

## Salvador Dali: *Christ of St John of the Cross*

It is not of this world, and yet it is,  
And that is how it should be.  
Strong light hits back and the arms  
Coming from where we cannot see,  
Ought not to see, another dimension  
For another time. At this time, we  
Share the life of bay and boat  
With simply painted fishermen  
Who give no Amen  
Even if clouds both apocalyptic and real  
Made them look up and feel  
What they had to feel  
Of shattering amazement, fear,  
Protection, and a wash of glory.  
Was it an end coming near?  
Was it a beginning coming near?  
What happened to the thorns and blood and sweat?  
What happened to the hands like claws the whipcord muscles?  
Has the artist never seen Grünewald?  
'I have to tell you John of the cross called,  
Said to remind you light and death once met.'

**Edwin Morgan**

*From A Book of Lives* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007).

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Have you seen this painting by Salvador **Dali**? You can see what it looks like at <http://www.glasgowmuseums.com/venue/page.cfm?venueid=4&itemid=68>

Not much is known about Matthias **Grünewald** (that was possibly not even his real name), but he probably lived c1475-1528 in Germany and painted many pictures of Christ's crucifixion

Where is the light coming from?

What do you think 'another dimension for another time' describes?

Why do they 'give no Amen'?

Why might these things be in this painting?

Why would the poem draw attention to them?

Who might be speaking here?

What strikes you about these last two lines?



### Some opening questions:

- *Is the poem more about the painting or about the story of the crucifixion? (make it clear people can change their minds throughout the discussion – then ask the same question to end)*
- *Are there any phrases/words/sounds that really catch your attention here? (try reading it a second time aloud, to give people time to think about specific words; there's a lot of rhyme and repeated phrases to discover)*

### Some more question ideas:

- *What effects do the last two lines have for you?*
- *Does the poem ask anything about what we expect of artists?*
- *What do you feel the poem says about religious faith?*
- *Does this poem move you? If it does, why?*

### Discussing this poem with a group

All you need are some questions to start of the discussion, and a few more up your sleeve to help move discussion along. If you like these questions, use some of them – or put your own. To start, it's helpful to look for **patterns**, however small – maybe repeated sounds, words, numbers of lines in a section or stanza. And look for **anything that surprises you** – maybe a word/name you don't expect, a break in an otherwise regular-sounding rhythm. Ask yourself, why did that surprise me? What does it make me think? And don't feel you have to have The Answer; with your encouragement, your group will enjoy coming up with their own ideas.

See the tip sheet on '**Shared Inquiry**' method for group discussion, written by Marsha Howard of Poets House in New York, in the Poetry Boxes section of our Reading Room site, [www.readingroom.spl.org.uk](http://www.readingroom.spl.org.uk).

Make sure someone reads the poem aloud before you start to discuss it. Can you arrange to show everyone a copy of the painting, printed or online at <http://www.glasgowmuseums.com/venue/page.cfm?venueid=4&itemid=68>? This poem is likely to raise some wider discussion on art and faith, and of course the painting itself, but try to steer discussion back to the poem.



## Best Scottish Poems 2007

'Salvador Dali: *Christ of St John of the Cross*' is one of the poems selected for the Scottish Poetry Library's Best Scottish Poems 2007 by guest editor, poet Alan Spence. You can read the selection in full in the Poetry Online section of the Scottish Poetry Library's main website, [www.spl.org.uk](http://www.spl.org.uk). The online selection also contains comments and a biographical note after each poem, reproduced here.

### Note on the poem

The winner of *The Herald's* poll to find the ten favourite paintings in Scottish public collections was Salvador Dali's mysterious, beautiful and controversial *Christ of St John of the Cross*, from Glasgow's own collection. This painting, bought for the city by Dr Tom Honeyman in 1951 for £8,200, a princely sum in the time of post-war austerity, was instantly taken to the hearts of Glaswegians and has continued to be viewed by successive generations of citizens with fierce proprietorial pride.

Morgan's poem captures the juxtaposition of transcendental and commonplace in the sky-suspended Christ figure and the uninvolved fishermen below. It comments, too, on the curious lack of overt suffering in the crucified god man – 'What happened to the thorns and blood and sweat?'

*Lesley Duncan, Poetry Editor, The Herald*

### Editor's comment

Edwin Morgan is our finest living poet, still producing beautiful work at the age of 87. The opening line is vintage Morgan - a zen paradox in perfect iambic pentameter. The rest of the poem is a meditation on the subject matter with a neat dialectic switch at the end. Only Eddie could have written the final couplet, both conversational and transcendent.

*Alan Spence, Editor, Best Scottish Poems 2007*

### Poet's Biography

Born Glasgow in April 1920, Edwin Morgan has lived in Glasgow all his life, except for service with the RAMC in the Middle East during the Second World War, and his poetry is grounded in the city. He retired from Glasgow University as titular Professor of English in 1980, serving as Glasgow's first Poet Laureate 1999-2002. The title of his 1973 collection, *From Glasgow to Saturn*, suggests the range of Morgan's subject matter. He is the first to hold the post of 'Scots Makar', created by the Scottish Executive in 2004 to recognise the achievement of Scottish poets throughout the centuries. His latest collections include *Tales from Baron Munchausen* (Mariscat Press, 2005), and *The Book of Lives* (Carc Janet Press, 2007).

