

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-48664-5 - Poems of this War: By Younger Poets

Edited by Patricia Ledward and Colin Strang

Excerpt

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## I. 'We saw doom patterned in the ordinary sky'

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### I. THE CONSCRIPTS

We go to war in various ways  
 From farms and factories, the usual ways  
 Of life suddenly distorted to terrible  
 Experience. Thus fear becomes the visible  
 Coffin at the funeral.

*We saw doom patterned in the ordinary sky.*  
 Here we go who yesterday  
 Were the people, the men who are to be  
 The people after the whirlpool stills  
 And quiet regains the valleys and the hills.  
 These were the neighbours  
 Of our fear, theirs was the curse  
 As well. The prophecy ran coldly  
 In our common blood and cried loudly  
 For swift sacrifice.

*We saw doom patterned in the ordinary sky.*  
 After all there was a universal  
 Tongue waiting patiently to assemble  
 The unmarshalled needs. Who sought to leap  
 Alone are marching now in step.

We go to war in various ways  
 Yet each aspires above himself to raise  
 The defeated banners. We have broken our fear.  
 The hour explodes the familiar life: we bear  
 The bleeding memory on.

*We see birth patterned in the deathly sky.*

EMMANUEL LITVINOFF

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2. THOUGHTS ON THE EVE

I could love Life the more  
 Would it but pass away  
 As quietly as the day  
 Ebbs from the darkening star.

This dearly cherished thought,  
 Deep and enraptured pain,  
 Soothes like a gentle rain  
 My wild tempestuous heart.

To sail a billowing sea  
 And watch the departing shore  
 From a tall sea-girt tower  
 Is to die splendidly.

But to my chosen end  
 I would more humbly creep  
 As men weary for sleep  
 Pray darkness descend.

But should some savage Hand  
 My rising manhood stem,  
 Torn, haunted by its dream,  
 From Time, lonely to stand;

Life had I loved the more  
 Had it but passed away  
 As quietly as the day  
 Ebbs from the darkening star.

EMMANUEL LITVINOFF

3. COME! LET US DANCE

Come! let us dance  
 The dance of death!  
 Dissemble doom  
 With love's light breath!

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Pipe away  
    To the metal moon  
That hears unmoved  
    Our witless tune.

Pluck the lyre  
    In a funeral dirge:  
We face unswerving  
    Death's dread purge;

Dauntless, despotic,  
    Devilish, drear,  
The purge of death  
    Is coming near;

The purge that leaves  
    Nor king nor fool  
Nor measures man  
    By any rule,

But takes us all  
    In any order  
By heart disease  
    Or front-page murder!

Dance, dance  
    To the beggar's lute.  
Dance, and sing  
    Ere he strike you mute.

Come to the dance!  
    The dance of death!  
Dissemble doom  
    With love's light breath!

PETER BAKER

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#### 4. THE LEVEL MIND

The level mind bodingly watches  
the green leaf that the wrinkle touches—  
across young lands the brown leaf marches.

The streets weep, grey and fearing  
their memory's sons, summer's bearing—  
their heartless foil cold puppets wearing.

Dead plants in honeymoon gardens fallen,  
seeds still remembering the vain pollen—  
bodies that march, their voices stolen.

The level mind bodingly watches  
the fraud hand that the slim life snatches,  
the streets that weep the children's marches.

ALEX COMFORT

#### 5. EMPTY SHELLS

I

The red hands took you; to the hot dust beyond  
the cool village walks, climbing, riding in rain  
past Druid stones, cows at the moorland pond;  
kicks at the beech leaves in the lonely lane.  
Gorse fired from hill to hill; the golden curl  
of cloud; sea-walls cracking, the lean winds flashing  
knives of foam to our throats; but you heard  
the straining gates where fiercer waves were crashing.

Discussions in cold blood, meetings, delay;  
your bag packed, handshakes, everyone away.

I watch the sea-gulls, white screams round the plough;  
walk out to the low tide over the red  
sand, crush empty shells, thinking of Spain, how  
I grow old, and you perhaps are dead.

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II

Some thing of Spring in Autumn, of brooding  
on change; a deepened music in the skies,  
sun striking new chords from the organ earth, moving  
deep harmonies in the sea; the woods are wise.

Only our dreams are real—the leaves are dust  
where we walked; now, in the blank-staring street,  
for those who wait, no answer, only rust  
on the clutched rails, and the tread of wearied feet.

The cold dawn, aching; in the numb rain,  
lonely travellers in the crowded train.

No strain for hoping now; I can reach  
to stillness, with eyes Janus-like at last.  
But in empty shells, picked up on the beach,  
murmurs the storm to come, the storm past.

MARGARET CROSLAND

6. WAR

Because the world is falling and there comes no answer;  
Because the leaves soon hide an outworn age;  
Because the time is past for children's playing,  
And a stranger suddenly walks upon the stage;  
Because the world is not the world we lived in  
And life is not a game,  
And most of the Gods we worshipped lost their haloes  
When the muses lost their name,  
We would remember the old days and their imagined  
glories;  
The tinsel trappings of a wondrous past.  
Postulating that the new world shall be born now  
And that this war is the last.

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And we would hope that something should be altered  
 In the cruel careless fundamental law,  
 But we must beware or the moment will escape us;  
 It has done so before,  
 And we must see that out of the practical slaughter  
 Rise no mere vapoury dreams,  
 But a world where the poor are fed, the tyrants humbled  
 And men know what life means.

JOCK CURLE

7. NEWS OF SUFFERING

Shouldering a way through crowds,  
 Or brooding with the dance of leaf  
 Delightful on the sunlit page,  
 I freeze in grief  
 For trees that will not bud in Spring  
 Now murder drags faith from its bed,  
 And the potential serpent coils  
 In the stern head,  
 But know my sorrow will not ease  
 Eyes empty in the last despair:  
 For me now are the claws of love,  
 And the sick prayer.

CLIFFORD DYMENT

8. METROPOLIS

I dreamt that suddenly the metropolitan sky  
 Closed in its dark dome a million dead,  
 Blindly and soundlessly, merciless like lead,  
 Shut in a huge tomb that company  
 Of mad imperial men. I heard their cry  
 Fade as the door closed, and as the stone  
 Rolled on their lust and laughter I saw  
 One most beautifully spared like Noah  
 Reaching towards me. His blood and bone  
 Through a pellucid miraculous prism shone.

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‘I am Shakespeare’, he said, and then I knew  
 How Hamlet hung like a vision in his eye,  
 Questioning my right to live or die:  
 Lear and Othello in a storm of dew  
 Whose passion and tragedy we travel to.

‘I too am Christ.’ His lips were red  
 With the bitter vinegar he’d rinsed thereon.  
 O like a classical bird his heart bore on  
 My fate like an omen. ‘I come’, he said,  
 ‘With Calvary’s disaster on my head.’

Strange in a dream, alone with that man, I stood  
 At the world’s centre, while east and west  
 Winds worried the nostril of each beast,  
 The sun shone, birds hopped, leaves of the wood  
 Lay embalmed in an unreal solitude.

‘Shakespeare and Christ, the bright and brittle blade  
 That splinters with power the city sky,  
 This is the nerve you live and labour by.’  
 I remembered the huge tomb, its million dead,  
 ‘O what of those mad imperious men?’ I said,

And woke. And suddenly the metropolitan sky  
 Broke in a thousand fragments. I heard  
 Shakespeare shouting his innumerable word  
 Louder and louder—the creed, curse, cry  
 Of men in history.

JOHN HALL

#### 9. CONSCRIPTS

Related to the picnic in the wood,  
 The letters that the lover failed to post,  
 To August, and the closing of the year,  
 No formula can exorcise their fear.

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Tomorrow stalks the country of their pleasure  
And misconstrues the need for sacrifice;  
    Because they grudge the summer that they give,  
    Our glib memorials are no palliative.

Shipwrecked, they grope forever underseas  
Or plot the graph of human recollection.  
    Here, on a mountain-range they did not know,  
    They see the future buried under snow.

To some, a window set above the park  
Affords a passage to their common love;  
    As retribution for the cancelled hours,  
    Imagination gives the actress flowers.

Others must loiter in the ruined house,  
Knees flexed above a phantom of the mind,  
    Or let the demon lead them to the street;  
    For them love's currency is counterfeit.

Recoiling from the certainty of touch,  
They write their passion in another's book:  
    The rhyme and reason of the present tense  
    Is found in motion or impermanence.

In privacy they play their own Iago,  
And juggle with the language of the flesh;  
    Because pretence and disbelief are one,  
    They fear the revelation of the sun.

Shall they return to find the garden empty,  
And sweep the cobwebs from an upstairs room?  
    See, in the wounded mirror on the wall,  
    The anger of the present shadows all.

FRANCIS KING



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10. GONE IS THE SPRING

Gone is the spring, and the undertones  
 of summer, heavy and ominous, demanding  
 from the living life, from the dead that their ageless  
 shadow  
 obscure not the sickening lie which haunts the pages of  
 history.

Now let us simplify the issue,  
 canalizing moods and currents which fox us  
 into believing this or doing that, irrespective  
 of the long insistent desire to thatch our untented houses.

Weaving our dreams of folly and delight, or  
 examining with microscopic glance  
 the fears and visions of childhood, the conditional  
 WHY of  
 events which suddenly shamed our pretty, unwanted  
 endearments.

'We too have demands of a rational nature,  
 we guests to your dream kingdom;  
 for we have our claim, our honour; your hidden anger  
 cannot relieve you now: we are not very impressed  
 with your ancient sport of the ostrich, the power and the  
 subtlety of the seashell's wished-for music,  
 sharpening the bronze voices of boys, and their waiting  
 bodies, the hopes and desire of their graceful, desolate  
 movements.'

The cant of reactionary, forget it!  
 Renounce now the plaint of children, with their  
 stupid, lovable faces and futile regrets, for  
 theirs is the sensitive withdrawal, the studied retreat  
 of the snail

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or the cannon. For you is memory and magic,  
 power of limb and the possible forgiveness.  
 Say 'For us to act, and action is loving—that,  
 and the silent faith to unite with life, ignored by the  
 selfish.'

Because hatred is power, and impotence  
 suffering, to idle death to the living,  
 what then? Shall we say the link, the long and magical  
 chain of history is broken, the umbilical cord is severed?

And so on this summer evening the voices  
 of saints, and the prayer of the small and the lonely  
 shall be our questioners, and the silent face of memory  
 our accuser; the song of the helpless our history, and  
 our answer.

ALAN ROOK

## II. SEPTEMBER HOLIDAY

All Nature's agents image war to me.  
 Even that butterfly above the ditch  
 Flutters with sinister intent; a bee,  
 Heavy with honey, drones at bomber's pitch.  
 The distant tractor furrows for attack  
 Trenches meticulous as a general's plan.  
 Those corn-shocks rest like rifles in a stack;  
 That sheaf ungathered is a fallen man . . .  
 Nothing is simple now, nothing immune  
 From war's contagion, time's conspiracy.  
 Throughout the sunny Cotswold afternoon  
 All Nature's agents image death to me.

CLIVE SANSOM