

IAN BANCROFT's
SECOND WORLD WAR POETRY

ELEGY FOR AN AIRMAN

He was a guest with us; on a long vacation
Of tears and disillusion.

He'd kept his luggage packed and paid his rent;
He knew he'd be no permanent resident.

But now he's gone, the bare place at the table
Whispers my own defence had been too feeble,
Although I'd caught the message in his eyes –
He' found his heart's rest in the greying skies.

Last Sunday I saw peacocks in the snow;
Today the world's in thaw.
And last night in the lamplit river's song
I heard the church bells ring.

I should have built
an armed defensive zone
to halt
the enemy. I forgot the rain.

Don't think I weep him; that will come
When all these rains have cracked my futile dam.

He's gone for good; I saw when he first came
The two-way ticket; (o the world has spent
Freely his fellows); I'll lock the empty room.
And Troilus to Troye homeward he wente.

THE SOLDIER AND THE GIRL

'Cold night it is and clouds cover the moon
Which once dressed white these moors; even the hills
Are walked by cloud-ghosts, circling the pass,
Unfelt their feet by the scarless flint.
Winds wake to wailing the heather
Crisp now with death, and the dying bracken
Sings of my sadness. In the frozen
Tarn only in peace; I see there
The tattered trees, unleaved and bending,
Broken by storm; there is traced also
My face, caught by the snatching stares at my shoulder.
Who are you with the hidden eyes and hands
Cold-whispering in my hair?'

'Lady you knew me for your lover.
Returned I am from the wounding wars,
Have traversed the pass, picking my steps
Warily among the hostile stones.
The jealous clouds preventing my coming
For many days, but the certain needle swung
Here to its centre. I am the lost fighter
Who joined battle for an impossible
Country, boundaries unmarked, unseen;
With few comrades strove ever forward
Eager for first view of the envisioned land.
Scorning the sober counsels of those old men,
Faces scored with disenchantment, we pressed on.
Some retreated: but the remnant renewed
The struggle, until at dusk one day, the sun
Splashing our bodies with bright blood,
We saw the churchyard in the mountains.

And the graves grooved with our names –
The intolerable certainty of failure.
There was yet left
A chance of return, knowing what we had pierced
By our persistence to the final end –
Success in self-destruction. I alone
Came back. And I ask you lady for strength
To underprop this doomed and fragile palace.’

‘But your eyes, soldier, are ringed with despair,
In them I see red sunsets; and the roar
Of avalanches bearing down bodies
Resounds in them. And is here
Death on the icy summit, the cairns
Snow-hidden, and the snarling horns
Of hunters who hope for killing,
And I also see the stains
Of blood on fields of wheat,
And love and pity there, no fear nor hate.’

‘Look no more in my eyes lady, your love
Alone I need. I bring you this bruised body
Not for myself only, but for my comrades
Who fell on our striding journey;
Losing their lives, they passed to me
The fear of unremembered courage,
I must create before the final flame.
My message holds meaning for our people.
Give me power, power before the last thrust
Blanks these hot eyes and stills this wheeling heart.’

‘Cold night it is and the winds are wailing,
Come to my cottage out of their sad calling:
There are holes in the roof, and grey rats
Peer in the night, but the winds are mute.’

BRIDGE ON THE ORNE, 1944

Somewhere in the soft heart of this chaos
Hides a deliberate hand of childlike shyness
Which sent us off despairing to the bridge.

June's tenderness lies gently on the river,
Nettles climb crazily amongst the idiotic
Jungle of twisted gliders. A tank burns, crackling.
Dead horses, swelling already, wear new blinkers
Of foraging flies mauling their latest plunder.
And over the narrow sorrel field, scorched black
By smoke and fire, rises the sniping wood.
A cow spread fancifully half on the bank
Thrusts four grotesque legs into the tangle
Of careless briar. Look at its eyes
Staring under the water like a pathetic pike,
Some angler's triumph in a beer-cool parlour.
And in a patchwork, like the second coming,
Men sprawl about the grass, their faces grey,
And hands flung outwards, hooked fingers clutching
At some unknowable vision. See how the palms
Shine pink and moist still, and the rim of dust
Clings to the dry mouths. One there was weeping,
White runnels on his dusty cheek trace out
His few last tears, for he was very young.

Now there is only fear and wonder,
Disgust perhaps will come to-morrow, when the heat
Puffs out decay like invisible smoke rings;
But now we look at the fatal wood, watching green branches
For movement in the windless afternoon.
A butterfly settles lightly on this man's temple,
White on dark red, then flies away.
We lose it against the blinding golden sun.

THE BEAUCHAMP CHAPEL

Collegiate Church of St Mary, Warwick

The chapel which your pious guineas built
Lifts delicately its roof, a dreamer pointing
The way of Heaven for the fumbling mind;
Your hands and eyes are ceaselessly anointing.

The Virgin's grace after five centuries.
O praise the brain whose metal adoration
Soared at the sun through pillaging and fire,
Stilling in stone our ageless consternation.

Tonight the reeds are clashing in the river;
Dishevelled peacocks shudder by the wall;
But your veined hands bring down a benediction
Of love and faith to wrap us like a shawl.

FUNERAL

They closed his wounds with water,
Sealed their sad staring by the trembling kiss
Of the hero's silent lady. driftwood,
Bubbling with pitch, made the final emphasis
for one whose death had crowned a day-long slaughter.

The pyre blazed high on the flowering hill
And smoke shadowed the breakers on the beach;
Grieving, his warriors paced their frightened steeds
Round the red blaze; out of the throaty reach
Of their lament his lady stood quite still.

She heard no chanting of his sworded might,
Of how he struck three foemen like a board
And died with sweat and sunlight in his eyes;
Remembering his farewell at the door
And how he shook with weeping in the night.