**Classic Poetry Series**

# Isaac Rosenberg

## - 60 poems -

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## Isaac Rosenberg (25 November 1890 – 1 April 1918)

Isaac Rosenberg was an English poet of the First World War who was considered to be one of the greatest of all English war poets. His "Poems from the Trenches" are recognised as some of the most outstanding written during the First World War.

Isaac Rosenberg was born to Barnet and Annie Rosenberg, who had fled Devinsk in Lithuania to escape anti-Jewish pogroms. In 1897, the family moved to 47 Cable Street in a poor district of the East End of London, and one with a strong Jewish community. He attended St. Paul's School around the corner in Wellclose Square, until his family (of Russian descent) moved to Stepney in 1900, so he could experience Jewish schooling. He left school at the age of fourteen and became an apprentice engraver.He was interested in both poetry and visual art, and managed to find the finances to attend the Slade School.

During his time at Slade School, Rosenberg notably studied alongside David Bomberg, Mark Gertler, Stanley Spencer, Paul Nash, Edward Wadsworth and Dora Carrington. He was taken up by Laurence Binyon and Edward Marsh, and began to write poetry seriously, but he suffered from ill-health. Afraid that his chronic bronchitis would worsen, Rosenberg hoped to try and cure himself by emigrating to the warmer climate of South Africa, where his sister Mina lived.

He wrote the poem On Receiving News of the War in Cape Town, South Africa. While others wrote about war as patriotic sacrifice, Rosenberg was critical of the war from its onset. However, needing employment in order to help support his mother, Rosenberg returned to England in October 1915 and enlisted in the army. He was assigned to the 12th Suffolk Folk Regiment, a 'bantam' battalion (men under 5'3"). After turning down an offer to become a lance corporal, Private Rosenberg was later transferred to the 11th Battalion, The King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment (KORL). He was sent to the Somme on the Western Front in France where, having just finished night patrol, he was killed at dawn on April 1, 1918; there is a dispute as to whether his death occurred at the hands of a sniper or in close combat. In either case, Fampoux is the name of the town where he died. He was first buried in a mass grave, but in 1926, his remains were identified and reinterred, not in England, but at Bailleul Road East Cemetery, Plot V, St. Laurent-Blangy, Pas de Calais, France.

In The Great War and Modern Memory, Paul Fussell's landmark study of the literature of the First World War, Fussell identifies Rosenberg's Break of Day in the Trenches as "the greatest poem of the war."

Works:

His self-portraits hang in the National Portrait Gallery  and Tate Britain. A commemorative blue plaque to him hangs outside The Whitechapel Gallery, formerly the Whitechapel Library, which was unveiled by Anglo-Jewish writer Emanuel Litvinoff.

On November 11, 1985, Rosenberg was among 16 Great War poets commemorated on a slate stone unveiled in Westminster Abbey's Poet's Corner.The inscription on the stone was written by a fellow Great War poet, Wilfred Owen. It reads: "My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity."

**‘A worm fed on the heart of Corinth'**

A worm fed on the heart of Corinth,
Babylon and Rome:
Not Paris raped tall Helen,
But this incestuous worm,
Who lured her vivid beauty
To his amorphous sleep.
England! Famous as Helen
Is thy betrothal sung
To him the shadowless,
More amorous than Solomon.

Isaac Rosenberg

**A Ballad Of Whitechapel**

God's mercy shines ;
And our full hearts must make record of this,
For grief that burst from out its dark confines
Into strange sunlit bliss.

I stood where glowed
The merry glare of golden whirring lights
Above the monstrous mass that seethed and flowed
Through one of London's nights.

1 watched the gleams
Of jagged warm lights on shrunk faces pale :
I heard mad laughter as one hears in dreams
Or Hell's harsh lurid tale.

The traffic rolled,
A gliding chaos populous of din,
A steaming wail at doom the Lord had scrawled
For perilous loads of sin.

And my soul thought :
'What fearful land have my steps wandered to ?
God's love is everywhere, but here is naught
Save love His anger slew.'

And as I stood
Lost in promiscuous bewilderment,
Which to my 'mazed soul was wonder-food,
A girl in garments rent

Peered 'neath lids shamed
And spoke to me and murmured to my blood.
My soul stopped dead, and all my horror
Named At her forgot of God.

Her hungered eyes,
Craving and yet so sadly spiritual,
Shone like the unsmirched corner of a jewel
Where else foul blemish lies.

I walked with her
Because my heart thought, 'Here the soul is clean,
The fragrance of the frankincense and myrrh
Is lost in odours mean.'

She told me how
The shadow of black death had newly come
And touched her father, mother, even now
Grim-hovering in her home,

Where fevered lay
Her wasting brother in a cold, bleak room,

Which theirs would be no longer than a day,
And then-the streets and doom.

Lord ! Lord ! Dear Lord
I knew that life was bitter, but my soul
Recoiled, as anguish-smitten by sharp sword,
Grieving such body's dole.

Then grief gave place
To a strange pulsing rapture as she spoke ;
For I could catch the glimpses of God's grace,
And a desire awoke

To take this trust
And warm and gladden it with love's new fires,
Burning the past to ashes and to dust
Through purified desires.

We walked our way,
One way hewn for us from the birth of Time ;
For we had wandered into Love's strange clime
Through ways sin waits to slay.

Love's euphony,
In Love's own temple that is our glad hearts,
Makes now long music wild deliciously;
Now Grief bath used his darts.

Love infinite,
Chastened by sorrow, hallowed by pure Name-
Not all the singing world can compass it.
Love-Love-0 tremulous name !

God's mercy shines ;
And my full heart bath made record of this,
Of grief that burst from out its dark confines
Into strange sunlit bliss.

Isaac Rosenberg

## A Careless Heart

A little breath can make a prayer,
A little wind can take it
And turn it back again to air:
Then say, why should you make it ?

An ardent thought can make a word,
A little ear can hear it,
A careless heart forget it heard :
Then why keep ever near it ?

Isaac Rosenberg

**A Girls Thoughts**

Dim apprehension of a trust
Comes over me this quiet hour,
As though the silence were a flower,
And this, its perfume, dark like dust.

My individual self would cling
Through fear, through pride, unto its fears :
It strives to shut out what it hears,
The founts of being murmuring.

0 ! Need, whose hauntings terrorize;
Whether my maiden ways would hide,
Or lose and to that need subside,
Life shrinks and instinct dreads surprise.

Isaac Rosenberg

**A Mood**

You are so light and gay,
So slight, sweet maid-
Your limbs like leaves in play,
Or beams that grasses braid :
O ! Joys whose jewels pray
My breast to be inlaid.

Frail fairy of the streets ;
Strong, dainty lure;
For all men's eyes the sweets
Whose lack makes hearts so poor ;
While your heart loveless beats.
Light, laughing, and impure.

O ! Fragrant waft of flesh,
Float through me so-
My limbs are in your mesh,
My blood forgets to flow ;
Ah ! Lilied meadows fresh,
It knows where it would go.

Isaac Rosenberg

## A Question

What if you shut your eyes and look,
Yea, look with all the spirit's eyes,
While mystic unrevealed skies
Unfold like pages of a book

Wherein new scenes of wonder rare
Are imaged, till the sense deceives
Itself, and what it sees believes-
Even what the soul has pictured there?

Isaac Rosenberg

## Ah, Koelue

Ah, Koelue!
Had you embalmed your beauty, so
It could not backward go,
Or change in any way,
What were the use, if on my eyes
The embalming spices were not laid
To keep us fixed,
Two amorous sculptures passioned endlessly?
What were the use, if my sight grew,
And its far branches were cloud-hung,
You small at the roots, like grass,
While the new lips my spirit would kiss
Were not red lips of flesh,
But the huge kiss of power?
Where yesterday soft hair through my fingers fell,
A shaggy mane would entwine,
And no slim form work fire to my thighs,
But human Life's inarticulate mass
Throb the pulse of a thing
Whose mountain flanks awry
Beg my mastery -- mine!
Ah! I will ride the dizzy beast of the world
My road -- my way!

Isaac Rosenberg

**At Night**

Crazed shadows, from no golden body
That I can see, embrace me warm ;
All is purple and closed
Round by night's arm.

A brilliance wings from dark-lit voices,
Wild lost voices of shadows white
See the long houses lean
To the weird flight.

Star amorous things that wake at sleep-time
(Because the sun spreads wide like a tree
With no good fruit for them)
Thrill secrecy.

Pale horses ride before the morning,
The secret roots of the sun to tread,
With hoofs shod with venom
And ageless dread;

To breathe on burning emerald grasses
And opalescent dews of the day,
And poison at the core
What smiles may stray.

Isaac Rosenberg

**August 1914**

What in our lives is burnt
In the fire of this?
The heart’s dear granary?
The much we shall miss?

Three lives hath one life –
Iron, honey, gold.
The gold, the honey gone –
Left is the hard and cold.

Iron are our lives
Molten right through our youth.
A burnt space through ripe fields
A fair mouth’s broken tooth

Isaac Rosenberg

**Beauty**

As a sword in the sun
A glory calling a glory
Our eyes, seeing it run,
Capture its gleam for our story.

Singer, marvellous gleam
Dancing in splendid light,
Here you have brought us our dream
Ah, but its stay is its flight !

Isaac Rosenberg

**Break of Day in the Trenches**

The darkness crumbles away
It is the same old druid Time as ever,
Only a live thing leaps my hand,
A queer sardonic rat,
As I pull the parapet's poppy
To stick behind my ear.
Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew
Your cosmopolitan sympathies,
Now you have touched this English hand
You will do the same to a German
Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure
To cross the sleeping green between.
It seems you inwardly grin as you pass
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,
Less chanced than you for life,
Bonds to the whims of murder,
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
The torn fields of France.
What do you see in our eyes
At the shrieking iron and flame
Hurled through still heavens?
What quaver -what heart aghast?
Poppies whose roots are in men's veins
Drop, and are ever dropping;
But mine in my ear is safe,
Just a little white with the dust.

Isaac Rosenberg

**Chagrin**

Caught still as Absalom,
Surely the air hangs
From the swayless cloud-boughs
Like hair of Absalom

Caught and hanging still.
From the imagined weight
Of spaces in a sky
Of mute chagrin my thoughts
Hang like branch-clung hair
To trunks of silence swung,
With the choked soul weighing down
Into thick emptiness.
Christ, end this hanging death,
For endlessness hangs therefrom !

Invisibly branches break
From invisible trees:
The cloud-woods where we rush
(Our eyes holding so much),
Which we must ride dim ages round
Ere the hands (we dream) can touch,
We ride, we ride-before the morning
The secret roots of the sun to tread-
And suddenly
We are lifted of all we know,
And hang from implacable boughs.

Isaac Rosenberg

**Creation**

As the pregnant womb of night
Thrills with imprisoned light,
Misty, nebulous-born,
Growing deeper into her morn,
So man, with no sudden stride,
Bloomed into pride.

In the womb of the All-spirit
The universe lay ; the will
Blind, an atom, lay still.
The pulse of matter
Obeyed in awe
And strove to flatter
The rhythmic law.
But the will grew ; nature feared,
And cast off the child she reared,
Now her rival, instinct-led,
With her own powers impregnated.

Brain and heart, blood-fervid flowers,
Creation is each act of yours.

Your roots are God, the pauseless cause,
But your boughs sway to self windy laws.
Perception is no dreamy birth
And magnifies transfigured earth.

With each new light, our eyes receive
A larger power to perceive.
If we could unveil our eyes,
Become as wise as the All-wise,
No love would be, no mystery :
Love and joy dwell in infinity.
Love begets love ; reaching highest
We find a higher still, unseen
From where we stood to reach the first ;
Moses must die to live in Christ,
The seed be buried to live to green.
Perfection must begin from worst.
Christ perceives a larger reachless love,
More full, and grows to reach thereof.
The green plant yearns for its yellow fruit.
Perfection always is a root,
And joy a motion that cloth feed
Itself on light of its own speed,
And round its radiant circle runs,
Creating and devouring suns.

Isaac Rosenberg

**Daughters Of War**

Space beats the ruddy freedom of their limbs,
Their naked dances with man's spirit naked
By the root side of the tree of life
(The under side of things
And shut from earth's profoundest eyes).

I saw in prophetic gleams
These mighty daughters in their dances
Beckon each soul aghast from its crimson corpse
To mix in their glittering dances :
I heard the mighty daughters' giant sighs
In sleepless passion for the sons of valour
And envy of the days fo flesh,
Barring their love with mortal boughs across-
The mortal boughs, the mortal tree of life.
The old bark burnt with iron wars
They blow to a live flame
To char the young green clays
And reach the occult soul; they have no softer lure,
No softer lure than the savage ways of death.

We were satisfied of our lords the moon and the sun
To take our wage of sleep and bread and warmth-
These maidens came-these strong everliving Amazons,
And in an easy might their wrists
Of night's sway and noon's sway the sceptres brake,
Clouding the wild, the soft lustres of our eyes.

Clouding the wild lustres, the clinging tender lights ;
Driving the darkness into the flame of clay
With the Amazonian wind of them
Over our corroding faces
That must be broken-broken for evermore,
So the soul can leap out
Into their huge embraces,
Though there are human faces
Best sculptures of Deity,
And sinews lusted after
By the Archangels tall,
Even these must leap to the love-heat of these maidens
From the flame of terrene days,
Leaving grey ashes to the wind-to the wind.

One (whose great lifted face,
Where wisdom's strength and beauty's strength
And the thewed strength of large beasts
Moved and merged, gloomed and lit)
Was speaking, surely, as the earth-men's earth fell away ;
Whose new hearing drank the sound
Where pictures, lutes, and mountains mixed
With the loosed spirit of a thought, Essenced to language thus

'My sisters force their males
From the doomed earth, from the doomed glee
And hankering of hearts.
Frail hands gleam up through the human quagmire, and lips of ash
Seem to wail, as in sad faded paintings
Far-sunken and strange.
My sisters have their males
Clean of the dust of old days
That clings about those white hands
And yearns in those voices sad :
But these shall not see them,
Or think of them in any days or years ;
They are my sisters' lovers in other days and years.'

Isaac Rosenberg

**Dawn**

O tender first cold flush of rose,
O budded dawn, wake dreamily ;
Your dim lips as your lids unclose
Murmur your own sad threnody.
0 as the soft and frail lights break
Upon your eyelids, and your eyes
Wider and wider grow and wake,
The old pale glory dies.

And then, as sleep lies down to sleep
And all her dreams lie somewhere dead,
The iron shepherd leads his sheep
To pastures parched whose green is shed.
Still, 0 frail dawn, still in your hair
And your cold eyes and sad sweet lips,
The ghosts of all the dreams are them,
To fade like passing ships.

Isaac Rosenberg

**Dead Man's Dump**

The plunging limbers over the shattered track
Racketed with their rusty freight,
Stuck out like many crowns of thorns,
And the rusty stakes like sceptres old
To stay the flood of brutish men
Upon our brothers dear.

The wheels lurched over sprawled dead
But pained them not, though their bones crunched,
Their shut mouths made no moan.
They lie there huddled, friend and foeman,
Man born of man, and born of woman,
And shells go crying over them
From night till night and now.

Earth has waited for them,
All the time of their growth
Fretting for their decay:
Now she has them at last!
In the strength of their strength
Suspended--stopped and held.

What fierce imaginings their dark souls lit?
Earth! have they gone into you!
Somewhere they must have gone,
And flung on your hard back
Is their soul's sack
Emptied of God-ancestralled essences.
Who hurled them out? Who hurled?

None saw their spirits' shadow shake the grass,
Or stood aside for the half used life to pass
Out of those doomed nostrils and the doomed mouth,
When the swift iron burning bee
Drained the wild honey of their youth.

What of us who, flung on the shrieking pyre,
Walk, our usual thoughts untouched,
Our lucky limbs as on ichor fed,
Immortal seeming ever?
Perhaps when the flames beat loud on us,
A fear may choke in our veins
And the startled blood may stop.

The air is loud with death,
The dark air spurts with fire,
The explosions ceaseless are.
Timelessly now, some minutes past,
Those dead strode time with vigorous life,
Till the shrapnel called `An end!'
But not to all. In bleeding pangs
Some borne on stretchers dreamed of home,

Dear things, war-blotted from their hearts.

Maniac Earth! howling and flying, your bowel
Seared by the jagged fire, the iron love,
The impetuous storm of savage love.
Dark Earth! dark Heavens! swinging in chemic smoke,
What dead are born when you kiss each soundless soul
With lightning and thunder from your mined heart,
Which man's self dug, and his blind fingers loosed?

A man's brains splattered on
A stretcher-bearer's face;
His shook shoulders slipped their load,
But when they bent to look again
The drowning soul was sunk too deep
For human tenderness.

They left this dead with the older dead,
Stretched at the cross roads.

Burnt black by strange decay
Their sinister faces lie,
The lid over each eye,
The grass and coloured clay
More motion have than they,
Joined to the great sunk silences.

Here is one not long dead;
His dark hearing caught our far wheels,
And the choked soul stretched weak hands
To reach the living word the far wheels said,
The blood-dazed intelligence beating for light,
Crying through the suspense of the far torturing wheels
Swift for the end to break
Or the wheels to break,
Cried as the tide of the world broke over his sight.

Will they come? Will they ever come?
Even as the mixed hoofs of the mules,
The quivering-bellied mules,
And the rushing wheels all mixed
With his tortured upturned sight.
So we crashed round the bend,
We heard his weak scream,
We heard his very last sound,
And our wheels grazed his dead face.

Isaac Rosenberg

**Don Juans Song**

The moon is in an ecstasy,
It wanes not nor can grow ;
The heavens are in a mist of love,
And deepest knowledge know :
What things in nature seem to move
Bear love as I bear love ?
And bear my pleasures so?

I bear my love as streams that bear
The sky still flow or shake :
Though deep within, too far on high.
Light blossoms kiss and wake
The waters sooner than the sky ;
And if they kiss and (lie
God made them frail to break.

Isaac Rosenberg

**Expression**

Call-call--and bruise the air :
Shatter dumb space!
Yea! We will ding this passion everywhere ;
Leaving no place

For the superb and grave
Magnificent throng,
The pregnant queens of quietness that brave
And edge our song

Of wonder at the light
(Our life-leased home),
Of greeting to our housemates.
And in might Our song shall roam

Life's heart, a blossoming fire
Blown bright by thought,
While gleams and fades the infinite desire,
Phantasmed naught.

Can this be caught and caged?
Wings can be clipt
Of eagles, the sun's gaudy measure gauged,
But no sense dipt

In the mystery of sense : The troubled throng
Of words break out like smothered fire through
Dense
And smouldering, wrong.

Isaac Rosenberg

**Far Away**

By what pale light or moon-pale shore
Drifts my soul in lonely flight ?
Regions God had floated o'er
Ere He touched the world with light ?

Not in Heaven and not in earth
Is this water, is this moon ;
For there is no starry birth,
And no dawning and no noon.

Far away-0 far away,
Mist-born-dewy vapours rise
From the dim gates of the day
Far below in earthly skies.

Isaac Rosenberg

**First Fruit**

I did not pluck at all,
And I am sorry now :
The garden is not barred
But the boughs are heavy with snow,
The flake-blossoms thickly fall
And the hid roots sigh, 'How long will our flowers be marred ?'

Strange as a bird were dumb,
Strange as a hueless leaf.
As one deaf hungers to hear,
Or gazes without belief,
The fruit yearned 'Fingers, come !'
0, shut hands, be empty another year.

Isaac Rosenberg

**From Night And Day**

IN THE WORKSHOP

Dim watery lights gleaming on gibbering faces,
Faces speechful, barren of soul and sordid,
Huddled and chewing a jest, lewd and gabbled
insidious:
Laughter, born of its dung, flashes and floods like sunlight,
Filling the room with a sense of a soul lethargic and kindly,
Touches my soul with a pathos, a hint of a wide desolation.

II
I saw the face of God to-day,
I heard the music of His smile,
And yet I was not far away,
And yet in Paradise the while.

I lay upon the sparkling grass,
And God's own mouth was kissing me,
And there was nothing that did pass
But blazed with divinity.

Divine-divine-upon my eyes,
Upon mine hair-divine--divine,
The fervour of the golden skies,
The ardent gaze of God on mine.

III
Then snake I to the tree, '
Were ye your own desire
What is it ye would be?'

Answered the tree to me,
'I am my own desire,
I am what 1 would be.

' If you were your desire
Would you lie under me,
And see me as you see?'

'I am my own desire
While I lie under you,
And that which I would be
Desire will sing to you.'

IV
I wander-I wander-0 will she wander here
Where'er my footsteps carry me I know that she is near,
A jewelled lamp within her hand and jewels in her hair ;
I lost her in a vision once and seek her everywhere.

My spirit whispers she is near, I look at you and you :

Surely she has not passed me, I sleeping as she flew.
I wander-I wander, and yet she is not here,
Although my spirit whispers to me that she is near.

Isaac Rosenberg

## Girl To A Soldier On leave

Girl To A Soldier On Leave
Love! You love me — your eyes
Have looked through death at mine.
You have tempted a grave too much
I let you — I repine.

I love you - Titan lover,
My own storm-days Titan.
Greater than the son of Zeus,
I know whom I would choose.

Titan — my splendid rebel —
The old Prometheus
Wanes like a ghost before your power —
His pangs were joys to yours.

Pallid days arid and wan
Tied your soul fast.
Babel-cities smoky tops
Pressed upon your growth

Weary gyves. What were you
But a word in the brains ways,
Or the sleep of Circes swine.
One gyve holds you yet.

It held you hiddenly on the Somme
Tied from my heart at home.
O must it loosen now? — I wish
You were bound with the old gyves.

Love! you love me — your eyes
Have looked through death at mine.
You have tempted a grave too much.
I let you - I repine.

Isaac Rosenberg

**God**

In his malodorous brain what slugs and mire,
Lanthorned in his oblique eyes, guttering burned!
His body lodged a rat where men nursed souls.
The world flashed grape-green eyes of a foiled cat
To him. On fragments of an old shrunk power,
On shy and maimed, on women wrung awry,
He lay, a bullying hulk, to crush them more.
But when one, fearless, turned and clawed like bronze,
Cringing was easy to blunt these stern paws,
And he would weigh the heavier on those after.

Who rests in God's mean flattery now? Your wealth
Is but his cunning to make death more hard.
Your iron sinews take more pain in breaking.
And he has made the market for your beauty
Too poor to buy, although you die to sell.
Only that he has never heard of sleep;
And when the cats come out the rats are sly.
Here we are safe till he slinks in at dawn

But he has gnawed a fibre from strange roots,
And in the morning some pale wonder ceases.
Things are not strange and strange things are forgetful.
Ah! if the day were arid, somehow lost
Out of us, but it is as hair of us,
And only in the hush no wind stirs it.
And in the light vague trouble lifts and breathes,
And restlessness still shadows the lost ways.
The fingers shut on voices that pass through,
Where blind farewells are taken easily ....

Ah! this miasma of a rotting God!

Isaac Rosenberg

**Hearts First Word. I.**

To sweeten a swift minute so
With such rare fragrance of sweet speech,
And make the after hours go
In a blank yearning each on each ;
To drain the springs till they be dry,
And then in anguish thirst for drink ;
So but to glimpse her robe thirst I,
And my soul hungers and I sink.

There is no word that we have said
Whereby the lips and heart arc fire;
No look the linked glances read
That held the springs of deep desire.
And yet the sounds her glad lips gave
Are on my soul vibrating still ;
Her eyes that swept me as a wave
Shine my soul's worship to fulfil.

Her hair, her eyes, her throat and chin-
Sweet hair, sweet eyes, sweet throat, so sweet,
So fair because the ways of sin
Have never known her perfect feet-
By what far ways and marvellous
May I such lovely heaven reach ?
What dread, dark seas and perilous
Lie 'twist love's silence and love's speech?

Isaac Rosenberg

**Hearts First Word. II**

And all her soft dark hair
Breathed for him like a prayer,
And her white lost face
Was prisoned to sonie far place.
Love was not denied-
Love's ends would hide,
And Hower and fruit and tree
Were under its sea.
Yea, its abundance knelt
Where the nerves felt
The springs of feeling flow
And made pain grow !
There seemed no root or sky,
But a pent infinity
Where apparitions dim
Sculptured each whim
In dame and wandering mist
Of kisses to be kist.

LADY, YOU ARE MY GOD

Lady, you are my God-
Lady, you are my Heaven.

If I am your God
Labour for your Heaven.

Lady, you are my God,
And shall not love win Heaven ?

If love made me God
Deeds must win my Heaven.

If my love made you God,
What more can 1 for Heaven ?

Isaac Rosenberg

## Home-Thoughts From France

Wan, fragile faces of joy,
Pitiful mouths that strive
To light with smiles the place
We dream we walk alive,

To you I stretch my hands,
Hands shut in pitiless trance
In a land of ruin and woe,
The desolate land of France.

Dear faces startled and shaken,
Out of wild dust and sounds
You yearn to me, lure and sadden
My heart with futile bounds.

Isaac Rosenberg

## If You Are Fire

If you are fire and I am fire,
Who blows the flame apart
So that desire eludes desire
Around one central heart ?

A single root and separate bough,
And what blind hands between
That make our longing's mutual glow
As if it had not been ?

Isaac Rosenberg

**In Piccadi**

Lamp-lit faces, to you
What is your starry dew ?
Gold flowers of the night blue !

Deep in wet pavement's slime
Mud-rooted is your fierce prime,
To bloom in lust's coloured clime.

The sheen of eyes that lust,
Which dew-time made your trust,
Lights your passionless dust.

Isaac Rosenberg

**In the Trenches**

I snatched two poppies
From the parapet’s ledge,
Two bright red poppies
That winked on the ledge.
Behind my ear
I stuck one through,
One blood red poppy
I gave to you.

The sandbags narrowed
And screwed out our jest,
And tore the poppy
You had on your breast ...
Down - a shell - O! Christ,
I am choked ... safe ... dust blind, I
See trench floor poppies
Strewn. Smashed you lie.

Isaac Rosenberg

## In The Underworld

I have lived in the underworld so long:
How can you, a creature of light,
Without terror understand the song
And unmoved hear what moves in night?

I am a spirit that yours has found,
Strange, undelightful, obscure,
Created by some other God, and bound
In terrible darkness, breathing breath impure.

Creature of light and happiness,
Deeper the darkness was when you,
With your bright terror eddying the distress,
Grazed the dark waves and shivering further flew.

Isaac Rosenberg

**In War**

Fret the nonchalant noon
With your spleen
Or your gay brow,
For the motion of your spirit
Ever moves with these.

When day shall be too quiet,
Deaf to you
And your dumb smile,
Untuned air shall lap the stillness
In the old space for your voice-

The voice that once could mirror
Remote depths
Of moving being,
Stirred by responsive voices near,
Suddenly stilled for ever.

No ghost darkens the places
Dark to One ;
But my eyes dream,
And my heart is heavy to think
How it was heavy once.

In the old days when death Stalked the world
For the flower of men,
And the rose of beauty faded
And pined in the great gloom,

One day we dug a grave :
We were vexed
With the sun's heat.
We scanned the hooded dead :
At noon we sat and talked.

How death had kissed their eyes
Three dread noons since,
How human art won
The dark soul to flicker
Till it was lost again :

And we whom chance kept whole-
But haggard,
Spent-were charged
To make a place for them who knew
No pain in any place.

The good priest came to pray ;
Our ears half heard,
And half we thought
Of alien things, irrelevant ;
And the heat and thirst were great.

The good priest read : 'I heard .
Dimly my brain
Held words and lost. . . .
Sudden my blood ran cold. . . .
God ! God ! It could not be.

He read my brother's name ; I sank-
I clutched the priest.
They did not tell me it was he
Was killed three days ago.

What are the great sceptred dooms
To us, caught
In the wild wave
We break ourselves on them,
My brother, our hearts and years.

THE DEAD HEROES

Flame out, you glorious skies,
Welcome our brave;
Kiss their exultant eyes ;
Give what they gave.

Flash, mailed seraphim,
Your burning spears;
New days to outflame their dim
Heroic years.

Thrills their baptismal tread
The bright proud air ;
The embattled plumes outspread
Burn upwards there.

Flame out, flame out, 0 Song !
Star ring to star;
Strong as our hurt is strong
Our children are.

Their blood is England's heart ;
By their dead hands
It is their noble part
That England stands.

England-Time gave them thee;
They gave back this
To win Eternity
And claim God's kiss.

Isaac Rosenberg

**Isolation : A Fragment**

My Maker shunneth me :
Even as a wretch stricken with leprosy,
So hold I pestilent supremacy.
Yea! He Instil fled far as the uttermost star,
Beyond the unperturbed fastnesses of night
And dreams that bastioned are
By fretted towers of sleep that scare His light.

Of wisdom writ, whereto
My burdened feet may haste withouten rue,
I may not spell-and I am sore to do.
Yea, all (seeing my Maker hath such dread),
Even mine own self-love, wists not but to fly
To Him, and sore besped
Leaves me, its captain, in such mutiny.

Will, deemed incorporate
With me, bath flown ere love, to expiate
Its sinful stay where He did habitate.

Ah me, if they had left a sepulchre ;
But no-the light bath changed not, and in it
Of its same colour stir
Spirits I see not but phantasmed feel to flit.

Air, legioned with such, stirreth,
So that I seem to draw them with my breath,
Ghouls that devour each joy they do to death,
Strange glimmering griefs and sorrowing silences
Bearing dead flowers unseen whose charnel smell
Great awe to my sense is
Even in the rose-time when all else is well.

Isaac Rosenberg

**Killed In Action**

Your ' Youth ' has fallen from its shelf,
And you have fallen, you yourself.
They knocked a soldier on the head,
I mourn the poet who fell dead.
And yet I think it was by chance,
By oversight you died in France.
You were so poor an outward man,
So small against your spirit's span,
That Nature, being tired awhile,
Saw but your outward human pile;
And Nature, who would never let
A sun with light still in it set,
Before you even reached your sky,
In inadvertence let you die.

Isaac Rosenberg

**Louse Hunting**

Nudes -- stark and glistening,
Yelling in lurid glee. Grinning faces
And raging limbs
Whirl over the floor one fire.
For a shirt verminously busy
Yon soldier tore from his throat, with oaths
Godhead might shrink at, but not the lice.
And soon the shirt was aflare
Over the candle he'd lit while we lay.

Then we all sprang up and stript
To hunt the verminous brood.
Soon like a demons' pantomine
The place was raging.
See the silhouettes agape,
See the glibbering shadows
Mixed with the battled arms on the wall.
See gargantuan hooked fingers
Pluck in supreme flesh
To smutch supreme littleness.
See the merry limbs in hot Highland fling
Because some wizard vermin
Charmed from the quiet this revel
When our ears were half lulled
By the dark music
Blown from Sleep's trumpet.

Isaac Rosenberg

**Marching (As Seen From the Left File)**

My eyes catch ruddy necks
Sturdily pressed back -
All a red brick moving glint.
Like flaming pendulums, hands
Swing across the khaki -
Mustard-coloured khaki -
To the automatic feet.
We husband the ancient glory
In these bared necks and hands.
Not broke is the forge of Mars;
But a subtler brain beats iron
To shoe the hoofs of death,
(Who paws dynamic air now).
Blind fingers loose an iron cloud
To rain immortal darkness
On strong eyes.

Isaac Rosenberg

**My Days**

My days are but the tombs of buried hours ;
Which tombs are hidden in the piled years ;
But from the mounds there spring up many flowers,
Whose beauty well repays their cost of tears.
Time, like a sexton, pileth mould on mould,
Minutes on minutes till the tombs are high ;
But from the dust there fall some grains of gold,
And the dead corpse leaves what will never die-
It may be but a thought, the nursling seed
Of many thoughts, of many a high desire ;
Some little act that stirs a noble deed,
Like breath rekindling a smouldering fire :
They only live who have not lived in vain,
For in their works their life returns again.

Isaac Rosenberg

## O, In A World Of Men And Women

0, in a world of men and women,
Where all things seemed so strange to me,
And speech the common world called human
For me was a vain mimicry,

I thought-O, am I one in sorrow ?
Or is the world more quick to hide
Their pain with raiment that they borrow
From pleasure in the house of pride ?

O joy of mine, 0 longed-for stranger,
How I would greet you if you came:
In the world's joys I've been a ranger,
In my world sorrow is their name.

Isaac Rosenberg

## Of Any Old Man

Wreck not the ageing heart of quietness,
With alien uproar and rude jolly cries,
Which satyr like to a mild maidens pride,
Ripens not wisdom, but a large recoil,
Give them their withered peace, their trial grave,
Their old youth's three-scored shadowy effigy,
Mock them not with your ripened turbulence,
Their frost mailed petulance with your torrid wrath,
While edging your boisterous thunder shivers one word,
Pap to their senile shivering, drug to truth,
The feigned ramparts of bleak ignorance,
Experience - crown of naked majesties,
That tells us nought we know not - but confirms,
Oh think! You reverend shadowy austere,
Your Christ's youth was not ended when he died.

Isaac Rosenberg

## On A Lady Singing

She bade us listen to the singing lark
In tones far sweeter than its own:
For fear that she should cease and leave us dark
We built the bird a feigned throne,
Shrined in her gracious glory-giving ways
From sceptred hands of starred humility-
Praising herself the more in giving praise
To music less than she.

Isaac Rosenberg

**On Receiving News of the War**

Snow is a strange white word.
No ice or frost
Has asked of bud or bird
For Winter's cost.

Yet ice and frost and snow
From earth to sky
This Summer land doth know.
No man knows why.

In all men's hearts it is.
Some spirit old
Hath turned with malign kiss
Our lives to mould.

Red fangs have torn His face.
God's blood is shed.
He mourns from His lone place
His children dead.

O! ancient crimson curse!
Corrode, consume.
Give back this universe
Its pristine bloom.

Isaac Rosenberg

**Returning, We Hear the Larks**

Sombre the night is.
And though we have our lives, we know
What sinister threat lies there.

Dragging these anguished limbs, we only know
This poison-blasted track opens on our camp -
On a little safe sleep.

But hark! joy - joy - strange joy.
Lo! heights of night ringing with unseen larks.
Music showering our upturned list'ning faces.

Death could drop from the dark
As easily as song -
But song only dropped,
Like a blind man's dreams on the sand
By dangerous tides,
Like a girl's dark hair for she dreams no ruin lies there,
Or her kisses where a serpent hides.

Isaac Rosenberg

**Sleep**

Godhead's lip hangs
When our pulses have no golden tremors,
And his whips are flicked by mice
And all star-amorous things.

Drops, drops of shivering quiet
Filter under my lids.
Now only am I powerful.
What though the cunning gods outwit us here
In daytime and in playtime,
Surely they feel the gyres we lay on them
In our sleep.

0, subtle gods lying hidden!
0, gods with your oblique eyes !
Your elbows in the dawn, and wrists
Bright with the afternoon,
1)o you not shake when a mortal slides
Into your own unvexed peace ?

When a moving stillness breaks over your knees
(An emanation of piled (eons' pressures),
From our bodies flat and straight,
And your limbs are locked,
Futilely gods',
And shut your sinister essences

Isaac Rosenberg

**Soldier: Twentieth Century**

I love you, great new Titan!
Am I not you?
Napoleon or Caesar
Out of you grew.

Out of the unthinkable torture,
Eyes kissed by death,
Won back to the world again,
Lost and won in a breath,

Cruel men are made immortal,
Out of your pain born.
They have stolen the sun's power
With their feet on your shoulders worn.

Let them shrink from your girth,
That has outgrown the pallid days,
When you slept like Circe's swine,
Or a word in the brain's way.

Isaac Rosenberg

**Song**

A silver rose to show
Is your sweet face;
And like the heavens' white brow,
Sometime God's battle-place,
Your blood is quiet now.

Your body is a star
Unto my thought ;
But stars are not too far,
And can be caught-
Small pools their prisons are.

Isaac Rosenberg

**Spring**

I walk and wonder
To hear the birds sing,
Without you my lady
How can there be Spring?
I see the pink blossoms
That slept for a year;
But who could have woke them,
While you were not near?

Birds sing to the blossoms;
Blind, dreaming your pink,
These blush to the songsters,
Your music they think.
So well had you taught them,
To look and to sing;
Your bloom and your music;
The ways of the Spring.

Isaac Rosenberg

**Spring, 1916**

Slow, rigid, is this masquerade
That passes as through a difficult air :
Heavily-heavily passes.
What has she fed on ? Who her table laid
Through the three seasons ? What forbidden fare
Ruined her as a mortal lass is ?

I played with her two years ago,
Who might be now her own sister in stone;
So altered from her May mien,
When round the pink a necklace of warm snow
Laughed to her throat where my mouth's touch had gone.
How is this, ruined Queen?

Who lured her vivid beauty so
'l'o be that strained chill thing that moves
So ghastly midst her young brood
Of pregnant shoots that she for men did grow ?
Where are the strong men who made these their loves ?
Spring ! God pity your mood !

Isaac Rosenberg

**Tess**

The free fair life that has never been mine, the glory that might have been,
If I were what you seem to be and what I may not be !
I know I walk upon the earth, but a dreadful wall between
My spirit and your spirit lies, your joy and my misery.

The angels that lie watching us, the little human play,
What deem they of the laughter and the tears that flow apart ?
When a word of man is a woman's doom do they turn and wonder and say,
'Ah ! Why has God made love so great that love must burst her heart ?'

Isaac Rosenberg

**The Blind God**

Streaked with immortal blasphemies,
Betwixt His twin eternities
The Shaper of mortal destinies
Sits in that limbo of dreamless sleep,
Some nothing that hath shadows deep.

The world is only a small pool
In the meadows of Eternity,
And men like fishes lying cool ;
And the wise man and the fool
In its depths like fishes lie.
When an angel drops a rod
And he draws you to the sky
Will you bear to meet your God
You have streaked with blasphemy ?

Isaac Rosenberg

**The Burning Of The Temple**

Fierce wrath of Solomon,
Where sleepest thou ?
0 see, The fabric which thou won
Earth and ocean to give thee-
0 look at the red skies.

Or hath the sun plunged down ?
What is this molten gold-
These thundering fires blown
Through heaven, where the smoke rolled ?
Again the great king dies.

His dreams go out in smoke.
His days he let not pass
And sculptured here are broke,
Are charred as the burnt grass,
Gone as his mouth's last sighs.

Isaac Rosenberg

## The Destruction Of Jerusalem By The Babylonian Hordes

They left their Babylon bare
Of all its tall men,
Of all its proud horses ;
They made for Lebanon.

And shadowy sowers went
Before their spears to sow
The fruit whose taste is ash,
For Judah's soul to know.

They who bowed to the Bull god,
Whose wings roofed Babylon,
In endless hosts darkened
The bright-heavened Lebanon.

They washed their grime in pools
Where laughing girls forgot
The wiles they used for Solomon.
Sweet laughter, remembered not !

Sweet laughter charred in the flame
That clutched the cloud and earth,
While Solomon's towers crashed between
To a gird of Babylon's mirth.

Isaac Rosenberg

**The Dying Soldier**

' Here are houses,' he moaned,
'I could reach, but my brain swims.'
Then they thundered and flashed,
And shook the earth to its rims.

'They are gunpits,' he gasped,
'Our men are at the guns.
Water! . . . Water! . . , Oh, water !
For one of England's dying sons.'

' We cannot give you water,
Were all England in your breath.'
' Water! . .. Water! . . . Oh, water !'
fie moaned and swooned to death,

Isaac Rosenberg

**The Female God**

We curl into your eyes-
They drink our files and have never drained :
In the fierce forest of your hair
Our desires beat blindly for their treasure.

In your eyes' subtle pit,
Far down, glimmer our souls ;
And your hair like massive forest trees
Shadows our pulses, overtired and dumb.

Like a candle lost in an electric glare
Our spirits tread your eyes' infinities :
In the wrecking waves of your tumultuous locks
Do you not hear the moaning of our pulses ?

Queen ! Goddess! Animal!
In sleep do your dreams battle with our souls ?
When your hair is spread like a lover on the pillow
Do not our jealous pulses wake between ?

You have dethroned the ancient God,
You have usurped his Sabbath, his common days;
Yea, every moment is delivered to you,
Our Temple, our Eternal, our one God !

Our souls have passed into your eyes,
Our days into your hair;
And you, our rose-deaf prison, are very pleased with the world,
Your world.

Isaac Rosenberg

**The Immortals**

I killed them, but they would not die.
Yea! all the day and all the night
For them I could not rest or sleep,
Nor guard from them nor hide in flight.

Then in my agony I turned
And made my hands red in their gore.
In vain - for faster than I slew
They rose more cruel than before.

I killed and killed with slaughter mad;
I killed till all my strength was gone.
And still they rose to torture me,
For Devils only die in fun.

I used to think the Devil hid
In women’s smiles and wine’s carouse.
I called him Satan, Balzebub.
But now I call him, dirty louse.

Isaac Rosenberg

**The Jew**

Moses, from whose loins I sprung,
Lit by a lamp in his blood
Ten immutable rules, a moon
For mutable lampless men.

The blonde, the bronze, the ruddy,
With the same heaving blood,
Keep tide to the moon of Moses.
Then why do they sneer at me?

Isaac Rosenberg

**The Nun**

So thy soul's meekness shrinks,
Too loth to show her face-
Why should she shun the world ?
It is a holy place.

Concealed to itself
If the flower kept its scent,
Of itself amorous,
Less rich its ornament.

Use-utmost in each kind-
Is beauty, truth in one,
While soul rays light to soul
In one God-linked sun.

Isaac Rosenberg

**The One Lost**

I mingle with your bones:
You steal in subtle noose
This lighted dust .Jehovah loans
And now I lose.

What will the Lender say
When I shall not be found,
Safe-sheltered at the Judgment Day,
Being in you bound ?

he'll hunt through wards of Heaven,
Call to uncoffined earth
'Where is this soul, unjudged, not given
Dole for good's dearth?'

And I, lying so safe
Within you, hearing all,
To have cheated God shall laugh,
Freed by your thrall.

Isaac Rosenberg

**The Troop Ship**

Grotesque and queerly huddled
Contortionists to twist
The sleepy soul to a sleep,
We lie all sorts of ways
And cannot sleep.
The wet wind is so cold,
And the lurching men so careless,
That, should you drop to a doze,
Winds' fumble or men's feet
Are on your face.

Isaac Rosenberg

## Through These Pale Cold Days

Through these pale cold days
What dark faces burn
Out of three thousand years,
And their wild eyes yearn,

While underneath their brows
Like waifs their spirits grope
For the pools of Hebron again--
For Lebanon's summer slope.

They leave these blond still days
In dust behind their tread
They see with living eyes
How long they have been dead.

Isaac Rosenberg

**Wedded**

They leave their love-lorn haunts,
Their sigh-warm floating Eden;
And they are mute at once,
Mortals by God unheeden,
By their past kisses chidden.

But they have kist and known
Clear things we dim by guesses-
Spirit to spirit grown:
Heaven, born in hand-caresses.
Love, fall from sheltering tresses.

And they are dumb and strange:
Bared trees bowed from each other.
Their last green interchange
What lost dreams shall discover?
Dead, strayed, to love-strange lover.

Isaac Rosenberg

## Zion

She stood-a hill-ensceptred Queen,
The glory streaming from her ;
While Heaven flashed her rays between,
And shed eternal summer.

The gates of morning opened wide
On sunny dome and steeple;
Noon gleamed upon the mountain-side
'Thronged with a happy people ;

And twilight's drowsy, half closed eyes
Beheld that virgin splendour
Whose orbs were as her darkening skies,
And as her spirit, tender.

Girt with that strength, first-horn of right,
Held fast by deeds of honour,
I ler robe she wove with rays more bright
Than Heaven could rain upon her.

Where is that light-that citadel
That robe with woof of glory ?
She lost her virtue and she fell,
And only left her story.

Isaac Rosenberg