

89. The Thrush by Edward Thomas - A Friend to Simon Crompton

Michael Shaeffer

Hello and welcome to The Poetry Exchange. I'm Michael Shaeffer.

Fiona Bennett

And I'm Fiona Bennett.

Fiona and Michael

Lovely to see you!

Michael Shaeffer

We say that every episode, Fi. But of course, it's always true.

Fiona Bennett

It's very true.

Michael Shaeffer

Now, we wanted to begin this month's episode by reminding you, if you weren't already aware, that we are going to be holding our online evening of poetry readings that we call '[In the Company of Poems](#)', and we're going to be doing that on February 21st at 7pm, GMT, it'll be about an hour. And we've already got some fantastic guests joining us and incredible readers of poems. Myself and Fiona will be there as well reading some poems. But we've got the incredible Roy McFarlane, Degna Stone, and Hannah Jane Walker. There are more to be announced. Make sure you follow our Instagram with all the updates for who else is going to be joining us. We've done this twice before now, Fi, is that right?

Fiona Bennett

Yes.

Michael Shaeffer

Yeah. And it's been a really popular event. It is a fundraising event for us at The Poetry Exchange; it helps us to keep doing the work that we're doing, and keep making the podcast and making sure it's free for everyone. So your support is really appreciated. And it's a fantastic evening. You can buy

tickets, there's a link on our website: www.thepoetryexchange.co.uk. And that will take you through to [Eventbrite](#), I believe. And you can get your ticket there. How much is it, Fi?

Fiona Bennett

It's sort of a pay what you can with a minimum suggestion.

Michael Shaeffer

That's right. Yeah.

Fiona Bennett

So we want to keep it as open as we can, as we do everything.

Michael Shaeffer

And what are we going to be doing on on that evening, Fiona?

Fiona Bennett

It's a little bit different to the podcast, because it's less conversation and more pure poetry. So it's a sort of feast of listening and hearing poems. Yeah, a sonic feast is really the way to describe it, I think. And we'll be reading poems that we've already introduced you to - maybe there might be some favourites in there that we know people have enjoyed in the past - but many new ones too. And we'll be inviting our guest readers to bring along a poem that's been a friend to them lately too.

Michael Shaeffer

I'm looking forward to it.

Fiona Bennett

So, Michael, this month's episode is a very special episode that we're dedicating to our dear friend and colleague, who very sadly died at the end of last year - the brilliant and extraordinary Martin Heaney - who may be known to some of the listeners who are listening, he may indeed be a colleague or a friend of some of those out there. And some of you may know him through his episode of The Poetry Exchange, which came a few years ago when he brought us 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree.' But we wanted to take this moment to think about him and to honour him. And to honour him - there are so many things to say - but especially in the context of The Poetry Exchange, what he has brought to us as a supporter of the project from the beginning, his dedication to words and his dedication to the importance and the power of the reading of poetry, something that Martin understood in a very particular and unique way. And when I was starting thinking out about the project he was very close to the ideas and came and gave views and advice and all the brilliant things that he always did with a

unique lens and a unique ear. So as a great reader of poetry, he's always been a very close friend to the project. And indeed, as a great friend to me, and to many others, his championing of friendship itself is also part of what has fueled this project. He in his natural connecting way had introduced us to the wonderful guest who we're going to hear from this month, who is a very close and old friend of Martin's. Martin having introduced us to Simon, who we're going to be hearing from - it felt like a joining of the circle of friendship, to bring a conversation with Simon this month, as a dedication to Martin. So you'll be listening to myself and Michael, talking about 'The Thrush' by Ed Thomas - the poem that's been a friend to Simon.

Fiona Bennett

Would you just give it a read out loud for us?

Simon Crompton

Certainly, yeah.

The Thrush

by Edward Thomas

When Winter's ahead,
What can you read in November
That you read in April
When Winter's dead?

I hear the thrush, and I see
Him alone at the end of the lane
Near the bare poplar's tip,
Singing continuously.

Is it more that you know
Than that, even as in April,
So in November,
Winter is gone that must go?

Or is all your lore
Not to call November November,
And April April,
And Winter Winter—no more?

But I know the months all,
And their sweet names, April,
May and June and October,
As you call and call

I must remember
What died into April
And consider what will be born
Of a fair November;

And April I love for what
It was born of, and November
For what it will die in,
What they are and what they are not,

While you love what is kind,
What you can sing in
And love and forget in
All that's ahead and behind.

Fiona Bennett

Beautiful. Thank you.

Simon Crompton

I think it's - it's a very difficult poem to read actually. And I'm not sure it's an entirely easy poem to understand. The meaning washes over you in a kind of very non-specific way from the very start.

Michael Shaeffer

I confess I struggled slightly with it if I'm honest, Simon. I was going 'oh I'm not sure I understand this one, Fiona!'

Fiona Bennett

I think when you mentioned to me that it might be your friend, I think you maybe said 'it's a bit of a riddle.' It does feel that, and of course, as you've so rightly said, there's a carrier wave of meaning in it that we perhaps grasp without analysing it too much.

Simon Crompton

Yes.

Fiona Bennett

So what we love to know here is what it is to you, Simon, and perhaps when it came into your life?

Simon Crompton

Well, the question of when it came into my life is an interesting one, because I'm not entirely sure. I'll tell the story...I was probably not in the best of places, this was about 10, 12 years ago. My mum hadn't long been - she'd died not that long before that. And I was kind of feeling a bit lost. And I've got some very good friends who own a little cottage in Steep - the village of Steep in Hampshire - which is where Edward Thomas spent much of his life and where he wrote much of his poetry. So they invited me to stay there. So I did and I had a fabulous time there writing a lot, thinking a lot. But in fact, I took - I knew that some of the last books my mum had read had been Edward Thomas, and the biography of him because they were - they were still lying open in her flat. So I took those with me and I read quite a lot. Edward Thomas during his life kind of spent so much time walking and writing about nature and what he saw. So I did the walks round Steep that he did along the Hangers, which are these beautiful hills. But by the end of it, I was kind of, I was feeling much better but kind of worried about going back and what I'd do and all the things awaiting me. And I remember - and I know it happened because I've got a little video of it on the final day of my trip there - I was walking along a lane in Steep and saw a thrush high in a poplar tree - well I don't know if it was a poplar tree - it was in a tree singing beautifully. And I remember stopping and thinking. And the thought that I had was the thought in this poem - or at least the thought in its simplest form - which is basically: I wonder what - how the world looks to that thrush? It's a little bit weird, because I know probably I had read the Edward Thomas poem before that. But I don't know that, and it's odd because it's not in the anthologies that I was reading at the time. And I must have read it after that. I've...well I don't know, I might have read it before, I might have read it after. But I suppose that's not the point; it's that the poem has become kind of part of that - I can't read the poem without thinking of that moment. Whether I've imposed my interpretation on the poem from my thought, or whether my thought was an interpretation of Edward Thomas, I don't know. But they're kind of closely linked really. And I've liked it ever since really. And I think it's partly because it also just works on that really simple level, that I do - I love walking - it's when I think.

Fiona Bennett

I don't know that we've ever had something like that before, Michael, where...where the image of the poem has actually happened, in quite the way that you just described it so beautifully, Simon. It's, it's extraordinary.

Simon Crompton

It sounds a little bit pretentious, and I'm very against getting pretentious about poems, but I kind of do feel something happened there. You know, I could - I could have chosen many other poems from different points in my life, but I think over my recent years, this is the one that probably has stuck with me most...that's been a friend to me most.

Michael Shaeffer

It's such a beautiful story, Simon, and I very much resonate with what you were saying about walking, and what happens in those moments that you described so beautifully. And actually, it's really kind of opened up the poem for me hearing you talk about that. Just in that first stanza, it seems to me the poet is thinking into the future, and then thinking of the past in the way that you described, and then he goes to the thrush, who's completely in the present, you know.

Simon Crompton

Exactly. Yeah. Yeah.

Michael Shaeffer

'When Winter's ahead / What can you read in November [as in the future] / That you read in April' - you know, it's...and that's such a clever, very simple way of capturing that thing that we all do - find ourselves stuck in our head, you know, worrying about what will happen, and concerning ourselves with stuff that's happened in the past. And yeah, it's brilliant.

Simon Crompton

Yeah. No, I feel - I feel that - I feel that he's...I mean Edward Thomas did get depressed a lot. And he's, he's not in a great state of mind at the start, it seems to me, so 'Winter's ahead' - I'm feeling glum; how can I recreate how I felt in April, when - with the, you know - the summer ahead of me, now November's here? What is it about now that's different than April? Where can I find the hope that I found when it was April - that's how I read that. And then as you say, he goes on, and it's like a break and then suddenly from the thought he hears a thrush, and just the singing continuously. So then he goes into this meditation in some way or this thought about what - what is going on in the thrush's head? What are they thinking? And is it just a simple view of the world whereby everything comes together? There's no, there's no fear, or there's no hope, you know, winter comes and winter goes. Or maybe you just don't have words for these things. You know, maybe you just accept everything as being one big whole that you don't have the worry that we do about defining things. The year is one and worries and hopes and fears are one.

Michael Shaeffer

It's interesting, isn't it, how he does that sort of comparison with himself and the thrush?

Simon Crompton

Yes.

Michael Shaeffer

'Or is all your lore / Not to call November November, / And April April, / And Winter Winter—no more?' And then he goes: 'But I know the months all, [...] as you call and call.'

Simon Crompton

Yes.

Michael Shaeffer

It's sort of deceptively brilliant, isn't it? I mean, it's sort of apparently sort of quite simple. There's not difficult language in this. It's not, you know, no allusions to classical mythology. But actually, it's incredibly skillful, isn't it?

Simon Crompton

Absolutely. You're right, it's conversational. It's almost he is having a chat with himself and a chat with the thrush. It's the thought that matters to him. What can I learn from the fact that you're just sitting at the top of the tree singing your heart out? But it has to come back to how he feels and he kind of...but I think when he comes back to how he feels he's already in a better state of mind than he was at the start. That he's saying, well, actually, I'm not like you. I - I know all the names of the months. But they're sweet names. He loves them. In so few words, as well, I mean, so concise.

Fiona Bennett

It's astonishingly concise, isn't it? I mean, just a handful of words in a line.

Michael Shaeffer

What's he saying for you here, Simon, in this sixth stanza? It's almost like he's beginning to draw some sort of a conclusion here or something or it's sort of a note to self: 'I must remember / What died into April / And consider what will be born / Of a fair November.' Is that some hope?

Simon Crompton

Yeah, I think so. I think he's saying: okay, I must remember what you're telling me. April's a time of dying, but it's also a time of rebirth. And the same with November. Whatever time of year it is, you'll

get both - that basically you remember what died in one month, but each month gives rise to something else as well. So...and it's almost a kind of anti-nostalgic thing. See I think, again, and this is something I see very much in myself, I think he's worried not just about the future and what it might bring, but about being nostalgic about the past. And I think he's saying what the thrush teaches is you look at everything as one.

Michael Shaeffer

That makes complete sense to me. And I really love that last stanza where he returns to the thrush.

Simon Crompton

Yeah.

Michael Shaeffer

'While you love what is kind, / What you can sing in / And love and forget in / All that's ahead and behind.' It's amazing.

Fiona Bennett

I think that word 'kind' is so extraordinary.

Simon Crompton

Yes, I do. I'm not quite sure...I think it could either mean 'kind' as in gentle and kind to each other. Or it could mean 'kind' - the things that are like your kind of family of...

Fiona Bennett

Yeah, right. Your kindred, kind of thing? Yeah.

Simon Crompton

Yeah.

Fiona Bennett

There's something about the way that it goes into that also makes me feel that it is a return to the thrush, but that it's also somehow him.

Simon Crompton

Yes.

Fiona Bennett

I mean, there's an 'I' behind that 'you'...that he comes to the perspective of the thrush to some degree, as you did in that moment when you saw it, Simon?

Simon Crompton

Well, yes, I wouldn't pretend ever to have the complexity of thought and expression that Edward Thomas did. But there's a similarity there.

Fiona Bennett

Those moments, though, in nature, when you're walking, and something - there's an epiphany isn't there? That's the only word I can think of - you, you have an epiphany. When it happens, it's very special. And you, you can't really put it into words actually. This seems to me like a kind of perfect thing that you would have that experience, not have to put it into words, and then find the poem that's done it for you. Sort of perfect!

Simon Crompton

Yes, and I think - I think it's also the fact that it's so wondrous, that he has put such a complex argument into, how many, eight short stanzas, where the meanings are open but, you know, it has quite an emotional response in you. And I think part of it is in that final stanza, because you're right, Fiona, I think it is a kind of resolution. And I think, to me, it's almost like a bird song. Before that it's all a little bit staccato. But towards the end, it seems to me that this wonderful kind of...suddenly gathers pace into this sort of stream of thought, which I just, I just love.

Michael Shaeffer

And it reflects the ways in which he's been changed by the experience. Something's been freed or released.

Simon Crompton

Yes. I look at the word 'forget' as well there in that final stanza. To 'love and forget in.' That's an interesting word because it's not suggesting everything's rosy. In some ways, he's kind of longing for the sense of, yeah, the lack of human thought that a thrush has. He's longing for that sort of instinctive joy and love, but to better forget all the other stuff that's going on. I love his lack of sentimentality. He's always looking for the truth rather than for a solution.

Fiona Bennett

And the song in the poem is very beautiful, isn't it? Just the sounds of it all?

Simon Crompton

It reminds me - I don't know if you've read any other Edward Thomas - of his most famous poem, 'Adlestrop.'

Fiona Bennett

Yeah, there's a definite 'Adlestrop' moment in the middle there, isn't there?

Simon Crompton

Yeah. It's that - again - that thing of just a moment, and just taking the thought of a moment and weaving that into something wonderful.

Michael Shaeffer

I was just gonna say he must have been a relatively young man when he wrote this. He died in the First World War, aged 39.

Simon Crompton

Yeah. The weird thing is that he wrote all his poems in the last three years of his life. He actually only wrote poetry having met Robert Frost. He'd written huge amounts of prose and diaries, and he'd been a very respected critic and done all sorts of stuff. But by, yeah, 1913, Robert Frost persuaded him to write poetry. And he did it for the three years till he died in the trenches.

Michael Shaeffer

Also, just to say how completely incredible that you had this moment whilst staying in his house, in his cottage...

Simon Crompton

It wasn't in his cottage, but it was in a cottage in the same village. Yeah. Yeah.

Michael Shaeffer

Ok. It's close enough, you know, Simon. And to have discovered that your, your mother was reading him as well.

Simon Crompton

Yeah. She loved him. She was very - and I remember before she died she talked about - she loved poetry - and she particularly in her later years, she read a huge amount. So I kind of think that had something to do with me wanting to read more of him.

Michael Shaeffer

Does this still stay with you, Simon, this poem? Do you...do you find yourself these days out on walks, maybe hearing a thrush, and this coming to mind? Or do you sort of return to the page and read this? How is it with you now?

Simon Crompton

I think doing this has made me return to the page in a way that I hadn't before. I've read it occasionally. But I've remembered the poem very regularly on walks. And I kind of - I actively seek out thrushes now - I just, I just love song thrushes, and if I hear a song thrush or see a song thrush high in a tree, singing their heart out, of course I immediately think of the poem and that time when I was in Steep. And it all...yeah, yeah, the joy is probably all the more because of the poem really.

Michael Shaeffer

Now, Simon, obviously, the invitation here was to bring in a poem that's been a friend to you. If you were to characterise this friend, what type of a friend would it be?

Simon Crompton

Very difficult question, Michael! I think the thing I think about my very best friends are they are the ones you feel completely at ease with that you don't have to pretend anything, you're just you and you just say things - how you feel and how they are. I think this poem is a terribly honest poem about his kind of state of mind and also just charting the way he felt at a particular time and the thought - the thought he had. I think it would be an honest friend, it would be a good friend.

Michael Shaeffer

The Thrush

by Edward Thomas

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What can you read in November
That you read in April
When Winter's dead?

I hear the thrush, and I see
Him alone at the end of the lane
Near the bare poplar's tip,
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Is it more that you know
Than that, even as in April,
So in November,
Winter is gone that must go?

Or is all your lore
Not to call November November,
And April April,
And Winter Winter—no more?

But I know the months all,
And their sweet names, April,
May and June and October,
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I must remember
What died into April
And consider what will be born
Of a fair November;

And April I love for what
It was born of, and November
For what it will die in,
What they are and what they are not,

While you love what is kind,
What you can sing in
And love and forget in
All that's ahead and behind.

Fiona Bennett

That was Michael with the gift reading of 'The Thrush 'by Edward Thomas.

Michael Shaeffer

Our thanks, of course to Simon for sharing that incredible poem and that beautiful conversation. Simon is a health journalist, editor and writer and also took the role of being a critical friend to Martin for Martin's own podcast, which is called '[Chatty Guy Talks Cancer Care and Hope.](#)' And we will leave a link in the description to Martin's podcast which is completely extraordinary. Martin talks with such

great eloquence and wisdom and with this incredible perspective on living with his condition, I would thoroughly recommend it. It's quite an extraordinary thing. I've not heard anything quite like it, Fi.

Fiona Bennett

You mentioned that eloquence and I think that's something that I very much associate with Martin and you feel there was a very profound understanding of the importance and the power of the written and the spoken word that was shared between Simon and Martin. And I think one of the episodes is also a conversation between the two of them.

Michael Shaeffer

And we'll also leave a link to the episode that we did with Martin, where he talks about the importance of ['The Lake Isle of Innisfree'](#) for him. And in fact we've found out recently that Martin had known that poem, and in fact 'did it', if you like, at drama school. Yeah, we'll leave a link for that one as well, so you can have a listen to that - it's a beautiful ep.

Fiona Bennett

So Michael, I was thinking about the bonus poem for this month. And in the back of my mind, I hoped that in the audio archive of The Poetry Exchange, there would still be this recording that I remember vividly Martin making with me at the start of the project of a very, very beautiful poem. But I had a little moment of thinking, 'oh is it, have we still,' you know, what with one thing and another, online digital files go wandering, you know...but thankfully we've found it, haven't we, this morning, and it's a beautiful, beautiful reading that Martin gave of this poem, when we were very early with the ideas of the project. And in fact, I'd just sent a message out to a few poets that I knew saying, 'can you let me know if you've got a poem that's been a friend to you?' And this was brought in actually by the poet themselves. It was a friend to her in the act of writing it. And it's been a friend to many others, and she's a terrific poet - [Gill McEvoy](#) - and it's a real honour to share her poem, and in particular, to share Martin's gorgeous reading of it. So I think we'll finish the episode with that reading.

Michael Shaeffer

This is 'Sometimes All It Takes' by Gill McEvoy, read by Martin Heaney.

Martin Heaney

Sometimes all it takes

by Gill McEvoy

Sometimes all it takes

to be happy

is a line of washing drying gently in the sun,
a fork stuck in a border,

sunlight falling through leaves
striking the gold rim of the blackbird's eye

as it watches from the fence
for the digging to be done.

Michael Shaeffer

We'll be back with you next month with more poems as friends. Until then, thank you for listening.

Credits:

Gill McEvoy, 'Sometimes all it takes.' [Selected Poems](#) available February 2024 from The Hedgehog Poetry Press.

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