

OUT OF THIS WAR

A Poem

by

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From a drawing by Augustus John.

THE FORTUNE PRESS
12 BUCKINGHAM PALACE ROAD
LONDON

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MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

AIR RAID and THE SPREADING CROSS have appeared
in *Kingdom Come*, and ELEGY FOR THE DEAD in
Poetry (London).

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I. PREFACE

I ROLL the suns of twenty-five summers in my fist,
Their bellies filled with fruit and corn and thunder.
The many-flavoured waters of the East slide in my veins,
And I am ripe for plunder.

A simple polyp, crossed with life, and maiden,
From a seaweed-dangled house of tropic sea,
I bit the narrow stone of a London alley,
A burning cipher on the changing face.

The Evil Eye in houses, crowned me with a question;
Its dying roots teased bare by a fungus death.
'To be or not to be, that is the question'
An ether-mask expanding on the breath.

I saw the swallow mix with the pool, and the engine
Slide on the appropriate lane of gas.
I came to find the Life that loosens the nuts
And makes me slide into a sea of oil.

The Indian Ocean is arched with pearl and coral,
And a many-scented life blooms on the jasmine stick.
But Life is a rolling apple; experience a pin;
A wind-starred apple that I cannot pick.

That's why I stretched a rope across the ocean,
Became the tight-rope walker of my dreams.
Searching for antipodeal experience, to round
The small circumference of a sesame-seed.*

The temples are old, the people very old,
Their maps of love repulping in the paunch.
The net of dreams expanding in the air,
Like the envelope of the whorled and singing conch.

* Symbol of smallness in the East.

The temples are old, but digestion older;
Cunning parquetry, too flat for their naked feet.
They divide the fish with the stubs of fingers,
And bite the lotus clean with a snip of teeth.

Here, Death is measured with Big Ben or theodolite;
The ceremonies of mansions, neat on the washing line.
Neatly brewed and bottled, the heady liquor,
Lies different on the tongue, to our simple wines.

Tapes and set-squares, cones, tangents,
The formal property of the cupboard brain;
Are projected into further lines, cones and tangents,
A nut too well precisioned for my head.

The Eye hung the air with her dark lashes,
Coy as an unveiled bride, as bold.
If you will dwell with me, she said,
You'll finger all the secrets that I hold.

She crashed her eyelid down like a steel shutter,
Receded into the boiling, gutted air.
Behind her, the bloody heaps of her harvests rising
And the hairy long-armed men juggling with fire.

II. THE HERO

WHERE shall the innocent, curly head shelter from the blast,
The bombs and tombs are falling on Leicester Square.
Hour-glass sand aflame on the roof-tops; the mouth
Of fear eating air we breathe.

When the halo is doffed, the bed-sown limbs regarded,
A hero's emotions are real in the dart of a wasp.
He will adopt the accustomed style of his fathers
And dive into the thunder with a mask.

The Teutonic Rilke will cover the Hero with laurel;
Genghiz Khan allow him a hundred oyster brides.
But remember, the hero is a fool with a theory
That wouldn't work—the fire in his head was sand.

Strike the hero on the one, receive the other cheek
Stronger than the first with the steel of wisdom
—The weapon of the strong and heroic, no other.
Force does not breed in the vegetable kingdom.

No better than vegetable, we have need of root and plot;
Denied, a crimson crime will branch from the crime.
Who fights, not the hero, but the oppressor,
Denied the love of reason, to make him different.

The Hero will sit him down with Bible and book
Learn the stories of Indian, German and Pole.
War as the evil branching on the outraged body
Will steal from the stalking grave and wash it whole.

In a temple of weakness, war reveals its head
The disordered blood the pillar, stone and crop.
Solemn with Injustice, Vanities, Ambitions;
Both these last are deadly and Primary Evils.

A Primary Evil to rim the earth with war.
The evil resides not in itself, but causes
—The mutilated page in the book, the suffered slight,
The gnawing hunger and our accusing losses.

To rise up on the martyred blood and shriek vengeance,
And plunge the angry bayonet in the scabbard of blood,
Is the Secondary Evil, without recompense
That times the bomb of another war.

The two Evils are collateral and pledged:
The one unformulated without the other.
The resentful hand not met with force
Use violence again will not bother.

O for the clean wind that will split the fruit
And pluck the golden heart for the common earth,
Singing of the frosted time when Evil will rise
Not one-accusing, but laid across its causes.

It probes into the infinite reaches of space
And graded life below, the Buddha said.
Evil is the all-flavouring element
Blowing equally on the new-born and the dead.

O to hold this terrifying vision in the mind,
Roll the hills and grooves, like a well-known bead!
Half this battle and the murder over;
The hero stirring in the common weed and seed.

This his fond task, to ride the sky
Between his knees the iron time gripped and curled.
The chart of cause and effect unfurled before him,
This his creation he swings on the shoulder of the world.

III. AIR RAID

THIS iron moment stretches over Europe
Like the clang of a deep bell.
The vacant squares, staring stony-eyed to the moon
Will never stir or tell
How soon, ah how soon
Will the thunder drop

On our sad heads. The hot noon
Is sad and never better
Charged with quick and turgid tears
For the bomber;
And as the tempest nears
Is it soon, O Lord, soon!

Our hungry star is dying over Europe
A silent mouth in the burning cell;
And as the dead eye slants from the ruins to the sky—
Quick danger of eyes and hell—
Will it cry, will it cry
When will the murder stop

On the blameless head. Fist of love
Lying bleeding and neglected over the hill
Of ruin and treason,
See the fire upon his breast, the unbended will
Of his hand and reason
Break terribly from above

On the heroic head. He shall dream dreams
Stout dreams of mountain and sunlight
Purifying in the sloping air;
He shall open the night
To pattern the stars; But where, O where
Will he lay the bud schemes

But in the dry air. For man under blinkers and lipstick
Is bull bellowing war which once declared must be worked.
Without battle, reaction bombs the track of growth.
With battle, a dream is perpetuated
That ends in dreams. Ah, is it worth
To blow the spirit through the filth and muck.

There is no answer—how expect an answer
The dread word is now a bold foetus
Whose red blood is our blood.
To give up would maim us
Or lay the spirit under the devouring sod.
Damn us and cheat her.

The time is harvested and hung
Dying, that brings love and growth snowing its fingers.
This is the time of bombs and white nightmare
Soaking red through faces. This is time that lingers
To touch the brain with madness. Does it care, O does it care
If the slow bells of desolation are rung

Over the dead land. Time was and time will be
For building and erection.
Time for work and time for rest.
This, this is September time: time of action
Time for murder and time for thrust,
For plunder, rape, devilry.

This is no summer to weigh the merits of war
While the iron Junker loads the sky
Against us. In our jackets of nightmare
We shall stoke the ship, until the boilers crack
Like our hollow bones. But where, where
Will we find us after wreck?

IV. THE SPREADING CROSS

WHERE, where will we find us after wreck,
Deep river, sand or shallow?
After the city is slain and the thin laughter
Of mouldy bone echoing in corners; after swallow
And stick and stone are mixed in slaughter;
After the memories, memorials—and after
Where will we find us after wreck?

After the burst of treaties and brute splendour
Loud on the slaughter bleeding empty stone;
When our sharp loves are blunted like night
Forking nowhere, and wind distractedly pulls bone from bone;
When the pulse is slow and thorned, the lips tight
And angry fires are loading another fight—
Where will we find us after wreck?

The clouds of fear are silently assembled above this night
To disappear in soft immersion in the cavern heart.
The seven-voiced guns are talking fast again
And again and again the planes return to London. The start
This of the spreading cross and pain;
But when the floods come and doves return,
Where will we find us after wreck?

A simple book of his, the awful other's want,
A little mercy on the clean surgeon's knife
Would have avoided all this. Who can say?
Today the cars of war run only when life
Is stranded for reason. And when the day
Of reckoning descends and someone, perhaps he, the other has
to pay—
Where will we find us after wreck?

Life is not single or double, but like an ocean
Drawn round the earth on meeting floors.
(Movement in the local place disturbs the love-beds all.)
Hunger and anger are not indigenous, but spread like sores
Across the earth from Washington to Calcutta. But when the
pall
Of smoke and lies is lifted and the deceivers fall, all,
Where will we find us after wreck?

These are the things we must think of. Tonight the bowl air is
taut.

The points of flame about the plane are two angers meeting;
But they will break each other
And our hot anger dying
What we must love and hate or fight about
Is when the bombs and bands are ushered out
Where, O where will we find us after wreck?

V. STATEMENTS (WITH CONNECTIONS) AND POSTSCRIPT

We are cut, subdued or absorbed
In turn. The planet years
Return from spaces of white light
To cover the land with tears;

Find incessant repetition, trull monotone
That never varies or ceases.
Life erecting, life killing
Life absorbing—

The hack thesis

Unending and animal
The sallow poet embraces
By the light of the buffoon moon.
We are faces

Watered by rivers and singed with fire-wind
Always the same and one.
We die, we live, we seed, we quarrel
Under the proud balloon sun.

Are kingly and big
Tall as Mussolini
Are weak, are oppressed: It was always thus
Always will be. Maybe.

II

Time tremendous, incalculable
Like space, white abyss
Yawning on
This mote precipice,

Our moment. We are
Points in the sunbeam.
Our period smaller than atom face
In the fervid stream.

Under black years
We bend; are changed
Or absorbed in ruin.
Lifeless purity of thought (bright Socrates) ranged
In neat cluster on the shelf,
And Jesus (passionate purity of will)
Are reduced to whispers
Under this wide sky and hill.

Time, Time chiming on stars
Beyond vision;
Letting fall upon the Great
The toy gun (benison).

III

Under the great ice rock of the Fourth Period
The Neanderthaler flowered like a weed.
Savage crashed the eye on the first light
And swung the battle-axe of flint. Seed

Of grass, coloured berry, rhinoceros for his belly;
The white steppe for his mind and blood for his fingers.
In rude cavern he forced the maidenheads
—The savage, he killed them afterwards.

IV

In time, in time, with the slow ague of time,
Man fell on the lap of Europe from the south.
He slaughtered the savage with his cunning brain,
But carried off all the women for concubines.

V

Thus, we are double-faced. Behind the easy façade
Of custom, acquired grace or intelligence,
Lurks the Neanderthaler with a savage grin;
What God has joined, no mortal shall dispense.

Under the lee of the great European rock,
We rape and are not satisfied.
But the Other One lurking behind—the wicked *voyeur*,
Rattles his glad sabres and grows bloody-eyed.

We carry, say, two flames, on one candle-length,
Or two hearts in one pouch—it is the same.
Make no mistake, we'll start to worry when
The one drives the other insane.

VI

This awful man, why won't he leave us alone,
He is always following one about.
Shout for the policeman.
He's in bond with him without a doubt.

VII

In the corners of the street, in the traffic,
Watch him grin his sadist syllables. Now
He is exploding the guns and battleships.
What next? Shall we throw him out?

POSTSCRIPT

Honour us, please, we are fighting for man and civilisation
But we are murdering the wit to become civilised.

VI. ELEGY FOR THE DEAD

RAW the plague that entombs us, and the fever
Running, open-faced, through this wilderness. Dunkirk
Will descend with a hold of black weeping. O Never,
The blood of St. Omer or Saarbrucken,
Flower again in the morning.

The Skager Rak

Threw its hands across the windy water
And gathered the remains, to an empty bosom.
Blood is the house under that water.
Or further, look, on the sharp coast of China;
Whirled the lantern of Death. Humbly they lie
Gunned on the evil that laid them low—What evil
Hand did they deal in this game of Greed!

Die

Progeny of the Sun, yellow brother, unimportant;
But the exultant Sin has fallen on our courtyards,
And after the worlds are hung in the Nothingness, together
We'll heave a different world of sandalwood and myrrh.

Down, soundlessly you went, innocent brother,
The swallow fist felled on the ancient musket;
Basket of Immortal Suffering red on the shoulder,
Bolder than the painful bullet you met.
Yet the suns return over the rice and wheat,
Return immortal brother, to your fields.
Yours the crime of love only. The deceit
Of gold and machines, unholy foreign meat.

Raw the wounds that enslave us. The open tomb
Of sallow Custom, rubbing mud over eyes
And icy lips. Wound down in hoary lies,
Unable to weave a telling synthesis
Of old cloth and mouldy habit. The Spring
Living, bowled under the bone of sloth and ritual.

Wrath of God, untwine the tangled eyes,
Incise the idiot cant, unseal the dumb lips!

Where the lily lights of yesterday,
The defiant singing and the stout belief
Clouting the sagging juices of the blood?
Where the fat adoration and temples fall, thud
The machinery of doubt or sanity
On twisted floors of memory—Flanders'
Running spite and crooked commentary,
The evil Hun and lost civilization.

Poor yellow head on Dunkirk sand,
Grand in Death's diffusion. You went
Splendidly to battle, to Oudernarde
And Ypres, at the yellow Menin Gate
With the dead word on your lips.
Old gestures and phrases bent you before their whips;
Did you believe them, or did the doubt fell
You, like France, even before you fell.

Civilization has its gaping doubts
Like winter its bulbs. The barbarian
Is winged on the knife and bayonet.
We question culture—the 100% Aryan,
Real in the objective existence, to some
But false to the solid blood. Law, custom,
Science, faith, faultless in *plein air* pull tombs
Over life spontaneous, and topple the hungry wombs.

Raw the plague of Socrates, and the Culture
Bred in the Athenian forum, caught and thrown
From Descartes to Spinoza, across the loam
Of groaning blood and bone. Life divided,
Life cut, stripped and plundered
Of the spontaneous sap and verjuice
Gleaming in supple institutions.

Dead

Is the earth, my poor and yellow head.

This sculpted flower reason, poised and perfect
In geometric blissfulness, is ignorant of pulse
And systole. Perfect in teeth and bulge
Never rubs faith into generous flame.
What use correctness, without emotion. What use
Our honest Goodness, without Emotional Thrust—
Truth without Sincerity (merely 'culturist')?

Heavy the years of solid night and destruction,
And the years return to the loaded earth
And empty heads. 'We knock our lying brains
Together extravagantly.' Never the round life
Of the striking, roaring blood did we fill,
But stilled by the aspatial glitter and glare,
The trumpet of a blind Utopia. We slept
The dear life in the tombs of Concept.

We bent the brittle life to the pattern of the stars,
Or swung the blood to the slide-rule or the bear.
Torn is the Sabbath from the blooming rose.
Man, the servant of his own devising
And division. We bent our holy lives
Across the Law that seldow gave us faith.

We are the children who believed without belief.
We are the children who loved without love.

II

Loud the lamentation that falls
On our stone valleys. Dunkirk is shot,
A bolt through oil into ghost face,
And hours, where things are not recalled or remembered.
Shot like a dog, the boy lies bleeding
Under the iron grape, calling for mercy;
Calling the temples, with his crooked hand.
Dust is the poem in that fallen hand.

Come now my ghost, my brother, to my side
Striding the deep holes of the Channel.
To-day's sorrow and ache, to-morrow's pleasure.
These pressured moments, to-morrow's leisure.

Dark

Is the doom over us all. And as we fall
We hold the poison monkshood to our bosoms.
Dazed in our cellar to the jazz-band's coaxing,
We empty our lives and hold our dreaming.

The white city loaded with metal and hate
Shakes its agues into the season's pool.
Ghost of my disaster, regard these faces
Banging their hollowness loud, in Underground.
Not in the Dornier doom you see them wound
But their own emptiness and lying lives.
Faith is tall in the open, out in the sun
Gunning the colic moods of all the million.

But their eyes are shut to the exploding night;
The heart falls away in weathered dust.
The evil has tunnelled to the bone
Of our gold days, to disasters blown.
We have no hands to hold, no eyes to weep;
And as the sweeping rain adds clod to heap
We add the minutes to a dead season,
The season of Nought and hibernation.

Descend O warmth into this frigid sex
And wax the blood to a rigid flame.
Propose a meaning for the thousand dead,
Our children fallen on the careless shame.
The mouths of ash are sighing in France
And the hoarded woe blowing from China.
Blood runs dry, this bread is cracked,
Our limbs are freezing and our trousers patched.

Give back the robe of splendid sap,
Lap us in the gold, the power and ooze
Of rounded hours in the melon's belly
Singing: throats of the sun-filled juice.
Diffuse the laws and purple thrones
Over the plains and weaving Life.
Knifed to a cross of blood we'll break
A white Freedom from such harsh roots.

London, October, 1940.