

For War is Hell poetry

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The Day's March

The battery grides and jingles,
Mile succeeds to mile;
Shaking the noonday sunshine
The guns lunge out awhile,
And then are still awhile.

We amble along the highway;
The reeking, powdery dust
Ascends and cakes our faces
With a striped, sweaty crust.

Under the still sky's violet
The heat throbs on the air ...
The white road's dusty radiance
Assumes a dark glare.

With a head hot and heavy,
And eyes that cannot rest,
And a black heart burning
In a stifled breast,

I sit in the saddle,
I feel the road unroll,
And keep my senses straightened
Toward to-morrow's goal. There, over unknown meadows
Which we must reach at last,
Day and night thunders
A black and chilly blast.

Heads forget heaviness,
Hearts forget spleen,
For by that mighty winnowing
Being is blown clean.

Light in the eyes again,
Strength in the hand,
A spirit dares, dies, forgives,
And can understand!

And, best! Love comes back again
After grief and shame,
And along the wind of death
Throws a clean flame.

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The battery grides and jingles,
Mile succeeds to mile;
Suddenly battering the silence
The guns burst out awhile ...

I lift my head and smile.

Robert Nichols

But a Short Time to Live

Our little hour, how swift it flies
When poppies flare and lilies smile;
How soon the fleeting minute dies,
Leaving us but a little while
To dream our dream, to sing our song,
To pick the fruit, to pluck the flower,
The Gods—They do not give us long,—
One little hour.

Our little hour,—how short it is
When Love with dew-eyed loveliness
Raises her lips for ours to kiss
And dies within our first caress.
Youth flickers out like wind-blown flame,
Sweets of to-day to-morrow sour,
For Time and Death, relentless, claim
Our little hour.

Our little hour, —how short a time
To wage our wars, to fan our hates,
To take our fill of armoured crime,
To troop our banners, storm the gates.
Blood on the sword, our eyes blood-red,
Blind in our puny reign of power,
Do we forget how soon is sped
Our little hour?

Our little hour, —how soon it dies:
How short a time to tell our beads,
To chant our feeble Litanies,
To think sweet thoughts, to do good deeds.
The altar lights grow pale and dim,
The bells hang silent in the tower—
So passes with the dying hymn
Our little hour.

Frederick Leslie A. Coulson

The Beach Road by the Wood

I know a beach road,
A road where I would go,
It runs up northward
From Cooden Bay to Hoe;
And there, in the High Woods,
Daffodils grow.

And whoever walks along there
Stops short and sees,
By the moist tree-roots
In a clearing of the trees,
Yellow great battalions of them,
Blowing in the breeze.

While the spring sun brightens,
And the dull sky clears,
They blow their golden trumpets,
Those golden trumpeteers!
They blow their golden trumpets
And they shake their glancing spears.

And all the rocking beech-trees
Are bright with buds again,
And the green and open spaces
Are greener after rain,
And far to southward one can hear
The sullen, moaning rain.

Once before I die
I will leave the town behind,
The loud town, the dark town
That cramps and chills the mind,
And I'll stand again bareheaded there
In the sunlight and the wind.

Yes, I shall stand
Where as a boy I stood
Above the dykes and levels
In the beach road by the wood,
And I'll smell again the sea breeze,
Salt and harsh and good.

And there shall rise to me
From that consecrated ground
The old dreams, the lost dreams
That years and cares have drowned:
Welling up within me
And above me and around
The song that I could never sing
And the face I never found.

Geoffrey Howard

Fulfilment

Was there love once? I have forgotten her.
Was there grief once? Grief yet is mine.
Other loves I have, men rough, but men who stir
More grief, more joy, than love of thee and thine.

Faces cheerful, full of whimsical mirth,
Lined by the wind, burned by the sun;
Bodies enraptured by the abounding earth,
As whose children we are brethren: one.

And any moment may descend hot death
To shatter limbs! Pulp, tear, blast
Beloved soldiers who love rough, life and breath
Not less for dying faithful to the last.

O the fading eyes, the grimed face turned bony,
Oped mouth gushing, fallen head,
Lessening pressure of a hand, shrunk, clammed and stony!
O sudden spasm, release of the dead!

Was there love once? I have forgotten her.
Was there grief once? Grief yet is mine.
O loved, living, dying, heroic soldier,
All, all my joy, my grief, my love, are thine.

Robert Nichols

Hills of Home

Oh! yon hills are filled with sunlight, and the green leaves paled to gold,
And the smoking mists of Autumn hanging faintly o'er the wold;
I dream of hills of other days whose sides I loved to roam
When Spring was dancing through the lanes of those distant hills of home.

The winds of heaven gathered there as pure and cold as dew;
Wood-sorrel and wild violets along the hedgerows grew,
The blossom on the pear-trees was as white as flakes of foam
In the orchard 'neath the shadow of those distant hills of home.

The first white frost in the meadow will be shining there to-day
And the furrowed upland glinting warm beside the woodland way;
There, a bright face and a clear hearth will be waiting when I come,
And my heart is throbbing wildly for those distant hills of home.

Malcolm Hemphrey

The Casualty Clearing Station

A bowl of daffodils,
A crimson-quilted bed,
Sheets and pillows white as snow—
White and gold and red—
And sisters moving to and fro,
With soft and silent tread.

So all my spirit fills
With pleasure infinite,
And all the feathered wings of rest
Seem flocking from the radiant West
To bear me thro' the night.

See, how they close me in,
They, and the sisters' arms.
One eye is closed, the other lid
Is watching how my spirit slid
Toward some red-roofed farms,
And having crept beneath them slept
Secure from war's alarms.

Gilbert Waterhouse

Aftermath

Have you forgotten yet?...

For the world's events have rumbled on since those gagged days,
Like traffic checked a while at the crossing of city-ways:
And the haunted gap in your mind has filled with thoughts that flow
Like clouds in the lit heaven of life; and you're a man reprieved to go,
Taking your peaceful share of Time, with joy to spare.
But the past is just the same,— and War's a bloody game...
Have you forgotten yet?...
Look down, and swear by the slain of the War that you'll never forget.

Do you remember the dark months you held the sector at Mametz,—
The nights you watched and wired and dug and piled sandbags on parapets?
Do you remember the rats; and the stench
Of corpses rotting in front of the front-line trench,—
And dawn coming, dirty-white, and chill with a hopeless rain?
Do you ever stop and ask, "Is it all going to happen again?"

Do you remember that hour of din before the attack,—
And the anger, the blind compassion that seized and shook you then
As you peered at the doomed and haggard faces of your men?
Do you remember the stretcher-cases lurching back
With dying eyes and lolling heads, those ashen-grey
Masks of the lads who once were keen and kind and gay?

Have you forgotten yet?...

Look up, and swear by the green of the Spring that you'll never forget.

Siegfried Sassoon

No Man's Land

No Man's Land is an eerie sight
At early dawn in the pale gray light.
Never a house and never a hedge
In No Man's Land from edge to edge,
And never a living soul walks there
To taste the fresh of the morning air;—
Only some lumps of rotting clay,
That were friends or foemen yesterday.

What are the bounds of No Man's Land?
You can see them clearly on either hand,
A mound of rag-bags gray in the sun,
Or a furrow of brown where the earthworks run
From the eastern hills to the western sea,
Through field or forest o'er river and lea;
No man may pass them, but aim you well
And Death rides across on the bullet or shell.

But No Man's Land is a goblin sight
When patrols crawl over at dead o' night;
Boche or British, Belgian or French,
You dice with death when you cross the trench.
When the "rapid", like fireflies in the dark,
Flits down the parapet spark by spark,
And you drop for cover to keep your head
With your face on the breast of the four months' dead.

The man who ranges in No Man's Land
Is dogged by the shadows on either hand
When the star-shell's flare, as it bursts o'erhead,
Scares the gray rats that feed on the dead,
And the bursting bomb or the bayonet-snatch
May answer the click of your safety-catch,
For the lone patrol, with his life in his hand,
Is hunting for blood in No Man's Land.

James H. Knight-Adkin

Courage

Alone amid the battle-din untouched
Stands out one figure beautiful, serene;
No grime of smoke nor reeking blood hath smutched
The virgin brow of this unconquered queen.
She is the Joy of Courage vanquishing
The unstilled tremors of the fearful heart;
And it is she that bids the poet sing,
And gives to each the strength to bear his part.

Her eye shall not be dimmed, but as a flame
Shall light the distant ages with its fire,
That men may know the glory of her name,
That purified our souls of fear's desire.
And she doth calm our sorrow, soothe our pain,
And she shall lead us back to peace again.

Dyneley Hussey

In Flanders Fields

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.

John McCrae

Home Thoughts from Laventie

Green gardens in Laventie!
Soldiers only know the street
Where the mud is churned and splashed about
By battle-wending feet;
And yet beside one stricken house there is a glimpse of grass—
Look for it when you pass.

Beyond the church whose pitted spire
Seems balanced on a strand
Of swaying stone and tottering brick,
Two roofless ruins stand;
And here, among the wreckage, where the back-wall should have been,
We found a garden green.

The grass was never trodden on,
The little path of gravel
Was overgrown with celandine;
No other folk did travel
Along its weedy surface but the nimble-footed mouse,
Running from house to house.

So all along the tender blades
Of soft and vivid grass
We lay, nor heard the limber wheels
That pass and ever pass
In noisy continuity until their stony rattle
Seems in itself a battle.

At length we rose up from this ease
Of tranquil happy mind,
And searched the garden's little length
Some new pleasance to find;
And there some yellow daffodils, and jasmine hanging high,
Did rest the tired eye.

The fairest and most fragrant
Of the many sweets we found
Was a little bush of Daphne flower
Upon a mossy mound,
And so thick were the blossoms set and so divine the scent,
That we were well content.

Hungry for Spring I bent my head,
The perfume fanned my face,
And all my soul was dancing
In that lovely little place,
Dancing with a measured step from wrecked and shattered towns
Away ... upon the Downs.

I saw green banks of daffodil,
Slim poplars in the breeze,
Great tan-brown hares in gusty March
A-courting on the leas.
And meadows, with their glittering streams—and silver-scurrying dace—
Home, what a perfect place!

Edward Wyndham Tennant

I Have a Rendezvous with Death

I have a rendezvous with Death
At some disputed barricade,
When Spring comes back with rustling shade
And apple-blossoms fill the air—
I have a rendezvous with Death
When Spring brings back blue days and fair.

It may be he shall take my hand
And lead me into his dark land
And close my eyes and quench my breath—
It may be I shall pass him still.
I have a rendezvous with Death
On some scarred slope of battered hill,
When Spring comes round again this year
And the first meadow-flowers appear.

God knows 't were better to be deep
Pillowed in silk and scented down,
Where Love throbs out in blissful sleep
Pulse nigh to pulse, and breath to breath,
Where hushed awakenings are dear ...
But I've a rendezvous with Death
At midnight in some flaming town,
When Spring trips north again this year,
And I to my pledged word am true,
I shall not fail that rendezvous.

Alan Seeger

The Messines Road

I

The road that runs up to Messines
Is double-locked with gates of fire,
Barred with high ramparts, and between
The unbridged river, and the wire.

None ever goes up to Messines,
For Death lurks all about the town,
Death holds the vale as his demesne,
And only Death moves up and down.

II

Choked with wild weeds, and overgrown
With rank grass, all torn and rent
By war's opposing engines, strewn
With débris from each day's event!

And in the dark the broken trees,
Whose arching boughs were once its shade
Grim and distorted, ghostly ease
In groans their souls vexed and afraid.

Yet here the farmer drove his cart,
Here friendly folk would meet and pass,
Here bore the good wife eggs to mart
And old and young walked up to Mass.

Here schoolboys lingered in the way,
Here the bent packman laboured by,
And lovers at the end o' the day
Whispered their secret blushingly.

A goodly road for simple needs,
An avenue to praise and paint,
Kept by fair use from wreck and weeds,
Blessed by the shrine of its own saint.

III

The road that runs up to Messines!
Ah, how we guard it day and night!
And how they guard it, who o'erween
A stricken people, with their might!

But we shall go up to Messines
Even thro' that fire-defended gate.
Over and thro' all else between
And give the highway back its state.

James Ebenezer Stewart

Optimism

At last there'll dawn the last of the long year,
Of the long year that seemed to dream no end,
Whose every dawn but turned the world more drear,
And slew some hope, or led away some friend.
Or be you dark, or buffeting, or blind,
We care not, day, but leave not death behind.

The hours that feed on war go heavy-hearted,
Death is no fare wherewith to make hearts fain.
Oh, we are sick to find that they who started
With glamour in their eyes came not again.
O day, be long and heavy if you will,
But on our hopes set not a bitter heel.

For tiny hopes like tiny flowers of Spring
Will come, though death and ruin hold the land,
Though storms may roar they may not break the wing
Of the earthed lark whose song is ever bland.
Fell year unpitiful, slow days of scorn,
Your kind shall die, and sweeter days be born.

Alfred Victor Ratcliffe

Ex-Service

Derision from the dead
Mocks armament madness.
Redeem (each Ruler said)
Mankind. Men died to do it.
And some with glorying gladness
Bore arms for earth and bled:
But most went glumly through it
Dumbly doomed to rue it.
The darkness of their dying
Grows one with War recorded;
Whose swindled ghosts are crying
From shell-holes in the past,
Our deeds with lies were lauded,
Our bones with wrongs rewarded.
Dream voices these-denying
Dud laurels to the last.

Siegfried Sassoon

London Stone

When you come to London Town,
(Grieving-grieving!)
Bring your flowers and lay them down
At the place of grieving.
When you come to London Town,
(Grieving-grieving!)
Bow your head and mourn your own,
With the others grieving.
For those minutes, let it wake
(Grieving-grieving!)
All the empty-heart and ache
That is not cured by grieving.
For those minutes, tell no lie:
(Grieving-grieving!)
"Grave, this is thy victory;
And the sting of death is grieving."
Where's our help, from earth or heaven,
(Grieving-grieving!)
To comfort us for what we've given,
And only gained the grieving.
Heaven's too far and earth too near,
(Grieving-grieving!)
But our neighbour's standing here,
Grieving as we're grieving.
What's his burden every day?
(Grieving-grieving!)
Nothing man can count or weigh,
But loss and love's own grieving.
What is the tie betwixt us two
(Grieving-grieving!)
That must last our whole lives through?
"As I suffer, so do you."
That may ease the grieving.

Rudyard Kipling

Far, far from Wipers

Far, far from Wipers I long to be.
Where German snipers can't get at me.
Dark is my dugout, cold are my feet.
Waiting for Whizzbangs to send me to sleep. Far, Far from Wipers

trench song