

Classic Poetry Series

Siegfried Sassoon
- poems -

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Siegfried Sassoon(1886 - 1967)

Siegfried Sassoon was perhaps the most innocent of the war poets. John Hildebidle has called Sassoon the "accidental hero." Born into a wealthy Jewish family in 1886, Sassoon lived the pastoral life of a young squire: fox-hunting, playing cricket, golfing and writing romantic verses.

Being an innocent, Sassoon's reaction to the realities of the war were all the more bitter and violent -- both his reaction through his poetry and his reaction on the battlefield (where, after the death of fellow officer David Thomas and his brother Hamo at Gallipoli, Sassoon earned the nickname "Mad Jack" for his near-suicidal exploits against the German lines -- in the early manifestation of his grief, when he still believed that the Germans were entirely to blame). As Paul Fussell said: "now he unleashed a talent for irony and satire and contumely that had been sleeping all during his pastoral youth." Sassoon also showed his innocence by going public with his protest against the war (as he grew to see that insensitive political leadership was the greater enemy than the Germans). Luckily, his friend and fellow poet Robert Graves convinced the review board that Sassoon was suffering from shell-shock and he was sent instead to the military hospital at Craiglockhart where he met and influenced Wilfred Owen.

Sassoon is a key figure in the study of the poetry of the Great War: he brought with him to the war the idyllic pastoral background; he began by writing war poetry reminiscent of Rupert Brooke; he mingled with such war poets as Robert Graves and Edmund Blunden; he spoke out publicly against the war (and yet returned to it); he influenced and mentored the then unknown Wilfred Owen; he spent thirty years reflecting on the war through his memoirs; and at last he found peace in his religious faith. Some critics found his later poetry lacking in comparison to his war poems. Sassoon, identifying with Herbert and Vaughan, recognized and understood this: "my development has been entirely consistent and in character" he answered, "almost all of them have ignored the fact that I am a religious poet."

"the Rank Stench Of Those Bodies Haunts Me Still"

The rank stench of those bodies haunts me still
And I remember things I'd best forget.
For now we've marched to a green, trenchless land
Twelve miles from battering guns: along the grass
Brown lines of tents are hives for snoring men;
Wide, radiant water sways the floating sky
Below dark, shivering trees. And living-clean
Comes back with thoughts of home and hours of sleep.
To-night I smell the battle; miles away
Gun-thunder leaps and thuds along the ridge;
The spouting shells dig pits in fields of death,
And wounded men, are moaning in the woods.
If any friend be there whom I have loved,
God speed him safe to England with a gash.
It's sundown in the camp; some youngster laughs,
Lifting his mug and drinking health to all
Who come unscathed from that unpitying waste:
(Terror and ruin lurk behind his gaze.)
Another sits with tranquil, musing face,
Puffing bis pipe and dreaming of the girl
Whose last scrawled letter lies upon his knee.
The sunlight falls, low-ruddy from the west,
Upon their heads. Last week they might have died
And now they stretch their limbs in tired content.
One says 'The bloody Bosche has got the knock;
'And soon they'll crumple up and chuck their games.
'We've got the beggars on the run at last!'
Then I remembered someone that I'd seen
Dead in a squalid, miserable ditch,
Heedless of toiling feet that trod him down.
He was a Prussian with a decent face,
Young, fresh, and pleasant, so I dare to say.
No doubt he loathed the war and longed for peace,
And cursed our souls because we'd killed bis friends.
One night he yawned along a half-dug trench
Midnight; and then the British guns began
With heavy shrapnel bursting low, and 'hows'
Whistling to cut the wire with blinding din.
He didn't move; the digging still went on;

Men stooped and shovelled; someone gave a grunt,
And moaned and died with agony in the sludge.
Then the long hiss of shells lifted and stopped.
He stared into the gloom; a rocket curved,
And rifles rattled angrily on the left
Down by the wood, and there was noise of bombs.
Then the damned English loomed in scrambling haste
Out of the dark and struggled through the wire,
And there were shouts and eurses; someone screamed
And men began to blunder down the trench
Without their rifles. It was time to go:
He grabbed his coat; stood up, gulping some bread;
Then clutched his head and fell.
I found him there
In the gray morning when the place was held.
His face was in the mud; one arm flung out
As when he crumpled up; his sturdy legs
Were bent beneath his trunk; heels to the skye.

Siegfried Sassoon

A Child's Prayer

For Morn, my dome of blue,
For Meadows, green and gay,
And Birds who love the twilight of the leaves,
Let Jesus keep me joyful when I pray.

For the big Bees that hum
And hide in bells of flowers;
For the winding roads that come
To Evening's holy door,
May Jesus bring me grateful to his arms,
And guard my innocence for evermore.

Siegfried Sassoon

A Letter Home

(To Robert Graves)

I

Here I'm sitting in the gloom
Of my quiet attic room.
France goes rolling all around,
Fledged with forest May has crowned.
And I puff my pipe, calm-hearted,
Thinking how the fighting started,
Wondering when we'll ever end it,
Back to hell with Kaiser sent it,
Gag the noise, pack up and go,
Clockwork soldiers in a row.
I've got better things to do
Than to waste my time on you.

II

Robert, when I drowse to-night,
Skirting lawns of sleep to chase
Shifting dreams in mazy light,
Somewhere then I'll see your face
Turning back to bid me follow
Where I wag my arms and hollo,
Over hedges hasting after
Crooked smile and baffling laughter,
Running tireless, floating, leaping,
Down your web-hung woods and valleys,
Where the glowworm stars are peeping,
Till I find you, quiet as stone
On a hill-top all alone,
Staring outward, gravely pondering
Jumbled leagues of hillock-wandering.

III

You and I have walked together
In the starving winter weather.

We've been glad because we knew
Time's too short and friends are few.
We've been sad because we missed
One whose yellow head was kissed
By the gods, who thought about him
Till they couldn't do without him.
Now he's here again; I've been
Soldier David dressed in green,
Standing in a wood that swings
To the madrigal he sings.
He's come back, all mirth and glory,
Like the prince in a fairy story.
Winter called him far away;
Blossoms bring him home with May.

IV

Well, I know you'll swear it's true
That you found him decked in blue
Striding up through morning-land
With a cloud on either hand.
Out in Wales, you'll say, he marches
Arm-in-arm with oaks and larches;
Hides all night in hilly nooks,
Laughs at dawn in tumbling brooks.
Yet, it's certain, here he teaches
Outpost-schemes to groups of beeches.
And I'm sure, as here I stand,
That he shines through every land,
That he sings in every place
Where we're thinking of his face.

V

Robert, there's a war in France;
Everywhere men bang and blunder,
Sweat and swear and worship Chance,
Creep and blink through cannon thunder.
Rifles crack and bullets flick,
Sing and hum like hornet-swarms.
Bones are smashed and buried quick.
Yet, through stunning battle storms,

All the while I watch the spark
Lit to guide me; for I know
Dreams will triumph, though the dark
Scowls above me where I go.
You can hear me; you can mingle
Radiant folly with my jingle.
War's a joke for me and you
While we know such dreams are true!

Siegfried Sassoon

A Mystic As Soldier

I lived my days apart,
Dreaming fair songs for God;
By the glory in my heart
Covered and crowned and shod.

Now God is in the strife,
And I must seek Him there,
Where death outnumbered life,
And fury smites the air.

I walk the secret way
With anger in my brain.
O music through my clay,
When will you sound again?

Siegfried Sassoon

A Poplar And The Moon

There stood a Poplar, tall and straight;
The fair, round Moon, uprisen late,
Made the long shadow on the grass
A ghostly bridge 'twixt heaven and me.
But May, with slumbrous nights, must pass;
And blustering winds will strip the tree.
And I've no magic to express
The moment of that loveliness;
So from these words you'll never guess
The stars and lilies I could see.

Siegfried Sassoon

A Subaltern

He turned to me with his kind, sleepy gaze
And fresh face slowly brightening to the grin
That sets my memory back to summer days,
With twenty runs to make, and last man in.
He told me he'd been having a bloody time
In trenches, crouching for the crumps to burst,
While squeaking rats scampered across the slime
And the grey palsied weather did its worst.

But as he stamped and shivered in the rain,
My stale philosophies had served him well;
Dreaming about his girl had sent his brain
Blanker than ever—she'd no place in Hell....
'Good God!' he laughed, and slowly filled his pipe,
Wondering 'why he always talked such tripe'.

Siegfried Sassoon

A Wanderer

When Watkin shifts the burden of his cares
And all that irked him in his bound employ,
Once more become a vagrom-hearted boy,
He moves to roundelays and jocund airs;
Loitering with dusty harvestmen, he shares
Old ale and sunshine; or, with maids half-coy,
Pays court to shadows; fools himself with joy,
Shaking a leg at junketings and fairs.

Sometimes, returning down his breezy miles,
A snatch of wayward April he will bring,
Piping the daffodilly that beguiles
Foolhardy lovers in the surge of spring.
And then once more by lanes and field-path stiles
Up the green world he wanders like a king.

Siegfried Sassoon

A Whispered Tale

I'd heard fool-heroes brag of where they'd been,
With stories of the glories that they'd seen.
But you, good simple soldier, seasoned well
In woods and posts and crater-lines of hell,
Who dodge remembered 'crumps' with wry grimace,
Endured experience in your queer, kind face,
Fatigues and vigils haunting nerve-strained eyes,
And both your brothers killed to make you wise;
You had no babbling phrases; what you said
Was like a message from the maimed and dead.
But memory brought the voice I knew, whose note
Was muted when they shot you in the throat;
And still you whisper of the war, and find
Sour jokes for all those horrors left behind.

Siegfried Sassoon

A Working Party

Three hours ago he blundered up the trench,
Sliding and poising, groping with his boots;
Sometimes he tripped and lurched against the walls
With hands that pawed the sodden bags of chalk.
He couldn't see the man who walked in front;
Only he heard the drum and rattle of feet
Stepping along barred trench boards, often splashing
Wretchedly where the sludge was ankle-deep.

Voices would grunt `Keep to your right -- make way!'
When squeezing past some men from the front-line:
White faces peered, puffing a point of red;
Candles and braziers glinted through the chinks
And curtain-flaps of dug-outs; then the gloom
Swallowed his sense of sight; he stooped and swore
Because a sagging wire had caught his neck.

A flare went up; the shining whiteness spread
And flickered upward, showing nimble rats
And mounds of glimmering sand-bags, bleached with rain;
Then the slow silver moment died in dark.
The wind came posting by with chilly gusts
And buffeting at the corners, piping thin.
And dreary through the crannies; rifle-shots
Would split and crack and sing along the night,
And shells came calmly through the drizzling air
To burst with hollow bang below the hill.

Three hours ago, he stumbled up the trench;
Now he will never walk that road again:
He must be carried back, a jolting lump
Beyond all needs of tenderness and care.

He was a young man with a meagre wife
And two small children in a Midland town,
He showed their photographs to all his mates,
And they considered him a decent chap
Who did his work and hadn't much to say,
And always laughed at other people's jokes

Because he hadn't any of his own.

That night when he was busy at his job
Of piling bags along the parapet,
He thought how slow time went, stamping his feet
And blowing on his fingers, pinched with cold.
He thought of getting back by half-past twelve,
And tot of rum to send him warm to sleep
In draughty dug-out frowsty with the fumes
Of coke, and full of snoring weary men.

He pushed another bag along the top,
Craning his body outward; then a flare
Gave one white glimpse of No Man's Land and wire;
And as he dropped his head the instant split
His startled life with lead, and all went out.

Siegfried Sassoon

Absolution

The anguish of the earth absolves our eyes
Till beauty shines in all that we can see.
War is our scourge; yet war has made us wise,
And, fighting for our freedom, we are free.

Horror of wounds and anger at the foe,
And loss of things desired; all these must pass.
We are the happy legion, for we know
Time's but a golden wind that shakes the grass.

There was an hour when we were loth to part
From life we longed to share no less than others.
Now, having claimed this heritage of heart,
What need we more, my comrades and my brothers?

Siegfried Sassoon

Aftermath

Have you forgotten yet?...

For the world's events have rumbled on since those gagged days,
Like traffic checked while at the crossing of city-ways:
And the haunted gap in your mind has filled with thoughts that flow
Like clouds in the lit heaven of life; and you're a man reprieved to go,
Taking your peaceful share of Time, with joy to spare.
But the past is just the same--and War's a bloody game...
Have you forgotten yet?...
Look down, and swear by the slain of the War that you'll never forget.

Do you remember the dark months you held the sector at Mametz--
The nights you watched and wired and dug and piled sandbags on parapets?
Do you remember the rats; and the stench
Of corpses rotting in front of the front-line trench--
And dawn coming, dirty-white, and chill with a hopeless rain?
Do you ever stop and ask, 'Is it all going to happen again?'

Do you remember that hour of din before the attack--
And the anger, the blind compassion that seized and shook you then
As you peered at the doomed and haggard faces of your men?
Do you remember the stretcher-cases lurching back
With dying eyes and lolling heads--those ashen-grey
Masks of the lads who once were keen and kind and gay?

Have you forgotten yet?...

Look up, and swear by the green of the spring that you'll never forget.

Siegfried Sassoon

Alone

I've listened: and all the sounds I heard
Were music,—wind, and stream, and bird.
With youth who sang from hill to hill
I've listened: my heart is hungry still.

I've looked: the morning world was green;
Bright roofs and towers of town I've seen;
And stars, wheeling through wingless night.
I've looked: and my soul yet longs for light.

I've thought: but in my sense survives
Only the impulse of those lives
That were my making. Hear me say
'I've thought!'—and darkness hides my day.

Siegfried Sassoon

An Old French Poet

When in your sober mood my body have ye laid
In sight and sound of things beloved, woodland and stream,
And the green turf has hidden the poor bones ye deem
No more a close companion with those rhymes we made;

Then, if some bird should pipe, or breezes stir the glade,
Thinking them for the while my voice, so let them seem
A fading message from the misty shores of dream,
Or wheresoever, following Death, my feet have strayed.

Siegfried Sassoon

Ancestors

Behold these jewelled, merchant Ancestors,
Foregathered in some chancellery of death;
Calm, provident, discreet, they stroke their beards
And move their faces slowly in the gloom,
And barter monstrous wealth with speech subdued,
Lustreless eyes and acquiescent lids.
And oft in pauses of their conference,
They listen to the measured breath of night's
Hushed sweep of wind aloft the swaying trees
In dimly gesturing gardens; then a voice
Climbs with clear mortal song half-sad for heaven.

A silent-footed message flits and brings
The ghostly Sultan from his glimmering halls;
A shadow at the window, turbaned, vast,
He leans; and, pondering the sweet influence
That steals around him in remembered flowers,
Hears the frail music wind along the slopes,
Put forth, and fade across the whispering sea.

Siegfried Sassoon

Ancient History

Adam, a brown old vulture in the rain,
Shivered below his wind-whipped olive-trees;
Huddling sharp chin on scarred and scraggy knees,
He moaned and mumbled to his darkening brain;
'He was the grandest of them all was Cain!
'A lion laired in the hills, that none could tire:
'Swift as a stag: a stallion of the plain,
'Hungry and fierce with deeds of huge desire.'

Grimly he thought of Abel, soft and fair
A lover with disaster in his face,
And scarlet blossom twisted in bright hair.
'Afraid to fight; was murder more disgrace?'
'God always hated Cain' He bowed his head
The gaunt wild man whose lovely sons were dead.

Siegfried Sassoon

Arcady Unheeding

Shepherds go whistling on their way
In the spring season of the year;
One watches weather-signs of day;
One of his maid most dear
Dreams; and they do not hear
The birds that sing and sing; they do not see
Wide wealds of blue beyond their windy lea,
Nor blossoms red and white on every tree.

Siegfried Sassoon

Arms And The Man

Young Croesus went to pay his call
On Colonel Sawbones, Caxton Hall:
And, though his wound was healed and mended,
He hoped he'd get his leave extended.

The waiting-room was dark and bare.
He eyed a neat-framed notice there
Above the fireplace hung to show
Disabled heroes where to go
For arms and legs; with scale of price,
And words of dignified advice
How officers could get them free.

Elbow or shoulder, hip or knee,
Two arms, two legs, though all were lost,
They'd be restored him free of cost.
Then a Girl Guide looked to say,
'Will Captain Croesus come this way?'

Siegfried Sassoon

At Carnoy

Down in the hollow there's the whole Brigade
Camped in four groups: through twilight falling slow
I hear a sound of mouth-organs, ill-played,
And murmur of voices, gruff, confused, and low.
Crouched among thistle-tufts I've watched the glow
Of a blurred orange sunset flare and fade;
And I'm content. To-morrow we must go
To take some cursèd Wood ... O world God made!

July 3rd, 1916.

Siegfried Sassoon

At Daybreak

I listen for him through the rain,
And in the dusk of starless hours
I know that he will come again;
Loth was he ever to forsake me:
He comes with glimmering of flowers
And stir of music to awake me.

Spirit of purity, he stands
As once he lived in charm and grace:
I may not hold him with my hands,
Nor bid him stay to heal my sorrow;
Only his fair, unshadowed face
Abides with me until to-morrow.

Siegfried Sassoon

At The Cenotaph

I saw the Prince of Darkness, with his Staff,
Standing bare-headed by the Cenotaph:
Unostentatious and respectful, there
He stood, and offered up the following prayer.
'Make them forget, O Lord, what this Memorial
Means; their discredited ideas revive;
Breed new belief that War is purgatorial
Proof of the pride and power of being alive;
Men's biologic urge to readjust
The Map of Europe, Lord of Hosts, increase;
Lift up their hearts in large destructive lust;
And crown their heads with blind vindictive Peace.'
The Prince of Darkness to the Cenotaph
Bowed. As he walked away I heard him laugh.

Siegfried Sassoon

Atrocities

You told me, in your drunken-boasting mood,
How once you butchered prisoners. That was good!
I'm sure you felt no pity while they stood
Patient and cowed and scared, as prisoners should.

How did you do them in? Come, don't be shy:
You know I love to hear how Germans die,
Downstairs in dug-outs. 'Camerad!' they cry;
Then squeal like stoats when bombs begin to fly.

And you? I know your record. You went sick
When orders looked unwholesome: then, with trick
And lie, you wangled home. And here you are,
Still talking big and boozing in a bar.

Siegfried Sassoon

Attack

AT dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun
In the wild purple of the glow'ring sun,
Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud
The menacing scarred slope; and, one by one,
Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire.
The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed
With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,
Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.
Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,
They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!

Siegfried Sassoon

Autumn

October's bellowing anger breaks and cleaves
The bronzed battalions of the stricken wood
In whose lament I hear a voice that grieves
For battle's fruitless harvest, and the feud
Of outraged men. Their lives are like the leaves
Scattered in flocks of ruin, tossed and blown
Along the westering furnace flaring red.
O martyred youth and manhood overthrown,
The burden of your wrongs is on my head.

Siegfried Sassoon

Banishment

I am banished from the patient men who fight
They smote my heart to pity, built my pride.
Shoulder to aching shoulder, side by side,
They trudged away from life's broad wealds of light.
Their wrongs were mine; and ever in my sight
They went arrayed in honour. But they died,—
Not one by one: and mutinous I cried
To those who sent them out into the night.

The darkness tells how vainly I have striven
To free them from the pit where they must dwell
In outcast gloom convulsed and jagged and riven
By grappling guns. Love drove me to rebel.
Love drives me back to grope with them through hell;
And in their tortured eyes I stand forgiven.

Siegfried Sassoon

Base Details

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath
I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base,
And speed glum heroes up the line to death.
You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,
Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel,
Reading the Roll of Honour. "Poor young chap,"
I'd say -- "I used to know his father well;
Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap."
And when the war is done and youth stone dead,
I'd toddle safely home and die -- in bed.

Siegfried Sassoon

Battalion-Relief

'FALL in! Now get a move on.' (Curse the rain.)
We splash away along the straggling village,
Out to the flat rich country, green with June...
And sunset flares across wet crops and tillage,
Blazing with splendour-patches. (Harvest soon,
Up in the Line.) 'Perhaps the War'll be done
'By Christmas-Day. Keep smiling then, old son.'

Here's the Canal: it's dusk; we cross the bridge.
'Lead on there, by platoons.' (The Line's a-glare
With shell-fire through the poplars; distant rattle
Of rifles and machine-guns.) 'Fritz is there!
'Christ, ain't it lively, Sergeant? Is't a battle?'
More rain: the lightning blinks, and thunder rumbles.
'There's over-head artillery!' some chap grumbles.

What's all this mob at the cross-roads? Where are the guides?...
'Lead on with number One.' And off they go.
'Three minute intervals.' (Poor blundering files,
Sweating and blindly burdened; who's to know
If death will catch them in those two dark miles?)
More rain. 'Lead on, Head-quarters.' (That's the lot.)
'Who's that?... Oh, Sergeant-Major, don't get shot!
'And tell me, have we won this war or not?'

Siegfried Sassoon

Because We Are Going

Because we are going from our wonted places
To be task-ridden by one shattering Aim,
And terror hides in all our laughing faces
That had no will to die, no thirst for fame,
Hear our last word. In Hell we seek for Heaven;
The agony of wounds shall make us clean;
And the failures of our sloth shall be forgiven
When Silence holds the songs that might have been,
And what we served remains, superb, unshaken,
England, our June of blossom that shines above
Disastrous War; for whom we have forsaken
Ways that were rich and gleeful and filled with love.
Thus are we heroes; since we might not choose
To live where Honour gave us life to lose.

Siegfried Sassoon

Before Day

Come in this hour to set my spirit free
When earth is no more mine though night goes out,
And stretching forth these arms I cannot be
Lord of winged sunrise and dim Arcady:
When fieldward boys far off with clack and shout
From orchards scare the birds in sudden rout,
Come, ere my heart grows cold and full of doubt,
In the still summer dawns that waken me.

When the first lark goes up to look for day
And morning glimmers out of dreams, come then
Out of the songless valleys, over grey
Wide misty lands to bring me on my way:
For I am lone, a dweller among men
Hungered for what my heart shall never say.

Siegfried Sassoon

Before Day

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Siegfried Sassoon

Before The Battle

Music of whispering trees
Hushed by a broad-winged breeze
Where shaken water gleams;
And evening radiance falling
With reedy bird-notes calling.
O bear me safe through dark, you low-voiced streams.

I have no need to pray
That fear may pass away;
I scorn the growl and rumble of the fight
That summons me from cool
Silence of marsh and pool
And yellow lilies is landed in light
O river of stars and shadows, lead me through the night.

June 25th, 1916.

Siegfried Sassoon

Blighters

The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin
And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks
Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;
'We're sure the Kaiser loves our dear old Tanks!'

I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
Lurching to rag-time tunes, or 'Home, sweet Home',
And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls
To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.

Siegfried Sassoon

Blind

His headstrong thoughts that once in eager strife
Leapt sure from eye to brain and back to eye,
Weaving unconscious tapestries of life,
Are now thrust inward, dungeoned from the sky.
And he who has watched his world and loved it all,
Starless and old and blind, a sight for pity,
With feeble steps and fingers on the wall,
Gropes with his staff along the rumbling city.

Siegfried Sassoon

Bombardment

Four days the earth was rent and torn
By bursting steel,
The houses fell about us;
Three nights we dared not sleep,
Sweating, and listening for the imminent crash
Which meant our death.

The fourth night every man,
Nerve-tortured, racked to exhaustion,
Slept, muttering and twitching,
While the shells crashed overhead.

The fifth day there came a hush;
We left our holes
And looked above the wreckage of the earth
To where the white clouds moved in silent lines
Across the untroubled blue.

Siegfried Sassoon

Break Of Day

There seemed a smell of autumn in the air
At the bleak end of night; he shivered there
In a dank, musty dug-out where he lay,
Legs wrapped in sand-bags,—lumps of chalk and clay
Spattering his face. Dry-mouthed, he thought, 'To-day
We start the damned attack; and, Lord knows why,
Zero's at nine; how bloody if I'm done in
Under the freedom of that morning sky!'
And then he coughed and dozed, cursing the din.

Was it the ghost of autumn in that smell
Of underground, or God's blank heart grown kind,
That sent a happy dream to him in hell?—
Where men are crushed like clods, and crawl to find
Some crater for their wretchedness; who lie
In outcast immolation, doomed to die
Far from clean things or any hope of cheer,
Cowed anger in their eyes, till darkness brims
And roars into their heads, and they can hear
Old childish talk, and tags of foolish hymns.

He sniffs the chilly air; (his dreaming starts),
He's riding in a dusty Sussex lane
In quiet September; slowly night departs;
And he's a living soul, absolved from pain.
Beyond the brambled fences where he goes
Are glimmering fields with harvest piled in sheaves,
And tree-tops dark against the stars grown pale;
Then, clear and shrill, a distant farm-cock crows;
And there's a wall of mist along the vale
Where willows shake their watery-sounding leaves,
He gazes on it all, and scarce believes
That earth is telling its old peaceful tale;
He thanks the blessed world that he was born...
Then, far away, a lonely note of the horn.

They're drawing the Big Wood! Unlatch the gate,
And set Golumpus going on the grass;
He knows the corner where it's best to wait

And hear the crashing woodland chorus pass;
The corner where old foxes make their track
To the Long Spinney; that's the place to be.
The bracken shakes below an ivied tree,
And then a cub looks out; and 'Tally-o-back!'
He bawls, and swings his thong with volleying crack,—
All the clean thrill of autumn in his blood,
And hunting surging through him like a flood
In joyous welcome from the untroubled past;
While the war drifts away, forgotten at last.

Now a red, sleepy sun above the rim
Of twilight stares along the quiet weald,
And the kind, simple country shines revealed
In solitudes of peace, no longer dim.
The old horse lifts his face and thanks the light,
Then stretches down his head to crop the green.
All things that he has loved are in his sight;
The places where his happiness has been
Are in his eyes, his heart, and they are good.

. . . .

Hark! there's the horn: they're drawing the Big Wood.

Siegfried Sassoon

Butterflies

Frail Travellers, deftly flickering over the flowers;
O living flowers against the heedless blue
Of summer days, what sends them dancing through
This fiery-blossom'd revel of the hours?

Theirs are the musing silences between
The enraptured crying of shrill birds that make
Heaven in the wood while summer dawns awake;
And theirs the faintest winds that hush the green.

And they are as my soul that wings its way
Out of the starlit dimness into morn:
And they are as my tremulous being—born
To know but this, the phantom glare of day.

Siegfried Sassoon

Christ And The Soldier

I

The straggled soldier halted — stared at Him — Then clumsily dumped down upon his knees, Gasping

'O blessed crucifix, I'm beat !'

And Christ, still sentried by the seraphim, Near the front-line, between two splintered trees, Spoke him:

'My son, behold these hands and feet.'

The soldier eyed him upward, limb by limb, Paused at the Face, then muttered,

'Wounds like these Would shift a bloke to Blighty just a treat !'

Christ, gazing downward, grieving and ungrim, Whispered,

'I made for you the mysteries, Beyond all battles moves the Paraclete.'

II

The soldier chucked his rifle in the dust, And slipped his pack, and wiped his neck, and said —

'O Christ Almighty, stop this bleeding fight !'

Above that hill the sky was stained like rust With smoke. In sullen daybreak flaring red The guns were thundering bombardment's blight. The soldier cried,

'I was born full of lust, With hunger, thirst, and wishfulness to wed. Who cares today if I done wrong or right?'

Christ asked all pitying,

'Can you put no trust In my known word that shrives each faithful head ? Am I not resurrection, life and light ?'

III

Machine-guns rattled from below the hill; High bullets flicked and whistled through the leaves; And smoke came drifting from exploding shells.

Christ said

'Believe; and I can cleanse your ill. I have not died in vain between two thieves; Nor made a fruitless gift of miracles.'

The soldier answered,

'Heal me if you will, Maybe there's comfort when a soul believes In mercy, and we need it in these hells. But be you for both sides ? I'm paid to kill And if I shoot a man his mother grieves. Does that come into what your teaching tells ?'

A bird lit on the Christ and twittered gay; Then a breeze passed and shook the ripening corn. A Red Cross waggon bumped along the track. Forsaken Jesus dreamed in the desolate day — Uplifted Jesus, Prince of Peace forsworn — An observation post for the attack.

'Lord Jesus, ain't you got no more to say ?'

Bowed hung that head below the crown of thorns. The soldier shifted, and picked up his pack, And slung his gun, and stumbled on his way.

'O God,' he groaned, 'why ever was I born ?'

... The battle boomed, and no reply came back.

Siegfried Sassoon

Companions

Leave not your bough, my slender song-bird sweet,
But pipe me now your roundelay complete.

Come, gentle breeze, and tarrying on your way,
Whisper my trees what you have seen to-day.

Stand, golden cloud, until my song be done,
(For he's too proud) before the face of the sun.

So one did sing, and the other breathed a story;
Then both took wing, and the sun stepped forth in glory.

Siegfried Sassoon

Concert Party

(EGYPTIAN BASE CAMP)

They are gathering round....
Out of the twilight; over the grey-blue sand,
Shoals of low-jargoning men drift inward to the sound—
The jangle and throb of a piano ... tum-ti-tum...
Drawn by a lamp, they come
Out of the glimmering lines of their tents, over the shuffling sand.

O sing us the songs, the songs of our own land,
You warbling ladies in white.
Dimness conceals the hunger in our faces,
This wall of faces risen out of the night,
These eyes that keep their memories of the places
So long beyond their sight.

Jaded and gay, the ladies sing; and the chap in brown
Tilts his grey hat; jaunty and lean and pale,
He rattles the keys ... some actor-bloke from town...
God send you home; and then A long, long trail;
I hear you calling me; and Dixieland....
Sing slowly ... now the chorus ... one by one
We hear them, drink them; till the concert's done.
Silent, I watch the shadowy mass of soldiers stand.
Silent, they drift away, over the glimmering sand.

Kantara, April 1918.

Siegfried Sassoon

Conscripts

'Fall in, that awkward squad, and strike no more
Attractive attitudes! Dress by the right!
The luminous rich colours that you wore
Have changed to hueless khaki in the night.
Magic? What's magic got to do with you?
There's no such thing! Blood's red, and skies are blue.'

They gasped and sweated, marching up and down.
I drilled them till they cursed my raucous shout.
Love chucked his lute away and dropped his crown.
Rhyme got sore heels and wanted to fall out.
'Left, right! Press on your butts!' They looked at me
Reproachful; how I longed to set them free!

I gave them lectures on Defence, Attack;
They fidgeted and shuffled, yawned and sighed,
And boggled at my questions. Joy was slack,
And Wisdom gnawed his fingers, gloomy-eyed.
Young Fancy—how I loved him all the while—
Stared at his note-book with a rueful smile.

Their training done, I shipped them all to France,
Where most of those I'd loved too well got killed.
Rapture and pale Enchantment and Romance,
And many a sickly, slender lord who'd filled
My soul long since with litanies of sin,
Went home, because they couldn't stand the din.

But the kind, common ones that I despised
(Hardly a man of them I'd count as friend),
What stubborn-hearted virtues they disguised!
They stood and played the hero to the end,
Won gold and silver medals bright with bars,
And marched resplendent home with crowns and stars.

Siegfried Sassoon

Counter-Attack

We'd gained our first objective hours before
While dawn broke like a face with blinking eyes,
Pallid, unshaved and thirsty, blind with smoke.
Things seemed all right at first. We held their line,
With bombers posted, Lewis guns well placed,
And clink of shovels deepening the shallow trench.
The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs
High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps
And trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud,
Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled;
And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair,
Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering slime.
And then the rain began,—the jolly old rain!

A yawning soldier knelt against the bank,
Staring across the morning blar with fog;
He wondered when the Allemands would get busy;
And then, of course, they started with five-nines
Traversing, sure as fate, and never a dud.
Mute in the clamour of shells he watched them burst
Spouting dark earth and wire with gusts from hell,
While posturing giants dissolved in drifts of smoke.
He crouched and flinched, dizzy with galloping fear,
Sick for escape,—loathing the strangled horror
And butchered, frantic gestures of the dead.

An officer came blundering down the trench:
'Stand-to and man the fire-step!' On he went...
Gasping and bawling, 'Fire-step ... counter-attack!'
Then the haze lifted. Bombing on the right
Down the old sap: machine-guns on the left;
And stumbling figures looming out in front.
'O Christ, they're coming at us!' Bullets spat,
And he remembered his rifle ... rapid fire...
And started blazing wildly ... then a bang
Crumpled and spun him sideways, knocked him out
To grunt and wriggle: none heeded him; he choked
And fought the flapping veils of smothering gloom,
Lost in a blurred confusion of yells and groans...

Down, and down, and down, he sank and drowned,
Bleeding to death. The counter-attack had failed.

Siegfried Sassoon

David Cleek

I cannot think that Death will press his claim
To snuff you out or put you off your game:
You'll still contrive to play your steady round,
Though hurricanes may sweep the dismal ground,
And darkness blur the sandy-skirted green
Where silence gulfs the shot you strike so clean.

Saint Andrew guard your ghost, old David Cleek,
And send you home to Fifeshire once a week!
Good fortune speed your ball upon its way
When Heaven decrees its mightiest Medal Day;
Till saints and angels hymn for evermore
The miracle of your astounding score;
And He who keeps all players in His sight,
Walking the royal and ancient hills of light
Standing benignant at the eighteenth hole,
To everlasting Golf consigns your soul.

Siegfried Sassoon

Daybreak In A Garden

I heard the farm cocks crowing, loud, and faint, and thin,
When hooded night was going and one clear planet winked:
I heard shrill notes begin down the spired wood distinct,
When cloudy shoals were chinked and gilt with fires of day.
White-misted was the weald; the lawns were silver-grey;
The lark his lonely field for heaven had forsaken;
And the wind upon its way whispered the boughs of may,
And touched the nodding peony-flowers to bid them waken.

Siegfried Sassoon

Dead Musicians

I

From you, Beethoven, Bach, Mozart,
The substance of my dreams took fire.
You built cathedrals in my heart,
And lit my pinnacled desire.
You were the ardour and the bright
Procession of my thoughts toward prayer.
You were the wrath of storm, the light
On distant citadels aflare.

II

Great names, I cannot find you now
In these loud years of youth that strives
Through doom toward peace: upon my brow
I wear a wreath of banished lives.
You have no part with lads who fought
And laughed and suffered at my side.
Your fugues and symphonies have brought
No memory of my friends who died.

III

For when my brain is on their track,
In slangy speech I call them back.
With fox-trot tunes their ghosts I charm.
'Another little drink won't do us any harm.'
I think of rag-time; a bit of rag-time;
And see their faces crowding round
To the sound of the syncopated beat.
They've got such jolly things to tell,
Home from hell with a Blighty wound so neat...

. . . .

And so the song breaks off; and I'm alone.
They're dead ... For God's sake stop that gramophone.

Devotion To Duty

I was near the King that day. I saw him snatch
And briskly scan the G.H.Q. dispatch.
Thick-voiced, he read it out. (His face was grave.)
'This officer advanced with the first wave,

'And when our first objective had been gained,
'(Though wounded twice), reorganized the line:
'The spirit of the troops was by his fine
'Example most effectively sustained.'

He gripped his beard; then closed his eyes and said,
'Bathsheba must be warned that he is dead.
'Send for her. I will be the first to tell
'This wife how her heroic husband fell.'

Siegfried Sassoon

Died Of Wounds

His wet white face and miserable eyes
Brought nurses to him more than groans and sighs:
But hoarse and low and rapid rose and fell
His troubled voice: he did the business well.

The ward grew dark; but he was still complaining
And calling out for 'Dickie'. 'Curse the Wood!
'It's time to go. O Christ, and what's the good?
'We'll never take it, and it's always raining.'

I wondered where he'd been; then heard him shout,
'They snipe like hell! O Dickie, don't go out...
I fell asleep ... Next morning he was dead;
And some Slight Wound lay smiling on the bed.

Siegfried Sassoon

Does It Matter?

Does it matter? -losing your legs?
For people will always be kind,
And you need not show that you mind
When others come in after hunting
To gobble their muffins and eggs.
Does it matter? -losing you sight?
There's such splendid work for the blind;
And people will always be kind,
As you sit on the terrace remembering
And turning your face to the light.
Do they matter-those dreams in the pit?
You can drink and forget and be glad,
And people won't say that you're mad;
For they know that you've fought for your country,
And no one will worry a bit.

Siegfried Sassoon

Dreamers

Soldiers are citizens of death's gray land,
Drawing no dividend from time's to-morrows.
In the great hour of destiny they stand,
Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows.
Soldiers are sworn to action; they must win
Some flaming, fatal climax with their lives.
Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin
They think of firelit homes, clean beds, and wives.

I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,
Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,
And mocked by hopeless longing to regain
Bank-holidays, and picture shows, and spats,
And going to the office in the train.

Siegfried Sassoon

Dream-Forest

Where sunshine flecks the green,
Through towering woods my way
Goes winding all the day.

Scant are the flowers that bloom
Beneath the bosky screen
And cage of golden gloom.
Few are the birds that call,
Shrill-voiced and seldom seen.

Where silence masters all,
And light my footsteps fall,
The whispering runnels only
With blazing noon confer;
And comes no breeze to stir
The tangled thickets lonely.

Siegfried Sassoon

Dryads

When meadows are grey with the morn
In the dusk of the woods it is night:
The oak and the birch and the pine
War with the glimmer of light.

Dryads brown as the leaf
Move in the gloom of the glade;
When meadows are grey with the morn
Dim night in the wood has delayed.

The cocks that crow to the land
Are faint and hollow and shrill:
Dryads brown as the leaf
Whisper, and hide, and are still.

Siegfried Sassoon

Editorial Impressions

He seemed so certain 'all was going well',
As he discussed the glorious time he'd had
While visiting the trenches.

'One can tell

You've gathered big impressions!' grinned the lad
Who'd been severely wounded in the back
In some wiped-out impossible Attack.

'Impressions? Yes, most vivid! I am writing
A little book called Europe on the Rack,
Based on notes made while witnessing the fighting.

I hope I've caught the feeling of "the Line",
And the amazing spirit of the troops.

By Jove, those flying-chaps of ours are fine!

I watched one daring beggar looping loops,
Soaring and diving like some bird of prey.

And through it all I felt that splendour shine
Which makes us win.'

The soldier sipped his wine.

'Ah, yes, but it's the Press that leads the way!

Siegfried Sassoon

Elegy

Your dextrous wit will haunt us long
Wounding our grief with yesterday.
Your laughter is a broken song;
And death has found you, kind and gay.

We may forget those transient things
That made your charm and our delight:
But loyal love has deathless wings
That rise and triumph out of night.

So, in the days to come, your name
Shall be as music that ascends
When honour turns a heart from shame...
O heart of hearts! ... O friend of friends!

Siegfried Sassoon

Enemies

He stood alone in some queer sunless place
Where Armageddon ends. Perhaps he longed
For days he might have lived; but his young face
Gazed forth untroubled: and suddenly there thronged
Round him the hulking Germans that I shot
When for his death my brooding rage was hot.

He stared at them, half-wondering; and then
They told him how I'd killed them for his sake—
Those patient, stupid, sullen ghosts of men;
And still there seemed no answer he could make.
At last he turned and smiled. One took his hand
Because his face could make them understand.

Siegfried Sassoon

Everyone Sang

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;
And I was filled with such delight
As prisoned birds must find in freedom,
Winging wildly across the white
Orchards and dark-green fields; on--on--and out of sight.

Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;
And beauty came like the setting sun:
My heart was shaken with tears; and horror
Drifted away ... O, but Everyone
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.

Siegfried Sassoon

Ex-Service

Derision from the dead
Mocks armament madnes.
Redeem (each Ruler said)
Mankind. Men died to do it.
And some with glorying gladness
Bore arms for earth and bled:
But most went glumly through it
Dumbly doomed to rue it.

The darkness of their dying
Grows one with War recorded;
Whose swindled ghosts are crying
From shell-holes in the past,
Our deeds with lies were lauded,
Our bones with wrongs rewarded.
Dream voices these—denying
Dud laurels to the last.

Siegfried Sassoon

Falling Asleep

Voices moving about in the quiet house:
Thud of feet and a muffled shutting of doors:
Everyone yawning. Only the clocks are alert.

Out in the night there's autumn-smelling gloom
Crowded with whispering trees; across the park
A hollow cry of hounds like lonely bells:
And I know that the clouds are moving across the moon;
The low, red, rising moon. Now herons call
And wrangle by their pool; and hooting owls
Sail from the wood above pale stooks of oats.

Waiting for sleep, I drift from thoughts like these;
And where to-day was dream-like, build my dreams.
Music ... there was a bright white room below,
And someone singing a song about a soldier,
One hour, two hours ago: and soon the song
Will be 'last night': but now the beauty swings
Across my brain, ghost of remembered chords
Which still can make such radiance in my dream
That I can watch the marching of my soldiers,
And count their faces; faces; sunlit faces.

Falling asleep ... the herons, and the hounds....
September in the darkness; and the world
I've known; all fading past me into peace.

Siegfried Sassoon

Fancy Dress

Some Brave, awake in you to-night,
Knocked at your heart: an eagle's flight
Stirred in the feather on your head.
Your wide-set Indian eyes, alight
Above high cheek-bones smeared with red,
Unveiled cragg'd centuries, and led
You, the snared wraith of bygone things—
Wild ancestries of trackless Kings—
Out of the past ... So men have felt
Strange anger move them as they knelt
Praying to gods serenely starred
In heavens where tomahawks are barred.

Siegfried Sassoon

Fight To A Finish

The boys came back. Bands played and flags were flying,
And Yellow-Pressmen thronged the sunlit street
To cheer the soldiers who'd refrained from dying,
And hear the music of returning feet.
'Of all the thrills and ardours War has brought,
This moment is the finest.' (So they thought.)

Snapping their bayonets on to charge the mob,
Grim Fusiliers broke ranks with glint of steel,
At last the boys had found a cushy job.

. . . .

I heard the Yellow-Pressmen grunt and squeal;
And with my trusty bombers turned and went
To clear those Junkers out of Parliament.

Siegfried Sassoon

France

She triumphs, in the vivid green
Where sun and quivering foliage meet;
And in each soldier's heart serene;
When death stood near them they have seen
The radiant forests where her feet
Move on a breeze of silver sheen.

And they are fortunate, who fight
For gleaming landscapes swept and shafted
And crowned by cloud pavilions white;
Hearing such harmonies as might
Only from Heaven be downward wafted—
Voices of victory and delight.

Siegfried Sassoon

Glory Of Women

You love us when we're heroes, home on leave,
Or wounded in a mentionable place.
You worship decorations; you believe
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.
You make us shells. You listen with delight,
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.
You crown our distant ardours while we fight,
And mourn our laurelled memories when we're killed.
You can't believe that British troops 'retire'
When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run,
Trampling the terrible corpses--blind with blood.
O German mother dreaming by the fire,
While you are knitting socks to send your son
His face is trodden deeper in the mud.

Siegfried Sassoon

Goblin Revel

In gold and grey, with fleering looks of sin,
I watch them come; by two, by three, by four,
Advancing slow, with loutings they begin
Their woven measure, widening from the door;
While music-men behind are straddling in
With flutes to brisk their feet across the floor,—
And jangled dulcimers, and fiddles thin
That taunt the twirling antic through once more.

They pause, and hushed to whispers, steal away.
With cunning glances; silent go their shoon
On creakless stairs; but far away the dogs
Bark at some lonely farm: and haply they
Have clambered back into the dusky moon
That sinks beyond the marshes loud with frogs.

Siegfried Sassoon

Golgotha

Through darkness curves a spume of falling flares
That flood the field with shallow, blanching light.
The huddled sentry stares
On gloom at war with white,
And white receding slow, submerged in gloom.
Guns into mimic thunder burst and boom,
And mirthless laughter rakes the whistling night.
The sentry keeps his watch where no one stirs
But the brown rats, the nimble scavengers.

Siegfried Sassoon

Grandeur Of Ghosts

When I have heard small talk about great men
I climb to bed; light my two candles; then
Consider what was said; and put aside
What Such-a-one remarked and Someone-else replied.

They have spoken lightly of my deathless friends,
(Lamps for my gloom, hands guiding where I stumble,)
Quoting, for shallow conversational ends,
What Shelley shrilled, what Blake once wildly muttered

How can they use such names and be not humble?
I have sat silent; angry at what they uttered.
The dead bequeathed them life; the dead have said
What these can only memorize and mumble.

Siegfried Sassoon

Haunted

Evening was in the wood, louring with storm.
A time of drought had sucked the weedy pool
And baked the channels; birds had done with song.
Thirst was a dream of fountains in the moon,
Or willow-music blown across the water
Leisurely sliding on by weir and mill.

Uneasy was the man who wandered, brooding,
His face a little whiter than the dusk.
A drone of sultry wings flicker'd in his head.
The end of sunset burning thro' the boughs
Died in a smear of red; exhausted hours
Cumber'd, and ugly sorrows hemmed him in.

He thought: 'Somewhere there's thunder,' as he strove
To shake off dread; he dared not look behind him,
But stood, the sweat of horror on his face.
He blunder'd down a path, trampling on thistles,
In sudden race to leave the ghostly trees.
And: 'Soon I'll be in open fields,' he thought,
And half remembered starlight on the meadows,
Scent of mown grass and voices of tired men,
Fading along the field-paths; home and sleep
And cool-swept upland spaces, whispering leaves,
And far off the long churring night-jar's note.

But something in the wood, trying to daunt him,
Led him confused in circles through the thicket.
He was forgetting his old wretched folly,
And freedom was his need; his throat was choking.
Barbed brambles gripped and clawed him round his legs,
And he floundered over snags and hidden stumps.
Mumbling: 'I will get out! I must get out!'
Butting and thrusting up the baffling gloom,
Pausing to listen in a space 'twixt thorns,
He peers around with peering, frantic eyes.
An evil creature in the twilight looping,
Flapped blindly in his face. Beating it off,
He screeched in terror, and straightway something clambered

Heavily from an oak, and dropped, bent double,
To shamble at him zigzag, squat and bestial.
Headlong he charges down the wood, and falls
With roaring brain--agony--the snap't spark--
And blots of green and purple in his eyes.
Then the slow fingers groping on his neck,
And at his heart the strangling clasp of death.

Siegfried Sassoon

Hero

'Jack fell as he'd have wished,' the Mother said,
And folded up the letter that she'd read.
'The Colonel writes so nicely.' Something broke
In the tired voice that quavered to a choke.
She half looked up. 'We mothers are so proud
Of our dead soldiers.' Then her face was bowed.

Quietly the Brother Officer went out.
He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies
That she would nourish all her days, no doubt.
For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes
Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.

He thought how 'Jack', cold-footed, useless swine,
Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried
To get sent home, and how, at last, he died,
Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
Except that lonely woman with white hair.

Siegfried Sassoon

How To Die

Dark clouds are smouldering into red
While down the craters morning burns.
The dying soldier shifts his head
To watch the glory that returns;
He lifts his fingers toward the skies
Where holy brightness breaks in flame;
Radiance reflected in his eyes,
And on his lips a whispered name.

You'd think, to hear some people talk,
That lads go West with sobs and curses,
And sullen faces white as chalk,
Hankering for wreaths and tombs and hearses.
But they've been taught the way to do it
Like Christian soldiers; not with haste
And shuddering groans; but passing through it
With due regard for decent taste.

Siegfried Sassoon

I Stood With The Dead

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

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

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

Siegfried Sassoon

Idyll

In the grey summer garden I shall find you
With day-break and the morning hills behind you.
There will be rain-wet roses; stir of wings;
And down the wood a thrush that wakes and sings.
Not from the past you'll come, but from that deep
Where beauty murmurs to the soul asleep:
And I shall know the sense of life re-born
From dreams into the mystery of morn
Where gloom and brightness meet. And standing there
Till that calm song is done, at last we'll share
The league-spread, quiring symphonies that are
Joy in the world, and peace, and dawn's one star.

Siegfried Sassoon

In An Underground Dressing Station

Quietly they set their burden down: he tried
To grin; moaned; moved his head from side to side.

He gripped the stretcher; stiffened; glared; and screamed,
'O put my leg down, doctor, do!' (He'd got
A bullet in his ankle; and he'd been shot
Horribly through the guts.) The surgeon seemed
So kind and gentle, saying, above that crying,
'You
must
keep still, my lad.' But he was dying.

Siegfried Sassoon

In Barracks

The barrack-square, washed clean with rain,
Shines wet and wintry-grey and cold.
Young Fusiliers, strong-legged and bold,
March and wheel and march again.
The sun looks over the barrack gate,
Warm and white with glaring shine,
To watch the soldiers of the Line
That life has hired to fight with fate.

Fall out: the long parades are done.
Up comes the dark; down goes the sun.
The square is walled with windowed light.
Sleep well, you lusty Fusiliers;
Shut your brave eyes on sense and sight,
And banish from your dreamless ears
The bugle's dying notes that say,
'Another night; another day.'

Siegfried Sassoon

In Me, Past, Present, Future Meet

In me, past, present, future meet
To hold long chiding conference.
My lusts usurp the present tense
And strangle Reason in his seat.
My loves leap through the future's fence
To dance with dream-enfranchised feet.

In me the cave-man clasps the seer,
And garlanded Apollo goes
Chanting to Abraham's deaf ear.
In me the tiger sniffs the rose.
Look in my heart, kind friends, and tremble,
Since there your elements assemble.

Siegfried Sassoon

'In The Pink'

So Davies wrote: ' This leaves me in the pink. '
Then scrawled his name: ' Your loving sweetheart Willie '
With crosses for a hug. He'd had a drink
Of rum and tea; and, though the barn was chilly,
For once his blood ran warm; he had pay to spend,
Winter was passing; soon the year would mend.

He couldn't sleep that night. Stiff in the dark
He groaned and thought of Sundays at the farm,
When he'd go out as cheerful as a lark
In his best suit to wander arm-in-arm
With brown-eyed Gwen, and whisper in her ear
The simple, silly things she liked to hear.

And then he thought: to-morrow night we trudge
Up to the trenches, and my boots are rotten.
Five miles of stodgy clay and freezing sludge,
And everything but wretchedness forgotten.
To-night he's in the pink; but soon he'll die.
And still the war goes on; he don't know why.

Siegfried Sassoon

Invocation

Come down from heaven to meet me when my breath
Chokes, and through drumming shafts of stifling death
I stumble toward escape, to find the door
Opening on morn where I may breathe once more
Clear cock-crow airs across some valley dim
With whispering trees. While dawn along the rim
Of night's horizon flows in lakes of fire,
Come down from heaven's bright hill, my song's desire.

Belov'd and faithful, teach my soul to wake
In glades deep-ranked with flowers that gleam and shake
And flock your paths with wonder. In your gaze
Show me the vanquished vigil of my days.
Mute in that golden silence hung with green,
Come down from heaven and bring me in your eyes
Remembrance of all beauty that has been,
And stillness from the pools of Paradise.

Siegfried Sassoon

Joy-Bells

Ring your sweet bells; but let them be farewells
To the green-vista'd gladness of the past
That changed us into soldiers; swing your bells
To a joyful chime; but let it be the last.

What means this metal in windy belfries hung
When guns are all our need? Dissolve these bells
Whose tones are tuned for peace: with martial tongue
Let them cry doom and storm the sun with shells.

Bells are like fierce-browed prelates who proclaim
That 'if our Lord returned He'd fight for us.'
So let our bells and bishops do the same,
Shoulder to shoulder with the motor-bus.

Siegfried Sassoon

Lamentations

I found him in the guard-room at the Base.
From the blind darkness I had heard his crying
And blundered in. With puzzled, patient face
A sergeant watched him; it was no good trying
To stop it; for he howled and beat his chest.
And, all because his brother had gone west,
Raved at the bleeding war; his rampant grief
Moaned, shouted, sobbed, and choked, while he was kneeling
Half-naked on the floor. In my belief
Such men have lost all patriotic feeling.

Siegfried Sassoon

Limitations

If you could crowd them into forty lines!
Yes; you can do it, once you get a start;
All that you want is waiting in your head,
For long-ago you've learnt it off by heart.

. . . .

Begin: your mind's the room where you have slept,
(Don't pause for rhymes), till twilight woke you early.
The window stands wide-open, as it stood
When tree-tops loomed enchanted for a child
Hearing the dawn's first thrushes through the wood
Warbling (you know the words) serene and wild.

You've said it all before: you dreamed of Death,
A dim Apollo in the bird-voiced breeze
That drifts across the morning veiled with showers,
While golden weather shines among dark trees.

You've got your limitations; let them sing,
And all your life will waken with a cry:
Why should you halt when rapture's on the wing
And you've no limit but the cloud-flocked sky?...

But some chap shouts, 'Here, stop it; that's been done!'—
As God might holloa to the rising sun,
And then relent, because the glorying rays
Remind Him of green-glinting Eden days,
And Adam's trustful eyes as he looks up
From carving eagles on his beechwood cup.

Young Adam knew his job; he could condense
Life to an eagle from the unknown immense....
Go on, whoever you are; your lines can be
A whisper in the music from the weirs
Of song that plunge and tumble toward the sea
That is the uncharted mercy of our tears.

. . . .

I told you it was easy! ... Words are fools

Who follow blindly, once they get a lead.
But thoughts are kingfishers that haunt the pools
Of quiet; seldom-seen: and all you need
Is just that flash of joy above your dream.
So, when those forty platitudes are done,
You'll hear a bird-note calling from the stream
That wandered through your childhood; and the sun
Will strike the old flaming wonder from the waters....
And there'll be forty lines not yet begun.

Siegfried Sassoon

Lovers

You were glad to-night: and now you've gone away.
Flushed in the dark, you put your dreams to bed;
But as you fall asleep I hear you say
Those tired sweet drowsy words we left unsaid.

Sleep well: for I can follow you, to bless
And lull your distant beauty where you roam;
And with wild songs of hoarded loveliness
Recall you to these arms that were your home.

Siegfried Sassoon

Memorial Tablet

Squire nagged and bullied till I went to fight,
(Under Lord Derby's Scheme). I died in hell—
(They called it Passchendaele). My wound was slight,
And I was hobbling back; and then a shell
Burst slick upon the duck-boards: so I fell
Into the bottomless mud, and lost the light.

At sermon-time, while Squire is in his pew,
He gives my gilded name a thoughtful stare:
For, though low down upon the list, I'm there;
'In proud and glorious memory' ... that's my due.
Two bleeding years I fought in France, for Squire:
I suffered anguish that he's never guessed.
Once I came home on leave: and then went west...
What greater glory could a man desire?

Siegfried Sassoon

Memory

When I was young my heart and head were light,
And I was gay and feckless as a colt
Out in the fields, with morning in the may,
Wind on the grass, wings in the orchard bloom.
O thrilling sweet, my joy, when life was free
And all the paths led on from hawthorn-time
Across the carolling meadows into June.

But now my heart is heavy-laden. I sit
Burning my dreams away beside the fire:
For death has made me wise and bitter and strong;
And I am rich in all that I have lost.
O starshine on the fields of long-ago,
Bring me the darkness and the nightingale;
Dim wealds of vanished summer, peace of home,
And silence; and the faces of my friends.

Siegfried Sassoon

Microcosmos

I am that fantasy which race has wrought
Of mundane chance-material. I am time
Paeaned by the senses five like bells that chime.

I am that cramped and crumbling house of clay
Where mansoul weaves the secret webs of thought.
Venturer--automaton--I cannot tell
What powers and instincts animate and betray
And do their dreamwork in me. Seed and star,
Sown by the wind, in spirit I am far
From self, the dull control with whom I dwell.

Also I am ancestral. Aeons ahead
And ages back, both son and sire I live
Mote-like between the unquickened and the dead--
From whom I take, and unto whom I give.

Siegfried Sassoon

Middle-Ages

I heard a clash, and a cry,
And a horseman fleeing the wood.
The moon hid in a cloud.
Deep in shadow I stood.
'Ugly work!' thought I,
Holding my breath.
'Men must be cruel and proud,
'Jousting for death'.

With gusty glimmering shone
The moon; and the wind blew colder.
A man went over the hill,
Bent to his horse's shoulder.
'Time for me to be gone'...
Darkly I fled.
Owls in the wood were shrill,
And the moon sank red.

Siegfried Sassoon

Miracles

I dreamt I saw a huge grey boat in silence steaming
Down a canal; it drew the dizzy landscape after;
The solemn world was sucked along with it—a streaming
Land-slide of loveliness. O, but I rocked with laughter,
Staring, and clinging to my tree-top. For a lake
Of gleaming peace swept on behind. (I mustn't wake.)

And then great clouds gathered and burst in spumes of green
That plunged into the water; and the sun came out
On glittering islands thronged with orchards scarlet-bloomed;
And rosy-plumed flamingoes flashed across the scene...
O, but the beauty of their freedom made me shout...
And when I woke I wondered where on earth I'd been.

Siegfried Sassoon

Morning Express

Along the wind-swept platform, pinched and white,
The travellers stand in pools of wintry light,
Offering themselves to morn's long, slanting arrows.
The train's due; porters trundle laden barrows.
The train steams in, volleying resplendent clouds
Of sun-blown vapour. Hither and about,
Scared people hurry, storming the doors in crowds.
The officials seem to waken with a shout,
Resolved to hoist and plunder; some to the vans
Leap; others rumble the milk in gleaming cans.
Boys, indolent-eyed, from baskets leaning back,
Question each face; a man with a hammer steals
Stooping from coach to coach; with clang and clack
Touches and tests, and listens to the wheels.
Guard sounds a warning whistle, points to the clock
With brandished flag, and on his folded flock
Claps the last door: the monster grunts: 'Enough!'
Tightening his load of links with pant and puff.
Under the arch, then forth into blue day,
Glide the processional windows on their way,
And glimpse the stately folk who sit at ease
To view the world like kings taking the seas
in prosperous weather: drifting banners tell
Their progress to the counties; with them goes
The clamour of their journeying; while those
Who sped them stand to wave a last farewell.

Siegfried Sassoon

Morning-Glory

In this meadow starred with spring
Shepherds kneel before their king.
Mary throned, with dreaming eyes,
Gowned in blue like rain-washed skies,
Lifts her tiny son that he
May behold their courtesy.
And green-smocked children, awed and good,
Bring him blossoms from the wood.

Clear the sunlit steeples chime
Mary's coronation-time.
Loud the happy children quire
To the golden-windowed morn;
While the lord of their desire
Sleeps below the crimson thorn.

Siegfried Sassoon

Morning-Land

Old English songs, you bring to me
A simple sweetness somewhat kin
To birds that through the mystery
Of earliest morn make tuneful din,
While hamlet steeples sleepily
At cock-crow chime out three and four,
Till maids get up betime and go
With faces like the red sun low
Clattering about the dairy floor.

Siegfried Sassoon

Night On The Convoy

(ALEXANDRIA-MARSEILLES)

Out in the blustering darkness, on the deck
A gleam of stars looks down. Long blurs of black,
The lean Destroyers, level with our track,
Plunging and stealing, watch the perilous way
Through backward racing seas and caverns of chill spray.
One sentry by the davits, in the gloom
Stands mute: the boat heaves onward through the night.
Shrouded is every chink of cabined light:
And sluiced by floundering waves that hiss and boom
And crash like guns, the troop-ship shudders ... doom.

Now something at my feet stirs with a sigh;
And slowly growing used to groping dark,
I know that the hurricane-deck, down all its length,
Is heaped and spread with lads in sprawling strength—
Blanketed soldiers sleeping. In the stark
Danger of life at war, they lie so still,
All prostrate and defenceless, head by head...
And I remember Arras, and that hill
Where dumb with pain I stumbled among the dead.

We are going home. The troop-ship, in a thrill
Of fiery-chamber'd anguish, throbs and rolls.
We are going home ... victims ... three thousand souls.

May 1918.

Siegfried Sassoon

Night-Piece

Ye hooded witches, baleful shapes that moan,
Quench your fantastic lanterns and be still;
For now the moon through heaven sails alone,
Shedding her peaceful rays from hill to hill.
The faun from out his dim and secret place
Draws nigh the darkling pool and from his dream
Half-wakens, seeing there his sylvan face
Reflected, and the wistful eyes that gleam.

To his cold lips he sets the pipe to blow
Some drowsy note that charms the listening air:
The dryads from their trees come down and creep
Near to his side; monotonous and low,
He plays and plays till at the woodside there
Stirs to the voice of everlasting sleep.

Siegfried Sassoon

Nimrod In September

When half the drowsy world's a-bed
And misty morning rises red,
With jollity of horn and lusty cheer,
Young Nimrod urges on his dwindling rout;
Along the yellowing coverts we can hear
His horse's hoofs thud hither and about:
In mulberry coat he rides and makes
Huge clamour in the sultry brakes.

Siegfried Sassoon

Noah

When old Noah stared across the floods,
Sky and water melted into one
Looking-glass of shifting tides and sun.

Mountain-tops were few: the ship was foul:
All the morn old Noah marvelled greatly
At this weltering world that shone so stately,
Drowning deep the rivers and the plains.
Through the stillness came a rippling breeze;
Noah sighed, remembering the green trees.

Clear along the morning stooped a bird,—
Lit beside him with a blossomed sprig.
Earth was saved; and Noah danced a jig.

Siegfried Sassoon

October

Across the land a faint blue veil of mist
Seems hung; the woods wear yet arrayment sober
Till frost shall make them flame; silent and whist
The drooping cherry orchards of October
Like mournful pennons hang their shrivelling leaves
Russet and orange: all things now decay;
Long since ye garnered in your autumn sheaves,
And sad the robins pipe at set of day.

Now do ye dream of Spring when greening shaws
Confer with the shrewd breezes, and of slopes
Flower-kirtled, and of April, virgin guest;
Days that ye love, despite their windy flaws,
Since they are woven with all joys and hopes
Whereof ye nevermore shall be possessed.

Siegfried Sassoon

On Passing The New Menin Gate

Who will remember, passing through this Gate,
the unheroic dead who fed the guns?
Who shall absolve the foulness of their fate,-
Those doomed, conscripted, unvictorious ones?

Crudely renewed, the Salient holds its own.
Paid are its dim defenders by this pomp;
Paid, with a pile of peace-complacent stone,
The armies who endured that sullen swamp.

Here was the world's worst wound. And here with pride
'Their name liveth for ever', the Gateway claims.
Was ever an immolation so belied
as these intolerably nameless names?
Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime
Rise and deride this sepulchre of crime.

Siegfried Sassoon

Parted

Sleepless I listen to the surge and drone
And drifting roar of the town's undertone;
Till through quiet falling rain I hear the bells
Tolling and chiming their brief tune that tells
Day's midnight end. And from the day that's over
No flashes of delight I can recover;
But only dreary winter streets, and faces
Of people moving in loud clanging places:
And I in my loneliness, longing for you...

For all I did to-day, and all I'll do
To-morrow, in this city of intense
Arteried activities that throb and strive,
Is but a beating down of that suspense
Which holds me from your arms.
I am alive
Only that I may find you at the end
Of these slow-striking hours I toil to spend,
Putting each one behind me, knowing but this—
That all my days are turning toward your kiss;
That all expectancy awaits the deep
Consoling passion of your eyes, that keep
Their radiance for my coming, and their peace
For when I find in you my love's release.

Siegfried Sassoon

Picture-Show

And still they come and go: and this is all I know—
That from the gloom I watch an endless picture-show,
Where wild or listless faces flicker on their way,
With glad or grievous hearts I'll never understand
Because Time spins so fast, and they've no time to stay
Beyond the moment's gesture of a lifted hand.

And still, between the shadow and the blinding flame,
The brave despair of men flings onward, ever the same
As in those doom-lit years that wait them, and have been...
And life is just the picture dancing on a screen.

Siegfried Sassoon

Prelude To An Unwritten Masterpiece

You like my bird-sung gardens: wings and flowers;
Calm landscapes for emotion; star-lit lawns;
And Youth against the sun-rise ... 'Not profound;
'But such a haunting music in the sound:
'Do it once more; it helps us to forget'.

Last night I dreamt an old recurring scene—
Some complex out of childhood; (sex, of course!)
I can't remember how the trouble starts;
And then I'm running blindly in the sun
Down the old orchard, and there's something cruel
Chasing me; someone roused to a grim pursuit
Of clumsy anger ... Crash! I'm through the fence
And thrusting wildly down the wood that's dense
With woven green of safety; paths that wind
Moss-grown from glade to glade; and far behind,
One thwarted yell; then silence. I've escaped.

That's where it used to stop. Last night I went
Onward until the trees were dark and huge,
And I was lost, cut off from all return
By swamps and birdless jungles. I'd no chance
Of getting home for tea. I woke with shivers,
And thought of crocodiles in crawling rivers.

Some day I'll build (more ruggedly than Doughty)
A dark tremendous song you'll never hear.
My beard will be a snow-storm, drifting whiter
On bowed, prophetic shoulders, year by year.
And some will say, 'His work has grown so dreary.'
Others, 'He used to be a charming writer'.
And you, my friend, will query—
'Why can't you cut it short, you pompous blighter?'

Siegfried Sassoon

Prelude: The Troops

Dim, gradual thinning of the shapeless gloom
Shudders to drizzling daybreak that reveals
Disconsolate men who stamp their sodden boots
And turn dulled, sunken faces to the sky
Haggard and hopeless. They, who have beaten down
The stale despair of night, must now renew
Their desolation in the truce of dawn,
Murdering the livid hours that grope for peace.

Yet these, who cling to life with stubborn hands,
Can grin through storms of death and find a gap
In the clawed, cruel tangles of his defence.
They march from safety, and the bird-sung joy
Of grass-green thickets, to the land where all
Is ruin, and nothing blossoms but the sky
That hastens over them where they endure
Sad, smoking, flat horizons, reeking woods,
And foundered trench-lines volleying doom for doom.

O my brave brown companions, when your souls
Flock silently away, and the eyeless dead
Shame the wild beast of battle on the ridge,
Death will stand grieving in that field of war
Since your unvanquished hardihood is spent.
And through some mooned Valhalla there will pass
Battalions and battalions, scarred from hell;
The unreturning army that was youth;
The legions who have suffered and are dust.

Siegfried Sassoon

Reconciliation

When you are standing at your hero's grave,
Or near some homeless village where he died,
Remember, through your heart's rekindling pride,
The German soldiers who were loyal and brave.

Men fought like brutes; and hideous things were done;
And you have nourished hatred, harsh and blind.
But in that Golgotha perhaps you'll find
The mothers of the men who killed your son.

Siegfried Sassoon

Remorse

Lost in the swamp and welter of the pit,
He flounders off the duck-boards; only he knows
Each flash and spouting crash,--each instant lit
When gloom reveals the streaming rain. He goes
Heavily, blindly on. And, while he blunders,
"Could anything be worse than this?"--he wonders,
Remembering how he saw those Germans run,
Screaming for mercy among the stumps of trees:
Green-faced, they dodged and darted: there was one
Livid with terror, clutching at his knees. . .
Our chaps were sticking 'em like pigs . . . "O hell!"
He thought--"there's things in war one dare not tell
Poor father sitting safe at home, who reads
Of dying heroes and their deathless deeds."

Siegfried Sassoon

Repression Of War Experience

Now light the candles; one; two; there's a moth;
What silly beggars they are to blunder in
And scorch their wings with glory, liquid flame—
No, no, not that,—it's bad to think of war,
When thoughts you've gagged all day come back to scare you;
And it's been proved that soldiers don't go mad
Unless they lose control of ugly thoughts
That drive them out to jabber among the trees.

Now light your pipe; look, what a steady hand.
Draw a deep breath; stop thinking; count fifteen,
And you're as right as rain...
Why won't it rain?...
I wish there'd be a thunder-storm to-night,
With bucketsful of water to sluice the dark,
And make the roses hang their dripping heads.
Books; what a jolly company they are,
Standing so quiet and patient on their shelves,
Dressed in dim brown, and black, and white, and green,
And every kind of colour. Which will you read?
Come on; O do read something; they're so wise.
I tell you all the wisdom of the world
Is waiting for you on those shelves; and yet
You sit and gnaw your nails, and let your pipe out,
And listen to the silence: on the ceiling
There's one big, dizzy moth that bumps and flutters;
And in the breathless air outside the house
The garden waits for something that delays.
There must be crowds of ghosts among the trees,—
Not people killed in battle,—they're in France,—
But horrible shapes in shrouds—old men who died
Slow, natural deaths,—old men with ugly souls,
Who wore their bodies out with nasty sins.

. . . .

You're quiet and peaceful, summering safe at home;
You'd never think there was a bloody war on!...
O yes, you would ... why, you can hear the guns.
Hark! Thud, thud, thud,—quite soft ... they never cease—

Those whispering guns—O Christ, I want to go out
And screech at them to stop—I'm going crazy;
I'm going stark, staring mad because of the guns.

Siegfried Sassoon

Sassoon's Public Statement Of Defiance

'I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it.

I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation.

I have seen and endured the suffering of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust. I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerity's for which the fighting men are being sacrificed.

On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realise.'

Siegfried Sassoon

Secret Music

I keep such music in my brain
No din this side of death can quell;
Glory exulting over pain,
And beauty, garlanded in hell.

My dreaming spirit will not heed
The roar of guns that would destroy
My life that on the gloom can read
Proud-surgin melodies of joy.

To the world's end I went, and found
Death in his carnival of glare;
But in my torment I was crowned,
And music dawned above despair.

Siegfried Sassoon

Sick Leave

When I'm asleep, dreaming and lulled and warm,—
They come, the homeless ones, the noiseless dead.
While the dim charging breakers of the storm
Bellow and drone and rumble overhead,
Out of the gloom they gather about my bed.
They whisper to my heart; their thoughts are mine.
'Why are you here with all your watches ended?
From Ypres to Frise we sought you in the Line.'
In bitter safety I awake, unfriended;
And while the dawn begins with slashing rain
I think of the Battalion in the mud.
'When are you going out to them again?
Are they not still your brothers through our blood?'

Siegfried Sassoon

Slumber-Song

Sleep; and my song shall build about your bed
A paradise of dimness. You shall feel
The folding of tired wings; and peace will dwell
Throned in your silence: and one hour shall hold
Summer, and midnight, and immensity
Lulled to forgetfulness. For, where you dream,
The stately gloom of foliage shall embower
Your slumbering thought with tapestries of blue.
And there shall be no memory of the sky,
Nor sunlight with its cruelty of swords.
But, to your soul that sinks from deep to deep
Through drowned and glimmering colour, Time shall be
Only slow rhythmic swaying; and your breath;
And roses in the darkness; and my love.

Siegfried Sassoon

Solar Eclipse

Observe these blue solemnities of sky
Offering for the academes of after-ages
A mythologic welkin freaked with white!

Listen : one tiny tinkling rivulet
Accentuates the super-sultry stillness
That drones on ripening landscapes which imply
Serene Parnassus plagued with amorous goats.

* * * *

Far down the vale Apollo has pursued
The noon-bedazzled nymph whose hunted heart
Holds but the trampling panic whence it fled,
And now the heavens are piled with darkening trouble
And counter-march of clouds that troop intent
Fire-crested into conflict.

Daphne turns

At the wood's edge in bronze and olive gloom:
Sickness assails the sun whose blazing disc
Dwindles : the Eden of those auburn slopes
Lours in the tarnished copper of eclipse.

Yet virgin in her god-impelled approach
To Graeco-Roman ravishment, she waits
While the unsated python slides to crush
Her lust-eluding fleetness. Envious Jove
Rumbles Olympus. All the classic world
Leans breathless toward the legend she creates.

From thunderous vapour smites the immortal beam . . .
Then, crowned with fangs of foliage, flames the god.

* * * *

' Apollo ! ' ... Up the autumn valley echoes
A hollow shout from nowhere. Daphne's limbs
Lapse into laureldom : green-shadowed flesh
Writhes aborescent; glamour obscures her gaze
With blind and bossed distortion. She escapes.

Siegfried Sassoon

Song-Books Of The War

In fifty years, when peace outshines
Remembrance of the battle lines,
Adventurous lads will sigh and cast
Proud looks upon the plundered past.
On summer morn or winter's night,
Their hearts will kindle for the fight,
Reading a snatch of soldier-song,
Savage and jaunty, fierce and strong;
And through the angry marching rhymes
Of blind regret and haggard mirth,
They'll envy us the dazzling times
When sacrifice absolved our earth.

Some ancient man with silver locks
Will lift his weary face to say:
'War was a fiend who stopped our clocks
Although we met him grim and gay.'
And then he'll speak of Haig's last drive,
Marvelling that any came alive
Out of the shambles that men built
And smashed, to cleanse the world of guilt.
But the boys, with grin and sidelong glance,
Will think, 'Poor grandad's day is done.'
And dream of lads who fought in France
And lived in time to share the fun.

Siegfried Sassoon

South Wind

Where have you been, South Wind, this May-day morning,—
With larks aloft, or skimming with the swallow,
Or with blackbirds in a green, sun-glintoned thicket?

Oh, I heard you like a tyrant in the valley;
Your ruffian haste shook the young, blossoming orchards;
You clapped rude hands, hallooing round the chimney,
And white your pennons streamed along the river.

You have robbed the bee, South Wind, in your adventure,
Blustering with gentle flowers; but I forgave you
When you stole to me shyly with scent of hawthorn.

Siegfried Sassoon

Sporting Acquaintances

I watched old squatting Chimpanzee: he traced
His painful patterns in the dirt: I saw
Red-haired Ourang-utang, whimsical-faced,
Chewing a sportsman's meditative straw:
I'd met them years ago, and half-forgotten
They'd come to grief (but how, I'd never heard,
Poor beggars!); still, it seemed so rude and rotten
To stand and gape at them with never a word.

I ventured 'Ages since we met,' and tried
My candid smile of friendship; no success.
One scratched his hairy thigh, while t'other sighed
And glanced away. I saw they liked me less
Than when, on Epsom Downs, in cloudless weather,
We backed The Tetrarch and got drunk together.

Siegfried Sassoon

Stand-To: Good Friday Morning

I'd been on duty from two till four.
I went and stared at the dug-out door.
Down in the frowst I heard them snore.
'Stand to!' Somebody grunted and swore.
Dawn was misty; the skies were still;
Larks were singing, discordant, shrill;
They seemed happy; but I felt ill.
Deep in water I splashed my way
Up the trench to our bogged front line.
Rain had fallen the whole damned night.
O Jesus, send me a wound to-day,
And I'll believe in Your bread and wine,
And get my bloody old sins washed white!

Siegfried Sassoon

Storm And Sunlight

I

In barns we crouch, and under stacks of straw,
Harking the storm that rides a hurtling legion
Up the arched sky, and speeds quick heels of panic
With growling thunder loosed in fork and clap
That echoes crashing thro' the slumbrous vault.
The whispering woodlands darken: vulture Gloom
Stoops, menacing the skeltering flocks of Light,
Where the gaunt shepherd shakes his gleaming staff
And foots with angry tidings down the slope.
Drip, drip; the rain steals in through soaking thatch
By cob-webbed rafters to the dusty floor.
Drums shatter in the tumult; wrathful Chaos
Points pealing din to the zenith, then resolves
Terror in wonderment with rich collapse.

II

Now from drenched eaves a swallow darts to skim
The crystal stillness of an air unveiled
To tremulous blue. Raise your bowed heads, and let
Your horns adore the sky, ye patient kine!
Haste, flashing brooks! Small, chuckling rills, rejoice!
Be open-eyed for Heaven, ye pools of peace!
Shine, rain-bow hills! Dream on, fair glimpsèd vale
In haze of drifting gold! And all sweet birds,
Sing out your raptures to the radiant leaves!
And ye, close huddling Men, come forth to stand
A moment simple in the gaze of God
That sweeps along your pastures! Breathe his might!
Lift your blind faces to be filled with day,
And share his benediction with the flowers.

Siegfried Sassoon

Stretcher Case

He woke; the clank and racket of the train
Kept time with angry throbbings in his brain.
Then for a while he lapsed and drowsed again.

At last he lifted his bewildered eyes
And blinked, and rolled them sidelong; hills and skies,
Heavily wooded, hot with August haze,
And, slipping backward, golden for his gaze,
Acres of harvest.

Feebly now he drags
Exhausted ego back from glooms and quags
And blasting tumult, terror, hurtling glare,
To calm and brightness, havens of sweet air.
He sighed, confused; then drew a cautious breath;
This level journeying was no ride through death.
'If I were dead,' he mused, 'there'd be no thinking—
Only some plunging underworld of sinking,
And hueless, shifting welter where I'd drown.'

Then he remembered that his name was Brown.

But was he back in Blighty? Slow he turned,
Till in his heart thanksgiving leapt and burned.
There shone the blue serene, the prosperous land,
Trees, cows and hedges; skipping these, he scanned
Large, friendly names, that change not with the year,
Lung Tonic, Mustard, Liver Pills and Beer.

Siegfried Sassoon

Suicide In The Trenches

I knew a simple soldier boy
Who grinned at life in empty joy,
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,
And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
He put a bullet through his brain.
No one spoke of him again.

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go.

Siegfried Sassoon

Survivors

No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain
Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk.
Of course they're 'longing to go out again,'—
These boys with old, scared faces, learning to walk.
They'll soon forget their haunted nights; their cowed
Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died,—
Their dreams that drip with murder; and they'll be proud
Of glorious war that shatter'd all their pride...
Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;
Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad.

Craiglockart. October, 1917.

Siegfried Sassoon

The Choral Union

He staggered in from night and frost and fog
And lampless streets: he'd guzzled like a hog
And drunk till he was dazed. And now he came
To hear—he couldn't call to mind the name—
But he'd been given a ticket for the show,
And thought he'd (hiccup) chance his luck and go.

The hall swam in his eyes, and soaring light
Was dazzling splendid after the dank night.
He sat and blinked, safe in his cushioned seat,
And licked his lips; he'd like a brandy, neat.

'Who is the King of Glory?' they were saying,
He pricked his ears; what was it? Were they praying?...
By God, it might be Heaven! For singers stood
Ranked in pure white; and everyone seemed good;
And clergymen were sitting meekly round
With joyful faces, drinking in the sound;
And holy women, and plump whiskered men.
Could this be Heaven? And was he dead? And then
They all stood up; the mighty chorus broke
In storms of song above those blameless folk;
And 'Hallelujah, Hallelujah!' rang
The burden of the triumph that they sang.

He gasped; it must be true; he'd got to Heaven
With all his sins that seventy times were seven;
And whispering 'Hallelujah' mid their shout,
He wondered when Lord God would turn him out.

Siegfried Sassoon

The Dark House

Dusk in the rain-soaked garden,
And dark the house within.
A door creaked: someone was early
To watch the dawn begin.
But he stole away like a thief
In the chilly, star-bright air:
Though the house was shuttered for slumber,
He had left one wakeful there.

Nothing moved in the garden.
Never a bird would sing,
Nor shake and scatter the dew from the boughs
With shy and startled wing.
But when that lover had passed the gate
A quavering thrush began...
'Come back; come back!' he shrilled to the heart
Of the passion-plighted man.

Siegfried Sassoon

The Death-Bed

He drowsed and was aware of silence heaped
Round him, unshaken as the steadfast walls;
Aqueous like floating rays of amber light,
Soaring and quivering in the wings of sleep.
Silence and safety; and his mortal shore
Lipped by the inward, moonless waves of death.

Someone was holding water to his mouth.
He swallowed, unresisting; moaned and dropped
Through crimson gloom to darkness; and forgot
The opiate throb and ache that was his wound.
Water—calm, sliding green above the weir.
Water—a sky-lit alley for his boat,
Bird-voiced, and bordered with reflected flowers
And shaken hues of summer; drifting down,
He dipped contented oars, and sighed, and slept.

Night, with a gust of wind, was in the ward,
Blowing the curtain to a glimmering curve.
Night. He was blind; he could not see the stars
Glinting among the wraiths of wandering cloud;
Queer blots of colour, purple, scarlet, green,
Flickered and faded in his drowning eyes.

Rain—he could hear it rustling through the dark;
Fragrance and passionless music woven as one;
Warm rain on drooping roses; pattering showers
That soak the woods; not the harsh rain that sweeps
Behind the thunder, but a trickling peace,
Gently and slowly washing life away.

He stirred, shifting his body; then the pain
Leapt like a prowling beast, and gripped and tore
His groping dreams with grinding claws and fangs.
But someone was beside him; soon he lay
Shuddering because that evil thing had passed.
And death, who'd stepped toward him, paused and stared.

Light many lamps and gather round his bed.

Lend him your eyes, warm blood, and will to live.
Speak to him; rouse him; you may save him yet.
He's young; he hated War; how should he die
When cruel old campaigners win safe through?

But death replied: 'I choose him.' So he went,
And there was silence in the summer night;
Silence and safety; and the veils of sleep.
Then, far away, the thudding of the guns.

Siegfried Sassoon

The Dragon And The Undying

All night the flares go up; the Dragon sings
And beats upon the dark with furious wings;
And, stung to rage by his own darting fires,
Reaches with grappling coils from town to town;
He lusts to break the loveliness of spires,
And hurls their martyred music toppling down.
Yet, though the slain are homeless as the breeze,

Vocal are they, like storm-bewilder'd seas.
Their faces are the fair, unshrouded night,
And planets are their eyes, their ageless dreams.
Tenderly stooping earthward from their height,
They wander in the dusk with chanting streams,
And they are dawn-lit trees, with arms up-flung,
To hail the burning heavens they left unsung.

Siegfried Sassoon

The Dream

I

Moonlight and dew-drenched blossom, and the scent
Of summer gardens; these can bring you all
Those dreams that in the starlit silence fall:
Sweet songs are full of odours.
While I went
Last night in drizzling dusk along a lane,
I passed a squalid farm; from byre and midden
Came the rank smell that brought me once again
A dream of war that in the past was hidden.

II

Up a disconsolate straggling village street
I saw the tired troops trudge: I heard their feet.
The cheery Q.M.S. was there to meet
And guide our Company in...
I watched them stumble
Into some crazy hovel, too beat to grumble;
Saw them file inward, slipping from their backs
Rifles, equipment, packs.
On filthy straw they sit in the gloom, each face
Bowed to patched, sodden boots they must unlace,
While the wind chills their sweat through chinks and cracks.

III

I'm looking at their blistered feet; young Jones
Stares up at me, mud-splashed and white and jaded;
Out of his eyes the morning light has faded.
Old soldiers with three winters in their bones
Puff their damp Woodbines, whistle, stretch their toes:
They can still grin at me, for each of 'em knows
That I'm as tired as they are...
Can they guess
The secret burden that is always mine?—
Pride in their courage; pity for their distress;
And burning bitterness

That I must take them to the accursèd Line.

IV

I cannot hear their voices, but I see
Dim candles in the barn: they gulp their tea,
And soon they'll sleep like logs. Ten miles away
The battle winks and thuds in blundering strife.
And I must lead them nearer, day by day,
To the foul beast of war that bludgeons life.

Siegfried Sassoon

The Dreamers

Soldiers are citizens of death's gray land,
Drawing no dividend from time's to-morrows.
In the great hour of destiny they stand,
Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows.
Soldiers are sworn to action; they must win
Some flaming, fatal climax with their lives.
Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin
They think of firelit homes, clean beds, and wives.

I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,
Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,
And mocked by hopeless longing to regain
Bank-holidays, and picture shows, and spats,
And going to the office in the train.

Siegfried Sassoon

The Dug-Out

Why do you lie with your legs ungainly huddled,
And one arm bent across your sullen, cold,
Exhausted face? It hurts my heart to watch you,
Deep-shadowed from the candle's guttering gold;
And you wonder why I shake you by the shoulder;
Drowsy, you mumble and sigh and turn your head...
<i>You are too young to fall asleep for ever;
And when you sleep you remind me of the dead. </i>

Siegfried Sassoon

The Fathers

Snug at the club two fathers sat,
Gross, goggle-eyed, and full of chat.
One of them said: 'My eldest lad
Writes cheery letters from Bagdad.
But Arthur's getting all the fun
At Arras with his nine-inch gun.'

'Yes,' wheezed the other, 'that's the luck!
My boy's quite broken-hearted, stuck
In England training all this year.
Still, if there's truth in what we hear,
The Huns intend to ask for more
Before they bolt across the Rhine.'
I watched them toddle through the door—
These impotent old friends of mine.

Siegfried Sassoon

The General

'Good-morning; good-morning!' the General said
When we met him last week on our way to the line.
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,
And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
'He's a cheery old card,' grunted Harry to Jack
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.

. . . .

But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

Siegfried Sassoon

The Goldsmith

This job's the best I've done.' He bent his head
Over the golden vessel that he'd wrought.
A bird was singing. But the craftsman's thought
Is a forgotten language, lost and dead.

He sighed and stretch'd brown arms. His friend came in
And stood beside him in the morning sun.
The goldwork glitter'd.... 'That's the best I've done.
'And now I've got a necklace to begin.'

This was at Gnosos, in the isle of Crete...
A girl was selling flowers along the street.

Siegfried Sassoon

The Hawthorn Tree

Not much to me is yonder lane
Where I go every day;
But when there's been a shower of rain
And hedge-birds whistle gay,
I know my lad that's out in France
With fearsome things to see
Would give his eyes for just one glance
At our white hawthorn tree.

. . . .

Not much to me is yonder lane
Where he so longs to tread:
But when there's been a shower of rain
I think I'll never weep again
Until I've heard he's dead.

Siegfried Sassoon

The Heritage

Cry out on Time that he may take away
Your cold philosophies that give no hint
Of spirit-quicken'd flesh; fall down and pray
That Death come never with a face of flint:
Death is our heritage; with Life we share
The sunlight that must own his darkening hour:
Within his very presence yet we dare
To gather gladness like a fading flower.

For even as this, our joy not long may live
Perfect; and most in change the heart can trace
The miracle of life and human things:
All we have held to destiny we give;
Dawn glimmers on the soul-forsaken face;
Not we, but others, hear the bird that sings.

Siegfried Sassoon

The Hero

'Jack fell as he'd have wished,' the mother said,
And folded up the letter that she'd read.
'The Colonel writes so nicely.' Something broke
In the tired voice that quavered to a choke.
She half looked up. 'We mothers are so proud
Of our dead soldiers.' Then her face was bowed.

Quietly the Brother Officer went out.
He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies
That she would nourish all her days, no doubt
For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes
Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.

He thought how 'Jack', cold-footed, useless swine,
Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried
To get sent home, and how, at last, he died,
Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
Except that lonely woman with white hair.

Siegfried Sassoon

The Imperfect Lover

I never asked you to be perfect—did I?—
Though often I've called you sweet, in the invasion
Of mastering love. I never prayed that you
Might stand, unsoiled, angelic and inhuman,
Pointing the way toward Sainthood like a sign-post.

Oh yes, I know the way to heaven was easy.
We found the little kingdom of our passion
That all can share who walk the road of lovers.
In wild and secret happiness we stumbled;
And gods and demons clamoured in our senses.

But I've grown thoughtful now. And you have lost
Your early-morning freshness of surprise
At being so utterly mine: you've learned to fear
The gloomy, stricken places in my soul,
And the occasional ghosts that haunt my gaze.

You made me glad; and I can still return
To you, the haven of my lonely pride:
But I am sworn to murder those illusions
That blossom from desire with desperate beauty:
And there shall be no falsehood in our failure;
Since, if we loved like beasts, the thing is done,
And I'll not hide it, though our heaven be hell.

You dream long liturgies of our devotion.
Yet, in my heart, I dread our love's destruction.
But, should you grow to hate me, I would ask
No mercy of your mood: I'd have you stand
And look me in the eyes, and laugh, and smite me.

Then I should know, at least, that truth endured,
Though love had died of wounds. And you could leave me
Unvanquished in my atmosphere of devils.

Siegfried Sassoon

The Investiture

GOD with a Roll of Honour in His hand
Sits welcoming the heroes who have died,
While sorrowless angels ranked on either side
Stand easy in Elysium's meadow-land.
Then you come shyly through the garden gate,
Wearing a blood-soaked bandage on your head;
And God says something kind because you're dead,
And homesick, discontented with your fate.

If I were there we'd snowball Death with skulls;
Or ride away to hunt in Devil's Wood
With ghosts of puppies that we walked of old.
But you're alone; and solitude annuls
Our earthly jokes; and strangely wise and good
You roam forlorn along the streets of gold.

Siegfried Sassoon

The Kiss

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

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

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

Siegfried Sassoon

The Last Meeting

I

Because the night was falling warm and still
Upon a golden day at April's end,
I thought; I will go up the hill once more
To find the face of him that I have lost,
And speak with him before his ghost has flown
Far from the earth that might not keep him long.

So down the road I went, pausing to see
How slow the dusk drew on, and how the folk
Loitered about their doorways, well-content
With the fine weather and the waxing year.
The miller's house, that glimmered with grey walls,
Turned me aside; and for a while I leaned
Along the tottering rail beside the bridge
To watch the dripping mill-wheel green with damp.
The miller peered at me with shadowed eyes
And pallid face: I could not hear his voice
For sound of the weir's plunging. He was old.
His days went round with the unhurrying wheel.

Moving along the street, each side I saw
The humble, kindly folk in lamp-lit rooms;
Children at table; simple, homely wives;
Strong, grizzled men; and soldiers back from war,
Scaring the gaping elders with loud talk.

Soon all the jumbled roofs were down the hill,
And I was turning up the grassy lane
That goes to the big, empty house that stands
Above the town, half-hid by towering trees.
I looked below and saw the glinting lights:
I heard the treble cries of bustling life,
And mirth, and scolding; and the grind of wheels.
An engine whistled, piercing-shrill, and called
High echoes from the sombre slopes afar;
Then a long line of trucks began to move.

It was quite still; the columned chestnuts stood
Dark in their noble canopies of leaves.

I thought: 'A little longer I'll delay,
And then he'll be more glad to hear my feet,
And with low laughter ask me why I'm late.
The place will be too dim to show his eyes,
But he will loom above me like a tree,
With lifted arms and body tall and strong.'

There stood the empty house; a ghostly hulk
Becalmed and huge, massed in the mantling dark,
As builders left it when quick-shattering war
Leapt upon France and called her men to fight.
Lightly along the terraces I trod,
Crunching the rubble till I found the door
That gaped in twilight, framing inward gloom.
An owl flew out from under the high eaves
To vanish secretly among the firs,
Where lofty boughs netted the gleam of stars.
I stumbled in; the dusty floors were strewn
With cumbering piles of planks and props and beams;
Tall windows gapped the walls; the place was free
To every searching gust and jousting gale;
But now they slept; I was afraid to speak,
And heavily the shadows crowded in.

I called him, once; then listened: nothing moved:
Only my thumping heart beat out the time.
Whispering his name, I groped from room to room.

Quite empty was that house; it could not hold
His human ghost, remembered in the love
That strove in vain to be companioned still.

II

Blindly I sought the woods that I had known
So beautiful with morning when I came
Amazed with spring that wove the hazel twigs
With misty raiment of awakening green.
I found a holy dimness, and the peace
Of sanctuary, austerely built of trees,

And wonder stooping from the tranquil sky.

Ah! but there was no need to call his name.
He was beside me now, as swift as light.
I knew him crushed to earth in scentless flowers,
And lifted in the rapture of dark pines.
'For now,' he said, 'my spirit has more eyes
Than heaven has stars; and they are lit by love.
My body is the magic of the world,
And dawn and sunset flame with my spilt blood.
My breath is the great wind, and I am filled
With molten power and surge of the bright waves
That chant my doom along the ocean's edge.

'Look in the faces of the flowers and find
The innocence that shrives me; stoop to the stream
That you may share the wisdom of my peace.
For talking water travels undismayed.
The luminous willows lean to it with tales
Of the young earth; and swallows dip their wings
Where showering hawthorn strews the lanes of light.

'I can remember summer in one thought
Of wind-swept green, and deeps of melting blue,
And scent of limes in bloom; and I can hear
Distinct the early mower in the grass,
Whetting his blade along some morn of June.

'For I was born to the round world's delight,
And knowledge of enfolding motherhood,
Whose tenderness, that shines through constant toil,
Gathers the naked children to her knees.
In death I can remember how she came
To kiss me while I slept; still I can share
The glee of childhood; and the fleeting gloom
When all my flowers were washed with rain of tears.

'I triumph in the choruses of birds,
Bursting like April buds in gyres of song.
My meditations are the blaze of noon
On silent woods, where glory burns the leaves.
I have shared breathless vigils; I have slaked

The thirst of my desires in bounteous rain
Pouring and splashing downward through the dark.
Loud storm has roused me with its winking glare,
And voice of doom that crackles overhead.
I have been tired and watchful, craving rest,
Till the slow-footed hours have touched my brows
And laid me on the breast of sundering sleep.'

III

I know that he is lost among the stars,
And may return no more but in their light.
Though his hushed voice may call me in the stir
Of whispering trees, I shall not understand.
Men may not speak with stillness; and the joy
Of brooks that leap and tumble down green hills
Is faster than their feet; and all their thoughts
Can win no meaning from the talk of birds.

My heart is fooled with fancies, being wise;
For fancy is the gleaming of wet flowers
When the hid sun looks forth with golden stare.
Thus, when I find new loveliness to praise,
And things long-known shine out in sudden grace,
Then will I think: 'He moves before me now.'
So he will never come but in delight,
And, as it was in life, his name shall be
Wonder awaking in a summer dawn,
And youth, that dying, touched my lips to song.

Flixécourt. May 1916.

Siegfried Sassoon

The One-Legged Man

Propped on a stick he viewed the August weald;
Squat orchard trees and oasts with painted cowls;
A homely, tangled hedge, a corn-stalked field,
And sound of barking dogs and farmyard fowls.

And he'd come home again to find it more
Desirable than ever it was before.
How right it seemed that he should reach the span
Of comfortable years allowed to man!
Splendid to eat and sleep and choose a wife,
Safe with his wound, a citizen of life.
He hobbled blithely through the garden gate,
And thought: 'Thank God they had to amputate!'

Siegfried Sassoon

The Poet As Hero

You've heard me, scornful, harsh, and discontented,
Mocking and loathing War: you've asked me why
Of my old, silly sweetness I've repented--
My ecstasies changed to an ugly cry.

You are aware that once I sought the Grail,
Riding in armour bright, serene and strong;
And it was told that through my infant wail
There rose immortal semblances of song.

But now I've said good-bye to Galahad,
And am no more the knight of dreams and show:
For lust and senseless hatred make me glad,
And my killed friends are with me where I go.
Wound for red wound I burn to smite their wrongs;
And there is absolution in my songs.

Siegfried Sassoon

The Portrait

I watch you, gazing at me from the wall,
And wonder how you'd match your dreams with mine,
If, mastering time's illusion, I could call
You back to share this quiet candle-shine.

For you were young, three hundred years ago;
And by your looks I guess that you were wise...
Come, whisper soft, and Death will never know
You've slipped away from those calm, painted eyes.

Strange is your voice... Poor ninny, dead so long,
And all your pride forgotten like your name.
'One April morn I heard a blackbird's song.
And joy was in my heart like leaves aflame.'

And so you died before your songs took wing;
While Andrew Marvell followed in your wake.
'Love thrilled me into music. I could sing
But for a moment, — but for beauty's sake.'

Who passes? There's a star-lit breeze that stirs
The glimmer of white lilies in the gloom.
Who speaks? Death has his silent messengers.
And there was more than silence in this room

While you were gazing at me from the wall
And wondering how you'd match your dreams with mine,
If, mastering time's illusion, you could call
Me back to share your vanished candle-shine.

Siegfried Sassoon

The Rear-Guard

Groping along the tunnel, step by step,
He winked his prying torch with patching glare
From side to side, and sniffed the unwholesome air.

Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know,
A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed;
And he, exploring fifty feet below
The rosy gloom of battle overhead.
Tripping, he grappled the wall; saw someone lie
Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug,
And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug.
'I'm looking for headquarters.' No reply.
'God blast your neck!' (For days he'd had no sleep.)
'Get up and guide me through this stinking place.'
Savage, he kicked a soft, unanswering heap,
And flashed his beam across the livid face
Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore
Agony dying hard ten days before;
And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound.
Alone he staggered on until he found
Dawn's ghost that filtered down a shafted stair
To the dazed, muttering creatures underground
Who hear the boom of shells in muffled sound.
At last, with sweat of horror in his hair,
He climbed through darkness to the twilight air,
Unloading hell behind him step by step.

Siegfried Sassoon

The Rear-Guard

Groping along the tunnel, step by step,
He winked his prying torch with patching glare
From side to side, and sniffed the unwholesome air.

Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know,
A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed;
And he, exploring fifty feet below
The rosy gloom of battle overhead.
Tripping, he grappled the wall; saw someone lie
Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug,
And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug.
"I'm looking for headquarters." No reply.
"God blast your neck!" (For days he'd had no sleep.)
"Get up and guide me through this stinking place."
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Siegfried Sassoon

The Redeemer

Darkness: the rain sluiced down; the mire was deep;
It was past twelve on a mid-winter night,
When peaceful folk in beds lay snug asleep;
There, with much work to do before the light,
We lugged our clay-sucked boots as best we might
Along the trench; sometimes a bullet sang,
And droning shells burst with a hollow bang;
We were soaked, chilled and wretched, every one;
Darkness; the distant wink of a huge gun.

I turned in the black ditch, loathing the storm;
A rocket fizzed and burned with blanching flare,
And lit the face of what had been a form
Floundering in mirk. He stood before me there;
I say that He was Christ; stiff in the glare,
And leaning forward from His burdening task,
Both arms supporting it; His eyes on mine
Stared from the woeful head that seemed a mask
Of mortal pain in Hell's unholy shine.

No thorny crown, only a woollen cap
He wore--an English soldier, white and strong,
Who loved his time like any simple chap,
Good days of work and sport and homely song;
Now he has learned that nights are very long,
And dawn a watching of the windowed sky.
But to the end, unjudging, he'll endure
Horror and pain, not discontent to die

That Lancaster on Lune may stand secure.
He faced me, reeling in his weariness,
Shouldering his load of planks, so hard to bear.
I say that He was Christ, who wrought to bless
All groping things with freedom bright as air,
And with His mercy washed and made them fair.
Then the flame sank, and all grew black as pitch,
While we began to struggle along the ditch;
And someone flung his burden in the muck,
Mumbling: 'O Christ Almighty, now I'm stuck!'

Siegfried Sassoon

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Siegfried Sassoon

The Road

The Road is thronged with women; soldiers pass
And halt, but never see them; yet they're here—
A patient crowd along the sodden grass,
Silent, worn out with waiting, sick with fear.
The Road goes crawling up a long hillside,
All ruts and stones and sludge, and the emptied dregs
Of battle thrown in heaps; here where they died
Are stretched big-bellied horses with stiff legs,
And dead men, bloody-fingered from the fight,
Stare up at cavern'd darkness winking white.

You in the bomb-scorched kilt, poor sprawling Jock,
You tottered here and fell, and stumbled on,
Half-dazed for want of sleep: no dream would mock
Your reeling brain with comforts lost and gone.
You did not feel her arms about your knees,
Her blind caress, her lips upon your head:
Too tired for thoughts of home and love and ease,
The Road would serve you well enough for bed.

Siegfried Sassoon

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Siegfried Sassoon

The Road To Ruin

My hopes, my messengers I sent
Across the ten years continent
Of Time. In dream I saw them go--

And thought, 'When they come back I'll show
To what far place I lead my friends
Where this disastrous decade ends.'

Like one in purgatory, I learned
The loss of hope. For none returned,
And long in darkening dream I lay.
Then came a ghost whose warning breath
Gasp'd from an agony of death,
'No, not that way; no, not that way.'

Siegfried Sassoon

The Tombstone-Maker

He primmed his loose red mouth and leaned his head
Against a sorrowing angel's breast, and said:
'You'd think so much bereavement would have made
'Unusual big demands upon my trade.
'The War comes cruel hard on some poor folk;
'Unless the fighting stops I'll soon be broke.'

He eyed the Cemetery across the road.
'There's scores of bodies out abroad, this while,
'That should be here by rights. They little know'd
'How they'd get buried in such wretched style.'

I told him with a sympathetic grin,
That Germans boil dead soldiers down for fat;
And he was horrified. 'What shameful sin!
'O sir, that Christian souls should come to that!'

Siegfried Sassoon

The Triumph

When life was a cobweb of stars for Beauty who came
In the whisper of leaves or a bird's lone cry in the glen,
On dawn-lit hills and horizons girdled with flame
I sought for the triumph that troubles the faces of men.

With death in the terrible flickering gloom of the fight
I was cruel and fierce with despair; I was naked and bound;
was stricken: and Beauty returned through the shambles of night;
In the faces of men she returned; and their triumph I found.

Siegfried Sassoon

The Troops

Dim, gradual thinning of the shapeless gloom
Shudders to drizzling daybreak that reveals
Disconsolate men who stamp their sodden boots
And turn dulled, sunken faces to the sky
Haggard and hopeless. They, who have beaten down
The stale despair of night, must now renew
Their desolation in the truce of dawn,
Murdering the livid hours that grope for peace.

Yet these, who cling to life with stubborn hands,
Can grin through storms of death and find a gap
In the clawed, cruel tangles of his defence.
They march from safety, and the bird-sung joy
Of grass-green thickets, to the land where all
Is ruin, and nothing blossoms but the sky
That hastens over them where they endure
Sad, smoking, flat horizons, reeking woods,
And foundered trench-lines volleying doom for doom.

O my brave brown companions, when your souls
Flock silently away, and the eyeless dead
Shame the wild beast of battle on the ridge,
Death will stand grieving in that field of war
Since your unvanquished hardihood is spent.
And through some mooned Valhalla there will pass
Battalions and battalions, scarred from hell;
The unreturning army that was youth;
The legions who have suffered and are dust.

Siegfried Sassoon

The Working Party

Three hours ago he blundered up the trench,
Sliding and poising, groping with his boots;
Sometimes he tripped and lurched against the walls
With hands that pawed the sodden bags of chalk.
He couldn't see the man who walked in front;
Only he heard the drum and rattle of feet
Stepping along barred trench boards, often splashing
Wretchedly where the sludge was ankle-deep.

Voices would grunt `Keep to your right -- make way!'
When squeezing past some men from the front-line:
White faces peered, puffing a point of red;
Candles and braziers glinted through the chinks
And curtain-flaps of dug-outs; then the gloom
Swallowed his sense of sight; he stooped and swore
Because a sagging wire had caught his neck.

A flare went up; the shining whiteness spread
And flickered upward, showing nimble rats
And mounds of glimmering sand-bags, bleached with rain;
Then the slow silver moment died in dark.
The wind came posting by with chilly gusts
And buffeting at the corners, piping thin.
And dreary through the crannies; rifle-shots
Would split and crack and sing along the night,
And shells came calmly through the drizzling air
To burst with hollow bang below the hill.

Three hours ago, he stumbled up the trench;
Now he will never walk that road again:
He must be carried back, a jolting lump
Beyond all needs of tenderness and care.

He was a young man with a meagre wife
And two small children in a Midland town,
He showed their photographs to all his mates,
And they considered him a decent chap
Who did his work and hadn't much to say,
And always laughed at other people's jokes

Because he hadn't any of his own.

That night when he was busy at his job
Of piling bags along the parapet,
He thought how slow time went, stamping his feet
And blowing on his fingers, pinched with cold.
He thought of getting back by half-past twelve,
And tot of rum to send him warm to sleep
In draughty dug-out frowsty with the fumes
Of coke, and full of snoring weary men.

He pushed another bag along the top,
Craning his body outward; then a flare
Gave one white glimpse of No Man's Land and wire;
And as he dropped his head the instant split
His startled life with lead, and all went out.

Siegfried Sassoon

Their Frailty

He's got a Blighty wound. He's safe; and then
War's fine and bold and bright.
She can forget the doomed and prisoned men
Who agonize and fight.

He's back in France. She loathes the listless strain
And peril of his plight,
Beseeching Heaven to send him home again,
She prays for peace each night.

Husbands and sons and lovers; everywhere
They die; War bleeds us white
Mothers and wives and sweethearts,—they don't care
So long as He's all right.

Siegfried Sassoon

'They'

The Bishop tells us: 'When the boys come back
'They will not be the same; for they'll have fought
'In a just cause: they lead the last attack
'On Anti-Christ; their comrades' blood has bought
'New right to breed an honourable race,
'They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.'

'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.
'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;
'Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;
'And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find
'A chap who's served that hasn't found some change.
' And the Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!'

Siegfried Sassoon

Thrushes

Tossed on the glittering air they soar and skim,
Whose voices make the emptiness of light
A windy palace. Quavering from the brim
Of dawn, and bold with song at edge of night,
They clutch their leafy pinnacles and sing
Scornful of man, and from his toils aloof
Whose heart's a haunted woodland whispering;
Whose thoughts return on tempest-baffled wing;
Who hears the cry of God in everything,
And storms the gate of nothingness for proof.

Siegfried Sassoon

To A Childless Woman

You think I cannot understand. Ah, but I do...
I have been wrung with anger and compassion for you.
I wonder if you'd loathe my pity, if you knew.

But you shall know. I've carried in my heart too long
This secret burden. Has not silence wrought your wrong—
Brought you to dumb and wintry middle-age, with grey
Unfruitful withering?—Ah, the pitiless things I say...

What do you ask your God for, at the end of day,
Kneeling beside your bed with bowed and hopeless head?
What mercy can He give you?—Dreams of the unborn
Children that haunt your soul like loving words unsaid—
Dreams, as a song half-heard through sleep in early morn?

I see you in the chapel, where you bend before
The enhaloed calm of everlasting Motherhood
That wounds your life; I see you humbled to adore
The painted miracle you've never understood.

Tender, and bitter-sweet, and shy, I've watched you holding
Another's child. O childless woman, was it then
That, with an instant's cry, your heart, made young again,
Was crucified for ever—those poor arms enfolding
The life, the consummation that had been denied you?
I too have longed for children. Ah, but you must not weep.
Something I have to whisper as I kneel beside you...
And you must pray for me before you fall asleep.

Siegfried Sassoon

To A Very Wise Man

I

Fires in the dark you build; tall quivering flames
In the huge midnight forest of the unknown.
Your soul is full of cities with dead names,
And blind-faced, earth-bound gods of bronze and stone
Whose priests and kings and lust-begotten lords
Watch the procession of their thundering hosts,
Or guard relentless fanes with flickering swords
And wizardry of ghosts.

II

In a strange house I woke; heard overhead
Hastily-thudding feet and a muffled scream...
(Is death like that?) ... I quaked uncomforted,
Striving to frame to-morrow in a dream
Of woods and sliding pools and cloudless day.
(You know how bees come into a twilight room
From dazzling afternoon, then sail away
Out of the curtained gloom.)

III

You understand my thoughts; though, when you think,
You're out beyond the boundaries of my brain.
I'm but a bird at dawn that cries 'chink, chink'—
A garden-bird that warbles in the rain.
And you're the flying-man, the speck that steers
A careful course far down the verge of day,
Half-way across the world. Above the years
You soar ... Is death so bad? ... I wish you'd say.

Siegfried Sassoon

To Any Dead Officer

Well, how are things in Heaven? I wish you'd say,
Because I'd like to know that you're all right.
Tell me, have you found everlasting day,
Or been sucked in by everlasting night?
For when I shut my eyes your face shows plain;
I hear you make some cheery old remark—
I can rebuild you in my brain,
Though you've gone out patrolling in the dark.

You hated tours of trenches; you were proud
Of nothing more than having good years to spend;
Longed to get home and join the careless crowd
Of chaps who work in peace with Time for friend.
That's all washed out now. You're beyond the wire:
No earthly chance can send you crawling back;
You've finished with machine-gun fire—
Knocked over in a hopeless dud-attack.

Somehow I always thought you'd get done in,
Because you were so desperate keen to live:
You were all out to try and save your skin,
Well knowing how much the world had got to give.
You joked at shells and talked the usual 'shop,'
Stuck to your dirty job and did it fine:
With 'Jesus Christ! when will it stop?
Three years ... It's hell unless we break their line.'

So when they told me you'd been left for dead
I wouldn't believe them, feeling it must be true.
Next week the bloody Roll of Honour said
'Wounded and missing'—(That's the thing to do
When lads are left in shell-holes dying slow,
With nothing but blank sky and wounds that ache,
Moaning for water till they know
It's night, and then it's not worth while to wake!)

. . . .

Good-bye, old lad! Remember me to God,
And tell Him that our Politicians swear

They won't give in till Prussian Rule's been trod
Under the Heel of England ... Are you there?...
Yes ... and the War won't end for at least two years;
But we've got stacks of men ... I'm blind with tears,
Staring into the dark. Cheerio!
I wish they'd killed you in a decent show.

Siegfried Sassoon

To His Dead Body

When roaring gloom surged inward and you cried,
Groping for friendly hands, and clutched, and died,
Like racing smoke, swift from your lolling head
phantoms of thought and memory thinned and fled.

Yet, though my dreams that throng the darkened stair
Can bring me no report of how you fare,
Safe quit of wars, I speed you on your way
Up lonely, glimmering fields to find new day,
Slow-rising, saintless, confident and kind—
Dear, red-faced father God who lit your mind.

Siegfried Sassoon

To Leonide Massine In 'cleopatra'

O beauty doomed and perfect for an hour,
Leaping along the verge of death and night,
You show me dauntless Youth that went to fight
Four long years past, discovering pride and power.

You die but in our dreams, who watch you fall
Knowing that to-morrow you will dance again.
But not to ebbing music were they slain
Who sleep in ruined graves, beyond recall;
Who, following phantom-glory, friend and foe,
Into the darkness that was War must go;
Blind; banished from desire.
O mortal heart
Be still; you have drained the cup; you have played your part.

Siegfried Sassoon

To My Brother

Give me your hand, my brother, search my face;
Look in these eyes lest I should think of shame;
For we have made an end of all things base.
We are returning by the road we came.

Your lot is with the ghosts of soldiers dead,
And I am in the field where men must fight.
But in the gloom I see your laurell'd head
And through your victory I shall win the light.

Siegfried Sassoon

To Victory

Return to greet me, colours that were my joy,
Not in the woeful crimson of men slain,
But shining as a garden; come with the streaming
Banners of dawn and sundown after rain.

I want to fill my gaze with blue and silver,
Radiance through living roses, spires of green
Rising in young-limbed copse and lovely wood,
Where the hueless wind passes and cries unseen.

I am not sad; only I long for lustre, --
Tired of the greys and browns and the leafless ash.
I would have hours that move like a glitter of dancers
Far from the angry guns that boom and flash.

Return, musical, gay with blossom and fleetness,
Days when my sight shall be clear and my heart rejoice;
Come from the sea with breadth of approaching brightness,
When the blithe wind laughs on the hills with uplifted voice.

Siegfried Sassoon

Today

This is To-day, a child in white and blue
Running to meet me out of Night who stilled
The ghost of Yester-eve; this is fair Morn
The mother of To-morrow. And these clouds
That chase the sunshine over gleaming hills
Are thoughts, delighting in the golden change
And the ceremony of their drifting state.

This is To-day. To-morrow might bring death,—
And Life, the gleeful madrigal of birds,
Be drowned in glimmer of sleep. To-day I know
How sweet it is to spend these eyes, and boast
This bubble of vistaed memory and sense
Blown by my joy aloft the glittering airs
Of heavenly peace. Oh take me to yourselves,
Earth, sky, and spirit! Let me stand within
The circle of your transience, that my voice
May thrill the lonely silences with song.

Siegfried Sassoon

Together

Splashing along the boggy woods all day,
And over brambled hedge and holding clay,
I shall not think of him:
But when the watery fields grow brown and dim,
And hounds have lost their fox, and horses tire,
I know that he'll be with me on my way
Home through the darkness to the evening fire.
He's jumped each stile along the glistening lanes;
His hand will be upon the mud-soaked reins;
Hearing the saddle creak,
He'll wonder if the frost will come next week.
I shall forget him in the morning light;
And while we gallop on he will not speak:
But at the stable-door he'll say good-night.

Siegfried Sassoon

Tree And Sky

Let my soul, a shining tree,
Silver branches lift towards thee,
Where on a hallowed winter's night
The clear-eyed angels may alight.

And if there should be tempests in
My spirit, let them surge like din
Of noble melodies at war;
With fervour of such blades of triumph as are
Flashed in white orisons of saints who go
On shafts of glory to the ecstasies they know.

Siegfried Sassoon

Trench Duty

Shaken from sleep, and numbed and scarce awake,
Out in the trench with three hours' watch to take,
I blunder through the splashing mirk; and then
Hear the gruff muttering voices of the men
Crouching in cabins candle-chinked with light.
Hark! There's the big bombardment on our right
Rumbling and bumping; and the dark's a glare
Of flickering horror in the sectors where
We raid the Boche; men waiting, stiff and chilled,
Or crawling on their bellies through the wire.
'What? Stretcher-bearers wanted? Some one killed?'
Five minutes ago I heard a sniper fire:
Why did he do it? ... Starlight overhead—
Blank stars. I'm wide-awake; and some chap's dead.

Siegfried Sassoon

Twelve Months After

Hullo! here's my platoon, the lot I had last year.

'The war'll be over soon.'

'What 'opes?'

'No bloody fear!'

Then, 'Number Seven, 'shun! All present and correct.'

They're standing in the sun, impassive and erect.

Young Gibson with his grin; and Morgan, tired and white;

Jordan, who's out to win a D.C.M. some night;

And Hughes that's keen on wiring; and Davies ('79),

Who always must be firing at the Boche front line.

. . . .

'Old soldiers never die; they simply fide a-why!'

That's what they used to sing along the roads last spring;

That's what they used to say before the push began;

That's where they are to-day, knocked over to a man.

Siegfried Sassoon

Two Hundred Years After

Trudging by Corbie Ridge one winter's night,
(Unless old hearsay memories tricked his sight)
Along the pallid edge of the quiet sky
He watched a nosing lorry grinding on,
And straggling files of men; when these were gone,
A double limber and six mules went by,
Hauling the rations up through ruts and mud
To trench-lines dugged two hundred years ago.
Then darkness hid them with a rainy scud,
And soon he saw the village lights below.

But when he'd told his tale, an old man said
That he'd seen soldiers pass along that hill;
'Poor silent things, they were the English dead
Who came to fight in France and got their fill.'

Siegfried Sassoon

Villon

They threw me from the gates: my matted hair
Was dank with dungeon wetness; my spent frame
O'erlaid with marish agues: everywhere
Tortured by leaping pangs of frost and flame,
So hideous was I that even Lazarus there
In noisome rags arrayed and leprous shame,
Beside me set had seemed full sweet and fair,
And looked on me with loathing.

But one came
Who laid a cloak on me and brought me in
Tenderly to an hostel quiet and clean;
Used me with healing hands for all my needs.
The mortal stain of my reputed sin,
My state despised, and my defilèd weeds,
He hath put by as though they had not been.

Siegfried Sassoon

Vision

I love all things that pass: their briefness is
Music that fades on transient silences.
Winds, birds, and glittering leaves that flare and fall—
They fling delight across the world; they call
To rhythmic-flashing limbs that rove and race...
A moment in the dawn for Youth's lit face;
A moment's passion, closing on the cry—
'O Beauty, born of lovely things that die!'

Siegfried Sassoon

What The Captain Said At The Point-To-Point

I've had a good bump round; my little horse
Refused the brook first time,
Then jumped it prime;
And ran out at the double,
But of course
There's always trouble at a double:
And then—I don't know how
It was—he turned it up
At that big, hairy fence before the plough;
And some young silly pup
(I don't know which),
Near as a toucher knocked me into the ditch;
But we finished full of running, and quite sound:
And anyhow I've had a good bump round.

Siegfried Sassoon

When I'm Among A Blaze Of Lights

When I'm among a blaze of lights,
With tawdry music and cigars
And women dawdling through delights,
And officers in cocktail bars,
Sometimes I think of garden nights
And elm trees nodding at the stars.

I dream of a small firelit room
With yellow candles burning straight,
And glowing pictures in the gloom,
And kindly books that hold me late.
Of things like these I choose to think
When I can never be alone:
Then someone says 'Another drink?'
And turns my living heart to stone.

Siegfried Sassoon

Wind In The Beechwood

The glorying forest shakes and swings with glancing
Of boughs that dip and strain; young, slanting sprays
Beckon and shift like lissom creatures dancing,
While the blown beechwood streams with drifting rays.
Rooted in steadfast calm, grey stems are seen
Like weather-beaten masts; the wood, unfurled,
Seems as a ship with crowding sails of green
That sweeps across the lonely billowing world.

O luminous and lovely! Let your flowers,
Your ageless-squadroned wings, your surge and gleam,
Drown me in quivering brightness: let me fade
In the warm, rustling music of the hours
That guard your ancient wisdom, till my dream
Moves with the chant and whisper of the glade.

Siegfried Sassoon

Wirers

'Pass it along, the wiring party's going out'—
And yawning sentries mumble, 'Wirers going out.'
Unravelling; twisting; hammering stakes with muffled thud,
They toil with stealthy haste and anger in their blood.

The Boche sends up a flare. Black forms stand rigid there,
Stock-still like posts; then darkness, and the clumsy ghosts
Stride hither and thither, whispering, tripped by clutching snare
Of snags and tangles.
Ghastly dawn with vaporious coasts
Gleams desolate along the sky, night's misery ended.

Young Hughes was badly hit; I heard him carried away,
Moaning at every lurch; no doubt he'll die to-day.
But we can say the front-line wire's been safely mended.

Siegfried Sassoon

Wisdom

When Wisdom tells me that the world's a speck
Lost on the shoreless blue of God's To-Day...
I smile, and think, 'For every man his way:
The world's my ship, and I'm alone on deck!'
And when he tells me that the world's a spark
Lit in the whistling gloom of God's To-Night...
I look within me to the edge of dark,
And dream, 'The world's my field, and I'm the lark,
Alone with upward song, alone with light!'

Siegfried Sassoon

Wonderment

Then a wind blew;
And he who had forgot he moved
Lonely amid the green and silver morning weather,
Suddenly grew
Aware of clouds and trees
Gleaming and white and shafted, shaken together
And blown to music by the ruffling breeze.

Like flush of wings
The moment passed: he stood
Dazzled with blossom in the swaying wood;
Then he remembered how, through all swift things,
This mortal scene stands built of memories,—
Shaped by the wise
Who gazed in breathing wonderment,
And left us their brave eyes
To light the ways they went.

Siegfried Sassoon

Wraiths

They know not the green leaves;
In whose earth-haunting dream
Dimly the forest heaves,
And voiceless goes the stream.
Strangely they seek a place
In love's night-remembered hall;
Peering from face to face,
Until some heart shall call
And keep them, for a breath,
Half-mortal ... (Hark to the rain!)...
They are dead ... (O hear how death
Gropes on the shutter'd pane!)

Siegfried Sassoon