

Elegy For a Soldier

Scanned Original Document	2
Retyped Poem	6



ELEGY FOR A SOLDIER

"Grief melts away
Like snow in May."

George Herbert

...and I was wintered as the apple tree
that stood there like a black witch in the snow.
It was a northern grief that blew the cold
into my soul and left me bleak and bare,
as bare as winter blue that is like slate.
And where the heart had been there was a bulb,
and only mattocks could have dug it up,
remembering foxholes in the frozen ground.
And all my senses, numb, annulled, were turned
into a wire entanglement of nerves,
so pity would be hung up on the barbs
like a dead mouse on a thorn, the prey of shrikes.
Grief was the winter that had gripped my soul.
And, then, there was the warmth of life again,
the warmth of love remembering the world.
Despair rose into hope by slow degrees,
as sap ascending from the roots of trees.

I am unwintered, like the apple tree,
by its own witchcraft opening the wings
of a silver and rose-breasted ecstasy.
My soul shakes out white sorrow to the wind,
and scattering the petals tinged with pain,
puts forth the leafage of this elegy.
And from the heart burst tints of tenderness.
These words come easily as leaves in spring,
and quietly, as on the living breath,
they stir, they lift to speak of you and death.

I put forth words you cannot hear as time
once brought you wreaths you could not see or smell.
The wreaths have withered, Time has wandered on.
Like leaves my words shall fall, yet shall have made
a shade for contemplation and refreshment.
And then there are the fruits to pluck at last.
For sorrow, dusted by the golden dust
that was your youth, shall yield in poetry
the sweet maturing of my memories.
And when my mind is gray and whitening
in its forgetfulness I shall find here
the memories laid up against that time.
Old memories are sweeter than red apples,
though there is a tang of acid in the taste.
But memories as green as these are tart:

(continued)

Maneuvers: I remember. Tennessee
in winter. Remembering winter is not hard,
one does not easily forget the cold.
But Tennessee? From bivouac in July,
I can recall not all, but several things:
a cardinal bird in a bush, wild valentine;
the sting of a bit of sassafras root in the mouth;
a group of fellows stoning a squirrel from tree
to tree; and dust, hot drinking water, and dust.
Winter. Our canteens froze. And late maneuvers,
"to harden the troops," when things were "tactical."
No fires at night. You snorted, they didn't have
to freeze a man to harden him. I see
you there, as if I had a snapshot of the past:
crouched above a fire of leaves, whose flames
were yellow tatters in the wind, and damning the cold
and the Army, you looked as though you were practising
black art as you passed your hands above the warmth,
to conjure up a blaze of August days.
And now, not all the dedicated flames
that burn eternally upon the shrines
can warm you where lie, forever cold.

There is a little village in Lorraine,
a veteran of wars since Charlemagne.
And we got drunk in a cellar there, on wine,
remember how we found the barrel of wine,
while the Germans were shelling hell out of the town?
We sat there, a candle between, and talked and drank.
You said you were afraid, and, then, you said
how deeply those old villages had touched you.
Old villages were like old family Bibles,
and it was hard to see them torn apart.
But they had lasted and would last, you knew.
They made you think of lamps and love, and made
you feel, well, firm inside and not afraid.
And was it wine that made you say all that?
And now you are dead and drunk on the darkness of death.
And was it wine or something more than wine?

And that last winter through the wind and snow.
Ahead of us death fell gigantically,
and like dead crows, the dead lay on the snow,
stiff, black; the dry snow drifted over them.
And somewhere you were killed along a road.
I found you where you fell, face-down like a coin,
and turned you over, and could not see to see...
I looked at the torn trees down the road. And you
were dead. I looked down the road at the burning town.
And you were dead. I walked off down the road,
and left you for the snow to cover up,
the snow that pulls white sheets over the dead.

(continued)

I walked among the apple trees today.
And it was moist and dark beneath the trees,
but above, the blossoms were so thick and white
that it seemed the boughs were holding up a drift
of snow and trying to keep it from falling through.
But now and then some petals sifted down.
On my way home I stopped upon the hill
to see the apple orchard as a view.
In that last look I thought of you. For there
in the apple blossoms shone the pink and white
of the plaster walls of those old villages
where the sheep are being driven out to pasture
and the white dust floats about them in the sun.

And clear and cool and bodied as old wine
I smelled the apple blossoms on the wind.

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