

A photograph of a vast field of red poppies in the foreground, stretching towards a long, grey stone wall. Behind the wall are several multi-story buildings, including a prominent stone tower. The sky is blue with some light clouds. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

Poetry of World War 1

A Poem For Remembrance Day

Why are they selling poppies, Mummy?
Selling poppies in town today.
The poppies, child, are flowers of love.
For the men who marched away.

But why have they chosen a poppy, Mummy?
Why not a beautiful rose?
Because my child, men fought and died
In the fields where the poppies grow.

But why are the poppies so red, Mummy?
Why are the poppies so red?
Red is the colour of blood, my child.
The blood that our soldiers shed.

The heart of the poppy is black, Mummy.
Why does it have to be black?
Black, my child, is the symbol of grief.
For the men who never came back.

But why, Mummy are you crying so?
Your tears are giving you pain.
My tears are my fears for you my child.
For the world is forgetting again.

(Author unknown)



Anna Akhmatova

July 1914

I

It smells of burning. For four weeks
The dry peat bog has been burning.
The birds have not even sung today,
And the aspen has stopped quaking.

The sun has become God's displeasure,
Rain has not sprinkled the fields since Easter.
A one-legged stranger came along
And all alone in the courtyard he said:

'Fearful times are drawing near. Soon
Fresh graves will be everywhere.
There will be famine, earthquakes, widespread death,
And the eclipse of the sun and the moon.

But the enemy will not divide
Our land at will, for himself:
The Mother of God will spread her white mantle
over this enormous grief."

II

The sweet smell of juniper
Flies from the burning woods.
Soldiers' wives are wailing for the boys.
The widow's lament keens over the countryside.

The public prayers were not in vain,
The earth was yearning for rain!
Warm red liquid sprinkled
The trampled fields.

Low, low hangs the empty sky
And a praying voice quietly intones:
'They are wounding your sacred body,
They are casting lots for your robes.'

(translated by Judith Hemschemeyer)

Vera Brittain



August, 1914

God said, "Men have forgotten Me:
The souls that sleep shall wake again,
And blinded eyes must learn to see."

So since redemption comes through pain
He smote the earth with chastening rod,
And brought destruction's lurid reign;

But where His desolation trod
The people in their agony
Despairing cried, "There is no God."

John Allen Wyeth



Transport

A thick still heat stifles the dim saloon.
The rotten air hangs heavy on us all,
and trails a steady penetrating steam
of hot wet flannel and the evening's mess.
Close bodies swaying, catcalls out of tune,
while the jazz band syncopates the *Darkstown
Strutters' Ball*,
we crowd like minnows in a muddy stream.
O God, even here a sense of loneliness . . .
I grope my way on deck to watch the moon
gleam sharply where the shadows rise and fall
in the immense disturbance of the sea.
And like the vast possession of a dream
that black ship, and the pale sky's emptiness,
and this great wind become a part of me.

Rupert Brooke



The Soldier

If I should die, think only this of me:

That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever 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.

Harley Matthews

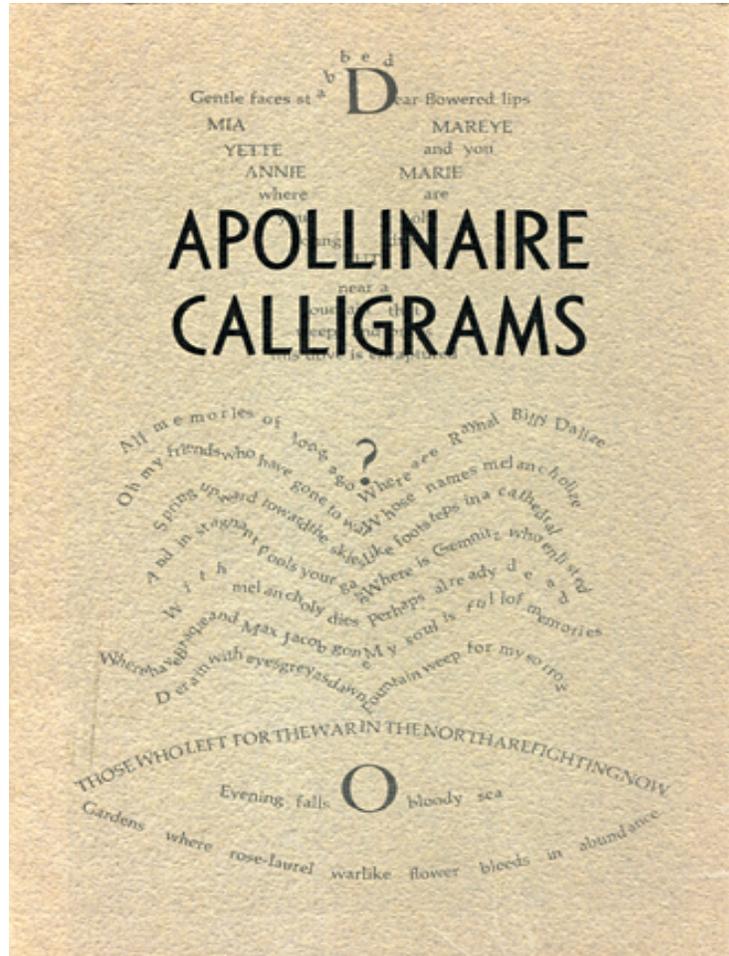


From **The Sleep of Death**

We see no terror in your eyes.
They say that sleeping you were found;
Now we with bayonets guard you round.
Night's shadow up the hillside creeps,
But you still watch the lighted skies,
Although the sentinel that sleeps
The next dawn dies.

Ah, the remorse is gone that grew
To think of what my comrade said:
"Give this to her when I am dead" -
A heart-shaped thing of little worth
That held her picture for his view,
But he was killed and in the earth
Before I knew.

Guillaume Apollinaire



GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE

Calligram for Madeleine (15 May 1915)

The sky's as blue and black as ink
My eyes drown in it and sink

Darkness a shell whines over me
I write this under a willow tree

The evening
shines
like
a
p
u
n
c
t
u
a
l
g
e
m

look some lovely she
sends
or like the shining
on our
battery

translated by OLIVER BERNARD

chosen by RACHAEL BOAST

E. E. Cummings

my sweet old etcetera

my sweet old etcetera
aunt lucy during the recent

war could and what
is more did tell you just
what everybody was fighting

for,
my sister

isabel created hundreds
(and
hundreds) of socks not to
mention shirts fleaproof earwarmers

etcetera wrists etcetera, my

mother hoped that

i would die etcetera
bravely of course my father used
to become hoarse talking about how it was
a privilege and if only he
could meanwhile my

self etcetera lay quietly
in the deep mud et

cetera
(dreaming,
et
cetera, of
Your smile
eyes knees and of your Etcetera)



An image from Siegfried Sassoon's journal (BBC.com, 10 August 2014)

Siegfried Sassoon

Everyone Sang

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 ... O, but Everyone
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.

Mary Borden

From **At the Somme: The Song of the Mud**

This is the song of the mud,
The pale yellow glistening mud that covers the hills like satin;
The grey gleaming silvery mud that is spread like enamel over the valleys;
The frothing, squirting, spurting, liquid mud that gurgles along the road beds;
The thick elastic mud that is kneaded and pounded and squeezed under the hoofs of the horses;
The invincible, inexhaustible mud of the war zone.
This is the song of the mud, the uniform of the poilu.
His coat is of mud, his great dragging flapping coat, that is too big for him and too heavy;
His coat that once was blue and now is grey and stiff with the mud that cakes to it.
This is the mud that clothes him. His trousers and boots are of mud,
And his skin is of mud;
And there is mud in his beard.
His head is crowned with a helmet of mud.
He wears it well.

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' pantomime

The place was raging.
See the silhouettes agape,
See the gibbering 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.

Wilfred Owen

From **Dulce et Decorum Est**

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

Georg Trakl

Grodek

At nightfall the autumn woods cry out
With deadly weapons and the golden plains,
The deep blue lakes, above which more darkly
Rolls the sun; the night embraces
Dying warriors, the wild lament
Of their broken mouths.
But quietly there in the willow dell
Red clouds in which an angry god resides,
The shed blood gathers, lunar coolness.
All the roads lead to blackest carrion.
Under golden twigs of the night and stars
The sister's shade now sways through the silent copse
To greet the ghosts of heroes, the bleeding heads;
And softly the dark flutes of autumn sound in the reeds.
O prouder grief! You brazen altars,
Today a great pain feeds the hot flame of the spirit,
The grandsons yet unborn.

(translation by Michael Hamburger)



Wilhelm Klemm

From **Clearing Station**

Every morning there is war again.
Naked wounded, as in old paintings.
Festered dressings hang like garlands from the shoulders.
The curious dark, mysterious head wounds.
The quivering nose-wings of the chest wounds.
The pallor of suppuration.

(translated by Patrick Bridgwater)

Yvan Goll

From **Requiem for the Dead of Europe**

Recitative (I)

Let me lament the exodus of so many men from their time;
Let me lament the women whose warbling hearts now scream;
Every lament let me note and add to the list,
When young widows sit by lamplight mourning for husbands lost;
I hear the blonde-voiced children crying for God their father at bedtime;
On every mantelpiece stand photographs wreathed with ivy, smiling, true to the past;
At every window stand lonely girls whose burning eyes are bright with tears;
In every garden lilies are growing, as though there's a grave to prepare;
In every street the cars are moving more slowly, as though to a funeral;
In every city of every land you can hear the passing-bell;
In every heart there's a single plaint,
I hear it more clearly every day.

(translated by Patrick Bridgwater)

Sterling Brown

From **Sam Smiley**

The whites had taught him how to rip
A Nordic belly with a thrust
Of bayonet, had taught him how
To transmute Nordic flesh to dust.

And a surprising fact had made
Belated impress on his mind:
The shrapnel bursts and poison gas
Were inexplicably colour blind.



T. E. Hulme

Trenches: St Eloi

(Abbreviated from the Conversation of Mr TEH)

Over the flat slopes of St Eloi
A wide wall of sand bags.
Night,
In the silence desultory men
Pottering over small fires, cleaning their mess- tins:
To and fro, from the lines,
Men walk as on Piccadilly,
Making paths in the dark,
Through scattered dead horses,
Over a dead Belgian's belly.

The Germans have rockets. The English have no rockets.
Behind the line, cannon, hidden, lying back miles.
Beyond the line, chaos:

My mind is a corridor. The minds about me are corridors.
Nothing suggests itself. There is nothing to do but keep on.

Elizabeth Daryush

Subalterns

She said to one: 'How glows
My heart at the hot thought
Of battle's glorious throes!'
He said: 'For us who fought
Are icy memories
That must for ever freeze
The sunny hours they bought.'

She said to one: 'How light
Must your freed heart be now,
After the heavy fight!"
He said: 'Well I don't know.....
The war gave one a shake,
Somehow, knocked one awake.....
Now. life's so deadly slow.'

Uri Zvi Greenberg

This fearful glowing on the nails in the boots of the dead
who kick at God, electrified
y being with a terror
that shone a if I were dying. With the flesh's
eyes I saw the divine
in fear's mystery, in men falling. I cried
then, as if I were the last to cry
who never again in life
will cry what I wept
on the Sawa's water.

(translated from Hebrew by Jon Silken and Ezra Spicehandler)

Sarojina Naidu



From **The Gift of India**

Is there ought you need that my hands withhold,
Rich gifts of raiment or grain or gold?
Lo! I have flung to the East and the West
Priceless treasures torn from my breast,
And yielded the sons of my stricken womb
To the drum-beats of the duty, the sabers of doom.
Gathered like pearls in their alien graves
Silent they sleep by the Persian waves,
Scattered like shells on Egyptian sands,
They lie with pale brows and brave, broken hands,
they are strewn like blossoms mown down by chance
On the blood-brown meadows of Flanders and France
Can ye measure the grief of the tears I weep
Or compass the woe of the watch I keep?

Charlotte Mew



May, 1915

Let us remember Spring will come again

To the scorched, blackened woods, where all the
wounded trees

Wait, with their old wise patience for the heavenly rain,
Sure of the sky: sure of the sea to send its healing breeze,
Sure of the sun. And even as to these

Surely the Spring, when God shall please
Will come again like a divine surprise

To those who sit to-day with their great Dead, hands in
their hands, eyes in their eyes,

At one with Love, at one with Grief: blind to the scattered
things and changing skies.

Seamus Heaney

In a Field

And there I was in the middle of a field,
The furrows once called "scores" still with their
gloss,
The tractor with its hoisted plough just gone

Snarling at an unexpected speed
Out on the road. Last of the jobs,
The windings had been ploughed, furrows turned

Three ply or four round each of the four sides
Of the breathing land, to mark it off
And out. Within that boundary now

Step the fleshy earth and follow
The long healed footprints of one who arrived
From nowhere, unfamiliar and de-mobbed,

In buttoned khaki and buffed army boots,
Bruising the turned-up acres of our back field
To stumble from the windings' magic ring

And take me by a hand to lead me back
Through the same old gate into the yard
Where everyone has suddenly appeared,

All standing waiting.

Giuseppe Ungaretti



Clear Sky

July 1918

After so much
mist
one by one
the stars
unveil

I breathe in
the cool air
that the colour of the sky
gives me

I know I am
a passing
image

Caught in an immortal
circle

(translated by Patrick Creagh)

Online Resources

[Online Anthology of World War I Poetry](#)

[Reframing the War, from the British Library](#)

[First World War I Poetry Digital Archive](#)

[Australian Poetry Library War Poems](#)

Print Resources

- Duffy, Carol Ann. *1914: Poetry Remembers*. Faber & Faber, 2013.
- Kendall, Tim. *First World War Poetry*. Oxford, 2014.
- Morgan, Gaby. *Poems from the First World War*. Macmillan, 2014.
- Walter, Matthew G. *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*. Penguin, 2006