

The Outpost

Poems

Wilfrid Gibson
1944

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By the Same Writer

The Searchlights

Challenge

The Alert

Coming and Going

(Oxford University Press)

Collected Poems, 1905-1925

The Golden Room

Hazards

Islands

Fuel

(Macmillan & Co.)

A Leaping Flame, A Sail!

(Privately Printed)

WILFRID GIBSON

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The Beech Logs

*With lively flames of lemon and amethyst
That flutter, twirl and twist
The sizzling beech-logs burst into a blaze;
And, watching, I recall the days
When to the Ridgeway I would clamber
Above the tidy cornlands, trimly hedged,
And on the down's edge, under branches fledged
With April emerald or October amber;
Would brood upon a world at strife
And mankind held
In an unparalleled
And universal agony;
Until the hanging woodland came to be
Sacrificed, too, to war's exigency—
The boughs endangering
The aircraft taking off at night
For oversea
In retributive flight
To wreck arms-factories of the enemy.*

*And, as the beech-logs crumble, charred with fire,
Dreaming, once more
I hear those branches swing
Before the West wind, gaily flourishing
The gallant banner of their leafy life:
And that memorial music seems to be
A stormy threnody
For all the brave, whose ecstasy*

*Upsurged in heady fountaining desire;
Until they, too, in the full energy
Of their exuberant youth fell, also doomed
To be consumed
Within the holocaust of total war.*

The Whales

Suddenly in his brain
With startling slam
Door after door claps to . . . and, shuddering,
He lifts his head and languidly
Over the bulwarks peers across the sea,
To find the boat surrounded by a gam
Of sperm-whale, cows and calves, that, merrily
Lob-tailing, slap the waves with flourished flukes,
Then sound the ocean glooms, to rise again
Spouting into the sun their spumy breath:
And, even as he looks
On the exhaustless energy
Of those gay gambolling
Undaunted creatures of the deep,
He, who, long derelict with death,
Had seemed to lie in his last sleep,
Feels youth resilient in his veins once more,
And with renewed vitality
Determines, come what may, that, even yet,
He will survive to set
His foot again upon his native shore.

The Unseen Rider

On the high down above the sea
I lie and listen to the talk
Of jackdaws roosting in the chalk
Of the cliff-face that from the surf
Of tumbling breakers rises sheer;
When, through the water's monotone
And chattering of daws, I hear
A thud of hoofs across the turf.

I hear; but dare not turn my head,
Lest I should break the spell the sound
Of horseshoes drumming on soft ground
For evermore must hold for me;
I dare not turn, lest I see there
Some casual horseman all unknown,
And not the boy with tossing hair
Who rides the downs of memory.

In the Small Hours

Prey to all the evil powers
Of the small black-hearted hours,
Wakeful in her bed she lay
Longing for the blink of day
And the dawn-song of the lark;
Though yet fearful of what morn
Held for a world, battle-torn;
When there shivered through the dark
The sharp-edged and eerie crying
Of a lych-owl in the park.

And that crying seemed to her
Fraught with all the sinister
Cruelty that ever drives
Men's hag-ridden hunted lives,
Till chance pounces, and they die:
Though again and yet again,
Clutching at the counterpane,
To allay the agony
Of her fluttering heart she murmured
"It is only a bird's cry!"

And Now He Stumbles On . . .

And now he stumbles on, a boy once more
Among the slippery mangolds, crisped and hoar
With sparkling rime—the heavy gamebag slung
About his shoulder, and his nostril stung
With icy tang and reek of fur and feather
Warm bloody carcasses and perished leather—
Then pauses, as, now overhead
A covey whirrs, and one by one
The partridge tumble dead
About him, slaughtered by his father's gun. . .

He had always loathed that slaughter—and yet he,
A bearded stripling, dressed in jungle-green,
Seeking to outwit enemies unseen,
Now bears a gun, himself, as, blunderingly,
He slithers through the swamp in tropic rain;
Condemned by forces terrible and blind
To slaughter or be slain,
A killer of his kind—
He, whose dumb boyish heart could never find
The bitter words
To voice his pity for those stricken birds!

The Snake

Out of the lush green brake
The coiling snake
In its sleek panoply
Of rich reticulated bronze and jade
Slithers; and, scarce awake,
The soldier watches, unafraid,
Who for five years has been outfacing death
In all its violent variety.

The Islander

A lad, he had longed to leave
His native isle,
And venture out into the world that lay
Beyond the severing waters of the kyle:

But, now that war has borne
Him oversea
Further than ranges of his wildest dream,
His heart knows only one desire, to be
Secure at home within
The little isle,
Cut off for ever from a crazy world
By the swift races of the severing kyle.

The Jaws of Death

Barely has he escaped
The alligator's jaws:
And now upon the margin of the swamp
He makes a pause
To gain his breath,
Glad to elude that brutal death;
And then
Into the jungle plunges, after all,
Only to fall
Trapped in an ambush by his fellow men.

Now He is Digging Sheep . . .

Now he is digging sheep
Out of a fellside drift where, crouching low
In the soft smother buried deep
They huddle under hummocked snow:
And, as he digs, the sweat
Streams down his face:
He digs and digs, and yet
Comes on no trace
Of his lost flock. . .
Then, in the tropic night,
He wakens with a shock
From troubled sleep;
And lies repining in the humid heat
For Northern icy airs and the cold light
Falling on dazzling folds of crystallized white.

The Can

An old tin can is glittering in the sun
Beyond the heaped-up corpses of the dead:
And, as it holds his eyes, into his head
Flashes the vision of some ancient man,
Long after the last battle's lost, and won,
And all the slain have sunk into the soil—
Some ancient man, grown old in peaceful toil,
Turning the mould and digging up that can
Again to glitter in the morning sun.

The Morass

His tank had stuck,
Bogged deep in the morass—
A stationary target—just his luck!
And, when the guns should get the range, like glass
They'd shatter it, or, leastways, knock it out,
Battered like an old kettle kicked about
From boy to boy across the grass
Of his old village-green . . . And he, well he
Was too done-in to worry; and, seemingly,
For evermore would be
Just part of the morass.

The Butterfly

Out of the swamp into the chequered light
Down the green jungle-glade
A huge flamboyant butterfly
Like the fantastic creature of a dream
Flutters in brilliant flight
Before his dazzled eyes:
And, as he gazes at it in surprise,
'Twould almost seem
To him that, from the reeking slough of war,
One day may yet arise
Some flame-winged vision of new loveliness
To lead men from the despond of distress.

The Craneman

The travelling crane halts, and into the mould
The tilting ladle pours
The molten steel;
And, as the whitehot glare
Scorches his face and hair,
The craneman's heart turns cold
Within his breast as, in the glow,
He sees a wave-washed tanker, battling on
In swirls of icy spray and snow
Through Arctic waters to far Russian shores,
And his young son, so lately gone
On convoy-duty, even now
Half-frozen at the wheel.

The Dead Fish

About the boat
Upon the oily green
The dead fish float,
Killed by depth-charges when the submarine
Was shattered—fish, fantastic and obscene
Blind creatures of the ooze, from ocean-night,
After long ages of obscurity
In the primeval quiet of deep sea,
By man's mad machinations brought to light.

Mountain Death

Forced to bail out above the Alps, they quit
One after one the burning plane, and float
Down through dense cloud, escaping death by fire,
Only on icy pinnacle and spire
Caught in their parachutes to wait for death,
Dangling in snowy solitudes, remote
From all they loved in life, and yield their breath
In sobbing gusts of agony
Until
The inexorable chill
Freezes their youthful bodies, doomed to be
Congealed in icy immortality.

Etna

After uneasy tossing in the night,
On even keel the craft rides easily
The dwindling swell of the subsiding sea
Through little chattering waves that sparkle bright,
Rejoicing in the early April light:

And, as, down through the mine-sown straits we run,
Looking towards the opal-misted strand,
With brooding heart upon the deck I stand,
Forlorn in the cold brilliance of a sun
Creating a new world, from darkness won:

When over the dream-dim Sicilian shore
The veils divide and in the dawning glow
The peak of Etna, virginal in snow,
Above grey puffs that from her craters pour
In austere loveliness is seen to soar

In quietude, a lone aloof white crest
That only, when the clouds an instant part,
Consolingly to man's war-tortured heart,
Stilling the lava-passions of his breast,
Reveals the vision of eventual rest.

Tantallon

Now he recalls
Tantallon Castle with its ruined walls,
Remembering how, an eager boy
Rambling that Northern shore,
Filled with the ecstasy of waking life,
He had wondered why in ancient strife
Mankind had battled, seeking to destroy
Each other's homes and sap security
In senseless siege of the exultant towers
That other hands had built in soaring pride . . .
Yet now, he, too, caught up in war
And carried oversea,
Storming this Southern mountainside,
Is set on like destruction, to hurl down
The embattled walls of this Sicilian town.

The Kill

He saw a figure crouching in the crags,
And fired; then charged with bayonet fixed, to find
That writhing body, slumped behind
A boulder on the rocky shelf,
Was his own self.

Always an Easy Temper . . .

Always an easy temper—and so he
Even to battle went lightheartedly:
But, when his friend fell, he with furious breath
In whitehot anger hurled himself on death.

The Orange

He plucks an orange from a tree,
Plucks it, and marvels much that he
By war's odd chance should come to be
In this strange land where oranges
Hang ripe on orchard trees.

And, gazing at that golden sphere,
His thoughts whisk back full many a year—
And, now, a boy, quite sharp and clear
He hears wheels grind crisp Christmas snow,
And draws an orange from the stocking-toe.

The Ticking Watch

He holds his wristwatch to his ear
And listens to time ticking out
The seconds, as the hour draws near—
The zero-hour, when he
May chance to be
Hurled into timeless and unmeasured
Eternity;
While still upon his pulseless wrist his watch
Ticks on regardlessly.

The Home

He looks upon the rubble that has been
Once a Sicilian home, with troubled eyes . . .
And then, in dream, he sees,
Beneath the Coolins in the Hebrides,
A little croft that crests a heathered rise—
A low thatched croft with whitewashed walls that hold
His heart's desire still in security:
Then, turning from that brief
Vision of peace, he shares the bitter grief
Of this outcast Sicilian family.

The Lava

Watching the lava-stream
Out of Vesuvius pour,
In the hot lurid gleam
Of molten death that threatens
The hillside homes, he only sees one more
Tributary to the tide
That sweeps this Southern land from side to side.

The Goldfish

Beneath the flaring of the shell-shot sky,
In the stone basin of the fountain lie
The ageless carp with quivering gold fins,
Indifferent to the transient despair
In which man's generations fight and die.

The Rainbow

The bloody battle many days ago
Swept to the mountain-passes; and the plain
Is strewn with corpses, rotting in the rain,
The huddled heaps of the untimely slain,
Spanned by the quivering cold lucency
Of timeless heaven's evanescent bow.

Down from the Apennines . . .

Down from the Apennines the snow-fed waters
Roar, and the soldier now with quickening blood
Recalls the brawling of fell-burns in flood;

And, gazing on the turbid hurly-burly
Of tawny waters flashing into foam,
For a glad instant almost feels at home

Among his Northern hills—no more an exile
In a strange country, and no longer pines
For his loved Pennines, in the Apennines.

Cassino

Until his death, she had never even heard
The name of that old town in Italy:
But now for ever that strange foreign word
For her is coupled in his memory

With Kielder, where her lover first drew breath,
And little thought to leave his North Tyne home,
And in outlandish mountains meet his death,
Battling with Germans on the road to Rome.

Yet now, since, sailing to that Southern coast,
He has fallen in the hazard of the war,
Her heart must flit with his uneasy ghost
'Twixt Kielder and Cassino evermore.

The Almond Trees

The almond trees against far peaks of snow,
First rosy flames of the quick-kindling Spring,
In vivid loveliness
Flicker and glow,
And to his spirit bring
A momentary solace as he gazes;
And waken in his heart, that long
Has blundered through the mazes
Of horror and distress,
A sudden burst of song.

He Took Life Easy . . .

He took life easy in the days of peace
And never of its worst made much ado:
So, when chance caught him in the thick of fight,
He took death easy, too.

The Calvary

He lifts his eyes, to see
Upon the craggy height
The tortured figure, crudely carved in wood,
That in the sunset-light
Seems now to stream with freshly-flowing blood;
When, even as he gazes, a stray shell
Shatters the calvary.

The Wedding Ring

The ring slipped from her finger suddenly
As she was drawing water from the well;
And, as down the dark shaft it fell,
Her heart fell with it—and she knew that he,
Her husband, fighting in far Italy,
Had dropped in death that instant; and their life
As man and wife,
Caught in the casual chances of the war,
Had vanished with the ring for evermore.

The Outpost

When the call came to them, from far and wide
They answered, leaving scattered homes—yet died
Together, when the outpost fell at last,
As brothers, side by side.

The Prisoner

He stands, exhausted and bewildered,
But still with hot heart on blind murder set,
While, grinning, his disarming captor
Proffers a cigarette.

The Tenement

He climbs and climbs the stair
To reach the room in the high tenement
Where she awaits him; flight on flight,
With lungs that labour in the stifling air,
He climbs and climbs through an unending night,
Climbs in despair
Of ever coming there,
Until, with spirit spent,
He sinks . . . and wakens on the mountainside,
Lying with shattered limbs; while far and wide
Ranging from hill to hill
The battle rages still
With roar and flare.

The Sea Shell

Crossing the Anzio strand,
He picked up a sea-shell of pearly hue;
And, as he held it in his hand
And looked on its fantastic whorls, he knew
How glad his little girl would be
To add it to her treasury
Of sea-shells gathered on the Northern shore,
If only he might live to bring
This fragile lovely thing
Home to her from the war.

The Song

Now in the gusty tent,
While the storm threshes down the mountainside,
The poet strives to write
The song that through the hubbub of the fight
Hummed in his head—
The song of early days of lost delight,
Before the battle-tide,
Sweeping the world, in crashing chaos drowned
All that he loved—the song that still shall sound
His joy in other ears when he is dead.

The Plough

Beside the smouldering farmstead he finds now,
Stuck in a furrow, an abandoned plough,
And longs to drop his weapons, and to hold
The stilts and drive the coulter through the mould,
Doing once more the job he loved of old.

The Lizard

With a quicksilver quiver through the stones
A lizard flicks in sight;
And he feels something of a boy's delight
To see that little slip of urgent life
Going about its breathless business,
Unconscious of the deadly strife.

The Pillbox

Of old, behind a chemist's counter he
Served customers with draughts and pills
And powders to alleviate their ills:
But now, as battle flares
To fury, he, among the snowbound hills
Of Southern Italy,
Within a concrete pillbox busily
Serves other customers with other wares.

The Rats

Their pinpoint eyes aglint in cold moonlight,
The brown rats scramble from their holes at night,
Rejoiced that man's mad slaughtering should yield
So rich a banquet on the stricken field.

The Clerk

In civil life, he drove a patient pen
On smooth white ledger-pages, harmlessly:
Now up the rough road of a mountain-glen
He drives a fell machine to cancel men.

The Monk

Kneeling within his cell,
The monk was praying when the fire-bombs fell;
And so his soul, maybe,
Evaded tedious purgatory—
Rapt straight to heaven from hell.

The Kid

He hears a bleating, and looks up, to see
A tethered nanny-goat, wild-eyed,
On a green shelf of the steep mountainside,
Nuzzling the still white carcass of her kid,
Slain by the random shot
Of some far sniper, hid
Down in the rocky glen:
And now remorsefully
He wonders it should be the lot
Of that young innocent life
To fall, a victim to the insane strife
Of murderous men.

The Shadow

Reaching the crest, laved in the sunset-glow
He sees his shadow thrown across the snow
Of a far hillside; and it seems to be
The helmed shadow of the god of war
Defiling nature's pristine purity.

The Revenant

The ceilings sag, the rafters, thrust awry
On tilted joists; through chinks in riven walls
Filters the bleak light of the Winter sky;
And fitfully the flaking plaster falls;

Casement and door, on hinges wrenched askew,
'Twixt crooked jamb and lintel idly flap
In every gusty draught, that shudders through
The desolated rooms, with startling clap:

While he who built this house, and little dreamt
Winged enemies should wreck its homely pride,
Who all his life still kept it trim and kempt
As on the day he brought to it his bride,

From the forgetful quiet of the tomb
Recalled to his old home by its distress,
Uneasily from room to shattered room
Rambles in memory-anguished restlessness.

The Birds Return

The cuckoos call and swallows slice the blue
On sickle-wings, returned anew
From Africa; but he, who sailed, before
Their Autumn flight, towards that Southern shore.
Comes back no more.

The cuckoos in her brain drum death's tattoo,
And those sharp swallow-wings cut through
Her very being, cleaving her heart's core . . .
The birds return: but from that fatal shore
He comes no more.

The Face

Over the bow in the wreckage he caught
A moment the glimmer of tangled gold hair;
And, stooping yet lower, he looked on a face
That gleamed in the flotsam, foam-cold and foam-fair—

A face that had come through the fury of storm
And the fury of fight and of man's treachery,
To dream in the dawnlight serenely awhile,
Till it sank in the untroubled ooze of deep sea:

And, though bright be the glances and merry the smiles
Of the girls in the village, he passes them by—
Still held in his heart by the glimpse of a face
That floated in peace beneath the dawn-sky.

The Respite

Crouched at the coppice-edge with tommy-gun,
Closely he scans the bracken-covered brae
That basks and shimmers in the morning sun,
Alert lest sudden-tossing fronds betray
The lurking of an enemy in the dense
Green brake; his body tingling with suspense
In every fibre and each sense
Whetted by hazard to a razor-keen
And quickened apprehension: when, aware
Of a familiar fragrance in the air,
His nostrils quiver with delight, and he
Relaxes, as into the sheltering green
He thrusts a hand and eagerly
Draws down long dangling honeysuckle sprays
Still dewy, and breathes in with bliss intense
Recovered sweets of early innocence;
And, for a moment tranced in memory,
Forgets all the outrageous violence
And murderous madness of hate-harried days—
A moment; then, refreshed, with sharper sight
Searches the sun-glazed hill
Whose bracken-thicket still
Shimmers unstirring in heat-rippled light.

Down the Glen

“Why do you still go traipsing down the glen
Day after day?”

“I’m only following the pathway Ben
Took, when he went away.”

“Better to keep on working; so that you
Forget the dead.”

“Maybe—but what is left for me to do.
Since I’ve made up his bed?”

The Summons

In dream she seems to feel the clasp
Of his strong fingers on her own—
Then shrinks, to find her hand held in the grasp
Of fleshless bone

And hear a voice “Though lone you lie,
Bereaved, in the wide bed, more lone
Lies he beneath the Libyan sky,
Stript to the bone:

And he, who shared your sleep with you,
Flesh of your flesh, now claims his own
True love to share his slumber—true
Bone of his bone.”

Embarkation Leave

Arrived on leave too late the night before
To visit his old workshop, now he turned
The key of the shed; and, thrusting wide the door,
In the cold light of the Winter dawn discerned,
Propped up on chocks on the hard earthen floor,
The keel of the ketch he had laid in happier days,
Before the world crashed to catastrophe,
And he had been called up. And, as he caught
Again the chips' keen tang of turpentine
With relish, his bright eyes with loving gaze
From swerving bow to sternpost of red pine
Followed once more the graceful sweeping line
From which the curved ribs branched, that, skilfully,
With sharp adze he had shaped, without a thought
That he might never even live to see
His dream-boat take the tide. And, as a gull
Greeted with sudden skirl the rising sun
Above the shed, he looked with deep distress
On the unfinished shapely skeleton
Of his desire, to think another's hand
Should cut the strakes and warp them for her hull
And fix the booms and rigging; and that he,
Himself, might never launch her from the strand
And proudly step the masts and bend the sails
To take the breeze.

And then warm thankfulness
Surged through his heart with hope that, anyhow,
His leave would let him work upon her now
For two whole days, and handle happily
His tools, instead of weapons; and, as he
Wrought at his bench, with the familiar wails
Of gulls and the loved murmur of the sea
Filling his ears, he might ignore awhile
The business of destruction and of death,
Doing his own true job. So, eagerly
Drawing into his lungs the living breath
Of dawn, he picked his plane up with a smile.

The Match

He strikes a match to light a cigarette;
And, at the flicker, something in his mind
Rekindles: and, amazed he could forget
One who had been so kind,
He now recalls how night and day,
When, sorely wounded, in the ward, half-blind
And helpless, swathed in bandages he lay,
She had served him hand and foot. And now again,
As through a surge of pain,
He sees her russet head
While she beside the bed
Leans over him to light
That first consoling cigarette—
Amazed he could forget,
Forget that night!
And yet,
Even then he had hardly been aware
Of the light glinting on her red-gold hair
And little flames reflected in her eyes
As they looked into his . . . Ay, he had been blind
Then, and until this instant, when the scratch
And flicker of a match
Rekindles his dull mind—
Blind, till this instant, blind!

Offerings

Last year in sunshine she was plucking flowers,
Snapping the juicy stalks of daffodils:
Now in the factory-glare through endless hours
Case after case she fills.

The blooms she picked for market brought delight
And gladdened strangers with their golden bells:
For strangers, too, she handles day and night
Far other offerings—shells!

The Broken Pipe

He'd broken his good briar, his constant friend,
And one he had thought would see him to the end:
Blown by the blast against the warehouse wall,
Staggered by shock, somehow he had let it fall.
'Twas bad luck, surely—his familiar pipe,
Grown old with him, so mellow, brown and ripe—
Bad luck, bad luck . . . And something in his head
Burned like a redhot coal; and spots of red
Were sparking in his eyes . . . He must stoop down
To save the broken bits, though he should drown
In the red tide that surged against his chest . . .
He must stoop down; and, after, he could rest
When all the bits were safe . . . his oldest friend—
He'd known . . . he'd known 'twould see him to the end.

The Home Bird

She knew that he was home, that he was lying
Safely asleep in bed:
She couldn't climb the stair, herself, to see,
Not these days, with her crippled knee,
Not even if he were dying
Or lay dead. . .
“Dead!”—that was what they said—
They said that he was dead,
Had died in battle: but, how could that be?
He'd never held with fighting, John—and he,
Always the home-bird! Such a tale to tell!
And to his mother, too! And shouldn't she
Know if her son were sleeping safe and well?

The Leather Jerkin

Far from his home and all familiar things
The lonely stripling on the foreign shore
Keeps sentry, watching with bewildered eyes
The Aurora leaping in the Northern skies
In quivering flames of icy green and blue;
And shudders at the strangeness as he stares:
And then, though biting the snell wind stings,
The thought some comfort to his young heart brings—
Though home be far from him, at least he wears
The leather jerkin that his father wore
When he in old days did his duty, too.

The Dance

Lads and lasses in service-dress
Dancing, dancing,
With lively limbs and gay eyes glancing
Dancing to lilting rhythms, entrancing
Minds overworn with the strain and the stress
Of shattering days and nights,
Into a dream of unchallenged delights
Dancing, dancing!

The Little Room

The wings of doom
Hover above
The little room
That holds our love:

Yet, though death fall
From out the night
And shatter all
Our life's delight,

Calm and strong-willed
We'll meet our doom,
Whose love has filled
The little room.

The Stack of Straw

On his last leave, though he was tired,
He had turned to with the rest and helped to build
The stack of straw; and, in his battle-dress,
Forked the dry rustling gold and packed it tight—
The stack of straw that, on the very night
When he was killed,
Patrolling the far Libyan wilderness,
Went up, self-fired,
In a wild blaze of furious heat and light.

The Old Love

I fancied I at last
Had wooed him from the sea,
To hold him happily
For ever safe and fast
At home with me.

But when the curse of war
Fresh hazards to the sea
And seamen brought, then he
Could rest in peace no more
At home with me:

And to the calling tides
Of his old love, the sea,
He answered eagerly;
And only heartbreak bides
At home with me.

The Hero

Life broke all promises: and gave, instead,
Death for his daily bread;
And he with every breath
Drew in the reek of death:
Life broke all promises; yet, as he died,
He snatched in triumph all life had denied.

The Lustre Jug

To-day my duster caught his favorite jug
And sent it smashing to the floor;
And, as its lustred splinters, littering
The flagstones, held my eyes, I thought—No more
From its broad spout he'll pour
The amber frothing ale into a mug—
And, listening to his linnet twittering,
I stood, still dazzled by the glittering,
And murmured to myself half-crazily—
“No more, no more his hand will pour
The amber ale when he . . . if he
Should come back from the war.”

The Little Copse

So, it was gone—they wrote—the little copse
Of silver-birches by the singing stream,
Shrivelled to ash by chance incendiaries—
The little copse, so full of memories
Of childhood's games and laughter! Yet, in dream,
Driving through swirls of blinding searing sand
Of this hell-burning land,
Still through its April leafy flickering
He sees the white boles in cool sunlight gleam,
While startled squirrels set the boughs aswing.

The Cancelled Leave

I watched the passengers alighting
From the belated train;
And anxiously my glance kept flitting,
Kept flitting to and fro
From face to face, in vain:

No eyes met mine in recognition;
And, when all had gone past,
I realised his leave was cancelled—
That Death, the new C. O.,
Had taken charge at last.

In the Dead of the Night

Lying awake
In the dead of the night,
He hears the far roar
Of aircraft in flight

And the skirl and the thud
Of bombs plumping down
On the houses and shops
Of the old market-town;

And, troubled, recalls
How he, as a boy,
Set out each September
With heart full of joy

To spend a great day
At the Michaelmas Fair,
When the stalls and the swings
Filled the old Market Square:

And, living again
That early delight,
He grieves for the town
In its pitiful plight—

The town that of old
Was his city of dream:
And now through his head
The bombs hurl and scream;

And his heart is consumed
By the fury and heat,
As the old houses crumble
In every loved street

in every loved street,

And it shrivels to ash,
Forlorn in the glare
Of the terror that rains
On the old Market Square.

Desert Night

What do you see as you pace the night
To and fro
On sentry-go?
The full moon trancing with light
Cheviot silvered with snow!

What do you smell as you pace the night
On sentry-beat
With burning feet?
Redesdale in morning light
Foaming with meadowsweet!

What do you hear as you pace the night
Of breathless fear
With straining ear?
The roar of the frothing white
Lasher of Otterburn weir!

She Watches on the Shore

She watches on the shore,
Blinded by spindrift, though no craft could ride
The swirling surf of the rampageous tide;
And, at the ending of the bitter night,
Finds at her feet in daybreak's callous light
Only a broken oar.

Drifts

The drift, a good three-feet at the doorsill—
And she must dig herself out now! How he
Had always loved to clear away the snow,
Driving the shovel deep and heftily
Heaving it over the half-buried wall
With easy swing and sweltering cheeks aglow!

Ay, she must dig herself out presently—
A job she did not care about at all,
A slow backbreaking job for her . . . while Will
In a far sunscorched land
Was even now, maybe,
Digging his tank out of the silted sand.

The Silver Cup

She burnishes the silver cup
He won for the half-mile;
Then carefully she sets it up
Beneath the shade of speckless glass
That seems to twinkle mockingly,
As with a smile
To think that she
Should still be limping after death
With troubled breath,
While at the goal her son
Already rests beneath the grass,
His race well run.

Hill Music

He climbs the benty brae
Above Crag Lough where, rambling many a day
In boyhood, he had rejoiced to hear the crake
Of mallard and teal alighting on the lake
That lapped the pillared basalt, and the call
Of curlew in the quaggy slacks that lay
North of the Roman Wall—
Curlew whose fluting seemed to utter all
His young heart's inarticulate ecstasy:
And now, on his last leave, again he hears
Those voices of old years
That pierce him to the core
As, with a new intensity
He listens, lest it chance that he
Should hear that wild hill-music nevermore.

The Night Grows Late . . .

The night grows late;
Yet he does not return:
And, crouching by the glowing grate,
She strains to hear the clanging of the gate
Above the brawling of the burn in spate—

She strains to hear
Above the brawling of the burn
The yard-gate clanging sharp and clear:
And, as the dark hours pass and day draws near,
The hope within her bosom chills to fear.

The night grows late;
Yet he does not return:
The cinders smoulder in the grate,
And lower sounds the swiftly-dwindling spate—
Yet only the wind rattles the shut gate.

His Word

He swore he'd never leave me, come what might;
Yet broke his word.
If he were captured, or fell in the fight,
I never heard.

He went; and comes no more—but from my heart
He has not stirred,
Who, bidding me farewell, yet, for his part,
Has kept his word.

The Curtains

As his hand draws apart the thick curtains to let in the light,
He looks for the last time, it seems, on his own countryside
And watches a kestrel that hovers in glittering height
Over the fells where, but for the war, he would ride
Through gossamer-dew-sparkled bracken and blossoming ling;
And though he rejoices at first to hear the lark sing
As of old on such mornings, a shadow swoops over his eyes
As a presage of quick-coming doom steals into his heart;
And it seems that already in slumber unwaking he lies
In a chamber whose curtains of darkness no hand draws apart.

The Broken Tether

He had mended it again, the silver chain—
His earliest token
Of love for her, that she so carelessly had broken—
His skilful hand had mended it again.

But now that death had snapt the living chain—
The golden tether
That through untroubled years had held their hearts together—
What mortal hand could make it good again?

He came to Her that Night

He came to her that night
Of wind and sleety rain
When gust on gust the tempest
Assailed the pane.

With dark eyes glinting bright
He stood beside the bed,
A wan unearthly glimmer
About his head:

And suddenly his lips
Moved, and he seemed to speak;
When the wind lashed more wildly
With frantic shriek

Against the house, and drowned
His accents as they fell:
And she but caught the murmur—
“I always meant to tell. . .”

As, rushing down the dale,
Yet louder raged the storm:
And now she saw no longer
That shadowy form:

And when the morning broke
Behind the blinded pane
She listened to the patter
Of pelting rain

Wondering if in the end
His heart to her were true:
But what he came to tell her
She never knew.

The Waters of the Tyne

When last he watched the waters of the Tyne
With a boy's heart fulfilling its delight
In the tumultuous singing and the shine
Of choral hillborn waters, amber-bright,
How little he
Imagined through what spates of misery,
Crashing in swirling horror day and night,
His soul must plunge in the ensuing years—
How little his heart conceived what cruelty,
Latent within the world's heart even then,
Should shatter in an hour the ecstasy
Of living, while his frenzied fellowmen,
Hag-ridden by dark dreams and frantic fears,
Lured on to self-destruction, headlong hurled,
In a blind fury wrecking their own world!

Yet, still the amber waters of the Tyne
Greeted the day with singing and with shine. . .

The Gift

And she had given him
The little nickel torch
That he had carelessly,
As he approached the porch,
Switched on that he might see
The steps—the nickel torch,
Her birthday gift, whose light
Drew death from out the night.

The Chimneystack

He sees the old familiar chimney-stack
Flourish its reek aloft
Above the little croft
To welcome him from foreign-service back:

And, as he climbs the last stiff heather-brae,
The tang of kindled peat
Is wafted down to greet
The old campaigner on his homeward way:

And he recalls how often in far lands
In dreaming mirage he
Had seemed to smell and see
The home-reek rising from the burning sands.

The Letter

Over mine-sown, torpedo-shuttled deeps,
Undaunted by dive-bombers swooping low
And all the old storm-perils of the sea,
Some ancient tub has laboured hardily,
And, winning into haven, brought to me
In this frail envelope as white as snow
Word of your welfare and your thought of me—
Over dark wastes where danger never sleeps
And death for ever ranges day and night,
Safe in this envelope so frail and slight
Has brought your heart to me.

The Troth

She had broken with him just before he sailed:
Yet, though he had never heard
From her a single word,
When the last desperate attack had failed,
And he lay riddled-through,
Clearly beyond the surging gloom
He saw her, sitting lonely in her room;
And in a flash he knew
Her heart to him was true.

It Always Was His Pride . . .

It always was his pride to be
The first to hear the curlew call
At blink of day or evenfall
When April brought them from the sea.

The curlew call unceasingly
Day after day, for him in vain. . .
O come September quick again
And send them flying back to sea!

The Last Flight

At last the broken body slept
Beneath the shattered plane;
And straight the starry spirit leapt
To take the air again
On wings of flashing light and swept
Beyond the bounds of mortal night.

Border Watch

All night the roaring of the force
That threshes down the narrow ghyll
Has thundered through his head until
Half-dazed he drowns on the hill:

And he is scarcely startled when
In the full moonshine there appears
A band of reivers, armed with spears
And swords and bows of other years:

And, as an instant through his veins
Runs the old Border-blood, full-spate,
He turns to rouse before too late
The dales to meet the hordes of hate:

Then laughs, to think himself a ghost
Of his forebears who, man by man,
Kept watch and ward, when, clan on clan,
Scots thieves the Border over-ran.

The Cheerful Blaze

With sleepy eyes and drowsy minds adaze
The farmhands sat about the cheerful blaze
Within the ingle, relishing the heat
After long labour in the soaking sleet
Throughout the bitter February day;
And little dreamt the log-flames, leaping red
Up the wide chimneystack, would serve to show
In the black night a tell-tale glow
To the lone raider, prowling over head,
And so to sudden death give them away.

The Watch

The watch I had given him he lost
The night before he left; and he
Was worried, thinking what it cost—
The money wasted that I'd spent;
And how, without it, he would be
Always uncertain how time went
And never sure if he were late:
And, as I saw him to the gate,
His last words were "I cannot think
How I mislaid it!"

Yesterday

I found it, slipped into a chink
Between the bed-head and the wall—
Too late, too late! for, where he lies
With slumber-sealed unworried eyes
In a strange country far away
Time never troubles him at all.

The Fluttered Doves

When the bomb fell, the fluttered doves
About the dovecote circled in affright,
Tossing and tumbling in the starry night
Whose glitter on their flashing pinions gleamed;
Then one by one took courage to alight
And go to roost once more; but little dreamed
The whistling boy who scattered golden grain
Would never call them from their cote again.

The Desolate Heart

Now she must see to the black-out, before
She switches on the light, though she,
If only her own safety were at stake,
Would scarcely take
The trouble to draw down a blind,
Even though the sky were full of flying death,
To save her useless body, now that he
Can come to her no more.

What matter, though a random bomb should break
Her limbs and stop her breath . . .
And might not she, perchance, awake to find
That death had torn apart
The curtains of her mind
And stripped grief's black-out from her desolate heart?

Tantalus

As, in the derelict boat
That idly drifts in the soul-parching glare,
He gazes overside
With crazy stare
And burning throat,
He suddenly sees glass after glass
Of good ale, amber-clear,
Upon the sea afloat,
And frothing tankards ride
The salty swell: but when, with trembling fingers,
He stoops to snatch them from the tide,
One after one they pass
Beyond his reach and vanish into air;
While in his nostril lingers
Only a ghostly whiff of phantom beer.

The Link

She set the door ajar
And watched with memory-lighted eyes the star
Burning in beryl air above Hawk Scar:

And, as the lucency
Transfused her spirit with serenity,
She felt within her heart that oversea

He, too, in alien skies
Was even then watching the planet rise
With dark and quiet home-remembering eyes

And they, though severed far,
Were linked still by the solace of the star
They loved to watch of old above Hawk Scar.

The Blind Man

Beneath collapsing skies,
Half-stunned, with sightless eyes,
Awhile he stands;
Then seeks with groping hands
And numbly-fumbling feet
To find a safe retreat
From smashing bomb and shell—
Puzzled that men with sight
Whose eyes were blest with light
Should turn the world to hell;
And that their hearts should be
Stone-blind with treachery.

The Crest

He had always meant to climb
Helvellyan and from its high scarp look down
On the grey houses of his native town,
Huddled in its green dale: and, as the train
Steams from the station, and he sees the sun
Gilding the naked ridges after rain,
He knows his eyes have looked for the last time
On that familiar steep; yet vows, when war is done,
His spirit, enfranchised in peace newly-won,
Shall seek its lasting rest
On that austere hill-crest.

And This, the End . . .

And this, the end—to lie
Under a brazen sky,
Adrift in a boat, while one by one
His mates about him die—
His shipmates one by one
Perish, cursing the sun—
The sun that in a brazen sky,
A lidless white unblinking eye,
Watches with pitiless stare
His mates that one by one,
Their lips burnt black in the salty glare,
With wordless curses die!

Alone

Flesh of my flesh
And bone of my bone,
In a far country
He fights all alone.

Blood of my blood
And mind of my mind,
He fights with good comrades,
But none of his kind:

He fights with good comrades;
Yet fights all alone
'Mid strangers who know not
The things he has known—

The home of his heart;
The light on the lawn
When gossamers quiver
With dews of the dawn;

The way the flames dance
On the Winter hearthstone
And gladden the faces
Of folk of his own;

His bonnie bay mare;
The dog he loves best;
The voice of the river
That sang him to rest.

Flesh of my flesh
And bone of my bone,
In a far country
He fights all alone.

Munitions

I fill the shells all day,
While somewhere far away
He mans a gun to keep
The enemy at bay:
And, even when at night
I snatch uneasy sleep,
I share with him the fight;
And in my heart I pray
That in some desperate stand
On the sheer brink of hell
Some shell filled by my hand
May serve him well.

The Tarn

He dives in a mountain-tarn,
Bottomless, cold as death;
Then struggles once more to the light
With fluttering breath;

And, shivering, with limbs of ice
In the tingling Northern air,
Towels his body and shakes
The wet from his hair. . .

And then he awakes, to find
Himself in a nightmare land
Still battling against the hot blast
Of the scathing sand.

The Children

The children on the Common, gathering
Blackberries on a gold September day,
Pluck ripe fruit from each curving bramble-spray,
Laughing and chattering happily. . . .
When suddenly
On swooping wing
A Heinkel dives towards the ground
And spatters bullets all around;
Then, zooming, soars and goes upon its way. . .
And now no happy chattering
Gladdens the golden day.

The Lime

He always said, when he'd the time,
He'd lop the boughs that overhung
The window and shut out the light:
And it would worry him at night
When in the squalls of wind and rain
Against the house a low branch swung
And scabbled twigs against the pane. . .

When he'd the time. . . when he'd the time. . .
Now with all time upon his hands
He's sleeping somewhere oversea;
And worries naught about the tree,
Although on nights of wind and rain,
Unlopped, with lashing boughs it stands
And scabbles twigs against the pane.

Snow

With shrill delighted cries
And sparkling eyes
And kindled cheeks aglow
The child plays in crisp crystallized snow—
The child whose heart is yet too young to know
Aught of the war, or how the Winter lies
Heavy as death on that strange Northern land
Where even now, maybe, in a last stand
With frozen limbs his father fronts the foe
In overwhelming drifts of fatal snow.

The Spar

Spent with the struggle in an icy sea,
He had almost given up when, luckily,
His fingers struck a drifting spar that swung
Within their reach, and tightly to it clung
Till he was rescued. . .

And now drowsily

He lies between warm blankets, wondering
In what far country grew the living tree
From which the baulk was hewn that chanced to bring
Life in his grasp again—in what far land
Had it been shaped, by whose unconscious hand,
Cunningly wielding axe and adze, that he
And it should come together in mid-sea?

Scorched Earth

The wheat that in his little patch he had sown
And watched in April springing green,
And with his hoe
Row after row
Had weeded clean,
Until, full-grown,
Long-strawed and plump of head,
He had rejoiced to see it stand,
The richest crop in all the land—
The wheat that he had cherished as his own
And hoped to garner—others came
And harvested with flame:
And now his treasure, charred and grey,
A waste of smoking ashes lay,
While he went hungry for a crust of bread.

The Hour

When the hour struck for him, although
'Twas tinkled and boomed out
From belfries all about,
I did not know—
I did not know that it was his last hour;
And, as it tolled from steeple and from tower,
I only grieved that time should go so slow—
Time that, for him, was gone for evermore,
Too fleetly flown!—and in impatience rose
To set ajar the door
For his return, the door
That his hand nevermore
Should open or close.

Under the Rowan

Under the rowan
He bade me farewell
When the berries were ruddy
Against the brown fell.

Under the rowan
I heard of his death;
And the sweet creamy blossom
Half-stifled my breath.

Under the rowan
Again burning red,
A year since we parted
I tryst with the dead.

The Fire

Now she, herself, must fetch the wood and coal
To start the kitchen fire, which always he,
Leaving her drowsing still, each morning lit
To make for her an early cup of tea.

Dear knows, she sorely missed that morning cup:
And she was but numb-fingered when it came
To fires; and always now the wood seemed damp;
And, damp or dry, 'twas hard to start a flame.

Ay, he'd a hand with fires, and other things—
Things she'd scarce noticed till they came to part:
And, lying wakeful in her lonely bed,
She longed to feel his hand upon her heart.

Over

Well, it was over and done—
Over for him, at least:
For the battle still raged; and never he'd know
Who'd lost and who'd won
When it ceased—
And yet, could the heart in his breast
In cold indifference rest
If the triumphing feet of the foe
Trampled down all he loved best?

The Driver

Last year he drove in the Five Acre Field,
Glowing beneath unclouded English skies,
A tractor, reaping amber grain for bread—
The bread of life. This year, instead,
He drives a tank across strange lands that yield
Another crop—a sterile crop that lies
In dark swathes splashed with red.

The Victim

She worried sore lest he should fall
In a far-distant fight
And never come to her again:
And yet, that very night,
The victim of a raiding plane,
Crushed under a bomb-shattered wall
She lay; while he came safe through all.

One Hour

In time of peace afar
They dwelt apart, unknown;
But, when in total war
Nations were overthrown,
Together, from the strife
Caught up in chance's net,
Beneath a wild red star
At last they met;
And, blending blood and breath,
One hour of reckless life
They snatched from death.

Her Son

She had to let him go,
Although the rending pain
Of his first coming tore her life again,
She had to let him go.

The Withered Branch

In the full-foliaged tree a withered branch,
Snapt by the tempest, droops its shrivelled leaves
That rustle overhead:
And, hearing them, the father quietly grieves,
Remembering his son, in battle dead.

The Quiet Heart

And now her heart was quiet, nevermore
To be torn, anguished, betwixt hope and fear:
For now she knew; and neither hope nor fear
Might trouble her dead heart for evermore.

The Family

A log whose rings record a century
May in a hundred minutes be consumed;
Yet even in briefer time this family
That had outlived tree after forest-tree
To perish in war's holocaust was doomed.

The Test

He often wondered how he would meet
The test: yet, when the instant came,
All doubt was shrivelled in exultant flame
As he stood up to death
And rallied the retreat
With his last breath,
And, dying, kindled victory from defeat.

The Adage

Over and over again
The adage runs through her mind,
Beating a tune in her brain—
“Fast bind, safe find!”

For, though, when death wrenched them apart
He was lost to her at the last,
In the sanctuary of her heart
She holds him fast.

The Nurse

While bombs crash all about
And night is terror-torn,
Within the shattered home
She tends the labouring wife
And calmly fights for life
Till, in the house of death,
A child is born.

The Voyage

“I’ll see you without fail
Before you leave”—
He wrote; and little reckoned he,
Before the morning I was due to sail,
Should be embarked upon a lonelier sea;
And I, bereft,
The one life left
To grieve.

Heart of My Heart . . .

Heart of my heart, though you lie
In a grave unknown
Under an alien sky;
Though heavy your slumber and deep,
Know this, that you never may sleep,
Heart of my heart, alone.

Sole Survivor

“You were the sole survivor? All the rest,
When the ship struck the floating mine, went down?
You should thank God, who rescued you. . .”

“And left

My mates to drown?”

The Lesson

God save us, when, the bread of life to earn,
To forge death's weapons boys and girls must learn!

Employment

In wartime no one need be unemployed—
At least while aught is left to be destroyed.

The Category

A 1—and fit for anything—
Fit to live out man's three-score-years-and-ten,
And then, again,
Fit to be killed within this very hour,
Caught in the murderous shower
Of a machine-gun's random spattering.

The Dragons

'Twas "Once upon a time. . ." But now the war
Brings back again those fabled days of yore
And men may see with unastonished eyes
Fire-belching dragons roaring through the skies.

The Hit

Though many bombs were dropt on Little Dene
Before they fled our fighters hurriedly,
They only left behind one casualty,
The war-memorial on the village-green.

The Weathercock

Over the hill the sunlight on the vane
Had always held his eyes;
And loveliest it glanced when rainy skies
Let through a shaft to strike it gold again,

Pluming with light the challenging bright bird
Who gallantly would veer
To face the blast of Winter without fear,
Or idly twirled when Summer breezes stirred.

But now nor sun nor moon at any hour
Shall turn to silver or gold
The proud cock, lying broken in the mould
Beneath the rubble of the shattered tower.

The Alabaster Earl

The alabaster earl who lay
Beneath a gilded canopy
For century on century
Within the rich cathedral gloom,
Now on the wreckage of his tomb
Lies all exposed to common day.

Companions

He saw a sleek dark head
Beside him in the sea,
As, in the bombed ship's wake,
He struggled pluckily:
And "What cheer, mate!" said he—
"So, you've been made to take
An extra bath, like me!"

"We've both been dipped" he said
"Together, you and me,
Though it's not our bath-night—
A cold dip, too!" said he. . .
When, swiftly out of sight
The seal dived silently.

The Bland Face

The bland face in its frame
Of tarnished gilt still beamed
From the sole segment of the parlour-wall
That yet remained,
Smoke-smirched and water-stained,
When as bombs plunged and screamed,
The house went up in flame,
And in that fury all—
All else had perished—all
Save the bland face that in its frame
Of tarnished gilt still beamed.

The Vagrant

They have broken him in
With duties and drill,
Who all his life long
Has wandered at will;
And he marches in step
With the rest of the line,
Who rambled and shambled
Through shower and shine:
Yet, though with a bayonet
They teach him to kill,
With the hawk over Carter
His heart hovers still
Or lollops fleet-foot
With the hare overhill.

The Undertaker

So often, following his father's trade,
Snug elm and oaken coffins he has made
To keep his fellowmen, when they were laid
To rest in earth, at least for a brief term,
Secure against the all-devouring worm:
Yet, unprotected on the desert stones
His own corpse lies, while vultures pick his bones.

The Spy

Reptiles he'd always feared; and, as he crept
Among the desert-scrub and chanced to lay
His fingers on a clammy coil that slept
Against a boulder, he let out,
Unwittingly a stifled shout—
When straight a bullet singing through the air
Shattered his temple; and he bit the grey
Hot desert-dust; but only half-aware
That his own kind had given him away.

Salvage

When the house flared, it was too late to search
His treasures out; so, seizing the first thing
That came to hand, he rushed into the night:
And by the ashes in the morning light
He stands, his sole possession, a fluttering
And angry parrot screeching on its perch.

Fuel

The unwanted poet's works, in sheets unbound,
Stacked in a London warehouse, quire on quire,
At least did something to increase the blaze,
Even though they had failed to set the Thames on fire.

The Iron Days

The iron days, that, with sharp prongs of pain
Harrow our lives relentlessly, may serve
To break the clodded mould; that once again
The soil shall bear the green and living grain.

So Brief a Life . . .

So brief a life, and yet
Lived to the full, till death
Fired it to heaven-soaring ecstasy
With flaming breath!

The Heron

'Mid silver shallows of the moonlit mere
With plumage silver-chased the heron stands,
The spirit of that watery solitude,
Still in his memory, as on that old night;
And the calm image slakes with liquid light
His parching fear,
As now he marches on through torrid lands
With courage unsubdued.

His Letter

She takes his letter from its envelope
And reads his words with eyes that burn,
The cheery letter, full of hope
Of his return—
The letter that has only reached her since the brief
Official message came
To burn her heart up in a shrivelling flame;
And, as she reads his jesting words, she hears
His voice, that to her breast brings the relief
Of easing tears.

The Miller's Pond

Had she the heart to go
Down to the Miller's Pond, now she would see
The waterlilies in full blow,
As on the day when he and she,
Together, happily
Looked on those chalices of lucent snow;
And once again, maybe,
Out of the reeds in flashing flight
The kingfisher would dart,
The dazzling spirit of their young delight
Flickering to and fro
Above the dreaming pond's tranquility
Of green and white—
Had she the heart to go,
Alone, had she the heart. . .

The Homecoming

The raft has stranded on the shingled beach
And in a shroud of foam
The dead man lies, who never thought to reach
Again his native shore—
The seas that held his living heart in thrall,
The seas to whose stern service he gave all,
The seas have borne him home,
Have brought him home once more.

Crocuses

On his last leave he planted in the lawn
A thousand bulbs: and in the light of dawn
She sees a thousand gold upthrusting spears
That stab her heart to tears.

The Invalid

It seemed that he through lingering years must lie
And give up life with slowly gasping breath;
When all at once wings swept the midnight sky
And cut life short with swift mechanic death.

The Cottage Garden

This little plot of soil
Held his heart's love through all the evening hours
When he with patient toil
Won from the rich mould vegetables and flowers;
And now with faithful will,
Though in remembering eyes the quick tears start,
His widow turns to till
The garden into which he dug his heart.

The Summer Moon

He little thought that he
Should ever dread to see
The Summer moon ensilvering the tide
On a still stormless night,
Or that its lovely light
Should ever seem a treachery
Betraying him to slinking foes that glide
Beneath the glittering tranquility!

The Medal

A son they had, begotten of their love
To carry on their blood-stream, and to know
A fuller life than theirs, more free of risk—
A son they had, so short a while ago;
But now, a metal disk
Is all they have to show.

The Weeping Beech

In the green gloom beneath the weeping beech
Of the college-garden with abstracted eyes
The convalescent soldier lies
In seeming peace—yet still he hears the screech
Of hurtling shells and the relentless roar
Of tanks, and sees on that far hostile shore
His comrades fighting still, and fervently
Longs once again to be
Sharing with them the hazards of the war.

The Cost

Only six planes,
In all were lost—
Official brains
Assess the cost,
As night by night
Flight after flight
On reckless raids
Across the sky
Our young sons fly
To death propelled
By whirring blades. . .

Only six planes,
In all, were lost—
Official brains
Assess the cost.

The Young Poet

Born to express his urgent sense of life
In living words whose breath
Should outlast death,
While yet he strove to utter the delight
Of earth-enchanted eyes,
Caught in the senseless strife,
Baffled he fell; and now he lies
Dumb in the night.

The Magpies

*One for sorrow,
Two for mirth—
The magpies fly
Across the sky;
And, as she sees them passing by
Beyond the far hill-brow,
In the new desolation and the dearth
Of shattered life she knows that now
No omen may restore
Hope to her widowed heart for evermore.*

Hareshaw Linn

At length the din
Of battle dulls in dying ears. . .
And now his spirit hears
Once more the well-remembered roar
Of Hareshaw Linn—
Of Hareshaw Linn at flood,
In snowfed torrent dashing down
From the high fells: and now the blood
From his young body seems to pour
And mingle with the gleaming brown
Untrammelled waters that ere long shall be,
Merged in the sweeping current of the Tyne,
Borne on towards the bitter brine
Of the oblivious sea.

Ashes

He picks the bellows up and indolently
Puffs the expiring fire
Into reviving flame;
And wishes that he might as easily
Rouse with a breath
His dead desire
Of life, that crumbled instantly
To ashes, when the message came
Of his son's death.

The Woodpecker

Waking at dawn within the ward, he hears
The sharp staccato rattle
Of a woodpecker on the hollow elm,
Like a machine-gun's brattle:
And, as that tapping fills his ears,
He knows that nevermore
May he escape the memories of the war.

Stars

A moment since, the Winter sky
Was a serenity of starry light:
But now it roars with fury, as a flight
Of bombers booms towards the sea
And squadroned stars of red and green
Fantastically fly,
Ephemerally bright,
Across the startled heavens—till, presently,
The war-planes pass; and once again
In majesty serene
The eternal stars resume their ancient reign
In the cold azure of untroubled night.

And Still the Thrush Sings on . . .

And still the thrush sings on
That sang an hour ere dawn,
Before the messenger, with hasty feet
Spilling the dews
That glimmered on the lawn,
Brought the dread news—
The thrush sings on, to greet
The day, newborn,
The day that in a breath
Brought her heart's death.

The Folly

On a high knoll was built
A picturesque sham ruin in old days
By the first owner, who could little guess
That even crasser foolishness
Should blast his lordly mansion to a blaze,
And that its pride should fall
In more fantastic ruin, after all.

Dandelion Down

She watches dandelion-down,
Seed-laden, drifting through the air. . .
And sees in agony acute
Her son drop with his parachute
Amid the barrage of a hostile town.

Toys

With model tank and bomber-aeroplane
The little boy plays in all innocence
Of how mankind destroys
All that makes life worth living, in insane
Infatuation with such deadly toys.

In the End

Throughout his days death seemed to be
The one inveterate enemy;
Yet, when life failed him in the end,
He found in death a bosom-friend.

The Last Leave

He nearly missed the train,
As he returned from leave
To go to sea again:

And, watching the cold rain,
She, who is left to grieve,
Murmurs in dull refrain

Again and yet again
Murmurs from dawn to eve—
“He nearly missed the train. . .”

The Canopy

Billow on languorous billow, the water about the frail craft
That, derelict, lazily drifted in the wash of the tropical sea
Broke, spraying in irised brilliance, as idly it wallowed and swung,
Over the motionless slumberers sprawled on the salt-lustred raft,
While in the blue incandescence of a heaven that blazed without breath,
Flashing on flickering pinions the shrill laughing herring-gulls hung
Weaving and interweaving a wavering white canopy
Above the nigh-foundering indolent waterlogged craft of death.

The House Martins

Wing-weary and with failing strength
After their stormy flight
By day and night
From Africa, the martins reach at length
Their English home, where, under cottage-eaves,
Year after year they built their nest of clay
And reared their little brood
Among thick clustering creeper-leaves,
Only to find the site
A fire-charred ashen grey
Bomb-devastated solitude.

The Golden Mile

As down the Golden Mile I strode
Between the ranked laburnums, all the while
My heart was with the men who'd walked that road
And watched those fountains of rejoicing gold
Tossing in sunlight of old April days:
And wondered, now, as over parched
Sun-blinded desert ways
Day after day they marched,
If still their hearts might hold
Some grateful vision of the Golden Mile.

For This?

Was it for this our love
Brought him to birth,
And toiled to feed his frame
With the good fruits of earth?

Was it for this we charged
His questing mind
With all the quickening lore
That poets have divined?

Was it for this we watched
His spirit's fire
Kindle to flame and soar
In golden-winged desire?

For this—that he might yield
His eager breath
In desperate fight, and go
Before us down to death?

The Broken Bridge

The old bridge that for centuries
With slender bow had spanned the glen,
And whose smooth highroad served to ease
The back and forward journeys of
Far-faring and homecoming men
Among the boulders of the stream
A useless heap of rubble lies,
Destroyed in one night, as the dream
Of peaceful ways by which man hoped
To fare one day to paradise.

In Pride of Youth . . .

In pride of youth he stormed the ramped hillbrow,
Valiant for victory on the embattled height:
Yet now
His body, that rejoiced to feel the sun
Filling his veins with vigour, caught in death
And forced to yield its quick exultant breath
In that old half-forgotten fight,
Is but a skeleton
Clutching a rusty gun.

Rain

Down pours the rain;
And, as I hear it lashing at the pane,
I almost pray
That it may never cease
Until it flood all lands, and every shore
Be drowned in a new Deluge; and the old
Diseased world be washed clean and sweet again
Of human evil; and, in the clear and cold
Light of the virgin day,
The Ark of Righteousness shall rest at peace
On Ararat once more.

The Last Chapter

So quietly
The book had opened, and the story
Seemed but to promise a monotony
Of ventureless tranquility,
Laced here and there with comedy:
And little did he guess that he,
Before time's hand should lay him on the shelf,
Should in the final chapter find himself
Involved in a world-tragedy—
That in the end his life should prove to be
A tale of terror, not untouched of glory.

The Salmon

Dazed by the thunder, dazzled by the glitter,
He sees them leap the lasher of the weir;
And muses how each year
The salmon leave the ocean's salty surges
In silver-shining schools
And breast the waterfalls, to breed in quiet
Of still freshwater pools—

Musing, he watches, longing for the season
When men, too, weary of the battle-strife,
Will give up death, for life;
And quit the bitter seas of self-destruction,
To seek again the ways
Of peace and labour gladly in the quiet
Of full and fruitful days.

The Triumph

“That I should live to see such times” he said—

“The world collapsing in barbarity!

Well may we envy now the lucky dead

Who in a semblance of security

Lived out their lives and never knew the worst!”

Just then with flare and roar and crashing burst

The battle in fresh fury overhead:

And now he pondered “Ay, they never knew

The bitter worst—yet, something else missed, too,

Who drowsed, secure; and did not live to see

The spirit’s triumph in extremity;

’Mid stress of the last conflict flaming higher

Even than destruction’s all-consuming fire!

The Heart That Quivered

The heart that quivered at the touch of sorrow,
Now under blow on blow
Of tragedy no longer even winces,
Numbed to quiescence by the weight of woe—

Numbed by the worldwide misery that burdens
These black and bitter years—
And yet the sudden lilt of children's laughter
May quicken it to tears.

The Old Moon

The old moon, haggard and cadaverous,
Hangs in the iron vault of Polar sky
That domes the snowy plain where corpses lie
Frozen to passionless frigidity,
Fallen enemy by fallen enemy,
Who late,
Locked in hot-blooded hate,
Shattered the icy peace with furious
Onslaught of mortal anger; till again,
Their frenzy spent, the old moon rose, to see
Immortal quiet reign
Once more unchallenged on the Polar plain.

O Wind!

Though I have always loved
Your murmur through the leaves,
Golden with quivering lights
On Summer eves;
And on black Winter nights
Rejoiced to hear you roar
Through threshing boughs, O Wind
Take pity now on me,
O Wind of Memory,
And blow no more!

The Raven

Stationed at the hill watching-post alone,
Amid the slush of snows that slowly melt,
He hears a raven, croaking on the stone
That marks the site
Of some half-legendary fight
Betwixt long-perished tribes of Pict and Celt:
And, though he knows
The bird is only welcoming
The coming of the Spring
And the near passing of the Winter snows,
Yet, now that war
Threatens the dales and hills
Of his beloved countryside once more,
That raucous croaking fills
His heart with cold foreboding and seems to be
The very voice of all calamity.

The Backward Glance

Pausing amid war's bloody business,
He gives a hasty backward glance;
And for a moment stands as in a trance,
Staring into the old incredible years
When only ordinary hopes and fears
Troubled his usual happiness:
And then once more
He turns and desperately
He strains with anxious eyes
To peer into the future; but can see
Nothing of what yet lies
Beyond the fume and fury of the war:
And yet that backward glancing has instilled
His heart with hope old dreams may be fulfilled.

The New Washed Sheets

The new-washed sheets hang in the sun,
To virgin whiteness freshly won;
And she who toiled to make them white
Watches them flapping in the light
And wishes she
As easily
Might wash the old world clean and bright.

As the First Blackbird Sang . . .

As the first blackbird sang,
Into the deep dark well
Of his heart's wordless grief
The clear notes fell
One after one, and, echoing,
Between the dank walls rang,
Until his heart to brief
Forgetfulness was stirred,
And with the happy bird
Began to sing.

England Aroused

Serenely sails the swan in proud pretence
Of bland indifference
Towards her fluffy brood
Of cheeping cygnets; yet, should foot intrude
On the lake's marge, she bridles in defence;
And even the fox is eager to be gone
Before the icy fury of the swan—
Plumes arched in anger, and far-darting bill
Whipping and snapping on the snaky neck;
And slashing pinions lashing to a froth
The tranquil waters. . . .

So, in the lassitude
Of armistice, it seemed that England still,
Forgetful of her dreams, indifferently
In foolish pride of cold placidity
Brooded, till danger threatened all, when she
Arose in swan-like wrath
And plumed embattled majesty, to check
The insolent menace of barbarity.

Till Death . . .

“Till death. . .”—but it was life,
Suddenly flaring into worldwide strife,
That parted us: and now each lonely heart
Wonders in separation whether
It may be death that in the end shall bind us
Eternally together?

The Change of Wind

The rain-charged wind had shifted in the night,
With instant icy breath transfixing all
The drenched and dripping coppice; and in dawn-light
It glittered like a frozen waterfall—

Pendent from saplings bowed and sheathed in glass,
Long tapering lustres drooping over the brake
Of spangled fern and brittle-bladed grass
And crystallised bramble bordering the lake—

Transmuting the dark season's dank distress
That long had held us in despondency,
Fevered and fretful, to a quietness
Of cold pellucid immobility

Forecasting to hearts conflict-torn and tossed
The ultimate dark hour that brings surcease,
When, at a change of wind, perpetual frost
Shall seal earth's trouble in unpassioned peace.

Winter Wheat

Between the new-turned tilth's rich gleaming brown
And the bleached tussocks of the open down
Glitters an emerald slope of Winter wheat—
The low November sunlight scintillating
On each dew-sprinkled blade of living green—
Even in the old year's rout, betokening
That earth knows no defeat;
That still from seed unseen
Urge of renewal quickens unabating
With the fresh promise of resurgent Spring.

The News

“Here is the news” proclaims the calm announcer:
Yet he might spare his breath;
For it is news no longer, this old story,
This day-by-day reiterated tragedy
Of the world’s endless agony
And young men’s lives annihilated by
Indifferent, indiscriminating death.

The Lull

The sea-green beanfield tosses with the breeze
A scarlet foam of poppies in the sun;
And now the soldier, momentarily at ease
Beside his A.A. gun,
Recalls the surf of the Atlantic seas
That sweep the skerries of the Hebrides;
And in his heart he longs to be
Far from war-ravaged Normandy,
In the old life where he need only brave
Perils of wind and wave.

The Victors

Ploughing the waste, we turn up from the clay
The bones of warriors in some old affray
Fallen: but, what they fought for in their day,
Or who the victors were, now none can say.

No Room in the Inn

No room in the inn this starless Christmas night
For fugitives from Herod's soldiery
Who ruthlessly
Slaughter the innocents in every land—
No room, no shelter in the inn
Whose rent walls roofless stand
Amid the havoc and the din,
Blasted and charred; while, flight on flight,
Hell's squadrons sweep the sky,
Hurling destruction through the air
And scattering
Cascades of devastating fire—
No room, no shelter anywhere
For the homeless Mother in her travailing,
And for her Son no welcoming,
Not even from the kindly beasts, who lie,
Carcases, smouldering
Within the burnt-out byre!

The Happy Flight

A multitude of starlings fly
Above me, flecking the blue sky
As far as eye can see
With dark swift-shuttled patternings
Of whirring and exultant wings:
And all the crystal morning rings
With their wild whistling glee.

With sudden soft explosive sound
They rose as one bird from the ground
Where in the new-turned earth
They followed the loam-cleaving share,
Moved by one impulse to declare
Their life's delight and fill the air
With frenzy of shrill mirth.

And I, who plodded slowly by,
Brooding on war's long agony,
Felt my heart flutter, too,
With instant urge to scale the height
Of heaven with them in happy flight
And revel in the glittering light
Of Winter's windy blue.

Bethlehem

Even though the fates condemn
Man's heart to Calvary,
Still may his spirit face unflinchingly
The final agony,
Recalling on the cross his Bethlehem.

Like Cage Bred Birds Released

Like cage-bred birds released by accident
Into the unknown hazards of the night,
Our long peace-sheltered spirits in affright
Fluttered in darkness laced with livid light
When the world shattered in tempestuous strife,
And our home-loving hearts by panic rent
Longed to resume the old secure sweet life
Behind the accustomed bars:
Yet, in the tempest tossed, our wings at length
Have gained fresh strength
To ride the terrors of the unknown skies,
And through torn thunderclouds our eyes
Have kindled to new vision at the sight
Of unfamiliar stars.

Hill Waters

As the skeins of sleep unravel
And, from slumber slowly waking,
Light in golden glints is breaking
Through his mind, so long benighted,
Now he hears with heart delighted
Crystal streams that swiftly travel
Over shoals of amber gravel—

Crystal streams, in cold airs springing
From snow-mantled mountain-shoulders
That have tumbled over boulders
Down steep braes of bent and heather,
In celestial April weather
With their amber light and singing
New life to his spirit bringing:

And his heart, that, in the slaughter
Felt death's pang, once more rejoices
As again he hears hill-voices—
He, who even now lay dying,
Waked in paradise, and lying,
Far beyond the field of slaughter,
By the streams of living water.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

It was hard to determine across page breaks whether there was a stanza break or not.

[The end of *The Outpost* by Wilfrid Wilson Gibson]