

Vergissmeinnicht

Three weeks gone and the combatants gone
returning over the nightmare ground
we found the place again, and found
the soldier sprawling in the sun.

The frowning barrel of his gun
overshadowing. As we came on
that day, he hit my tank with one
like the entry of a demon.

Look. Here in the gunpit spoil
the dishonoured picture of his girl
who has put: *Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht.*
in a copybook gothic script.

We see him almost with content,
abased, and seeming to have paid
and mocked at by his own equipment
that's hard and good when he's decayed.

But she would weep to see today
how on his skin the swart flies move;
the dust upon the paper eye
and the burst stomach like a cave.

For here the lover and killer are mingled
who had one body and one heart.
And death who had the soldier singled
has done the lover mortal hurt.

Keith Douglas, 1942

Canto XLV With *Usura*

With usura hath no man a house of good stone
 each block cut smooth and well fitting
 that design might cover their face,
 with usura
 hath no man a painted paradise on his church wall
harpes et luz
 or where virgin receiveth message
 and halo projects from incision,
 with usura
 seeth no man Gonzaga his heirs and his concubines
 no picture is made to endure nor to live with
 but it is made to sell and sell quickly
 with usura, sin against nature,
 is thy bread ever more of stale rags
 is thy bread dry as paper,
 with no mountain wheat, no strong flour
 with usura the line grows thick
 with usura is no clear demarcation
 and no man can find site for his dwelling.
 Stonecutter is kept from his tone
 weaver is kept from his loom
WITH USURA
 wool comes not to market
 sheep bringeth no gain with usura
 Usura is a murrain, usura
 blunteth the needle in the maid's hand
 and stoppeth the spinner's cunning. Pietro Lombardo
 came not by usura
 Duccio came not by usura
 nor Pier della Francesca; Zuan Bellin' not by usura
 nor was 'La Calunnia' painted.
 Came not by usura Angelico; came not Ambrogio Praedis,
 Came no church of cut stone signed: *Adamo me fecit*.
 Not by usura St. Trophime
 Not by usura Saint Hilaire,
 Usura rusteth the chisel
 It rusteth the craft and the craftsman

Then resolve me, tell me aright
 If Waller sang or Dowland played

Your eyen two wol sleye me sodenly
 I may the beauté of hem nat susteyne

And for 180 years almost nothing.

Ed ascoltando al leggier mormorio

there came new subtlety of eyes into my tent,
 whether of the spirit or hypostasis,
 but what the blindfold hides
 or at carneval

nor any pair showed anger
 Saw but the eyes and stance between the eyes,
 colour, diastasis,
 careless or unaware it had not the
 whole tent's room
 nor was place for the full εἶδος
 interpass, penetrate
 casting but shade beyond the other lights
 sky's clear
 night's sea
 green of the mountain pool
 shone from the unmasked eyes in half-mask's space.

What thou lovest well remains,

the rest is dross

What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee

What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage

Whose world, or mine or theirs

or is it of none?

First came the seen, then thus the palpable

Elysium, though it were in the halls of hell,

What thou lovest well is thy true heritage

What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee

The ant's a centaur in his dragon world.

Pull down thy vanity, it is not man

Made courage, or made order, or made grace,

Pull down thy vanity, I say pull down.

A corn roast and bonfire in summer camp.
That summer you got lost on a Nature Walk;
More than you dared admit, you thought of home:
No one else knows where the mind wanders to.

The fifth of August, 1942.
It was the morning and very hot. It was the day
They came at dawn with rifles to The Home
For Jewish Children, cutting short the meal
Of bread and soup, lining them up to walk
In close formation off to a special camp.

How often you have thought about that camp,
As though in some strange way you were driven to,
And about the children, and how they were made to walk,
Yolek who had bad lungs, who wasn't a day
Over five years old, commanded to leave his meal
And shamle between armed guards to his long home.

We're approaching August again. It will drive home
The regulation torments of that camp
Yolek was sent to, his small, unfinished meal,
The electric fences, the numeral tattoo,
The quite extraordinary heat of the day
They all were forced to take that terrible walk.

Whether on a silent, solitary walk
Or among crowds, far off or safe at home,
You will remember, helplessly, that day,
And the smell of smoke, and the loudspeakers of the camp.
Wherever you are, Yolek will be there, too.
His unuttered name will interrupt your meal.

Prepare to receive him in your home some day.
Though they killed him in the camp they sent him to,
He will walk in as you're sitting down to a meal.

Anthony Hecht, 1982

“More Light! More Light!”*for Heinrich Blücher and Hannah Arendt*

Composed in the Tower before his execution
These moving verses, and being brought at that time
Painfully to the stake, submitted, declaring thus:
"I implore my God to witness that I have made no crime."

Nor was he forsaken of courage, but the death was horrible,
The sack of gunpowder failing to ignite.
His legs were blistered sticks on which the black sap
Bubbled and burst as he howled for the Kindly Light.

And that was but one, and by no means one of the worst;
Permitted at least his pitiful dignity;
And such as were by made prayers in the name of Christ,
That shall judge all men, for his soul's tranquility.

We move now to outside a German wood.
Three men are there commanded to dig a hole
In which the two Jews are ordered to lie down
And be buried alive by the third, who is a Pole.

Not light from the shrine at Weimar beyond the hill
Nor light from heaven appeared. But he did refuse.
A Luger settled back deeply in its glove.
He was ordered to change places with the Jews.

Much casual death had drained away their souls.
The thick dirt mounted toward the quivering chin.
When only the head was exposed the order came
To dig him out again and to get back in.

No light, no light in the blue Polish eye.
When he finished a riding boot packed down the earth.
The Luger hovered lightly in its glove.
He was shot in the belly and in three hours bled to death.

No prayers or incense rose up in those hours
Which grew to be years, and every day came mute
Ghosts from the ovens, sifting through crisp air,
And settled upon his eyes in a black soot.

Anthony Hecht, 1967

Sacrifice

I - ABRAHAM

Long years, and I found favor
In the sight of the Lord, who brought me out of Ur
To where his promise lay,
There with him to confer
On Justice and Mercy and the appointed day
Of Sodom's ashen fate;
For me he closeted sweetness in the date,
And gave to salt its savor.

Three promises he gave,
Came like three kings or angels to my door:
His purposes concealed
In coiled and kerneled store
He planted as a seedling that would yield
In my enfeebled years
A miracle that would command my tears
With piercings of the grave.

"Old man, behold Creation,"
Said the Lord, "the leaping hills, the thousand-starred
Heavens and watery floor.
Is anything too hard
For the Lord, who shut all seas within their doors?"
And then, for his name's sake
He led me, knowing where my heart would break,
Into temptation.

The whole of my long life
Pivoted on one terrible day at dawn.
Isaac, my son, and I
Were to Moriah gone.
There followed an hour in which I wished to die,
Being visited by these things:
My name called out, the beat of gigantic wings,
Faggots, and flame, and knife

II - ISAAC

Youthful I was and trusting and strong of limb,
The fresh-split firewood roped tight to my back,
And I bore unknowing that morning my funeral pyre.
My father, face averted, carried the flame,
And, in its scabbard, the ritual blade he bore.
It seemed to me at the time a wearisome trek.

I thought of my mother, how, in her age, the Lord
Had blessed her among women, giving her me
As joke and token both, unlikelihood
Being his way. But where, where from our herd
Was the sacrifice, I asked my father. He,
In a spasm of agony, bound me hand and foot.

I thought, I am poured out like water, like wax
My heart is melted in the midst of my bowels.
Both were tear-blinded. Hate and love and fear
Wrestled to ruin us, savage us beyond cure.
And the fine blade gleamed with the fury of live coals
Where we had reared an altar among the rocks.

Peace be to us both, to father Abraham,
To me, elected the shorn stunned lamb of God—
We were sentenced, and reprieved by the same Voice—
And to all our seed, by this terror sanctified,
To be numbered even as the stars at the small price
Of an old scapegoated and thicket-baffled ram.

III - 1945

It was widely known that the army of occupation
Was in full retreat. The small provincial roads
Rumbled now every night with tanks and trucks,
Echoed with cries in German, much *mach schnell*,
Züruck, ganz richtig, augenblicklich, jawohl,
Audible in the Normandy countryside.
So it had been for days, or, rather, nights,
The troops at first making their moves in darkness,

But pressures of haste, toward the end of March
Left stragglers to make their single ways alone,
At their own risk, and even in daylight hours.

Since the soldiers were commandeering anything
They needed – food, drink, vehicles of all sorts –
One rural family dismantled their bicycle,
Daubed the chrome parts – rims, sprockets, spokes – with mud,
And wired them carefully to the upper boughs
Of the orchard. And the inevitable came
In the shape of a young soldier, weighted down
With pack and bedroll, rifle, entrenching tools,
Steel helmet and heavy boots just after dawn.
The family was at breakfast. He ordered them out
In front of the house with abusive German words
They couldn't understand, but gesture and rifle
Made his imperious wishes perfectly clear.
They stood in a huddled group, all nine of them.
And then he barked his furious command:
Fahrrad! They all looked blank. He shouted again:
FAHRRAD! FAHRRAD! FAHRRAD!, as though sheer volume
Joined with his anger would make his meaning plain.
The father of the family experimentally
Inquired, *Manger?* The soldier, furious,
At last dredged up an explosive *Bicyclette*,
Proud of himself, contemptuous of them.
To this the father in a small pantomime –
Shrugged shoulders, palms turned out, a helpless, long,
Slow shaking of the head, then the wide gesture
Of an arm, taking in all his property –
Conveyed *Nous n'avons pas de bicyclettes*
More clearly than his words. To the young soldier
This seemed unlikely. No one could live this far
From neighbors, on a poor untraveled road
That lacked phone lines, without the usual means
Of transport. There was no time to search
The house, the barn, cowsheds, coops, pens and ground.

He looked at the frightened family huddled together,
And with the blunt nose of his rifle barrel
Judiciously singled out the eldest son,
A boy perhaps fourteen, but big for his years,
Obliging him to place himself alone
Against the whitewashed front wall of the house.
Then, at the infallible distance of ten feet,
With rifle pointed right at the boy's chest,
The soldier shouted what was certainly meant
To be his terminal order: *BICYCLETTE!*

It was still early on a chilly morning.
The water in the tire-treads of the road
Lay clouded, polished pale and chalked with frost,
Like the paraffin-sealed coverings of preserves.
The very grass was a stiff lead-crystal gray,
Though splendidly prismatic where the sun
Made its slow way between the lingering shadows
Of nearby fence posts and more distant trees.
There was leisure enough to take full note of this
In the most minute detail as the soldier held
Steady his index finger on the trigger.

It wasn't charity. Perhaps mere prudence,
Saving a valuable round of ammunition
For some more urgent crisis. Whatever it was,
The soldier reslung his rifle on his shoulder,
Turned wordlessly and walked on down the road
The departed German vehicles had taken.

There followed a long silence, a long silence.
For years they lived together in that house,
Through daily tasks, through all the family meals,
In agonized, unviolated silence.

Anthony Hecht, 2001

excerpt from **The Age of Anxiety**

Let us then
Consider rather the incessant Now of
The traveller through time, his tired mind
Biased towards bigness since his body must
Exaggerate to exist, possessed by hope,
Acquisitive, in quest of his own
Absconded self yet scared to find it
As he bumbles by from birth to death
Menaced by madness; whose mode of being,
Bashful or braggart, is to be at once
Outside and inside his own demand
For personal pattern. His pure I
Must give account of and greet his Me,
That field of force where he feels he thinks,
His past present, presupposing death,
Must ask what he is in order to be
And make meaning by omission and stress,
Avid of elseness. All that exists
Matters to man; he minds what happens
And feels he is at fault, a fallen soul
With power to place, to explain every
What in his world but why he is neither
God nor good, this guilt his insoluble
Final fact, infusing his private
Nexus of needs, his noted aims
With incomprehensible comprehensive dread
At not being what he knows that before
This world was he was willed to become.

W. H. Auden (1947)

Simplify Me When I'm Dead

Remember me when I am dead
and simplify me when I'm dead.

As the processes of earth
strip off the colour of the skin:
take the brown hair and blue eye

and leave me simpler than at birth,
when hairless I came howling in
as the moon entered the cold sky.

Of my skeleton perhaps,
so stripped, a learned man will say
"He was of such a type and intelligence," no more.

Thus when in a year collapse
particular memories, you may
deduce, from the long pain I bore

the opinions I held, who was my foe
and what I left, even my appearance
but incidents will be no guide.

Time's wrong-way telescope will show
a minute man ten years hence
and by distance simplified.

Through that lens see if I seem
substance or nothing: of the world
deserving mention or charitable oblivion,

not by momentary spleen
or love into decision hurled,
leisurely arrive at an opinion.

Remember me when I am dead
and simplify me when I'm dead.

Keith Douglas, 1941