“What gives us hope in dark places?”

WW1 Poetry and Poets

Year 7 English
“I wish those people who talk about going on with this war whatever it costs could see the soldiers suffering from mustard gas poisoning. Great mustard coloured blisters, blinding eyes, all sticky and stuck together, always fighting for breath, with voices a mere whisper, saying that their throats are closing, and they know they will choke.”

Vera May Brittain, 1933
Night Duty

The pain and laughter of the day are done
So strangely hushed and still the long ward seems,
Only the Sister’s candle softly beams.
Clear from the church near by the clock strikes ’one’;
And all are wrapt away in secret sleep and dreams.

Here one cries sudden on a sobbing breath,
Gripped in the clutch of some incarnate fear:
What terror through the darkness draweth near?
What memory of carnage and of death?
What vanished scenes of dread to his closed eyes appear?

And one laughs out with an exultant joy.
An athlete he — Maybe his young limbs strain
In some remembered game, and not in vain
To win his side the goal — Poor crippled boy,
Who in the waking world will never run again.

One murmurs soft and low a woman’s name;
And here a vet’ran soldier calm and still
As sculptured marble sleeps, and roams at will
Through eastern lands where sunbeams scorch like flame,
By rich bazaar and town, and wood-wrapt snow-crowned hill.

Through the wide open window on great star,
Swinging her lamp above the pear-tree high,
Looks in upon these dreaming forms that lie
So near in body, yet in soul so far
As those bright worlds thick strewn ion that vast depth of sky.
The Little Car, 1914

On the 31st day of August in the year 1914
I left Deauville shortly before midnight
In Rouveyre's little car

Including his chauffeur there were three of us

We said goodbye to a whole epoch
Furious giants were looming over Europe
The eagles were leaving their eyries expecting the sun
Voracious fishes were swimming up from the abysses
Nations were rushing together to know each other through and through
The dead were trembling with fear in their dark dwellings

The dogs were barking in the direction of the frontiers
As I went I carried within me all the armies that were fighting
I felt them rising within me and spreading out over the regions through which their columns wound
With the forests the happy villages of Belgium
Francorchamps and Eau Rouge and the pouhons
A region through which invasions are always taking place
And the railway arteries along which those who were going away to die
Saluted one more time a life full of colours
The deep oceans where monsters were stirring
In old carcasses of wrecks
The unimaginable heights where men fight
Higher than the eagle soars
Man fights there against man

Guillaume Apollinaire (French, 1880 -1918) Wounded during WW1, with shrapnel in the head. Died of the Spanish Flu during the 1918 pandemic. Apollinaire was associated with the DADA and Surrealist group of artists working in France during the early part of the 20th century. He was a writer of numerous books and poetry.
And falls suddenly like a shooting star
I felt within me new beings full of dexterity
Building a new universe and running it as well
A merchant of unheard-of-opulence and of prodigious stature
Was setting out an extraordinary display of stock
And gigantic shepherds were driving forward
Great dumb flocks grazing on words as they went
And at them barked all the dogs along the road

I shall never
forget this journey by night during which none
of us said a word

O
dark
departure tend
when our 3
headlights failed before the war
BL A C K S M I T H S R E C A L L E D

E M O R N I N G
B E T W E E N  M I D N I G H T  A N D  O N E  I N  T H
n
e a r
L i s i e u x or else illes the
the very gold
blue

r s t t y r e
a n d 3 t i m e s w e h a d t o s t o p t o c h a n g e a b u

And when having passed through Fountainbleau
During the afternoon
We got to Paris
At the moment at which the mobilization posters were going up
We understood my comrade and I
That the little car had brought us into a
New age
And that although we were both already fully grown men
We had nevertheless just been born

French; trans. Oliver Bernard
Wilfred Owen (English 1893 -1918) composed many of his poems in the year before his death. He died in action at the age of 25. Only 5 of his poems were published during his lifetime.

Anthem for Doomed Youth, 1917

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.

Exposure, September 1918

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced cast winds that knive us…  
Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent…  
Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient…  
Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,  
But nothing happens.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,  
Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.  
Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,  
Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.  
What are we doing here?
The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow...
We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.
Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army
Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey,
But nothing happens.

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.
Less deathly than the air that shudders black with snow,
With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew;
We watch them wandering up and down the wind’s nonchalance,
But nothing happens.

Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces—
We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed,
Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,
Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses,
—Is it that we are dying?

Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed
With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;
For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;
Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed,—
We turn back to our dying.

Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn;
Nor ever suns smile true on child, or field, or fruit.
For God’s invincible spring our love is made afraid;
Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore were born,
For love of God seems dying.

Tonight, this frost will fasten on this mud and us,
Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp.
The burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp,
Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,
But nothing happens.
I Stood with the Dead

I stood with the Dead, so forsaken and still:
When dawn was grey I stood with the Dead.
And my slow heart said, ‘You must kill, you must kill’:
‘Soldier, soldier, morning is red.’

On the shapes of the slain in their crumpled disgrace
I stared for a while through the thin cold rain ....
‘O lad that I loved, there is rain on your face,
‘And your eyes are blurred and sick like the plain.’

I stood with the Dead . . . . They were dead; they were dead;
My heart and my head beat a march of dismay:
And gusts of the wind came dulled by the guns.
‘Fall in!’ I shouted; ‘Fall in for your pay!’

The Kiss, 1916

To these I turn, in these I trust, –
Brother Lead and sister Steel:
To his blind power I make appeal;
I guard her beauty clean from rust.

He spins and burns, and loves the air;
He splits a skull to win my praise:
But up the nobly marching days
She glitters naked, cold and fair.

Sweet sister, grant your soldier this,
That in good fury he may feel
The body where he sets his heel
Quail from your downward-darting kiss.
Perhaps, 1916

Perhaps some day the sun will shine again,
And I shall see that still the skies are blue,
And feel once more I do not live in vain,
Although I feel bereft of You.

Perhaps the golden meadows at my feet
Will make the sunny hours of Spring seem gay
And I shall find the white May blossoms sweet,
Though You have passed away.

Perhaps the summer woods will shimmer bright,
And crimson roses once again be fair,
And autumn harvest fields a rich delight,
Although You are not there.

Perhaps some day I shall not shrink in pain
To see the passing of the dying year,
And listen to the Christmas songs again
Although You cannot hear.

But, though kind Time may many joys renew,
There is one greatest joy I shall not know
Again, because my heart for loss of You

In Flanders Field, 1915

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
Scarcely 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.

**Rupert Brooke** (1887 - 1915) was well known and a national hero before his death in 1915. Known for his patriotic and lyrical verse, his work has split opinions over time due to its sentimentality and naivety. His work however, does represent the mood of England during early WW1.

**The Soldier, 1914**

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.
The Forest of the Dead, 1919

There are strange trees in that pale field
Of barren soil and bitter yield:
They stand without the city walls;
Their nakedness is unconcealed.

Cross after cross, mound after mound,
And no flowers blossom but are bound
The dying and the dead, in the wreaths
Sad crowns for kings of Underground.

The forest of the dead is still
No song of birds can ever thrill
Among the sapless boughs that bear
No fruit, no flower, for good or ill.

The sun by day, the moon by night
Give terrible or tender light,
But day or night, the forest stands
Unchanging, desolately bright.

With loving or unloving eye
Kinsman and alien pass them by:
Do the dead know, do the dead care,
Under the forest as they lie?

To each the tree above his head.
To each the sign in which is said.....
‘by this thou art to overcome’:
Under this forest sleep no dead.

These, having life, gave life away:
Is God less generous than they?
My Little Wet Home in the Trench, 29th April 1915

I've a little wet home in the trench,
Which the rain-storms continually drench;
Blue sky overhead,
Mud and clay for a bed,
And a stone that we use for a bench.
Bully beef and hard biscuits we chew;
Shells crackle and scare,
But no place can compare
With my little wet home in the trench.

Our friends in the trench o'er the way
Seem to know that we've come here to stay;
They rush and they shout,
But they can't get us out,
Though there's no dirty work they don't play.
They rushed us a few nights ago,
But we don't like intruders, and so
Some departed quite sore,
Others sleep evermore,
Near my little wet home in the trench.

So hurrah for the mud and the clay,
It's the road to “Der Tag”—that's “The Day.”
When we enter Berlin,
That big city of sin,
Where we'll make the fat Berliner pay,
We'll remember the cold, and the frost,
When we scour the fat land of the Bhost;
There'll be shed then, I fear
Redder stuff than a tear
For my little wet home in the trench.
**Screens (in the hospital)**

They put the screens around his bed;
   a crumpled heap I saw him lie,
White counterpane and rough dark head,
   those screens — they showed that he would die.

The put the screens about his bed;
   We might not play the gramophone,
And so we played at cards instead
   And left him dying there alone.

The covers on the screens are red,
   The counterpanes are white and clean;
He might have lived and loved and wed
   But now he’s done for at nineteen.

An ounce or more of Turkish lead,
   He got his wounds at Sulva Bay
They’ve brought the Union Jack to spread
   Upon him when he goes away.

He’ll want those three red screens no more,
   Another man will get his bed,
We’ll make the row we did before
   But — Jove! — I’m sorry that he’s dead.

**Winifred Mary Letts** (1882 - 1972) During the WW1 she joined the Voluntary Aid detachment as a nurse at Manchester Base Hospital, also training as a masseuse with the Almeric Paget Military Massage Corps. She published some volumes of poetry.
August 1914, March 1915

The sun rose over the sweep of the hill
All bare for the gathered hay,
And a blackbird sang by the window-sill,
And a girl knelt down to pray:
’Whom Thou hast kept through the night, O Lord,
Keep Thou safe through the day.’

The sun rose over the shell-swept height,
The guns are over the way,
And a soldier turned from the toil of the night
To the toil of another day,
And a bullet sang by the parapet
To drive in the new-turned clay.

The sun sank slow by the sweep of the hill,
They had carried all the hay,
And a blackbird sang by the window-sill,
And a girl knelt down to pray:
’Keep Thou safe through the night, O Lord,
Whom Thou hast kept through the day.’

The sun sank slow by the shell-swept height.
The guns had prepared a way.
And a soldier turned to sleep that night
Who would not wake for the day,
And a blackbird flew from the window sill,
When a girl knelt down to pray.

**May Wedderburn Cannan (1893 - 1973)** She volunteered at a railhead canteen in Rouen in France, which provided food and coffee to troops coming to France. She published several volumes of poetry. Her fiancé survived the battles of Mons and Ypres, however died of flu as the war closed.