers at the
foot of the cross, he is in the wrong timeframe
to experience Christ in this risen existence.

Day 14 – Tidal

The waves run up the shore
and fall back. I run
up the approaches of God
and fall back. The breakers return
reaching a little further,
gnawing away at the main land.
They have done this thousands
of years, exposing little by little
the rock under the soil's face.
I must imitate them only
in my return to the assault,
not in their violence. Dashing
my prayers at him will achieve
little other than the exposure
of the rock under his surface.
My returns must be made
on my knees. Let despair be known
as my ebb-tide; but let prayer
have its springs, too, brimming,
disarming him; discovering somewhere
among his fissures deposits of mercy
where trust may take root and grow.

The sea is a strong presence in Thomas's poetry – from the saints going by boat to an Island, to the questions the sea keeps repeating, to the approach to God, compared to the surf at the beach. The breakers gnaw at the land.

The poet describes that this tenacity, the thousands of years of approach and return, serve as a good example of turning to God, of prayer. Imitate them in returning to the assault, not giving up. But not in violence, which will only achieve hardness. 'My returns must be made on my knees'.

But let prayer have its springs too – disarming him, discovering among his fissures deposits of mercy where trust may take root and grow.

Day 15 – The other

There are nights that are so still
that I can hear the small owl calling
far off and a fox barking
miles away. It is then that I lie
in the lean hours awake listening
to the swell born somewhere in the Atlantic
rising and falling, rising and falling
wave on wave on the long shore
by the village, that is without light
and companionless. And the thought comes
of that other being who is awake, too,
letting our prayers break on him,
not like this for a few hours,
but for days, years, for eternity.

An echo of Tidal, but closer to home. In
a night's lean hours, surrounded by
nature, he imagines the eternal relentless
assault. That other being, awake too,
letting our prayers break on him for
eternity.

Day 16 – Raptor

You have made God small,
setting him astride
a pipette or a retort
studying the bubbles,
absorbed in an experiment
that will come to nothing.

I think of him rather
as an enormous owl
abroad in the shadows,
brushing me sometimes
with his wing so the blood
in my veins freezes, able

to find his way from one
soul to another because
he can see in the dark.

I have heard him crooning
to himself, so that almost
I could believe in angels,

those feathered overtones
in love's rafters, I have heard
him scream, too, fastening
his talons in his great
adversary, or in some lesser
denizen, maybe, like you or me.

This week of 'Returning to God' is very productive in the context of Thomas's poetry. His faith was in Deus Absconditus; God always a step ahead, an unknowable God. And Thomas describes his attitude towards this God, relentlessly approaching him, like the tide, but with less violence.

This poem is one of Rowan Williams favorites. At the end of his life, when Thomas was asked whether he actually believed in God, he answered: 'The question is not so much whether there is a God, but what kind of a God he is'.

The God imagined in this poem is a God of tough love, crooning to himself. The crooning is sweet 'feathered overtones in love's rafters'. But God is violent too, fastening his talons in his great adversary, or, perhaps in us.

This God, coming up from behind, seeing in the dark of my soul is not a small God, waiting somewhere in human experience to be found. This poem uses very effectively the 'otherness' of nature, to describe the otherness of God. A poem like this frees the imagination to see God in new ways.

Week 4 – Sorrow

Day 17 – Blackbird Singing

It seems wrong that out of this bird,
Black, bold, a suggestion of dark
Places about it, there yet should come
Such rich music, as though the notes'
Ore were changed to a rare metal
At one touch of that bright bill.

You have heard it often, alone at your desk
In a green April, your mind drawn
Away from its work by sweet disturbance
Of the mild evening outside your room.

A slow singer, but loading each phrase
With history's overtones, love, joy
And grief learned by his dark tribe
In other orchards and passed on
Instinctively as they are now,
But fresh always with new tears.

R.S. Thomas made his living as a priest, taking his duties seriously, but keeping himself to himself as well. When he moved to his first parish, married, but with nothing much to do in his afternoons, he took up bird-watching.

This poem is written in the second person: 'You have heard it often', lured from your work by this 'sweet disturbance of the mild evening outside your room'.

But the blackbirds' alto voice is not what strikes him first, it is his blackness 'a suggestion of dark places about it'. He places the blackbirds' slow song in a historical line; 'grief learned by his dark tribe in other orchards'. 'But fresh always with new tears'.

To me, blackbirds are harbingers of hope, the swelling of the heart with the first blackbird singing in February as the sun goes down. Thomas' focus on its blackness, and the paradox of such rich music coming from such a well, echoes with a larger sense in which beauty and darkness belong together. As Saul Bellow wrote: "Death is the dark backing a mirror needs if we are to see anything."

Day 18 – Judgment Day

Yes, that's how I was,
I know that face,
That bony figure
Without grace
Of flesh or limb;
In health happy,
Careless of the claim
Of the world's sick
Or the world's poor;
In pain craven –
Lord, breathe once more
On that sad mirror,
Let me be lost
In mist for ever
Rather than own
Such bleak reflections,
Let me go back
On my two knees
Slowly to undo
The knot of life
That was tied there.

This week of Sorrow continues with one of the harshest pains – the feeling of failure in life. The poet here recognizes himself – in health careless of those in pain.

He is now deeply ashamed of his 'bleak reflections' he asks the Lord to 'breathe once more on that sad mirror' and be lost in mist for ever. Or alternatively, to be able to go back, humbly to undo the knot of life that was tied there. The knot reflects Kierkegaard's 'dialectical knot', communication that is unclear, but pulls the reader into questioning who believes what.

Is he asking like Job, never to be born at all? Or just for a chance to untie the knots that he has let be in life? It is a poignant picture. Part of the relentless honesty in which he faces life, himself and others.

Day 19 – Funeral

They stand about conversing
In dark clumps, less beautiful than trees.
What have they come here to mourn?
There was a death, yes; but death's brother,
Sin, is of more importance.
Shabbily the teeth gleam,
Sharpening themselves on reputations
That were firm once. On the cheap coffin
The earth falls more cleanly than tears.
What are these red faces for?
This incidence of pious catarrh
At the grave's edge? He has returned
Where he belongs; this is acknowledged
By all but the lonely few
Making amends for the heart's coldness
He had from them, grudging a little
The simple splendour of the wreath
Of words the church lays on him.

Surely a funeral is a place of sorrow?
Thomas here doubts the fact. The
mourners come to put their teeth in the
reputations of others. They weep, but what
for? 'On the cheap coffin the earth falls
more cleanly than tears'. Only a few
acknowledge that he has returned where he
belongs.

Uncompromising, he seeks to face facts.
Including the fact that he is a part of this.
They grudge 'the simple splendour of the
wreath of words the church lays on him'.

Day 20 – Welsh History

We were a people taut for war; the hills
Were no harder, the thin grass
Clothed them more warmly than the coarse
Shirts our small bones.
We fought, and were always in retreat,
Like snow thawing upon the slopes
Of Mynydd Mawr; and yet the stranger
Never found our ultimate stand
In the thick woods, declaiming verse
To the sharp prompting of the harp.

Our kings died, or they were slain
By the old treachery at the ford.
Our bards perished, driven from the halls
Of nobles by the thorn and bramble.

We were a people bred on legends,
Warming our hands at the red past.
The great were ashamed of our loose rags
Clinging stubbornly to the proud tree
Of blood and birth, our lean bellies
And mud houses were a proof
Of our ineptitude for life.

We were a people wasting ourselves
In fruitless battles for our masters,
In lands to which we had no claim,
With men for whom we felt no hatred.

We were a people, and are so yet.
When we have finished quarrelling for crumbs
Under the table, or gnawing the bones
Of a dead culture, we will arise
And greet each other in a new dawn.

Sorrow is intertwined with Thomas' relation to Wales. Sorrow that he wasn't raised speaking Welsh, sorrow that he felt this would keep him from belonging. But also, there is sadness in his perception of Wales as a land of things past.

In Welsh Landscape he is even harsher about Wales: 'Mouldering quarries and mines; And an impotent people, Sick with inbreeding.' Here, there is some heroism 'a people bred on legends, warming our hands at the red past.'

But still 'our ineptitude for life', battling for lands to which we had no claim. Yet Thomas sees a new dawn for the people of Wales.

Day 21 – Young and Old

Cold sea, cold sky:
This is how age looks
At a thing. The people natter,
The wind blows. Nothing they do
Is of worth. The great problems
Remain, stubborn, unsolved.
Man leaves his footprints
Momentarily on a vast shore.

And the tide comes,
That the children play with.
Ours are the first questions
They shelve. The wind is the blood
In their veins. Above them the aircraft
Domesticate the huge sky.

Echoes of Ecclesiastes here – all is vanity
and chasing after wind. ‘This is how age
looks at a thing’.

The great problems remain unsolved.
There is sorrow in emptiness. And aircraft
domesticate the huge sky, even that sky. I
remember after Covid seeing the trails of
airplanes in the sky again – like a child
spoiling a drawing with a massive crayon.

But children luckily shelve the questions
we ask and play and feel the wind as
blood in their veins.

Day 22 – The Coming

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look, he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows; a bright
Serpent, a river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.

On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many people
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

The purest sorrow is compassion, sorrow turned into action. This most famous poem of R.S. Thomas describes the son of God, looking at 'a scorched land of fierce colour', in which a serpent uncoils itself.

A bare tree focuses the hope of the people, who reach out their thin arms 'as though waiting / for a vanished April / to return to its crossed / boughs'.

Looking at this cry for help, the son asks to go there.

Week 5 - Redemption

Day 23 – The Country Clergy

I see them working in old rectories
By the sun's light, by candlelight,
Venerable men, their black cloth
A little dusty, a little green
With holy mildew. And yet their skulls,
Ripening over so many prayers,
Topped into the same grave
With oafs and yokels. They left no books
Memorial to their lonely thought
In grey parishes; rather they wrote
On men's hearts and in the minds
Of young children sublime words
Too soon forgotten. God in his time
Or out of time will correct this.

Redemption. A word you hardly hear in any other context. Sometimes a movie or impressive story from sinner to saint contains reference, but mostly it is clear that on a purely human plane the word has little meaning. Redemption is at the same time the act of saving as the state of being saved. It fits Thomas, this ambiguous word.

Thomas often speaks of his inability to reach his parishioners, the dead air between them. Here he commiserates with his fellow priests, working steadily, their cloth 'green with holy mildew'. They wrote, not on paper, but on men's hearts and in the minds of young children. And God, in his time, or out of time will correct the wrong done them.

This poem about the role of the clergy, whose words often bear fruit in ways unknown to them ends this week of returning to God, searching, on bended knee for the air to move, like the pool at Bethesda.

Day 24 – Which

And in the book I read:
God is love. But lifting
my head, I do not find it
so. Shall I return

to my book and, between
print, wander an air
heavy with the scent
of this one word? Or not trust

language, only the blows that
life gives me, wearing them
like those red tokens with which
an agreement is sealed?

The incongruity between a powerful God of love and the world as we know it, is a question every Christian grapples with. Thomas wonders whether to return to the book and in its rarified air to find ‘this one word’ – Christ? Or – and we expect here to find the opposite of returning to the book – perhaps leaving God? Instead, he turns away from language, to show God his wounds, like stigmata. Perhaps this maimed body will serve as the animals Abraham passed through to seal the covenant with God.

Which is choice between Word and Flesh – perhaps purposely chosen, to be transformed by the word that became flesh...

Day 25 – The Belfry

I have seen it standing up grey,
Gaunt, as though no sunlight
Could ever thaw out the music
Of its great bell; terrible
In its own way, for religion
Is like that. There are times
When a black frost is upon
One's whole being, and the heart
In its bone belfry hangs and is dumb.

But who is to know? Always,
Even in winter in the cold
Of a stone church, on his knees
Someone is praying, whose prayers fall
Steadily through the hard spell
Of weather that is between God
And himself. Perhaps they are warm rain
That brings the sun and afterwards flowers
On the raw graves and throbbing of bells.

One's faith has seasons. Thomas here describes the winter of the spirit and wonders what will thaw the frozen being. Will the gaunt grey belfry ever release its music, or is it frozen, like the heart 'when a black frost is upon one's whole being'.

But who is to know – whether one man kneeling, steadily praying through the bad weather, does not bring spring?

Day 26 – A Day in Autumn

It will not always be like this,
The air windless, a few last
Leaves adding their decoration
To the trees' shoulders, braiding the cuffs
Of the boughs with gold; a bird preening

In the lawn's mirror. Having looked up
From the day's chores, pause a minute,
Let the mind take its photograph
Of the bright scene, something to wear
Against the heart in the long cold.

Unlike most of the other poems, that are from the collected poems, this is taken from *Poetry for Supper* (1958). Like his more famous *The bright field* this poem shows that the brief moment of beauty, bright here as well, is shoring you up against winter. It will not always be like this – do not forget to rest and wait a moment to gather warmth in beauty to last out the long cold.

Day 27 – Cures

'We sat under a tree
at the season when elms
put forth their leaves. It was then
Guillemette Benet said to me:
"My poor friend, my poor friend,
the soul is nothing
but blood."¹

So the deposition
at Foix. Inquisitor,
what would you have the soul
be to escape the rigour
of your laundering? Your Christ
died for you; for whom
would you have these die?
No answer. He has withdrawn
iron-faced into the silence
from which history resurrects
everything but our reasons.

Meanwhile a few leagues
to the west, like a suppuration
of grace, the soiled fountain
plays, where the scientists gather
bacteria. Their claims are refuted
by the virgin smile on the face
of the water. Holy Church
has become wise, recognising
the anaemic soul is no substitute
for the bone's need.

Thomas brings history into perspective. What answer would the Inquisition require to spare a heretic? And if Christ died for the Inquisitor, for whom do these heretics die? It is a beautiful question, from this perspective. Are they dying for the love of God? Or are they dying to protect God and his Church of defamation?

As a historian, I find truth in the sentence: 'he has withdrawn iron-faced into the silence from which history resurrects everything but our reasons.'

Then from the past, he moves to the present, where the water smiles at the efforts of scientists to understand. The Church no longer fights these heresies. But is there no mind that – freed of its crutches – bears testimony to God?

And why is this poem called Cures? The inquisition cured doubt by violence, scientists by certainty – but Thomas sees a spring of thought as the answer to the question of God.

And the mind,
then, weary of the pilgrimages
to its horizons – is there no spring of thought
adjacent to it, where it can be
dipped, so that emerging but
once in ten thousand times,
freed of its crutches, is sufficient
testimony to the presence in it
of a power other than its own?

From *Montaillou* by Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie,

Day 28 – Not the empty tomb

Not the empty tomb
but the uninhabited
cross. Look long enough
and you will see the arms
put on leaves. Not a crown
of thorns, but a crown of flowers
haloing it, with a bird singing
as though perched on paradise's threshold.

We have over-furnished
our faith. Our churches
are as limousines in the procession
towards heaven. But the verities
remain: a de-nuclearised
cross, uncontaminated
by our coinage; the chalice's
ichor; and one crumb of bread
on the tongue for the bird-like
intelligence to be made tame by.

This week of redemption, being saved
from evil, ends with a call for simplicity.
Do not look at the empty tomb, but at the
uninhabited cross. Is it uninhabited because
it was never filled, or because the crucified
man left it?

The cross, like Moses' staff, buds leaves.
And the crown of thorns has passed to be
replaced by a crown of flowers, in which a
bird sings.

Our faith is grown too complicated –
nothing but a drop of wine, the ethereal
blood flowing in the veins of the Gods of
old, held in a chalice. And one crumb of
bread only, enough to feed a bird and to
save a man.

But what then is intelligence doing there?
Being tamed by the mystery of bread and
wine?

Week 6 – Passion of Christ

Day 29 – In a Country Church

To one kneeling down no word came,
Only the wind's song, saddening the lips
Of the grave saints, rigid in glass;
Or the dry whisper of unseen wings,
Bats not angels, in the high roof.

Was he balked by silence? He kneeled long,
And saw love in a dark crown
Of thorns blazing, and a winter tree
Golden with fruit of a man's body.

Rarely was so much imagery stored in just nine lines. We see a man kneeling wordlessly. Around the country church, the wind blows, 'saddening the lips' of the glass saints. In the high roof, something flies around on 'unseen wings'. Bats, not angels. Thus, we have an empty, windswept church, in which words do not fill the void.

But this silence did not deter him as he knelt. And then in a moment, he saw love 'in a dark crown of thorns blazing'. We see Jesus with his crown of thorns, mocking him as King of the Jews. The image is intertwined with Moses, seeing the glory of God in the thornbush, and being appointed to lead his people out of slavery. Only eight words 'love in a dark crown of thorns blazing', and such a story of redemption and love and timeless mercy. And this love has effect, a winter tree 'golden with fruit of a man's body.'

Day 30 – Soliloquy

And God thought: Pray away,
Creatures; I'm going to destroy
It. The mistake's mine,
If you like. I have blundered
Before; the glaciers erased
My error.

I saw them go
Further than you – palaces,
Missiles. My privacy
Was invaded; then the flaw
Took over; they allied themselves
With the dust. Winds blew away
Their pasture. Their bones signalled
From the desert to me
In vain.

After the dust, fire;
The earth burned. I have forgotten
How long, but the fierce writing
Seduced me. I blew with my cool
Breath; the vapour condensed
In the hollows. The sun was torn
From my side. Out of the waters
You came, as subtle
As water, with your mineral
Poetry and promises
Of obedience. I listened to you
Too long. Within the churches
You built me you genuflected
To the machine. Where will it
Take you from the invisible
Viruses, the personnel
Of the darkness that do my will?

We overhear God, thinking to himself about his lost creation. Glaciers erased his error once, but again he feels like destroying his world. These creatures are now becoming insolent, 'the flaw took over' – missiles invade Gods privacy.

People ally themselves with the dust and turn creation to desert. Then the earth burned, and God cooled it. The sun was torn from Gods side, as the woman was created from man, as God was pierced on the cross.

Then 'out of the waters you came' and God listened again and went the extra mile. But this only builds up to another need to be saved, but from whom?

Day 31 – Song

I choose white, but with
Red on it, like the snow
In winter with its few
Holly berries and the one

Robin, that is a fire
To warm by and like Christ
Comes to us in his weakness,
But with a sharp song.

The imagery of Christmascards – white snow and holly berries and robins. The poet chooses white, but with red on it. Innocence and blood. The robin, like Christ, comes to us in his weakness, but with a sharp song.

Always the same hills
Crowd the horizon,
Remote witnesses
Of the still scene.

And in the foreground
The tall Cross,
Sombre, untenanted,
Aches for the Body
That is back in the cradle
Of a maid's arms.

Compassion – Pietà – is the name given in art history of a scene of the dead body of Jesus in the arms of Mary. 'The body, that is back in the cradle of a maid's arms.'

The cross, sombre, untenanted, aches for Christ. The sentient cross reminds of the dream of the Rood, an old Anglosaxon poem: 'I trembled when that man embraced me; yet I dared not bow to the ground, fall to the surface of the earth, but I had to stand fast. As a rood was I reared. I lifted the mighty King, the Lord of the heavens;'

Thomas in this poem zooms in, from the same hills, crowding the horizon as remote witnesses of the scene played out in the foreground. The tall Cross, aching for Christ.

Day 33 – Sure

Where the lamb died
a bird sings.

Where a soul perishes
what music? The cross

is an old-fashioned
weapon, but its bow
is drawn unerringly
against the heart.

Why is this poem called 'Sure'? Without doubt, the cross is drawn against the heart. It may be old-fashioned, but it is effective. It aims straight for the heart – where the lamb died, a bird sings.

Day 34 - The Echoes return slow (fragment)

The breaking of the wave
outside echoed the breaking
of the bread in his hands.

The crying of seagulls
was the cry from the Cross:
Lama Sabachthani. He lifted
the chalice, that crystal in
which love questioning is love
blinded with excess of light.

The simplicity of the sacrament absolved him from the complexities of the Word, in the prose text accompanying this poem. The breaking of the wave outside, well heard in the church in Aberdaron, echoed the breaking of the bread.

The cry of the seagulls echoes the cry of loneliness from the Cross. The blood of Christ is echoed in the chalice. The light in the crystal is the answer to the question of love – an answer that is blinding in its immensity.

Week 7 – Baptism

Day 35 – This to do

I have this that I must do
One day: overdraw on my balance
Of air, and breaking the surface
Of water go down into the green
Darkness to search for the door
To myself in dumbness and blindness
And uproar of scared blood
At the eardrums. There are no signposts
There but bones of the dead
Conger, no light but the pale
Phosphorous, where the slow corpses
Swag. I must go down with the poor
Purse of my body and buy courage,
Paying for it with the coins of my breath.

This poem plays with our air-borne life. One day, the poet says, I must take a deep breath ('overdraw on my balance of air') and go in search of the door to the self.

The uproar of scared blood in the eardrums accompany the dive of the dumb and blind. The only thing showing the way are the bones of the dead. The place where he searches for the door to himself is scary, with sharp-toothed conger bones and slow corpses.

His body is a purse with which to buy courage, paid for by the breath of life.

Day 36 – Within Sound of the Sea

I have a desire to walk on the shore,
To visit the caged beast whose murmurings
Kept me awake. What does it mean
That I have the power to do this
All day long, if I wish to?
I know what thoughts will arise,
What questions. They have done so before,
Unanswered. It is in the freedom
To go or not to I exist;
To balance all the exhilaration
Of brisk moments upon the sand
With the knowledgeable hours that my books
Give me. Between their pages
The beast sleeps and never looks out
Through the print's bars. Have I been wise
In the past, letting my nostrils
Plan my day? That salt scrubbing
Left me unclean. Am I wise now,
With all this pain in the air,
To keep my room, reading perhaps
Of that Being whose will is our peace?

Conversion starts with searching. Searching a truth, a destination. Thomas goes to sea to visit the caged beast, whose murmurings kept me awake. 'I could do this all day', but does it help me to find the unanswered questions all over again? A balance between brief moments of exhilaration and many hours of reading. Between the pages of books the beast sleeps and never looks out through the print's bars. Was the scrubbing of salt true, or the searching for meaning in the mind? That Being whose will is our peace – is He the answer?

Is God the answer? He is not found in the sea – that here even left the poet unclean, unlike the normal image of water cleansing. But perhaps he can be found reading – the Will of God is our peace.

Day 37 – The Echoes return slow (fragment)

I have no name:
time's changeling.
Put your hand
in my side and disbelieve

in my godhead.
Her face rises
over me and sets;
I am shone on

through tears. Charity
spares what should be
lopped off, before
it is too late.

In *The Echoes return slow*, a poet's autobiography, this cryptic poem marks the birth of his son. 'Put your hand in my side and disbelieve in my godhead' is a direct reference to Thomas, the doubting apostle, who disbelieved the risen Christ. This pun on his name he juxtaposes on the first sentence, in which he focuses on the unnamed being. Who shines on Thomas? His wife, coming from the intense experience of childbirth, or one of the lights God set in the heavens?

Charity spares what should be lopped off. Isn't this classic baptism? Grace saving the child.

Day 38 – Fathoms

Young I visited
this pool; asked my question,
passed on. In the middle years
visited it again. The question
had sunk down, hardly
a ripple. To be no longer
young, yet not to be old
is a calm without
equal. The water ticks on,
but time stands, fingerless.

Today, thirty years
later, on the margin
of eternity, dissolution,
nothing but the self
looking up at the self
looking down, with each
refusing to become
an object, so with the Dane's
help, from bottomless fathoms
I dredge up the truth.

Here what is submerged in water is not a person, but a question. A question, posed in youth, that sinks down without a ripple. To be no longer young, yet not old, is a calm without equal. Then, thirty years later again, the same pool mirrors the same person.

He feels to be on the margin of eternity and dissolution. The double reflection, the Self, looking at the Self, finally provides the answer. Reflection on the self, as well as of the self.

The Dane helping him in this is Kierkegaard, who frequently figures in Thomas's poetry. Kierkegaard postulates that truth can only be found indirectly, because it is subjective. A personal understanding (or "double reflection") changes a person.

He dredges up the truth from bottomless fathoms, a nice double entendre, fathom being a verb ('to discover the meaning of something'), as well as a unit for measuring the depth of water. A beautiful analogy for baptism.

Day 39 – Rich

I am a millionaire.
My bedroom is full of gold
light, of the sun's jewellery.
What shall I do with this wealth?
Buy happiness, buy gladness,
the wisdom that grows with the giving
of thanks? I will convert
a child's holding to the estate
of a man, investing the interest
in the child mind. Beyond this
room are the arid sluices
through which cash pours and the heart
desiccates, watching it pass.
Men draw their curtains against
beauty. Ah, let me, when night
comes, offer the moon
unhindered entry through trust's
windows so I may dream
silver, but awake to gold.

Imagination turns sunlight into gold.
What immaterial riches will he store
up with it? Happiness, gladness, the
wisdom of thankfulness?

There is reason enough to invest the
interest in the imagination. There are
so many dry places, where the golden
water disappears and men draw their
curtains against beauty. The heart hurts
in this process.

And so, when night comes – the
windows of trust are not shut against
beauty, so 'I may dream silver, but
awake to gold.'

Day 40 – Once

God looked at space and I appeared,
Rubbing my eyes at what I saw.
The earth smoked, no birds sang;
There were no footprints on the beaches
Of the hot sea, no creatures in it.
God spoke. I hid myself in the side
Of the mountain.

As though born again
I stepped out into the cool dew,
Trying to remember the fire sermon,
Astonished at the mingled chorus
Of weeds and flowers. In the brown bark
Of the trees I saw the many faces
Of life, forms hungry for birth,
Mouthing at me. I held my way
To the light, inspecting my shadow
Boldly; and in the late morning
You, rising towards me out of the depths
Of myself. I took your hand,
Remembering you, and together,
Confederates of the natural day,
We went forth to meet the Machine.

The poet finds himself at the dawn of
creation – the earth smoked, no birds yet,
no creatures. God spoke and the poet hides
himself, like Elia, in the side of the
mountain (1 Kings 19), like Moses too,
whom God touched with his hand to
protect him from His splendour.

As though born again – I stepped out into
the cool dew, the dawn of a new life.

The poet aims for the light and finds ‘You,
rising towards me out of the depths of
myself’.