

## 1918-2018 Healing Hearts and Minds

He's sitting on the chair,  
With the curtains drawn,  
Because there might be a sniper  
Taking aim across the lawn.

He's hyper vigilant.  
His nerves are on edge.  
His thoughts tangled up,  
Like rambles through a hedge.

She can't get to close.  
He can't bear to be touched.  
He's afraid that he'll hurt her.  
The guilt would be too much.

The changes she sees in him,  
They seem so immense,  
But she knows that he's in there,  
Under all of the mess.

And just like the bramble,  
When it feels the sun's warm,  
Grows flower and fruit,  
Beside stem, leaf and thorn.

She has hope that one day,  
He will again learn to trust.  
That the warmth of her heart,  
Won't let his mind rust.

## A Lavish Loss

Trees don't ask us to rid  
them of their limbs but

they grow new ones so  
we can get away with it.

Not as lucky as a tree if  
you step on a landmine

or are beneath the bomb  
a drone has dropped.

.  
The Romans scratched  
curses on their sling-bolts,

we scrawled curses on our  
bombers, the aim to bury

the enemy, maiming's  
second best. The ghosts

of war fitted with prosthetic  
limbs or wheel chairs remind

us we haven't got away with it.  
But don't curse the Gods,

they didn't start the war  
we ask the young to fight

but often forget to honour  
when they do. Courageous

are those who after so much  
dying can relish living.



## Afghanistan

Here:

I spray my perfume on the bluey - will it stay the trip?

As he tends the war-torn wounded with steeled calm, high stress and drips.

Heights of screams and groans so deep amidst the whirring kit,  
Medics shouting, pressing, pushing; acrid smells from those once fit.

I pray my bluey lifts his spirit - just so precious to us all,

My willing thoughts wing through the air as this war still appalls.

No coming home till R and R - a focused dream each day

When we can fly to shining stars with war far off and away -

Detached from conflict, hate and harm to glow in love, not pain,

And smell that perfume on my skin till he's called to do it all -

Again.

There:

He lies abed, absorbs my words - once, again, again

Oblivious to shaking ground - thundering engines lift the plane -

Winging human cargo home, drugged deep against the pain

Back to those who give their souls, life's work to break the chains -

Of constricting wounds and polytrauma shackling troubled minds

To fight despair and, with patience, repair each person over time.

Past prime may seem a distant goal, now trust the greatest need -

To help relieve each shattered mind - from memories of EID's.

Some gave their lives, some who survived will never be the same, but -

My bluey wills that his spirit is refilled as he's called to do it all -

Again.

## After the Guns

After the guns, a ringing silence  
Quiet in the contrast between what was then  
And now.  
You're there, beyond my hearing.  
You live beyond the dust, the mud  
The noise, the filth, the blood and stink,  
The fear, the pain and utter loneliness.  
You live beyond my voice,  
But not beyond my love.

## Armistice

And when the guns fall silent, think awhile:  
For every precious moment bloody won  
One man's no longer sighted by a gun;  
Allow him then a cheer, a tear, a smile.  
An end to toppling fairground ducks in file,  
No need to flinch from shells, nor wish to run;  
No heaving stomach fighting one-to-one;  
No long, long days to gain the stinking mile.

To run the field together, climb the stile;  
To silhouette the lark against the sun;  
Of doubts and wasting time there will be none:  
He'll see his lovely Lucy tease, beguile.  
"Hostilities resumed; return to fight."  
His forehead holed, the day slides into night.

## **Back Home**

He inhales greenness,  
fragrance of peace,  
cleansing the toxins of war  
mercilessly invading  
his veins.

Tranquillity drowns  
nightmarish clamours  
that haunt his dark.  
Feet released from boots  
stained red by foreign dust  
now tread on new cut grass.

A mind damaged  
by distant conflict  
releases its shadows  
into dappled stillness  
and serenity.

## Battle for the Dawn

You return, broken in body and mind -  
No will to face the challenge, of the life you left behind.  
But the demons that still haunt you are no longer real,  
Your resolve can overcome them, to let your spirit heal.  
Accept the comfort offered, from those that you hold dear,  
This is your finest battle, repel all thoughts of fear.  
Remember those who can't come back, keep them by your side,  
Take up the fight on their behalf, let them be your guide.  
This path you tread is proven, take each step slow but sure,  
One dawn you will awaken and be whole again once more.

## For Us That Walk

From photo album's family lore,  
their eyes meet ours; a uniform  
transforming youth; theatres of war,  
country calling them to perform.

Their eyes meet ours; a uniform  
for those that paid the nation's toll;  
country calling them to perform,  
they marched on stage, performed their role.

For those that paid the nation's toll;  
no curtain call to loud applause,  
they marched on stage, performed their role.  
The poet waits for battle pause.

No curtain call to loud applause,  
in death's carnage they left the stage.  
The poet waits for battle pause  
to pen the truth that turns his page.

In death's carnage they left the stage.  
The poet strived throughout the night  
to pen the truth that turns his page  
then poured out hell by candlelight.

The poet strived throughout the night  
to seek the words; contain his rage,  
then poured out hell by candlelight  
for us that walk on freedom's stage.

## HEALED

“I was drifting dust in the blast of the nations’ rage,  
legs just holding, arms seem just a ghost  
and I’m afraid my head is torn and soft.”

Faultless in the world’s raw fires, you have  
but tried your best; now we have come to our  
own test: your frame we heal, your fears we balm.

No roll call here to echo in the halls.  
We will not rest, but *you* will, in the splendour of these walls,  
traumas changed to dreams and homely dramas:

Kids’ school lunches, tweets to lovers, calls to others,  
things that normalize our lives, and yours; the quiet  
of these rounded hills, the bracing of the sturdy trees

Will heal your mind and fit the body, quick  
to take the reins of life again, abled,  
lighting a new candle past that darkest place.

## Lest We Forget

Lead me into that gentle soft morning,  
to that place  
where men once stood commanding the Sun,  
to that place  
where a half forgotten long ago adagio  
whispers through the air,  
across the broken ground  
and its sleeping grass,  
to that place  
moistened by the dew  
of half remembered valiant deeds;  
Lead me then into  
that gentle soft morning of a going,  
of a never coming back later;  
Later the grand parade  
halted, obedient, waiting  
waiting at that place  
where men once stood commanding the Sun;  
themselves cocooned in rapture  
for the final salute,  
one last acknowledgement  
that this,  
that all this,  
is later.

## Lost & Found

To think, how little did I know of me,  
Or him, or her, of them - now "we". Joined forces, bonded minds in step, Quick  
marched from pasts without regret.

We trained to tease our appetites,

We ran, we sang, through sleepless nights. Unlikely a family we soon became,  
Toy soldiers numbered and surnamed.

"So to war!" mighty generals direction, One final bravado polished inspection. We  
journeyed, trespassed foreign shore, Entered fray like nothing seen before.

Through these hundred days, embattled haze, Of endless nights of Guy Fawkes  
blaze. Fears we've conquered, challenges won, Defences, offensives, we've  
overcome.

Now scent of flower, sight of Spring,  
Oh wishful thoughts of home they bring. Fight on determined, end line we race, Last  
silhouettes fall, so close, such waste.

Hear silence of guns as smoked sky clears, Embracing of nearest with joy mixed  
tears. These friends found, those lost, this victory, For him, her, them – forever "we".

## Love Song

I know what lovers do in war-time -  
It's always war-time when I weep;  
There's always gun-fire in my shadow,  
And now I start and now I sleep.

Oh grass is green and grass is ashen,  
Moons are white and moons are black;  
There's always sadness in our loving,  
And coffin handles grace my back.

I know what lovers do in war-time -  
It's love, not war, that makes us cry;  
There's always death in love's embraces -  
And now we love and now we die.

## Memorial

They brought limestone from Croatia  
to this place of wide fields, narrow forests, black hills,  
built pillars that would gleam between dark trees and,  
on days like these, when cornfields ripple in the summer heat,  
and crow-scare gunshot cracks the drowsy quiet,  
they knew the stone would leap with light,  
blaze up against the blue, make last.

Sometimes the past breaks through:  
blood to tongue, metal to skin, bitter cordite to the shallow lung  
and I see myself, father, son, face to the trench wall, one hand upon  
the ladder's hand-worn wooden rung, eyes down  
avoiding eyes.

Seeking a hollow, a hedgerow, another small walled cemetery to see,  
I took this slight down-slope towards a line of trees,  
found water there, a thin stream threading through the farm,  
trickling softly to an open pool,  
saw, or thought this sudden flash of blue to be,  
a kingfisher, as if, or so I like to think,  
a greater truth prevailed unseen, revealed upon its vanishing,  
a watchful presence in the green.

## My Armistice Waits for Me

His Chosen Men lay resting, under the twinkling black,  
He should be planning forward, instead he's dreaming back.  
To her across the water, sweet beauty, soft and prim,  
To look upon, you weaken, true heaven out and in.  
Her skin, his touch does year for, green eyes his blues pray catch,  
Rough soldier lost in her grace, plump lips he longs to latch.  
His ears do ring from gunshot and battle aches his bones,  
Finding medicated soothing in her intoxicating tones.  
He longs to trade the Green-zone and grueling desert sands,  
For love-filled exploration, led by her swift, soft hands  
Although time and distance challenge what he hopes to grow,  
He prays for long years together and that she only know;  
It's her who brings the morning to his loneliest of nights.  
That she provides the reason to conquer every fight.  
To his soul that's witnessed wrongs, she balances with right.  
And down the darkest tunnel, it's she who is the light.

## My Service

They wrote that you found ways  
to smile, and lift the hearts of friends, holding hope in the darkest days.

Crawling out once more, to bring the injured home,  
you turned your back on  
the protecting earth,  
and fought on while you could

Would you do it again?  
I know you would

You always ran the race so fast,  
My heart forever in my mouth  
Watching you turn win every race  
with such delight

My milk dried to memories and  
to silent tears at all that went  
with you into the night

That was my service.  
To mother you and to raise you up to offer all you could

Would I do it again?  
You know I would

## Nightlark

In quieter moments,  
he shows me O for Oliver with this thumb  
tipping his forefinger and tries the word *hole*,  
waves his arms like a big shell going off, a barrage going up  
bursting his eardrums.

Through the window,  
the moon offers her double vowel, not the glare of snow  
or sharp sunlight, but the dusk light he prefers, like the mute key's  
soft rasp he plays on the piano.

The doctor asks what year is it?  
Sometimes, he says 1944. But today he says 1914.  
He means to say 2014 I explain,  
remembering the broken day he came, checking lists:  
jack knife, gas mask, rifle, bayonet, two wound dressings:  
one for bullet in,  
one for bullet out ...

Last night he woke from a bad dream,  
about stolen eggs from a bird's nest. He thrashed the air  
nails clawing the pillow, sharp as feather shafts.

I hushed and held him close, his head  
thrown back, mouth wide, on fire.  
At dawn, he's grinning at me, and I laugh  
as he sings *Hell-o* to the new earth-rise.

## One for the Team

I keep seeing you mate, intact and laughing,  
holding up your baby to make us smile.

I keep hearing you mate, joking, urging, 'come on lads keep together, don't step on the cracks it brings bad luck.

Keep it tight boys, we'll be home by the footy season.

We carried you home, silent and broken, you really took one for the team that day.

Your dad stood with pride head high, don't cry, don't cry.

Lucy took the flag, a token for the broken. The baby will have it one day.

They'll go to the wall to see your name, a game, 'let's find daddy's name'

but I keep seeing you mate, my shrink says you're not there, that makes us laugh doesn't it?

What do they know.

## Still Here

Should I return to where it all began -  
to unknown shores, to cold unsettled seas,  
or stand beneath now-empty skies and scan  
remote horizons, hoping I might see  
a face that I once knew, a voice once heard -  
brief flickers half-forgotten in Time's haze -  
would silence still the senses, or defer  
to images that time cannot erase:  
of standing fast, to face the storm ahead  
as spirits waver with a strange unease,  
or battling with panic, terror; dread,  
while loss is felt inherent on the breeze.

Yet, should I go back to that place again,  
where once I left soft traces of my years,  
though mind and body marred, I will remain  
the person I once was, and feel no fear.  
My courage leads me to a new terrain,  
a place wherein endurance shows the way;  
a place in which my spirit can attain  
serenity and strength for all my days.

I have this life, the will to persevere;  
feel sun and rain and hope: I am still here.

## Stronger than me

It was once stronger than me. The street noise  
and lights were helmet-heavy: turning and breaking cars  
screamed, horns fired a gun. I felt too small to stop it.

None of it made sense in a comfortable flat  
on the edge of a park, my mother and sisters  
asking how I was but I had no language for it

so sometimes I didn't pick up the phone. I tried.  
What I feared the most was that it had become me:  
frayed to useless. It had to be my fault to be this bad.

The first strand of hope was knowing others had been here.  
I didn't believe it. But the whisper got louder, warmer  
in tiny tiny increments: it passes, it passes, it passes.

I'm most proud of standing in that rain like a blessing  
and letting it fall around me, each day turning toward the sun.

## This is Who I am Now

At first, I could not make sense of the situation  
But when I saw part of me, beside me, I felt strangely calm  
Passive, submissive, still  
I had no desire to move away from the crimson, metallic trail  
The taste of salt and sand in my mouth  
I lay on the scorched blanket of dust and watched the sky  
The clouds formed into a silent shadow  
I'm floating, I'm hot, I'm cold. This is who I am now.

Sudden noise and light, I'm a casualty in a hospital bed  
There are others around me, but I cannot find the words to ask  
Silent, voiceless, still  
If I close my eyes it might all change again  
I used to feel heavier than this  
The mattress has shaped itself around me, become part of me  
Through the window I see the sky moving rapidly  
Like the monitors and machines next to me. This is who I am now.

New words to understand; trauma, prosthetic, pain, regeneration  
Anger first, leading to a new kind of resilience  
Strong, tenacious, single-minded,  
The strength to push my self-doubt, small and tight inside me  
The collage of light, noise and dust now makes some kind of sense.  
My family tell me I'm a survivor, I'm superhuman, their hero.  
These words are not all true, but they are part of my recovery.  
This is who I am now.

## Ties That Bind Forever

And if one day I am not there  
And you look and see my empty chair dont weep for me For I shall be  
Where the land meets the sky in eternity  
And even though I am out of sight  
I will walk beside you with a guiding light  
Because love does not die  
When the heart stops beating  
And life can be so very fleeting  
But hearts that have loved can transcend all time  
And the love that we shared will be yours and mine

## To The Warrior

Against hard stone cathedral steps he sits,  
A wagging dog his only comrade now.  
His webbing's worn, his coat no longer fits,  
All pride and glory ebbed away somehow.

Yet, as he stares downcast, while city crowds  
In thronged battalions battle who knows where,  
A woman kneels, smiles, looks into his eyes  
And, in surprise, sees dancing pictures there.

She feels the winds of Troy stream once again;  
Hears the Three Hundred staunch against their foe;  
Mud-spattered tommies storm the parapet;  
Normandy beaches bathe in golden glow.

"You are the Warrior." She takes his hand.  
"And shall be honoured in your promised land."

## Truce

On squelching mud and  
trampled grass, under the solemn  
grey of a French sky, between the rubble of a  
forgotten house, and the littering of golden mulch, he  
crouches behind the rocks. Stiff hands lock round the frozen rod,  
leather boots sink him deeper in soil, until he is connected to the Earth.  
As poppies bloom deep wounds, he kneels in silence and waits. A twig snaps  
somewhere far off, the quiet cracks like an egg. He slithers out from behind the  
rocks, creeps towards the sound, mud bubbles in warning. Jellied arms protest  
each movement, cold toes sting at each half-step, while sound is swallowed  
by wind, his bowels melt knowing the twig hears him too. "BANG!"  
James shouts, plastic gun pointed with pride. "Got you, Max."  
Max straightens his knees, throws his rifle in the mud.  
"That's not fair," Max says. "I want a rematch."  
James wipes his nose on a tissue.  
"No, I've won." He says.  
Max stomps his feet.  
"Truce?" James asks.  
Max huffs. "Fine,  
truce." The ground  
sighs in relief; as  
new life sprouts  
from the shell of  
a persistent seed.

Welcome

After war's grim travails  
think of me only as a good friend, who will share with you  
your anguish,  
and show you once again  
that dreams are quiet places, where battle cries  
may be silenced with love.