Poems from the First World War

The Soldier

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If I should die, think only this of me:

      That there’s some corner of a foreign field

That is for ever England. There shall be

      In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;

A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,

      Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam;

A body of England’s, breathing English air,

      Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,

      A pulse in the eternal mind, no less

            Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;

Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;

      And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,

            In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

How to kill

By Keith Douglas

Under the parabola of a ball,

a child turning into a man,

I looked into the air too long.

The ball fell in my hand, it sang

in the closed fist: Open Open

Behold a gift designed to kill.

Now in my dial of glass appears

the soldier who is going to die.

He smiles, and moves about in ways

his mother knows, habits of his.

The wires touch his face: I cry

NOW. Death, like a familiar, hears

And look, has made a man of dust

of a man of flesh. This sorcery

I do. Being damned, I am amused

to see the centre of love diffused

and the wave of love travel into vacancy.

How easy it is to make a ghost.

The weightless mosquito touches

her tiny shadow on the stone,

and with how like, how infinite

a lightness, man and shadow meet.

They fuse. A shadow is a man

when the mosquito death approaches

The Last post

by Carol Ann Duffy

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,

He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If poetry could tell it backwards, true, begin

that moment shrapnel scythed you to the stinking mud ...

but you get up, amazed, watch bled bad blood

run upwards from the slime into its wounds;

see lines and lines of British boys rewind

back to their trenches, kiss the photographs from home -

mothers, sweethearts, sisters, younger brothers

not entering the story now

to die and die and die.

Dulce - No - Decorum - No - Pro patria mori.

You walk away.

You walk away; drop your gun (fixed bayonet)

like all your mates do too -

Harry, Tommy, Wilfred, Edward, Bert -

and light a cigarette.

There's coffee in the square,

warm French bread

and all those thousands dead

are shaking dried mud from their hair

and queuing up for home. Freshly alive,

a lad plays Tipperary to the crowd, released

from History; the glistening, healthy horses fit for heroes, kings.

You lean against a wall,

your several million lives still possible

and crammed with love, work, children, talent, English beer, good food.

You see the poet tuck away his pocket-book and smile.

If poetry could truly tell it backwards,

then it would.

Testimony

By Seamus Heaney

'We were killing pigs when the

Yanks arrived.

A Tuesday morning, sunlight

and gutter-blood

Outside the slaughter house.

>From the main road

They would have heard the screaming,

Then heard it stop and had a view of us

In our gloves and aprons coming

down the hill.

Two lines of them, guns on their

shoulders, marching.

Armoured cars and tanks and open jeeps.

Sunburnt hands and arms.

Unarmed, in step,

Hosting for Normandy.

Not that we knew then

Where they were headed, standing

there like youngsters

As they tossed us gum and tubes of

coloured sweets'

Why do you lie with your legs ungainly huddled,

And one arm bent across your sullen, cold,

Exhausted face? It hurts my heart to watch you,

Deep-shadowed from the candle's guttering gold;

And you wonder why I shake you by the shoulder;

Drowsy, you mumble and sigh and turn your head...

You are too young to fall asleep for ever;

And when you sleep you remind me of the dead.

By Siegfried Sassoon

Suicide in the Trenches

By Siegfried Sassoon

I knew a simple soldier boy

Who grinned at life in empty joy,

Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,

And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,

With crumps and lice and lack of rum,

He put a bullet through his brain.

No one spoke of him again.

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye

Who cheer when soldier lads march by,

Sneak home and pray you'll never know

The hell where youth and laughter go.

Anthem for Doomed Youth

BY WILFRED OWEN

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

— Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle

Can patter out their hasty orisons.

No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;

Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—

The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;

And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?

Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes

Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.

The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;

Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,

And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Arms and the Boy

BY WILFRED OWEN

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade

How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;

Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;

And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-leads,

Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads,

Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth

Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.

There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;

And God will grow no talons at his heels,

Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls.

Dulce et Decorum Est

BY WILFRED OWEN

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,

Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,

Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,

And towards our distant rest began to trudge.

Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,

But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;

Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots

Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling

Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,

But someone still was yelling out and stumbling

And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime.—

Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,

As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,

He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace

Behind the wagon that we flung him in,

And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,

His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood

Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est

Pro patria mori.

The Last Laugh

BY WILFRED OWEN

‘O Jesus Christ! I’m hit,’ he said; and died.

Whether he vainly cursed or prayed indeed,

The Bullets chirped—In vain, vain, vain!

Machine-guns chuckled—Tut-tut! Tut-tut!

And the Big Gun guffawed.

Another sighed,—‘O Mother,—mother,—Dad!’

Then smiled at nothing, childlike, being dead.

And the lofty Shrapnel-cloud

Leisurely gestured,—Fool!

And the splinters spat, and tittered.

‘My Love!’ one moaned. Love-languid seemed his mood,

Till slowly lowered, his whole face kissed the mud.

And the Bayonets’ long teeth grinned;

Rabbles of Shells hooted and groaned;

And the Gas hissed.

Attack

BY SIEGFRIED SASSOON

At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun

In the wild purple of the glow'ring sun,

Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud

The menacing scarred slope; and, one by one,

Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire.

The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed

With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,

Men jostle and climb to, meet the bristling fire.

Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,

They leave their trenches, going over the top,

While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,

And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,

Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!

In Times of Peace

by John Agard

That finger - index to be exact -

so used to a trigger's warmth

how will it begin to deal with skin

that threatens only to embrace?

Those feet, so at home in heavy boots

and stepping over bodies -

how will they cope with a bubble bath

when foam is all there is for ambush?

And what of hearts in times of peace?

Will war-worn hearts grow sluggish

like Valentine roses wilting

without the adrenalin of a bullet's blood-rush?

When the dust of peace has settled on a nation,

how will human arms handle the death of weapons?

And what of ears, are ears so tuned to sirens

that the closing of wings causes a tremor?

As for eyes, are eyes ready for the soft dance

of a butterfly's bootless invasion?

For the Fallen

BY LAURENCE BINYON

With proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children,

England mourns for her dead across the sea.

Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of her spirit,

Fallen in the cause of the free.

Solemn the drums thrill; Death august and royal

Sings sorrow up into immortal spheres,

There is music in the midst of desolation

And a glory that shines upon our tears.

They went with songs to the battle, they were young,

Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.

They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted;

They fell with their faces to the foe.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:

Age shall not weary them, nor the years contemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning

We will remember them.

They mingle not with their laughing comrades again;

They sit no more at familiar tables of home;

They have no lot in our labour of the day-time;

They sleep beyond England's foam.

But where our desires are and our hopes profound,

Felt as a well-spring that is hidden from sight,

To the innermost heart of their own land they are known

As the stars are known to the Night;

As the stars that shall be bright when we are dust,

Moving in marches upon the heavenly plain;

As the stars that are starry in the time of our darkness,

To the end, to the end, they remain.

In Flanders Fields

BY JOHN MCCRAE

In Flanders fields the poppies blow

Between the crosses, row on row,

That mark our place; and in the sky

The larks, still bravely singing, fly

Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago

We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,

Loved and were loved, and now we lie,

In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:

To you from failing hands we throw

The torch; be yours to hold it high.

If ye break faith with us who die

We shall not sleep, though poppies grow

In Flanders fields.

I WENT into a public 'ouse to get a pint o'beer,

The publican 'e up an' sez, ``We serve no red-coats here.''

The girls be'ind the bar they laughed an' giggled fit to die,

I outs into the street again an' to myself sez I:

O it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' ``Tommy, go away'';

But it's ``Thank you, Mister Atkins,'' when the band begins to play,

The band begins to play, my boys, the band begins to play,

O it's ``Thank you, Mr. Atkins,'' when the band begins to play.

I went into a theatre as sober as could be,

They gave a drunk civilian room, but 'adn't none for me;

They sent me to the gallery or round the music 'alls,

But when it comes to fightin', Lord! they'll shove me in the stalls!

For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' ``Tommy, wait outside'';

But it's ``Special train for Atkins'' when the trooper's on the tide,

The troopship's on the tide, my boys, the troopship's on the tide,

O it's ``Special train for Atkins'' when the trooper's on the tide.

Yes, makin' mock o' uniforms that guard you while you sleep

Is cheaper than them uniforms, an' they're starvation cheap;

An' hustlin' drunken soldiers when they're goin' large a bit

Is five times better business than paradin' in full kit.

Then it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' ``Tommy how's yer soul?''

But it's ``Thin red line of 'eroes'' when the drums begin to roll,

The drums begin to roll, my boys, the drums begin to roll,

O it's ``Thin red line of 'eroes'' when the drums begin to roll.

We aren't no thin red 'eroes, nor we aren't no blackguards too,

But single men in barricks, most remarkable like you;

An' if sometimes our conduck isn't all your fancy paints:

Why, single men in barricks don't grow into plaster saints;

While it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an ``Tommy, fall be'ind,''

But it's ``Please to walk in front, sir,'' when there's trouble in the wind,

There's trouble in the wind, my boys, there's trouble in the wind,

O it's ``Please to walk in front, sir,'' when there's trouble in the wind.

You talk o' better food for us, an'schools, an' fires an' all:

We'll wait for extry rations if you treat us rational.

Don't mess about the cook-room slops, but prove it to our face

The Widow's Uniform is not the soldier-man's disgrace.

For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' ``Chuck him out, the brute!''

But it's ``Saviour of 'is country,'' when the guns begin to shoot;

Yes it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' anything you please;

But Tommy ain't a bloomin' fool--you bet that Tommy sees!

By Rudyard Kipling