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Opening extract from

Poems from the Second World War

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Poems from the Second World War

Polliciti Meliora

As one who, gazing at a vista
    Of beauty, sees the clouds close in,
And turns his back in sorrow, hearing
    The thunderclouds begin.
So we, whose life was all before us,
    Our hearts with sunlight filled,
Left in the hills our books and flowers,
    Descended, and were killed.
Write on the stones no words of sadness –
    Only the gladness due,
That we, who asked the most of living,
    Knew how to give it too.

Frank Thompson

September, 1939

The purple asters lift their heads
Beneath the azure autumn skies;
Above the sunflower's golden cup
Hover the scarlet butterflies.

Not in the sandbagged city street
Where London's silver guardians soar,
But through the cottage garden throbs
The aching grief of England's war.

Vera Brittain

In September 1939

The last war was my favourite picture story.
Illustrated London News bound in the study;
The German bayonet we believed still bloody

But was just rusty. Privacy of death.
My uncle's uniform meant more than glory;
Surprise that grief should be so transitory . . .

All the predictions of adolescence had
Disposed of glory in their realist path:
There'd be no need to duck and hold your breath.

Now, looking as useless and as beautiful
As dragonflies, the plump silver balloons
Hang over London also like zany moons.

Yet from the blacked-out window death still seems
Private, not an affair that's shared by all
The distant people, the flats, the Town Hall.

But some remember Spain and the black spots
They shouted 'Bombers' at. That memory screams
That we know as a film or in bad dreams.

Fear will alight on each like a dunce's cap
Or an unguesscd disease unless death drops
Quicker than the sirens or the traffic stops.

Bernard Gutteridge

Bournemouth, September 3rd, 1939

My summer ends, and term begins next week.
Why am I here in Bournemouth, with my aunt
And 'Uncle Bill', who something tells me can't
Be really my uncle? People speak
In hushed, excited tones. Down on the beach
An aeroplane comes in low over the sea
And there's a scattering as people reach
For towels and picnic gear and books, and flee
Towards the esplanade. Back at the hotel
We hear what the Prime Minister has said.
'So it's begun.' 'Yes, it was bound to.' 'Well,
Give it till Christmas.' Later, tucked in bed,
I hear the safe sea roll and wipe away
The castles I had built in sand that day.

Anthony Thwaite

The Second World War

The voice said 'We are at War'
And I was afraid, for I did not know what this
meant.
My sister and I ran to our friends next door
As if they could help. History was lessons learnt
With ancient dates, but here

Was something utterly new,
The radio, called the wireless then, had said
That the country would have to be brave. There
was much to do.
And I remember that night as I lay in bed
I thought of soldiers who

Had stood on our nursery floor
Holding guns, on guard and stiff. But war meant
blood
Shed over battlefields, Cavalry galloping. War
On that September Sunday made us feel frightened
Of what our world waited for.

Elizabeth Jennings

Newgale Sands 1940

Every Year
There is a short season
When the summer buses from the market town
Routed to the farthest rock of western Wales
Stop where the road swoops down upon the shore
At Newgale Sands:
The wind-rutted bungalows
Taking their crazy shutters down
Hoist the gay semaphores
The signal summer,
The sun blares in through doors
Blistering on sandy hinges,
Down in the bay
The rocks stare motionless
Into the August mirror of the sea.

But in June
When the honey honeysuckle is thickest on the
bush
The wind blows off the sea
And no one comes,
In any year
No season has begun then.
Only this year we know it never will begin,
None will come but those
Like us, to say goodbye, sisters to brothers,
Lovers to lovers.

This quite deserted year
We saw Newgale sands as men
Shipwrecked see the waiting island,
Two miles of bay still wet
At midday from the morning tide
Under the thick English summer sky
Which only lets the warmth through not the sun;
There was a noon tide bearing on the land
The unremitting roar
Of endless breakers racing
With furious hair after the fretted surf

Scattered like whitened bones on the flat sand;
And here, entangling the noon light,
A fresh stream glancing
Ice-cold out of the generous rock
For those thirsty and ragged landing

From the sun-baked boats,
And then the caves
Shelter for fires of driftwood
Within the echo, like a thousand underground falls,
Of never-quietened waves;
Limpets on the rocks, and warm pools streaming
With drowning weed, hiding crabs and crayfish,
Razor shells for knives,
And at last the green land, the turf
Growing to the cliff edge
Promising cornfields, promising sheep with black
faces, honeysuckle,
And the wild strawberries scarlet in the hedge
The size for birds' eyes.

We were content to be like castaways,
Idle while the vast sea rushed in
Grinding over the scrupulous sands
Whose every grain swam magnified and clear
Before our downward dazzled gaze,
Gallons of green waves
Spouted over our hot skins their delicious pain
Forcing sharp cries
Out of our heedless mouths,
With endless, endless, soporific roar
Falling on the ear,
On heart, on brain,
Sorrow and thought . . .

We were content to be like castaways,
Recognizing we had found an island
Midway between dangers,
Content, we rested there.

Joan Barton

Empty Your Pockets

Empty your pockets, Tom, Dick and Harry,
Strip your identity, leave it behind.
Lawyer, garage-hand, grocer, don't tarry
With your own country, your own kind.

Leave all your letters. Suburb and township,
Green fen and grocery, slipway and bay,
Hot-spring and prairie, smoke stack and coal-tip,
Leave in our keeping while you're away.

Tom, Dick and Harry, plain names and numbers,
Pilot, observer and gunner depart.
Their personal litter only encumbers
Somebody's head, somebody's heart.

John Pudney