

FIVE POEMS

IVOR GURNEY AT DARTFORD ASYLUM

. . .

Extract from a local newspaper...

“Grave Attacked”

Vandals attacked the grave of Ivor Gurney, the First World war poet and composer, at St Matthew’s Church, Twigworth, Gloucester. A memorial to Gurney, who died aged 47 in 1937, was smashed.

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DRY FEVER

(Ivor Gurney was a First-World war poet
and composer who spent three years
in the trenches and the last fifteen years
of his life in the Dartford Mental Asylum)

After nighttime shivers
And pagoda dreams are written down
Refresh myself with a newspaper,
Cutting out the body of a pig
While nurse brings tea before screams.
Decide then and there to keep
A dressing-gown on all day,
Cadge cig's, dig trenches,
Earn my keep.

When the doctor assembles me
For her couch, I slip off all rotten words,
Lose naked thoughts and lather up clean
For memory. The woman prescribing pills:
Red for ruin, blue for bums, zebra-striped
For a bit of constipation in the head.

Lost in heart, I wander about the grounds
And wish for the chat of friends.
Eyes down, book in hand, my pen records
The roof sounds of rain. Mud on familiar faces,
Thunder and the black bits of life.

When the policeman, whispers:
'Ivor! You be a long way from home.
You'd better get started back or the sheen
Of conifers will get you down.'
I start a good old hum and buzz
Ask for a shillin'
And pull my socks up for walk back.

(cont)

DRY FEVER (cont)

So when I come in at end of day,
Friends and horrors too. Hear melody chill
With cold whistle of soldier dying.
'Mad,' they say, those visitors who look by
With nothing on heads as I snuggle
Down in Cotswold grass.

A grey man in sagged out suit!
Minor poet who tramps small hills
And cares not a jot for immortality.
And learns by ordnance-map,
Blistered fields and parched up villages
Far from Flanders mud.

On a war pension of eight bob a week,
I walk a newer world and *cannot belong*.
Find memory in song and know
All night greatness with muddle in morning.

Think up letter on shortage of pianos.
Complain about there being no roll-call
Or bayonet practice even though I know
There's peace about these days.

Tremble through church and hymns
And sleep at last in rightful place
Among the rooks and dead.

* * *

ORDEAL IN RAIN
(Remembering Ivor Gurney)

Three days downpour
Oiling boots on Gloucester roads.
Hands in pockets, walk full breadth
Of lovely night-yellow sky.
Meet mist in trees and shiver
In patched up jacket.

Wish for old Canadian trench-coat.
A hefty half-my-weight coat
Torn from a soldier's
Wired-up frame whose paradise
In that field was silence.

Mind worn with too much quiet,
I huddle into a hollow, root for fags.
Go with old Gloucester tune and rag-bag memory
Until in that hospital of wounds
I see her: Annie Nelson Drummond.
Tell her about the day
Of two sunrises: one sunset
And three men taken out on the quiet.

Sweet with words, her face
Sallying at life but leaving too quick.
And pain there was then on skin
And heart. Not to mention fierce electricity
On my hair and dirty whispers
Malingering in the ears.

Sleep-cross
Severn meadows and home.
Find worrying brother holding anger
Out with tea. Has done so before!
Go straightway to softish bed.
Pull the cover over my head,
Guard against rats and breathe
Deep into dark and candle flash.

* * *

PUT THOSE LIGHTS OUT

(Ivor Gurney was a World War 1 poet and composer who entered Dartford Asylum in 1922 and remained there until his death from TB in 1937)

I leave the clamour and elegiacs of war
To other poets. Blood and carnage dry
On winds swept in from coldest parts of heaven.
Leave right-feeling better men than me, the words
For getting gassed and dying in the mind.
Then lark and march about at tea-time with 6/8 feet,
Seek humidity of trenches in boiler room,
Left-right-dead. Left-right-dead.

Cool off outside in paths of misery and hydrangeas.
Some sight! as not out of pyjamas six-months now.
Get sudden freeze on neck so bad I scream
For orderlies and back in room, still shaken, take
To writing letters. These days my own wired-up
Verse grates no end and not a note of music
Left behind the ears.

*Dear Scotland Yard,
At the last count there were 137 war poets!
That I'd say, was one too much.*

Doze off between corridor screams, then quick
To Recreation Room with forty-watt bulb
To finish sketch of Rochester Cathedral.
Handed warm sweet night-cap which reminds
Like when we raised our heads above the parapet
And an officer joked: 'Back for tea in a jiffy, lads!'
But only five returned and the officer taken apart
In more places than one.

Cont...

Swallow tablets to stop bad dreams but still see
 Men exploded. *Tut-tutting* in their mashed brains.
 Seven minutes to lights out, so practice
 My epitaph in best copperplate:
 'He broke no heart 'cept his own.'
 Then count heads of all good friends rotting
 Down like cabbages on windswept allotments.

Back in room, a minute before dark,
 Eyes front and eyes wet and about turn heart!
 Gone out the moon behind metal bars.
 Gone out hope and song and words like:
 'Love in the half-light is so sweet...'

Better a skull under cornfield crows.
 Better back in Picardie, picked clean to bone.

* * *

GETTING THROUGH WINTER

(Remembering Ivor Gurney)

Fall out, fall in,
Heads counted, voices tested,
Smiles wiped, I'll say!
It's end of term for mad and sad.

Fall back, fall down,
Sleep November and January until
Mud mornings dry to cold cuts.
Hum on telephone wires, that too.
Quite clearly, I've been better.

Mind confused by lunch of dead pork
And raddled turnips before shock
Of Doctor Thomas cartwheeling:
'Happy Christmas, everybody.'

Walk pathways
And never more careful of visitors' feet,
Until petal pink woman chats this and that:
'Was the war terrible? I lost my cat!
And did you ever see someone die?'

'I did, Mrs.
Poor sods cried:
Mum! and sometimes, God!
But never Dad or Phyllis.'

For visitors, I play party pieces.
Robin's Return and *The Maiden's Prayer*.
Then old Frederick's, *Funeral March*
And think guns and rats were nothing
To poor old Ludwig's ears.

. . .

March winds burn through cracked pane.
Friends here yesterday,
They cried a bit and I told 'em:
'The world's not new.'
But they still caught the last train back.

cont...

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Fall out, fall in,
The Sergeant Major whispers: '*Ivor?*
Better get mustered again, lad.'

Then he goes and catches it
Straight through belly and back.
And stays the night in no-man's-land
Where spuds grow mythical with slaughter.

Fall down, fall back,
Fall apart.
No love anywhere unless in cider songs
And *Dichterliebe's* and Annie Nelson Drummond
Long gone to a four-postered heart.

See the moon slide down the wall
And drift to thick sleep
On lushest carpet of Severn Meadows
And who knows what poppy field.

Then wake at half-night,
Half-way through the blinding lights,
Bite my lip bad
And know I'm dead.

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POSTHUMOUS ANGELS AND ANGER

Extract from a local newspaper...

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'Vandals have attacked the grave of Ivor Gurney, the First World war poet and composer, at St Matthew's Church, Twigworth, Gloucestershire. A memorial to Gurney, who died aged 47 in 1937, was smashed.'

...

Don't bones and memory deserve better?

The poet was mad, they say.
Eating cold geraniums in the dark,
Silly bastard!
No wonder TB got him under.

So let 'em sing rowdy,
Do nasties on the broken stone,
'Cause I don't give a fig for peace and quiet
Or the bloody old blue yonder.

Still wander in mind a bit,
I mean, that's all dead is, wandering!
And long like hell for the breeze through grass
With old Thomas and a few others to chat.

I could get back to life if I cared to,
But why should I go through pain
And watch men die all over again
And pine for don't know what.

So desecrate much as you like,
My songs are sung and my poetry snug in books.
Gurney's a top notch, second-rate type, definitely
In line for promotion through the ranks.

And Angels stop by most nights
And they think I'm mad too.

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