

Classic Poetry Series

Henry Reed

- poems -

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Henry Reed (22 February 1914 - 8 December 1986)

Henry Reed was a British poet, translator, radio dramatist and journalist. He was born in Birmingham and educated at King Edward VI School, Aston, followed by the University of Birmingham. At university he associated with [W. H. Auden](http://www.poemhunter.com/wystan-hugh-auden/), [Louis MacNeice](http://www.poemhunter.com/louis-macneice/) and Walter Allen. He went on to study for an MA and then worked as a teacher and journalist. He was called up to the Army in 1941, spending most of the war as a Japanese translator. After the war he worked for the BBC as a radio broadcaster and playwright, where his most memorable set of productions was the Hilda Tablet series in the 1950s. The series started with A Very Great Man Indeed, which purported to be a documentary about the research for a biography of a dead poet and novelist called Richard Shewin. This drew in part on Reed's own experience of researching a biography of the novelist Thomas Hardy. However, the 'twelve-tone composeress' Hilda Tablet, a friend of the late Richard Shewin, became the most interesting character in the play; and in the next play, she persuades the biographer to change the subject of the biography to her - telling him "not more than twelve volumes". Dame Hilda, as she later became, was based partly on Ethel Smyth and partly on Elisabeth Lutyens (who was not pleased, and considered legal action). Reed's most famous poem is Lessons of the War, a witty parody of British army basic training during World War II, which suffered from a lack of equipment at that time. Originally published in New Statesman and Nation (August 1942), the series was later published in A Map of Verona in 1946, and was his only collection to be published within his lifetime. Another anthologised poem is Chard Whitlow, a clever satire of [T. S. Eliot's](http://www.poemhunter.com/thomas-stearns-eliot/) Burnt Norton. Eliot himself was amused by Chard Whitlow's mournful imitations of himself ("As we get older we do not get any younger ..."). Unfortunately for Reed he was forever being confused with the much better known [Sir Herbert Read](http://www.poemhunter.com/sir-herbert-read/); the two men were unrelated. Reed responded to this confusion by naming his alter ego biographer in the Hilda Tablet plays "Herbert Reeve" and then by having everyone else get the name slightly wrong. The Papers of Henry Reed are kept safe at the University of Birmingham Special Collections

Works:

Collected Poems
The Auction Sale

A Map of Verona

Quelle belle heure, quels bons bras
me rendront ces régions d'où mes
sommeils et mes moindres mouvements?

A map of Verona is open, the small strange city;
With its river running round and through, it is river-embraced,
And over this city for a whole long winter season,
Through streets on a map, my thoughts have hovered and paced.

Across the river there is a wandering suburb,
An unsolved smile on a now familiar mouth;
Some enchantments of earlier towns are about you:
Once I was drawn to Naples in the south.

Naples I know now, street and hovel and garden,
The look of the islands from the avenue,
Capri and Ischia, like approaching drum-beats—
My youthful Naples, how I remember you!

You were an early chapter, a practice in sorrow,
Your shadows fell, but were only a token of pain,
A sketch in tenderness, lust, and sudden parting,
And I shall not need to trouble with you again.

But I remember, once your map lay open,
As now Verona's under the still lamp-light.
I thought, are these the streets to walk in the mornings,
Are these the gardens to linger in at night?

And all was useless that I thought I learned:
Maps are of place, not time, nor can they say
The surprising height and colour of a building,
Nor where the groups of people bar the way.

It is strange to remember those thoughts and try to catch
The underground whispers of music beneath the years,
The forgotten conjectures, the clouded, forgotten vision,
Which only in vanishing phrases reappears.

Again, it is strange to lead a conversation
Round to a name, to a cautious questioning
Of travellers, who talk of Juliet's tomb and fountains
And a shining smile of snowfall, late in Spring.

Their memories calm this winter of expectation,
Their talk restrains me, for I cannot flow
Like your impetuous river to embrace you;
Yet you are there, and one day I shall go.

The train will bring me perhaps in utter darkness
And drop me where you are blooming, unaware

That a stranger has entered your gates, and a new devotion
Is about to attend and haunt you everywhere.

The flutes are warm: in tomorrow's cave the music
Trembles and forms inside the musician's mind,
The lights begin, and the shifting crowds in the causeways
Are discerned through the dusk, and the rolling river behind.

And in what hour of beauty, in what good arms,
Shall I those regions and that city attain
From whence my dreams and slightest movements rise?
And what good Arms shall take them away again?

Henry Reed

Chard Whitlow

(Mr. Eliot's Sunday Evening Postscript)

As we get older we do not get any younger.
Seasons return, and to-day I am fifty-five,
And this time last year I was fifty-four
And this time next year I shall be sixty-two.
And I cannot say I should like (to speak for myself)
To see my time over again - if you can call it time:
Fidgeting uneasily under a draughty stair,
Or counting sleepless nights in the crowded tube.

There are certain precautions - though none of them very reliable -
Against the blast from bombs and the flying splinter,
But not against the blast from heaven, vento dei venti,
The wind within a wind unable to speak for wind;
And the frigid burnings of purgatory will not be touched
By any emollient.
I think you will find this put,
Better than I could ever hope to express it,
In the words of Karma: 'It is, we believe,
Idle to hope that the simple stirrup-pump
Will extinguish hell.'
Oh, listeners,
And you especially who have turned off the wireless,
And sit in Stoke or Basingstoke listening appreciatively to
the silence,
(Which is also the silence of hell) pray, not for your skins,
but for your souls.

And pray for me also under the draughty stair.
As we get older we do not get any younger.
And pray for Karma under the holy mountain.

Henry Reed

Judging Distances

Not only how far away, but the way that you say it
Is very important. Perhaps You may never get
The knack of judging a distance, but at least you know
How to report on a landscape: the central sector,
The right of the arc and that, which we had last Tuesday,
And at least you know

That maps are of time, not place, so far as the army
Happens to be concerned-- the reason being,
Is one which need not delay us. Again, you know
There are three kinds of tree, three only, the fir and the poplar,
And those which have bushy tops to; and lastly
That things only seem to be things.

A barn is not called a barn, to put it more plainly,
Or a field in the distance, where sheep may be safely grazing.
You must never be over-sure. You must say, when reporting:
At five o'clock in the central sector is a dozen
Of what appear to be animals; whatever you do,
Don't call the bleeders sheep.

I am sure that's quite clear; and suppose, for the sake of example,
The one at the end, asleep, endeavors to tell us
What he sees over there to the west, and how far away,
After first having come to attention. There to the west,
Of the fields of the summer sun and the shadows bestow
Vestments of purple and gold.

The white dwellings are like a mirage in the heat,
And under the swaying elms a man and a woman
Lie gently together. Which is, perhaps, only to say
That there is a row of houses to the left of the arc,
And that under some poplars a pair of what appear to be humans
Appear to be loving.

Well that, for an answer, is what we rightly call
Moderately satisfactory only, the reason being,
Is that two things have been ommitted, and those are very important.
The human beings, now: in what direction are they,
And how far away, would you say? And do not forget
There may be dead ground in between.

There may be dead ground in between; and I may not have got
The knack of judging a distance; I will only venture
A guess that perhaps between me and the apparent lovers,
(Who, incidentally, appear by now to have finished,)
At seven o'clock from the houses, is roughly a distance
Of about one year and a half.

Henry Reed

Lessons of the War

To Alan Mitchell

*Vixi duellis nuper idoneus
Et militavi non sine gloria*

I. Naming of Parts

Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday
We had daily cleaning. And tomorrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But today,
Today we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens,
And today we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,
When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel,
Which in your case you have not got. The branches
Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures,
Which in our case we have not got.

This is the safety-catch, which is always released
With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me
See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy
If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms
Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see
Any of them using their finger.

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this
Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it
Rapidly backwards and forwards; we call this
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards
The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:
They call it easing the Spring.

They call it easing the Spring. It is perfectly easy
If you have any strength in your thumb; like the bolt,
And the breech, and the cocking piece, and the point of balance,
Which in our case we have not got; and the almond-blossom
Silent in all of the gardens and the bees going backwards and forwards,
For today we have naming of parts.

Henry Reed

Morning

Look, my love, on the wall, and here, at this Eastern picture.
How still its scene, and neither of sleep nor waking:
No shadow falls from the tree or the golden mountain,
The boats on the glassy lake have no reflection,
No echo would come if you blew a horn in those valleys.

And look away, and move. Or speak, or sing:
And voices of the past murmur among your words,
Under your glance my dead selves quicken and stir,
And a thousand shadows attend where you go.

That is your movement. There is a golden stillness,
Soundless and fathomless, and far beyond it;
When brow on brow, or mouth to mouth assembled,
We lie in the calm of morning. And there, outside us,
The sun moves on, the boat jogs on the lake,
The huntsman calls.
And we lie here, our orient peace awakening,
No echo, and no shadow, and no reflection.

Henry Reed

Movement of Bodies

Those of you that have got through the rest, I am going to rapidly
Devote a little time to showing you, those that can master it,
A few ideas about tactics, which must not be confused
With what we call strategy. Tactics is merely
The mechanical movement of bodies, and that is what we mean by it.
Or perhaps I should say: by them.

Strategy, to be quite frank, you will have no hand in.
It is done by those up above, and it merely refers to,
The larger movements over which we have no control.
But tactics are also important, together or single.
You must never forget that, suddenly, in an engagement,
You may find yourself alone.

This brown clay model is a characteristic terrain
Of a simple and typical kind. Its general character
Should be taken in at a glance, and its general character
You can, see at a glance it is somewhat hilly by nature,
With a fair amount of typical vegetation
Disposed at certain parts.

Here at the top of the tray, which we might call the northwards,
Is a wooded headland, with a crown of bushy-topped trees on;
And proceeding downwards or south we take in at a glance
A variety of gorges and knolls and plateaus and basins and saddles,
Somewhat symmetrically put, for easy identification.
And here is our point of attack.

But remember of course it will not be a tray you will fight on,
Nor always by daylight. After a hot day, think of the night
Cooling the desert down, and you still moving over it:
Past a ruined tank or a gun, perhaps, or a dead friend,
In the midst of war, at peace. It might quite well be that.
It isn't always a tray.

And even this tray is different to what I had thought.
These models are somehow never always the same: for a reason
I do not know how to explain quite. Just as I do not know
Why there is always someone at this particular lesson
Who always starts crying. Now will you kindly
Empty those blinking eyes?

I thank you. I have no wish to seem impatient.
I know it is all very hard, but you would not like,
To take a simple example, to take for example,
This place we have thought of here, you would not like
To find yourself face to face with it, and you not knowing
What there might be inside?

Very well then: suppose this is what you must capture.
It will not be easy, not being very exposed,
Secluded away like it is, and somewhat protected

By a typical formation of what appear to be bushes,
So that you cannot see, as to what is concealed inside,
As to whether it is friend or foe.

And so, a strong feint will be necessary in this, connection.
It will not be a tray, remember. It may be a desert stretch
With nothing in sight, to speak of. I have no wish to be inconsiderate,
But I see there are two of you now, commencing to snivel.
I do not know where such emotional privates can come from.
Try to behave like men.

I thank you. I was saying: a thoughtful deception
Is always somewhat essential in such a case. You can see
That if only the attacker can capture such an emplacement
The rest of the terrain is his: a key-position, and calling
For the most resourceful manoeuvres. But that is what tactics is.
Or I should say rather: are.

Let us begin then and appreciate the situation.
I am thinking especially of the point we have been considering,
Though in a sense everything in the whole of the terrain,
Must be appreciated. I do not know what I have said
To upset so many of you. I know it is a difficult lesson.
Yesterday a man was sick,

But I have never known as many as five in a single intake,
Unable to cope with this lesson. I think you had better
Fall out, all five, and sit at the back of the room,
Being careful not to talk. The rest will close up.
Perhaps it was me saying 'a dead friend', earlier on?
Well, some of us live.

And I never know why, whenever we get to tactics,
Men either laugh or cry, though neither is strictly called for.
But perhaps I have started too early with a difficult task?
We will start again, further north, with a simpler problem.
Are you ready? Is everyone paying attention?
Very well then. Here are two hills.

Henry Reed

Naming of Parts

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For today we have the naming of parts.

Henry Reed

Psychological Warfare

This above all remember: they will be very brave men,
And you will be facing them. You must not despise them.

I am, as you know, like all true professional soldiers,
A profoundly religious man: the true soldier has to be.
And I therefore believe the war will be over by Easter Monday.
But I must in fairness state that a number of my brother-officers,
No less religious than I, believe it will hold out till Whitsun.
Others, more on the agnostic side (and I do not condemn them)
Fancy the thing will drag on till August Bank Holiday.

Be that as it may, some time in the very near future,
We are to expect Invasion ... and invasion not from the sea.
Vast numbers of troops will be dropped, probably from above,
Superbly equipped, determined and capable; and this above all,
Remember: they will be very brave men, and chosen as such.

You must not, of course, think I am praising them.
But what I have said is basically fundamental
To all I am about to reveal: the more so, since
Those of you that have not seen service overseas—
Which is the case with all of you, as it happens—this is the first time
You will have confronted them. My remarks are aimed
At preparing you for that.

Everyone, by the way, may smoke,
And be as relaxed as you can, like myself.
I shall wander among you as I talk and note your reactions.
Do not be nervous at this: this is a thing, after all,
We are all in together.

I want you to note in your notebooks, under ten separate headings,
The ten points I have to make, remembering always
That any single one of them may save your life. Is everyone ready?
Very well then.

The term, Psychological Warfare
Comes from the ancient Greek: psycho means character
And logical, of course, you all know. We did not have it
In the last conflict, the fourteen-eighteen affair,
Though I myself was through it from start to finish. (That is point one.)
I was, in fact, captured—or rather, I was taken prisoner—
In the Passchendaele show (a name you will all have heard of)
And in our captivity we had a close opportunity
(We were all pretty decently treated. I myself
Was a brigadier at the time: that is point two)
An opportunity I fancy I was the only one to appreciate
Of observing the psychiatry of our enemy
(The word in those days was always psychology,
A less exact description now largely abandoned). And though the subject
Is a highly complex one, I had, it was generally conceded,
A certain insight (I do not know how, but I have always, they say,

Had a certain insight) into the way the strangest things ebb up
From what psychoanalysts now refer to as the self-conscious.
It is possibly for this reason that I have been asked
To give you the gist of the thing, the—how shall I put it?—
The gist.

I was not of course captured alone
(Note that as point three) so that I also observed
Not only the enemy's behaviour; but ours. And gradually, I concluded
That we all of us have, whether we like it or lump it,
Our own individual psychiatry, given us, for better or worse,
By God Almighty. I say this reverently; you often find
These deeper themes of psychiatry crudely but well expressed
In common parlance. People say: 'We are all as God made us.'
And so they are. So are the enemy. And so are some of you.
This I in fact observed: point four. Not only the enemy
Had their psychiatry, but we, in a different sense,
Had ours. And I firmly believe you cannot (point six) master
Their psychiatry before you have got the gist of your own.
Let me explain more fully: I do not mean to imply
That any, or many, of you are actually mentally ill.
Though that is what the name would imply. But we, your officers,
Have to be aware that you, and many of your comrades,
May have a sudden psychiatry which, sometimes without warning,
May make you feel (and this is point five) a little bit odd.

I do not mean that in the sense of anything nasty:
I am not thinking of those chaps with their eyes always on each other
(Sometimes referred to as homosensualists
And easily detected by the way they lace up their boots)
But in the sense you may all feel a little disturbed,
Without knowing why, a little as if you were feeling an impulse,
Without knowing why: the term for this is ambivalence.
Often referred to for some mysterious reason,
By the professionals as Amby Valence,
As though they were referring to some nigger minstrel.
(Not, of course, that I have any colour prejudice:
After all, there are four excellent West Nigerians among you,
As black as your boot: they are not to blame for that.)

At all events this ambivalence is to be avoided.
Note that as point seven: I think you all know what I mean:
In the Holy Scriptures the word begins with an O,
Though in modern parlance it usually begins with an M.
You have most of you done it absentmindedly at some time or another,
But repeated, say, four times a day, it may become almost a habit,
Especially prone to by those of sedentary occupation,
By pale-faced clerks or schoolmasters, sitting all day at a desk,
Which is not, thank God, your position: you are always
More or less on the go: and that is what
(Again deep in the self-conscious) keeps you contented and happy here.

Even so, should you see some fellow-comrade
Give him all the help you can. In the spiritual sense, I mean,
With a sympathetic word or nudge, inform him in a manly fashion
'Such things are for boys, not men, lad.'
Everyone, eyes front!

I pause, gentlemen.
I pause. I am not easily shocked or taken aback,
But even while I have been speaking of this serious subject
I observe that one of you has had the effrontery—
Yes, you at the end of row three! No! Don't stand up, for God's sake, man,
And don't attempt to explain. Just tuck it away,
And try to behave like a man. Report to me
At eighteen hundred hours. The rest of you all eyes front.
I proceed to point six.

The enemy itself,
I have reason to know is greatly prone to such actions.
It is something we must learn to exploit: an explanation, I think,
Is that they are, by and large, undeveloped children,
Or adolescents, at most. It is perhaps to do with physique,
And we cannot and must not ignore their physique as such.
(Physique, of course, being much the same as psychiatry.)
They are usually blond, and often extremely well-made,
With large blue eyes and very white teeth,
And as a rule hairless chests, and very smooth, muscular thighs,
And extremely healthy complexions, especially when slightly sunburnt.
I am convinced there is something in all this that counts for something.
Something probably deep in the self-conscious of all of them.
Undeveloped children, I have said, and like children,
As those of you with families will know,
They are sometimes very aggressive, even the gentlest of them.

All the same we must not exaggerate; in the words of Saint Matthew:
'Clear your minds of cant.' That is point five: note it down.
Do not take any notice of claptrap in the press
Especially the kind that implies that the enemy will come here,
Solely with the intention of raping your sisters.
I do not know why it is always sisters they harp on:
I fancy it must ebb up from someone's self-conscious.
It is a patent absurdity for two simple reasons: (a)
They cannot know in advance what your sisters are like:
And (b) some of you have no sisters. Let that be the end of that.

There are much darker things than that we have to think of.
It is you they consider the enemy, you they are after.
And though, as Britishers, you will not be disposed to shoot down
A group of helpless men descending from the heavens,
Do not expect from them—and I am afraid I have to say this—gratitude:
They are bound to be over-excited,
As I said, adolescently aggressive, possibly drugged,
And later, in a macabre way, grotesquely playful.

Try to avoid being playfully kicked in the crutch,
Which quite apart from any temporary discomfort,
May lead to a hernia. I do not know why you should laugh.
I once had a friend who, not due to enemy action
But to a single loud sneeze, entirely his own, developed a hernia,
And had to have great removals, though only recently married.
(I am sorry, gentlemen, but anyone who finds such things funny
Ought to suffer them and see. You deserve the chance to.
I must ask you all to extinguish your cigarettes.)

There are other unpleasant things they may face you with.
You may, as I did in the fourteen-eighteen thing,
Find them cruelly, ruthlessly, starkly obsessed with the arts,
Music and painting, sculpture and the writing of verses,
Please, do not stand for that.

Our information is
That the enemy has no such rules, though of course they may have.
We must see what they say when they come. There can, of course,
Be no objection to the more virile arts:
In fact in private life I am very fond of the ballet,
Whose athleticism, manliness and sense of danger
Is open to all of us to admire. We had a ballet-dancer
In the last mob but three, as you have doubtless heard.
He was cruelly teased and laughed at—until he was seen in the gym.
And then, my goodness me! I was reminded of the sublime story
Of Samson, rending the veil of the Temple.
I do not mean he fetched the place actually down; though he clearly did what he could.

Though for some other reason I was never quite clear about,
And in spite of my own strong pressure on the poor lad's behalf,
And his own almost pathetic desire to stay on with us,
He was, in fact, demobilized after only three weeks' service,
Two and a half weeks of which he spent in prison.
Such are war's tragedies: how often we come upon them!
(Everyone may smoke again, those that wish.)

This brings me to my final point about the psychiatry
Of our formidable foe. To cope with it,
I know of nothing better than the sublime words of Saint Paul
In one of his well-known letters to the Corinthians:
'This above all, to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day
No man can take thee in.'

'This above all': what resonant words those are!
They lead me to point nine, which is a thing
I may have a special thing about, but if so,
Remember this is not the first war I have been through.
I refer (point nine this is) to the question of dignity.
Dignity. Human dignity. Yours. Never forget it, men.
Let it sink deep into your self-consciousness,

While still remaining plentifully available on the surface,
In the form of manly politeness. I mean, in particular, this:
Never behave in a manner to evoke contempt
Before thine enemy. Our enemy, I should say.

Comrades, and brothers-in-arms,
And those especially who have not understood my words,
You were not born to live like cowards or cravens:
Let me exhort you: never, whatever lies you have heard,
Be content to throw your arms on the ground and your other arms into the air and
squawk 'Kaputt!'
It is unsoldierly, unwarlike, vulgar, and out of date,
And may make the enemy laugh. They have a keen sense of humour,
Almost (though never quite, of course) as keen as our own.
No: when you come face to face with the foe, remember dignity,
And though a number of them do fortunately speak English,
Say, proudly, with cold politeness, in the visitor's own language:
'Ich ergebe mich.' Ich meaning I,
Ergebe meaning surrender, and mich meaning me.
'Ich ergebe mich.' Do not forget the phrase.
Practise it among yourselves: do not let it sound stilted,
Make it sound idiotish, as if you were always saying it,
Only always cold in tone: icy, if necessary:
It is such behaviour that will make them accord you
The same respect that they accorded myself,
At Passchendaele. (Incidentally,
You may also add the word nicht if you feel inclined to,
Nicht meaning not. It will amount to much the same thing.)

Dignity, then, and respect: those are the final aims
Of psychiatric relations, and psychological warfare.
They are the fundamentals also of our religion.
I may have mentioned my own religious intuitions:
They are why I venture to think this terrible war will be over
On Easter Monday, and that the invasion will take place
On either Maundy Thursday or Good Friday,
Probably the Thursday, which in so very many
Of our great, brave, proud, heroic and battered cities,
Is early closing day, as the enemy may have learnt from their agents.
Alas, there may be many such days in the immediate future.
But remember this in the better world we all have to build,
And build by ourselves alone—for the government
May well in the next few weeks have withdrawn to Canada—
What did you say? The man in row five. He said something.
Stand up and repeat what you said.
I said 'And a sodding good job', sir, I said, sir.
I have not asked anyone for political comments, thank you,
However apt. Sit down. I was saying:
That in the better world we all have to try to build
After the war is over, whether we win or lose,
Or whether we all agree to call it a draw,
We shall have to try our utmost to get used to each other,

To live together with dignity and respect.
As our Lord sublimely said in one of his weekly Sermons on the Mount
Outside Jerusalem (where interestingly enough,
I was stationed myself for three months in 1926):
'A thirteenth commandment I give you (this is point ten)
That ye love one another.' Love, in Biblical terms,
Meaning of course not quite what it means today,
But precisely what I have called dignity and respect.
And that, men, is the great psychiatric problem before you:
Of how on God's earth we shall ever learn to attain some sort
Of dignity.

And due respect.
One man.
For another.

Thank you; God bless you, men. Good afternoon.

Henry Reed

Returning of Issue

Tomorrow will be your last day here. Someone is speaking:
A familiar voice, speaking again at all of us.
And beyond the windows— it is inside now, and autumn—
On a wind growing daily harsher, small things to the earth
Are turning and whirling, small. Tomorrow will be
Your last day here,

But not we hope for always. You cannot see through the windows
If they are leaves or flowers. We hope that many of you
Will be coming back for good. Silence, and stupefaction.
The coarsening wind and the things whirling upon it
Scour that rough stamping-ground where we so long
Have spent our substance,

As the trees are spending theirs. How much of mine have I spent,
Father, oh father? How sorry we are to lose you
I do not have to say, since the sergeant-major
Has said it, the RSM has said it, and the colonel
Has sent over a message to say that he also says it.
Everyone sorry to lose us,

And you, oh father, father, once sorry too. I think
I can honestly say you are one and all of you now:
Soldiers. Silence, and disbelief. A fact that will stand you
In pretty good stead in the various jobs you go back to.
I wish you the best of luck. Silence. And all of you know
You can think of us here, as home.

As home: a home we shall any of you welcome you back to.
Most of you have, I know, some sort of work waiting for you,
And the rest of you now being, thanks to us, fit and able,
Will be bound to find something. I begin to be in want.
Would any citizen of this country send me
Into his fields? And

Before I finalise: one thing about tomorrow
I must make perfectly clear. Tomorrow is clear already:
I saw myself once, but now am by time forbidden
To see myself so: as the man who went evil ways,
Till lie determined, in time of famine, to seek
His father's home.

Autumn is later down there: it should now be the time
Of vivacious triumph in the fruitful fields.
As he approached, he ran over his speeches of sorrow,
Not less of truth for being much-rehearsed:
The last distilment from a long and inward.
Discourse of heartbreak. And

The first thing you do, after first thing tomorrow morning,
Is, those that leave not been previously detailed to do so,
Which I think is the case in most cases, is a systematic

Returning of issue. It is all-important
You should restore to store one of every store issued.
And in the case of two, two.

And I, as always late, shall never know that lifted fear
When the small hard-working master of those fields
Looked up. I trembled. But his heart came out to me
With a shout of compassion. And all my speech was only:
'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and am no more worthy
To be called thy son.'

But if I cried it, father, you could not hear me now,
Where now you lie, crumpled in that small grave
Like any withering dog. Your fields are sold and built on,
Your lanes are filled with husks the swine reject.
I scoop them in my hands. I have earned no more; and more
I shall not inherit. And

A careful check will be made of every such object
That was issued to each personnel originally,
And checked at issue. And let me be quite implicit:
That no accoutrements, impedimentas, fittings, or military garments
May be taken as souvenirs. The one exception is shirts,
And whatever you wear underneath.

These may be kept, those that wish. But the rest of the issue
Must be returned, except who intend to rejoin
In regular service. Silence. Which involves a simple procedure
I will explain in a simple group to those that rejoin.
Now, how many will that be? Silence. No one? No one at all?
I see. Very well. I have up to now

Spoken with the utmost of mildness. I speak so still,
But it does seem to me a bit of a bloody pity,
A bit un-bloody-feeling, after the all
We have bloody done for you, you should sit on your dumb bloody arses,
Just waiting like bloody milksops till I bloody dismiss you.
Silence, embarrassed, but silent.

And am I to break it, father, to break this silence?
Is there no bloody man among you? Not one bloody single one?
I will break the silence, father. Yes, sergeant, I will stay
In a group of one. Father, be proud of me.
Oh splendid, man! And for Christ's sake, tell them all,
Why you are doing this.

Why am I doing this? And is it too late to say no?
Come speak out, man: tell us, and shame these bastards.
I hope to shame no one, sergeant, in simply wishing
To remain a personnel. I have been such a thing before.
It was good, and simple; and it was the best I could do.
Here is a man, men! Silence.

Silence, indeed. How could I tell them, now?
I have nowhere else to go? How could I say
I have no longer gift or want; or how describe
The inexplicable tears that filled my eyes
When the poor sergeant said: 'After the all
We have bloody done for you'?

Goodbye forever, father, after the all you have done for me.
Soon I must start to forget you; but how to forget
That reconciliation, never enacted between us,
Which should have been ours, under the autumn sun?
I can see it and feel it now, clearer than daylight, clearer
For one brief moment, now,

Than even the astonished faces of my fellows,
The sergeant's uneasy smile, the trees, the relief at choosing
To learn once more the things I shall one day teach:
A rhetoric instead of words; instead of a love, the use
Of accoutrements, impedimenta, and fittings, and military garments,
And harlots, and riotous living.

Henry Reed

Sailor's Harbor

My thoughts, like sailors becalmed in Cape Town harbor,
Await your return, like a favorable wind, or like
New tackle for the voyage, without which it is useless starting.
We watch the sea daily, finish our daily tasks
By ten in the morning, and with the day to waste,
Wander through the suburbs, with quiet thoughts of the brothels,
And sometimes thoughts of the churches.

In the eating-houses we always contrive to get near to
The window, where we can keep an eye on the life-
Bearing sea. Suddenly a wind might blow, and we must not miss
First sight of the waves as they darken with promise for us.
We have been here too long. We know the quays,
And the streets near the quays, more than should ever be necessary.
When can we go on our way?

Certain we are of this, that when the wind comes,
It may be deceptive and sweet and finally blow
To shipwreck and ruin between here and the next port of call.
At all times we think of this. At last we have come to know
The marine charts can safely assure us of less and less
As we go farther south. So we cannot go out on the boulevards
Or climb Table Mountain,

Though if we had certainty, here there might be delight.
But all that is world in itself, the mountain, the streets,
The sand-dunes outside the town, we shyly and sadly return from.
They are too much to bear. And our curiosity
Lies alone in the over-scrubbed decks and the polished brasses
(For we have to look trim in the port) and in
The high-piled ambiguous cargo.

Henry Reed

The Auction Sale

Within the great grey flapping tent
The damp crowd stood or stamped about;
And some came in, and some went out
To drink the moist November air;
None fainted, though a few looked spent
And eyed some empty unbought chair.
It was getting on. And all had meant
Not to go home with empty hands
But full of gain, at little cost,
Of mirror, vase, or vinaigrette.
Yet often, after certain sales,
Some looked relieved that they had lost,
Others, at having won, upset.
Two men from London sat apart,
Both from the rest and each from each,
One man in grey and one in brown.
And each ignored the others face,
And both ignored the endless stream
Of bed and bedside cabinet,
Gazing intent upon the floor,
And they were strangers in that place.

Two other men, competing now,
Locals, whom everybody knew,
In shillings genially strove
For some small thing in ormolu.
Neither was eager; one looked down
Blankly at eighty-four, and then
Rallied again at eighty-eight,
And took it off at four pounds ten.
The loser grimly shook his fist,
But friendly, there was nothing meant.
Little gained was little missed,
And there was smiling in the tent.

The auctioneer paused to drink,
And wiped his lips and looked about,
Engaged in whispered colloquy
The clerk, who frowned and seemed to think,
And murmured: "Why not do it next?"
The auctioneer, though full of doubt,
Unacquiescent, rather vexed,
At last agreed, and at his sign
Two ministrants came softly forth
And lifted in an ashen shroud
Something extremely carefully packed,
Which might have been some sort of frame,
And was a picture-frame in fact.
They steadied it gently and with care,
And held it covered, standing there.

The auctioneer again looked round
And smiled uneasily at friends,
And said: "Well, friends, I have to say
Something I have not said to-day:
There's a reserve upon this number.
It is a picture which though unsigned
Is thought to be of a superior kind,
So I am sure you gentlemen will not mind
If I tell you at once before we start
That what I have been asked to say
Is, as I have said, to say:
There's a reserve upon this number."
There was a rustle in that place,
And some awoke as though from slumber.
And some disturbance fluttered there;
And as if summoned to begin,
Those who had stepped outside for air
Retrieved themselves and stepped back in.

The ministrants, two local boys,
Experienced in this sort of work,
And careful not to make too much noise,
Reached forward to unhook the shroud
Which slowly opening fell away
And on the public gaze released
The prospect of a great gold frame
That through the reluctant leaden air
Flashed a mature unsullied grace
Into the faces of the crowd.
And there was silence in that place.

*<i> Effulgent in the Paduan air,
Ardent to yield the Venus lay
Naked upon the sunwarmed earth.
Bronze and bright and crisp her hair,
By the right hand of Mars caressed,
Who sunk beside her on his knee,
His mouth towards her mouth inclined,
His left hand near her silken breast.
Flowers about them sprang and twined,
Accomplished Cupids leaped and sported,
And three, with dimpled arms enlaced
And brimming gaze of stifled mirth,
Looked wisely on at Mars's nape,
While others played with horns and pikes,
Or smaller objects of like shape.</i>*

And there was silence in the tent.
They gazed in silence; silently

The wind dropped down, no longer shook
The flapping sides and gaping holes.
And some moved back, and others went
Closer, to get a better look.

*In ritual, amorous delay,
Venus deposed her sheltering hand
Where her bright belly's aureate day
Melted down to dusk about her groin;
And, as from words that Mars had said
Into that hidden subtle ear,
She turned away her shining head.*

*The auctioneer cleared his throat,
And said: "I am sure I'm right in feeling
You will not feel it is at all unfair
For what when all is said and done
Is a work of very artistic painting
And not to be classed with common lumber
And anyway extremely rare,
You will not feel it at all unfair
If I mention again before proceeding,
There's a reserve upon this number."
Someone was heard to say with meaning:
"What, did I hear him say reserve?"
(Meaning, of course, a different meaning.)
This was a man from Sturminster,
Renowned for a quiet sense of fun,
And there was laughter in that place,
Though, not, of course, from everyone.*

*A calm and gentle mile away,
Among the trees a river ran
Boated with blue and scarlet sails;
A towered auburn city stood
Beyond them on the burnished heights,
And afar off and over all
The azure day for mile on mile
Unrolled towards the Dolomites.*

*The auctioneer said:
"I very much fear I have to say
I'm afraid we cannot look all day.
The reserve is seven hundred pounds.
Will anyone offer me seven fifty?
Seven thirty? Twenty-five?
Thank you sir. Seven twenty-five."
It was the man in brown who nodded,
Soon to be joined by him in grey.
The bidding started quietly.
No one from locally joined in.
Left to the men from London way,*

The auctioneer took proper pride,
And knew the proper way to guide
By pause, by silence, and by tapping,
The bidding toward a proper price.
And each of the two with unmoved face
Would nod and pause and nod and wait.
And there was tension in that place.

*And still within the Paduan field,
The silent summer scene stood by,
The sails, the hill-tops, and the sky,
And the bright warmth of Venus' glance
That had for centuries caught the eye
Of whosoever looked that way,
And now caught theirs, on this far day.*

Two people only did not look.
They were the men so calmly nodding,
Intently staring at the floor;
Though one of them, the one in brown,
Would sometimes slowly lift his gaze
And stare up towards the canvas roof,
Whereat a few men standing near
Inquiring eyes would also raise
To try and see what he was seeing.
The bidding mounted steadily
With silent nod or murmured yes
And passed the fifteen hundred mark,
And well beyond, and far beyond,
A nodding strife without success,
Till suddenly, with one soft word,
Something unusual occurred.

The auctioneer had asked politely,
With querying look and quiet smile:
"Come then, may I say two thousand?"
There was the customary pause,
When suddenly with one soft word,
Another voice was strangely heard
To join in, saying plainly: "Yes."
Not their voices, but a third.
Everyone turned in some surprise
To look, and see, and recognise
A young man who some time ago
Had taken a farm out Stalbridge way,
A very pleasant young man, but quiet,
Though always a friendly word to say,
Though no one in the dealing line,
But quiet and rather unsuccessful,
And often seen about the place
At outings or on market-day,
And very polite and inoffensive,

And quiet, as anyone would tell you,
But not from round here in any case.

The auctioneer, in some surprise,
Said: "Please, sir, did I hear you say
Yes to two thousand? Is that bid?
Twenty hundred am I bid?"
The two were silent, and the third,
The young man, answered plainly: "Yes.
Yes. Two thousand. Yes, I did."
Meaning that he had said that word.
"Ah, yes. Yes, thank you, sir," concurred
The auctioneer, surprised, but glad
To know that he had rightly heard,
And added: "Well, then, I may proceed.
I am bid two thousand for this picture.
Any advance upon that sum?
Any advance upon two thousand?
May I say two thousand twenty?
Twenty? Thirty? Thank you, sir.
May I say forty? Thank you, sir.
Fifty? You, sir? Thank you, sir."

And now instead of two, the three
Competed in the bargaining.
There was amazement in that place,
But still it gave, as someone said,
A sort of interest to the thing.
The young man nodded with the others,
And it was seen his nice young face,
Had lost its flush and now was white,
And those who stood quite near to him
Said (later, of course, they did not speak
While the bidding was going on)
That on his brow were beads of sweat,
Which as he nodded in acceptance
Would, one or two, fall down his cheek.

And in the tightening atmosphere
<i>Naked upon the sunwarmed earth</i>
Pauses were made and eyebrows raised,
Answered at last by further nods,
<i>Ardent to yield</i> the nods resumed
<i>Venus upon the sunwarmed </i>nods
<i>Abandoned Cupids danced</i> and nodded
<i>His mouth towards her</i> bid four thousand
Four thousand, any advance upon,
<i>And still beyond</i> four thousand fifty
<i>Unrolled towards the </i>nodding <i>sun</i>.
But it was seen, and very quickly,
That after four thousand twenty-five,
The man from over Stalbridge way

Did not respond, and from that point
He kept his silent gaze averted,
To show he would not speak again.
And it was seen his sweating face,
Which had been white, was glowing red,
And had a look of almost pain.

*Oh hand of Venus, hand of Mars,
Oh ardent mouth, oh burnished height,
Oh blue and scarlet gentle sails,
Oh Cupids smiling in the dance,
Oh unforgotten, living glance,
Oh river, hill and flowering plain,
Oh ever-living dying light.*

And had a look of almost pain.
The rest was quickly done. The bids
Advanced at slowly slackening pace
Up to four thousand sixty-five.
And at this point the man in grey
Declined his gaze upon the floor
And kept it there, as though to say
That he would bid no more that day
It was quite clear he had not won,
This man in grey, though anyone
Practised to read the human face
Might on his losing mouth descry
What could no doubt be termed a smile.
While on the face of him in brown
A like expertness might discern
Something that could be termed a frown.

There was a little faint applause.

The auctioneer sighed with joy,
The customary formalities
Were quickly over, and the strangers
Nodding a brief good-bye departed.
Venus and Mars were carefully veiled.
The auctioneer went on and proffered
Cupboard, table, chair and tray.
Bids of a modest kind were offered,
The traffic of a normal day.
A little later it was seen
The young man too had slipped away.
Which was, of course, to be expected.
Possibly there was nothing else
There at the sale to take his fancy.
Or possibly he even might
Be feeling ashamed at intervening,
Though possibly not, for after all,
He had certainly been within his right.

At all events, an hour later,
Along the Stalbridge Road a child
Saw the young man and told her mother,
Though not in fact till some days after,
That she had seen him in the dusk,
Not walking on the road at all,
But striding beneath the sodden trees;
And as she neared she saw that he
Had no covering on his head,
And did not seem to see her pass,
But went on, through the soaking grass,
Crying: that was what she said.

Bitterly, she added later.

Crying bitterly, she said.

Henry Reed

The Door and the Window

My love, you are timely come, let me lie by your heart.
For waking in the dark this morning, I woke to that mystery,
Which we can all wake to, at some dark time or another:
Waking to find the room not as I thought it was,
But the window further away, and the door in another direction.

This was not home, and you were far away
And I woke sick, and held by another passion,
In the icy grip of a dead, tormenting flame,
Consumed by the night, watched by the door and the window.
On a bed of stone, waiting for the day to bring you.

The door has opened: and can you, at last beside me,
Drive under the day that frozen and faithless darkness,
With its unseen torments flickering, which neither
The dearest look nor the longest kiss assuages?

Henry Reed

Unarmed Combat

In due course of course you will all be issued with
Your proper issue; but until tomorrow,
You can hardly be said to need it; and until that time,
We shall have unarmed combat. I shall teach you.
The various holds and rolls and throws and breakfalls
Which you may sometimes meet.

And the various holds and rolls and throws and breakfalls
Do not depend on any sort of weapon,
But only on what I might coin a phrase and call
The ever-important question of human balance,
And the ever-important need to be in a strong
Position at the start.

There are many kinds of weakness about the body,
Where you would least expect, like the ball of the foot.
But the various holds and rolls and throws and breakfalls
Will always come in useful. And never be frightened
To tackle from behind: it may not be clean to do so,
But this global war.

So give them all you have, and always give them
As good as you get; it will always get you somewhere.
(You may not know it, but you can tie a Jerry
Up without rope; it is one of the things I shall teach.)
Nothing will matter if only you are ready for him.
The readiness is all.

The readiness is all. How can I help but feel
I have been here before? But somehow then,
I was the tied-up one. How to get out
Was always then my problem. And even if I had
A piece of rope I was always the sort of person
Who threw rope aside.

And in my time I had given them all I had,
Which was never as good as I got, and it got me nowhere.
And the various holds and rolls and throws and breakfalls
Somehow or other I always seemed to put
In the wrong place. And, as for war, my wars
Were global from the start.

Perhaps I was never in a strong position.
Or the ball of my foot got hurt, or I had some weakness
Where I had least expected. But I think I see your point.
While awaiting a proper issue, we must learn the lesson
Of the ever-important question of human balance.
It is courage that counts.

Things may be the same again; and we must fight
Not in the hope of winning but rather of keeping
Something alive: so that when we meet our end,

It may be said that we tackled wherever we could,
That battle-fit we lived, and though defeated,
Not without glory fought.

Henry Reed