

Poems that shaped me

This is the tenth of a yearlong series written by Neil Richardson on 12 of the poems or poets which shaped his own thinking, writing and life. This month, he considers the work of **Thomas Blackburn** (1916-1977) and his poem **Hospital for Defectives**.

Hospital for Defectives

By your unnumbered charities
A miracle disclose,
Lord of the Images, whose love
The eyelid 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?



Thomas Blackburn and daughter Julia, 1958

I first met Tom Blackburn in 1966, the year I moved from Manchester to London to study at the College of Saint Mark and Saint John in order to qualify as a teacher. I was twenty years old and already interested in writing and writers, and so I was delighted to discover that on the staff of the College English Department were not only Tom Blackburn also but John Heath Stubbs, the blind poet, whose work perhaps I ought to have included in this series? Well, you have to leave some things for later!

To a young and easily impressed student, Tom was a little shambolic, but in an heroic, even magnificent way! He openly boasted of his sexual extravagances and amused the students with such phrases as "Oh, I am a great believer in marriage. I have been married three times!" He also spoke very tenderly about his daughter and was obviously very devoted to her, although in Julia's autobiography, she recounts some scary behaviour by her father. She wrote: "My father was a poet and an alcoholic who for many years was addicted to a powerful barbiturate called sodium amytal, which was first prescribed for him in 1943. When the cumulative

effect of the drug combined with the alcohol made him increasingly violent and so mad he began to growl and bark like a dog, he was tried out on all sorts of substitute pills, including one that he proudly said was used to tranquillise rhinoceroses.”

Tom was born in Hensingham, Cumberland. He started to study law at Selwyn College, Cambridge, then changed to a psychology course at Birkbeck, University which he completed. He then went on to study English at the University of Durham. After graduation he moved to London and became involved with the Soho literature circuit. He held a Gregory Fellowship in poetry at the University of Leeds between 1956 to 1958. He was married three times and with his second wife Rosalie de Meric he had a daughter, Julia Blackburn.

Julia wrote of the last few days of Tom's life,

“He had two divorces and several breakdowns, but then at the age of 60 he had a vision of the afterlife, which made him happy because he realised he was no longer afraid of dying. A year later, in the early morning of August 13, 1977, he finished writing a long letter to his brother with the words 'I am now going to lie down in a horizontal position and breathe long and deep'. He then went upstairs and died from a cerebral haemorrhage, just as he was getting into bed.”

By one of those strange quirks, his funeral was conducted by none other than R.S. Thomas, the poet with whom I am planning to end this series next month. Tom Blackburn was living in Wales at the end of his life, and R.S. Thomas was specially asked because both men were poets, although I don't know if they ever met.

Hospital for Defectives is a specially powerful poem. It asks questions about human weaknesses and especially what was in the mind of God when it came to these mental hospital inmates whose lives seem so different to ours and somehow, without serious purpose. The men don't speak to each other or communicate and Thomas asks the question in wonderful words:

“What is the meaning to be found
In such dark vowels as these?”

The depth of enquiry, addressed perhaps despairingly rather than angrily to God, is very provocative and I felt the power of this poem as a young man, and still do, more than 40 years later. We all find ourselves confused by the presence of seemingly pointless suffering and the human response to people with disabilities and learning difficulties can sometimes be cruel.

“Beneath the warder's blows,
The unleavened man did not cry out”



There are times when all the positive and wonderful aspects of creation and human creativity seem snared and bedraggled by failure. We are accustomed to regarding the Creation as “good” in the words of God in the Book of Genesis, so are these men in a turnip field to be considered God's failures?

We may not ever come to a conclusion, but with Thomas Blackburn, we certainly have a good question for the Almighty!

“Through such men in a turnip field
What is it that you say?”

Julia and Thomas in the garden of his house, in Putney, where he lived with his third wife, Peggy, in April 1965. This is very much the Tom Blackburn I knew when I was a young student.