World War I Poetry
Selections

**Rupert Brooke’s “The Soldier” (1914; 1916)**

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England’s, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the Eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given,
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

**Siegfried Sassoon’s “Glory of Women” (1917)**

You love us when we’re heroes, home on leave,
Or wounded in a mentionable place.
You worship decorations; you believe
That chivalry redeems the war’s disgrace.
You make us shells. You listen with delight,
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.
You crown our distant ardours while we fight,
And mourn our laureled memories when we’re killed.
You can’t believe that British troops “retire”
When hell’s last horror breaks them, and they run,
Trampling the terrible corpses—blind with blood.

O German mother dreaming by the fire,
While you are knitting socks to send your son
His face is trodden deeper in the mud.
Craiglockhart, 1917

*note: Craiglockhart Hospital is near Edingburgh, Scoutland;
this is where Sassoon & Wilfred Owen were treated for shell shock)*

**Siegfried Sassoon’s ‘”They”’ (1919)**

The Bishop tells us: “When the boys come back
“They will not be the same; for they’ll have fought
“In a just cause: they lead the last attack
“On Anti-Christ; their comrades’ blood has bought
“New right to breed an honourable race,
“They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.”
"We're none of us the same!" the boys reply.
"For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;
"Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;
"And Bert's gone syphilitic; you'll not find
"A chap who's served that hasn't found some change."
And the Bishop said: "The ways of God are strange!"

Siegfried Sassoon's “Everyone Sang” (April 1919)

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;
And I was filled with such delight
As prisoned birds must find in freedom,
Winging wildly across the white
Orchards and dark-green fields; on—on—and out of sight.
Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;
And beauty came like the setting sun:
My heart was shaken with tears; and horror
Drifted away . . . 0, but Everyone
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.

W. H. Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” (1938; 1940)

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understand
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.