

# Anthem for Doomed Youth

*"This book is not about heroes . . . nor is it about deeds, or lands, or anything about glory . . .*

*My subject is War and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity.*

*Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why true Poets must be truthful."*

*(from "Quite Early One Morning,"  
by DYLAN THOMAS. Part II, American Edition.)*

*Dedicated to*

WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL  
LEAGUE FOR PEACE  
AND FREEDOM

And that is the Preface, by Wilfred Owen, to a volume of his poems which was to show, to England, and to the intolerant world, the foolishness, unnaturalness, horror, inhumanity, and insupportability of War, and to expose, so that all could suffer and see, the heroic lies, the willingness of the old to sacrifice the young, indifference, grief, the Souls of Soldiers.

The volume, as Wilfred Owen visualized it in trench and shell hole and hospital, in the lunatic centre of battle, in the collapsed and apprehensive calm of sick-leave, never appeared. But many of the poems that were to have been included in the volume remain, their anguish unabated, their beauty for ever, their truth manifest, their warning unheeded.

Wilfred Owen was born in 1893 and killed in 1918. Twenty-five years of age, he was the greatest poet of the first Great War. Perhaps in the future, if there are men, then, still to read — by which I mean if there are men at all — he may be regarded as one of the great poets of all wars. But only War itself can resolve the problem of the ultimate truth of his, or of anyone else's poetry: War or its cessation. . . .

Owen speaks to us, down the revolving stages of thirty years, with terrible new significance and strength. We had not forgotten his poetry, but perhaps we had allowed ourselves to think of it as the voice of one particular time, one place, one war. Now, at the beginning of what, in the future, may never be known to historians as the "atomic age" — for obvious reasons: there may be no historians — we can see, rereading Owen, that he is a poet of all times, all places, and all wars. There is only one War: that of men against men.

Owen left to us less than sixty poems, many of them complete works of art, some of them fragments, some of them in several versions of revision, the last poem of them all dying away in the middle of a line: "Let us sleep now. . . ." I shall not try to follow his short life, from the first imitations of his beloved Keats to the last prodigious whisper of "sleep" down the profound and echoing tunnels of "Strange Meeting." Mr. Edmund Blunden, in the introduction to his probably definitive edition of the poems, has done that with skill and love. His collected poems make a little, huge book, working — and always he worked on his poems like fury, or a poet — from a lush ornamentation of language, brilliantly, borrowed melody, and ingenuous sentiment, to dark, grave, assonant rhythms, vocabulary purged and sinewed, wrathful pity and prophetic utterance.

But these are all words, my words. Let us hear him, before we try to see him, in some kind of flame-lit perspective, on the battlefields of France and the Earth. This poem is called:

## EXPOSURE

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds  
that knife 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  
gray,

But nothing happens.

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the  
silence.

Less deadly 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 black-  
bird 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 even suns smile true or 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, His frost will fasten on this mud and us,  
Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp.  
The burying-party, picks and shovels in their  
shaking grasp,

Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,  
But nothing happens.



Who wrote this? A boy of twenty-three or four, comfortably born and educated, serious, "literary," shy, never "exposed" before to anything harsher than a Channel crossing, fond of *Endymion* and the open air, fresh from a tutor's job. Earlier, in letters to his mother, he had written from the Somme, in 1917, in that infernal winter: "There is a fine heroic feeling about being in France, and I am in perfect spirits. . . ." Or again, he talked of his companions: "The roughest set of knaves I have ever been herded with." When he heard the guns for the first time, he said: "It was a sound not without a certain sublimity."

It was *this* young man, at first reacting so conventionally to his preconceived ideas of the "glory of battle" — and such ideas he was to slash and scorify a very short time afterwards — who wrote the poem? It was this young man, steel-helmeted, buff-jerkined, gauntleted, rubber-waded, in the freezing rain of the flooded trenches, in the mud that was not mud but an octopus of sucking clay, who wrote:

## ANTHEM FOR DOOMED YOUTH

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 for them from prayers or 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 good-byes.

The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;

Their flowers the tenderness of silent minds,

And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.



The world has happened to him. All its suffering moved about and within him. And his intense pity for all human fear, pain, and grief was given trumpet-tongue. He knew, as surely as though the words had been spoken to him aloud, as indeed they had been though they were the words of wounds, the shape of the dead, the colour of blood, he knew he stood alone among men to *plead* for them in their agony, to blast the walls of ignorance, pride, pulpit, and state. He stood like Everyman, in *No Man's Land*: "It is like the eternal place of gnashing of teeth; the Slough of Despond could be contained in one of its crater-holes; the fires of Sodom and Gomorrah could not light a candle to it — to find the way to *Babylon the Fallen*." And out of this, he wrote the poem called:

## GREATER LOVE

Red lips are not so red

As the stained stones kissed by the English  
dead.

Kindness of wooed and wooer

Seems shame to their love pure.

O Love, your eyes lose lure

When I behold eyes blinded in my stead!

Your slender attitude  
Trembles not exquisite like limbs knife-  
skewed,  
Rolling and rolling there  
Where God seems not to care;  
Till the fierce Love they bear  
Cramps them in death's extreme decrepitude.

Your voice sings not so soft, —  
Though even as wind murmuring through  
raftered loft, —  
Your dear voice is not dear,  
Gentle, and evening clear,  
As theirs whom none now hear,  
Now earth has stopped their piteous mounds  
that coughed.

Heart, you were never hot,  
Nor large, nor full like hearts made great  
with shot;  
And though your hand be pale,  
Paler are all which trail  
Your cross through flame and hail:  
Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them  
not.



It was impossible for him to avoid the sharing of suffering. He could not record a wound that was not his own. He had so very many deaths to die, and so very short a life within which to endure them all. It's no use trying to imagine what would have happened to Owen had he lived on. . . .

In hospital, labelled as a "neurasthenic case," he observed, and experienced, the torments of the living dead, and he has expressed their "philosophy" in the dreadful poem —

### A TERRE

*(Being the philosophy of many soldiers)*

Sit on the bed. I'm blind and three parts shell.  
Be careful; can't shake hands now; never shall.  
Both arms have mutinied against me, — brutes.  
My fingers fidget like ten idle brats.

I tried to peg out soldierly, — no use!  
One dies of war like any old disease.  
This bandage feels like pennies on my eyes.  
I have my medals? — Discs to make eyes close.  
My glorious ribbons? — Ripped from my own back  
In scarlet shreds. (That's for your poetry book.)

A short life and a merry one, my buck!  
We used to say we'd hate to live dead-old, —  
yet now . . . I'd willingly be puffy, bald,  
And patriotic. Buffers catch from boys  
At least the jokes hurled at them, I suppose  
Little I'd ever teach a son, but hitting,  
Shooting, war, hunting, all the arts of hurting.  
Well, that's what I learnt, — that and making  
money.

Your fifty years ahead seem none too many?  
Tell me how long I've got? God! For one year  
To help myself to nothing more than air!  
One Spring! Is one too good to spare, too long?  
Spring wind would work its own way to my lung,  
And grow me legs as quick as lilac-shoots.

My servant's lamed, but listen how he shouts!  
When I'm lugged out, he'll still be good for that.  
Here in this mummy-case, you know, I've thought  
How well I might have swept his floors for ever.  
I'd ask no nights off when the bustle's over,  
Enjoying so the dirt. Who's prejudiced  
Against a grimed hand when his own's quite dust,  
Less live than specks that in the sun-shafts turn,  
Less warm than dust that mixes with arm's tan?  
I'd love to be a sweep, now, black as Town,  
Yes; or a muckman. Must I be his load?

O Life, Life, let me breathe, — a dug-out rat!  
Not worse than ours the existences rats lead —  
Nosing along at night down some safe rut,  
They find a shell-proof home before they rot.  
Dead men may envy living mites in cheese,  
Or good germs even. Microbes have their joys,  
And subdivide, and never come to death.  
Certainly flowers have the easiest time on earth.  
"I shall be one with nature, herb and stone,"  
Shelley would tell me. Shelley would be stunned:

The dullest Tommy hugs that fancy now.  
"Pushing up daisies" is their creed, you know.  
To grain, then, go my fat, to buds my sap,  
For all the usefulness there is in soap.  
D'you think the Boche will ever stew man-soup?  
Some day, no doubt if . . .

Friend, be very sure  
I shall be better off with plants that share  
More peaceably the meadow and the shower.  
Soft rains will touch me,— as they could touch  
once,  
And nothing but the sun shall make me ware.  
Your guns may crash around me. I'll not hear;  
Or, if I wince, I shall not know I wince.  
Don't take my soul's poor comfort for your jest.  
Soldiers may grow a soul when turned to fronds,  
But here the thing's best left at home with friends.  
My soul's a little grief, grappling your chest,  
To climb your throat on sobs; easily chased  
On other sighs and wiped by fresher winds.  
Carry my crying spirit till it's weaned  
To do without what blood remained these wounds.



To see him in his flame-lit perspective, against the background now of the pocked and cratered warscape, shivering in the snow under the slitting wind, marooned on a frozen desert, or crying, in a little oven of mud, that his "senses are charred," is to see a man consigned to articulate immolation. He buries his smashed head with his own singed hands, and is himself the intoning priest over the ceremony, the suicide, the sunset. He is the common touch. He is the bell of the church of the broken body. He writes love letters home for the illiterate dead. Ignorant, uncaring, hapless as the rest of the bloody troops, he is their arguer shell-shocked into diction, though none may understand. He is content to be the unhonoured prophet in death's country: for fame, as he said, was the last infirmity he desired. . . .

But remember, he was not a "wise man" in the sense that he had achieved, for himself, a true way of believing. He believed there was no one true way because

all ways are by-tracked and rutted and pitfalled with ignorance and injustice and indifference. He was himself diffident and self-distrustful. He had to be wrong, clumsy, affected often, ambiguous, bewildered. Like every man at last, he had to fight the whole war by himself. He lost, and he won. In a letter written towards the end of his life and many deaths, he quoted from Rabindranath Tagore: "When I go hence, let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable."

He was killed on November 4, 1918. This is his last, and unfinished poem, found among his papers, after his death.

## STRANGE MEETING

It seemed that out of battle I escaped  
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since  
scooped  
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.  
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,  
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.  
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared  
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,  
Lifting distressful hands as if to bless.  
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,  
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.  
With a thousand pains that vision's face was  
grained;  
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,  
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made  
moan.  
"Strange friend," I said, "Here is no cause to  
mourn."  
"None" said the other, "Save the undone years,  
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,  
Was my life also; I went hunting wild  
After the wildest beauty in the world,  
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair.  
But mocks the steady running of the hour,  
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.  
For by my glee might many men have laughed,  
And of my weeping something had been left,  
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,  
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.  
Now men will go content with what we spoiled.  
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.

They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress,  
None will break ranks, though nations trek from  
progress.

Courage was mine, and I had mystery,  
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery;  
To miss the march of this retreating world  
Into vain citadels that were not walled.  
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-  
wheels

I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,  
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.  
I would have poured my spirit without stint  
But not through wounds, not on the cess of war.  
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds  
were.

I am the enemy you killed, my friend.  
I knew you in this dark; for you so frowned  
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.  
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.  
Let us sleep now. . . .



*NOTE: It is perhaps little known that Dylan Thomas was, during his lifetime, a dedicated worker and believer in Peace — The poems of this pamphlet are taken from content of his notable British Broadcasts in the years before his death. He spent much time in research, digging up this Poetry which seems to us to express so deeply and honestly, the utter folly and cruelty of War. . . . With his growing popularity since his death at 39 years, it has been necessary for New Directions, N.Y., to bring out "Quite Early One Morning" in a paperback American Edition. We are indebted to the publishers for permission to use the above material.*

THIS ANTHOLOGY HAS BEEN COLLECTED BY A MEMBER  
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LEAGUE FOR PEACE AND FREEDOM.

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