

HALLÉ

COLIN MATTHEWS

NO MAN'S LAND

CROSSING THE ALPS

AFTERTONES

NICHOLAS COLLON

RICHARD WILBERFORCE

IAN BOSTRIDGE

RODERICK WILLIAMS

HALLÉ CHOIR

HALLÉ YOUTH CHOIR



COLIN MATTHEWS (b. 1946)

AFTERTONES

Estrangement

1. Dim through cloud veils	2.30
2. In the ashen twilight	1.38
3. In the false moonlight	2.08
4. Oaks, once my friends.....	1.25

Aftermath

5. Swift away the century flies	1.20
6. Time has healed the wound, they say.....	1.20

7. But no, this fiction died.....	1.55
8. A brown charred trunk that deadly covered	1.18
9. Interlude	3.08

Childhood Beliefs

10. There the puddled lonely lane.....	3.32
11. Stones could talk together then.....	1.37
12. Trees on hilltops then were Palms.....	2.27
13. Half in glory, half in fear	2.42

HALLÉ

HALLÉ CHOIR (ASSOCIATE CHOIR DIRECTOR FRANCES COOKE)
RODERICK WILLIAMS BARITONE
NICHOLAS COLLON CONDUCTOR

14. CROSSING THE ALPS	6.21
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HALLÉ YOUTH CHOIR
RICHARD WILBERFORCE CONDUCTOR/DIRECTOR

NO MAN'S LAND

Part 1

15. <i>Introduction</i>	1.05
16. <i>There are two skeletons</i>	2.31
17. <i>Before divine creation</i>	2.40
18. <i>An old crow</i>	1.08
19. <i>Snug in my dug-out</i>	1.53
20. <i>I'll tell you something</i>	0.43
21. <i>You're quite right, sir</i>	1.41
22. <i>Fritz is my friend</i>	1.05
23. <i>Someone takes up his mouth organ</i>	2.12

Part 2

24. <i>I know a village some way away</i>	1.26
25. <i>I was sharing a smoke</i>	1.02
26. <i>Interlude</i>	1.44
27. <i>In my dream last night</i>	2.27
28. <i>I went to sleep in a bath</i>	2.42
29. <i>They are drunken</i>	1.06
30. <i>So come and join the forces</i>	1.28

HALLÉ

IAN BOSTRIDGE TENOR • RODERICK WILLIAMS BARITONE
NICHOLAS COLLON CONDUCTOR

TOTAL TIMING.....	60.47
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COLIN MATTHEWS (b.1946)

AFTERTONES

Three Landscapes of Edmund Blunden for baritone solo, chorus and orchestra.

1. *Estrangement*

2. *Aftermath*

Interlude

3. *Childhood Beliefs*

It might seem perverse to have chosen to set poetry of the First World War in a work commissioned by the Huddersfield Choral Society for the millennium. But to celebrate the twenty-first century means absorbing the lessons of the twentieth; and in any case, Edmund Blunden (1896–1974) was no conventional war poet, even though he spent more time at the front than any of his colleagues. In the midst of the horrors of the battlefield he was able to sustain a remarkable sense of landscape and place: he remained at heart a pastoral poet.

In making these settings I was concerned to underline, alongside the inevitable darkness, the essential gentleness of Blunden. The first poem depicts a bleak war-torn landscape, yet the mood is one more of nobility than bitterness. The central part is a dance of death, in which the poem's imagery paints an objective picture of the field of war, almost as if removed from personal experience. A short interlude for strings and harp introduces the final part, not explicitly a war poem, but one where a pastoral childhood landscape gradually merges into something approaching nightmare. I tempered the awesome vision of Blunden's final stanza by returning to the mood of the beginning, and a murmured memory of the heart-breakingly beautiful fourth verse.

Blunden's (prose) memoirs were called *Undertones of War*, and in calling this work *Aftertones* I wanted both to evoke his world, and to suggest an echo from the not so distant past. *Aftertones* is dedicated to Martyn Brabbins, who conducted the first performance, and to the Huddersfield Choral Society. The solo part in the third part was originally written for mezzo soprano, but has here been reworked for the voice of Roderick Williams.

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CROSSING THE ALPS

I have lived with Mahler's music for virtually all of my musical life, so this commission¹ was one I had the greatest pleasure in accepting. But to be paired with such a monumental symphony is more than a little intimidating, and I decided early on that, in spite of the temptation to use Mahler's huge orchestral forces, I would write a work for unaccompanied chorus. I had for a long time wanted to work again with the Hallé Choir. And rather than try to emulate Mahler in any way I wanted to contrast his setting of the *Resurrection Ode* with an essentially humanist message.

Crossing the Alps is written for chorus in eight parts, and although the harmonic language is not complex in itself, it moves in unexpected directions which I felt needed the underpinning of an organ pedal (as well as an optional part for the manual). It was composed between July and October of 2009, and lasts approximately seven minutes.

The text is from the 'crossing the Alps' sequence from Book VI of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, and I've taken the liberty of conflating the 1805 and 1850 texts. It deals with the liberation of the imagination, the decisive moment (although not the climax of the piece) being the words 'Our destiny, our nature, and our home, Is with infinitude, and only there'. The text was suggested to me by Paul Driver, to whom the work is dedicated.

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NO MAN'S LAND

No Man's Land follows on from my very positive collaboration with Christopher Reid on *Alphabicycle Order*² several years ago. The origin of the work was a call from Richard Hickox in November 2008, full of his usual bubbly enthusiasm and proposing a Proms commission to celebrate the City of London Sinfonia's 40th birthday in 2011. Like everyone, I was shocked to learn of his sudden death three days later. Richard conducted my first ever Proms performance, in 1983, and clearly the work had both to be written in his memory and take a different direction from his original suggestion of a celebratory work.

I have been obsessed with the First World War for many years, long

before the centenary of its outbreak came into view (one reason being that my maternal grandfather died on the Somme). But it is no easy subject to treat musically. Although I set Edmund Blunden in *Aftertones* I have avoided trying to set other war poets, particularly with the example of Britten and Wilfred Owen in mind. When I asked Christopher Reid to provide the text for this work I suggested the concept of a soldier in the midst of war, almost unaware of what he's found himself a part of. In the event his sequence of poems provided something both different and unexpected: we hear the ghosts of two soldiers hanging on barbed wire in no man's land. 'To pass the time, we let the wind/rummage in the hollows of our skulls/for memories and scraps of song and whisps of rhyme'.

Although there are elements of dialogue in the piece, and towards they end they sing together, they see the war for the most part through different eyes. The reflective Captain Gifford is contrasted with the more down-to-earth Sergeant Slack both by language and by the music they sing, with the sergeant's music embracing both an invented vernacular and original songs and marches from the period, including recordings made in 1914.

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COLIN MATTHEWS (NÉ EN 1946)

AFTERTONES

Trois paysages d'Edmund Blunden pour baryton solo, chœur et orchestre.

1. *Estrangement*

2. *Aftermath*

Interlude

3. *Childhood Beliefs*

Il pourrait sembler tortueux d'avoir choisi de mettre en musique des poèmes sur la Première Guerre mondiale dans un ouvrage commandé en vue du nouveau millénaire par la Huddersfield Choral Society, mais pour fêter la naissance du XXI^e siècle, il convenait de prendre en compte les enseignements tirés du XX^e siècle, et d'ailleurs, Edmund Blunden (1896-1974) n'était pas un poète de guerre conventionnel, même s'il passa plus de temps au front qu'aucun autre de ses confrères. Malgré l'horreur absolue des champs de bataille, il parvint à ne pas perdre sa remarquable sensibilité aux paysages et aux lieux, demeurant au fond un poète pastoral.

En mettant ces textes en musique, je tenais à souligner, outre l'inévitable noirceur, la tendresse intrinsèque de Blunden. Le premier poème décrit un morne paysage dévasté par la guerre, pourtant il y a dans l'air davantage de noblesse que d'amertume. La partie centrale est une danse de mort, au sein de laquelle l'imagerie du poème est un tableau objectif du champ de bataille, presque détaché de l'expérience subjective. Un bref interlude de cordes et de harpe introduit la partie finale, qui n'est pas explicitement un poème de guerre, mais un texte où un paysage d'enfance se fond progressivement dans quelque chose qui tient du cauchemar. J'ai tempéré la formidable vision de la strophe finale de Blunden en retournant à l'atmosphère du début, et à un écho murmuré du quatrième vers, d'une déchirante beauté.

Les mémoires de Blunden (en prose) étaient intitulés *Undertones of War*, et en baptisant ce morceau *Aftertones*, je voulais à la fois évoquer cet univers et faire résonner un passé qui n'est pas si lointain. *Aftertones* est dédié à Martyn Brabbins, qui en a dirigé la création, et à la Huddersfield

Choral Society. L'intervention soliste de la troisième partie avait d'abord été écrite pour mezzo-soprano, mais elle a ici été adaptée à la voix de Roderick Williams.

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CROSSING THE ALPS

Les œuvres de Mahler m'accompagnent pratiquement depuis que j'écoute et fais de la musique, aussi ai-je été très heureux de cette commande¹. Mais le fait de se retrouver associé à un tel monument du répertoire symphonique est particulièrement intimidant, aussi ai-je assez vite décidé qu'au lieu de céder à la tentation d'utiliser les énormes effectifs orchestraux de Mahler, j'allais écrire une pièce pour chœur a capella. Je souhaitais depuis longtemps retravailler avec le chœur du Hallé, et plutôt que de me livrer à quelque imitation de Mahler, je voulais mettre en valeur sa version de *l'Ode de la Résurrection* avec un message d'inspiration humaniste.

Crossing the Alps est écrit pour un chœur à huit voix, et même si son langage harmonique n'est pas complexe en soi, il prend des directions inattendues qui m'ont paru nécessiter le socle d'une pédale d'orgue - ainsi qu'une partie facultative pour le clavier. Le morceau a été composé entre juillet et octobre 2009 et dure environ sept minutes.

Les paroles sont tirées de la séquence de la traversée des Alpes du Livre VI du Prélude de Wordsworth, et je me suis permis d'apposer les textes de 1805 et de 1850. Il y est question de la libération de l'imaginaire, le passage décisif étant « Notre destin, notre nature, et notre foyer appartiennent à l'éternité, et rien qu'à elle, » même si ce n'est pas le climax du morceau. J'ai choisi ce texte sur les conseils de Paul Driver, et l'ouvrage lui est dédié.

Colin Matthews © 2010

NO MAN'S LAND

No Man's Land fait suite à ma fructueuse collaboration avec Christopher Reid sur *Alphabicycle Order*² il y a quelques années. Tout est parti

d'un coup de fil de Richard Hickox en novembre 2008 : plein de son enthousiasme coutumier, il proposait de me passer une commande pour marquer le quarantième anniversaire de la City of London Sinfonia, qui serait célébré dans le cadre des Proms en 2011. Comme tout le monde, j'ai eu un choc en apprenant son mort, survenue brutalement trois jours plus tard. C'est Richard qui avait dirigé la toute première œuvre que je présentais aux Proms, en 1983, et bien évidemment, je devais maintenant écrire en sa mémoire tout en m'éloignant du caractère festif qu'il avait en tête au départ.

Il y a de nombreuses années que je suis obnubilé par la Première Guerre mondiale, et cette obsession qui remonte bien avant que l'on ait commencé à parler du centenaire de 1914 provient notamment du fait que l'un des mes grands-pères est tombé au combat dans la Somme. Néanmoins, ce n'est pas un sujet facile à traiter en musique. Même si j'ai travaillé sur des textes d'Edmund Blunden dans *Aftertones*, j'ai évité de m'appuyer sur d'autres poètes de guerre, d'autant plus que je gardais en tête l'exemple de Britten et de Wilfred Owen. En demandant à Christopher Reid d'écrire le texte du présent ouvrage, j'ai proposé de prendre pour point de départ un soldat en pleine bataille, à peine conscient des événements auxquels il prend part. En fin de compte, les poèmes de Christopher ont apporté quelque chose de différent et d'insolite : on entendons s'exprimer les fantômes de deux soldats dont les cadavres sont suspendus aux barbelés d'un no man's land. « Pour tuer le temps, nous laissons le vent/fourrager dans nos crânes/et en tirer des souvenirs, des bribes de chansons et des lambeaux de rimes ».

Même s'il y a des éléments de dialogue dans le morceau, et même si vers la fin, les voix des deux soldats se rejoignent, dans l'ensemble, leurs perspectives respectives sur la guerre sont différentes. Le caractère réfléchi du capitaine Gifford contraste avec le côté plus prosaïque du sergent Slack, à la fois par le langage qu'ils utilisent et par la musique qu'ils chantent, la partie du sergent englobant un argot inventé associé à des chansons et des marches originales de l'époque, y compris des enregistrements réalisés en 1914.

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Traductions françaises de David Ylla-Somers

COLIN MATTHEWS (geboren 1946)

AFTERTONES

Three Landscapes of Edmund Blunden for baritone solo, chorus and orchestra.

1. *Estrangement*

2. *Aftermath*

Interlude

3. *Childhood Beliefs*

Es mag etwas abwegig scheinen, ein Gedicht aus dem Ersten Weltkrieg zu vertonen, wenn eigentlich das neue Jahrtausend gefeiert werden soll – wie bei diesem von der Huddersfield Choral Society in Auftrag gegebenen Werk. Doch wenn man das einundzwanzigste Jahrhundert festlich begehen will, gehören auch die Lektionen des zwanzigsten dazu. Ohnehin war Edmund Blunden (1896–1974) kein konventioneller Kriegsdichter, obwohl er mehr Zeit an der Front verbrachte als irgendeiner seiner Kollegen. Inmitten der Schrecken des Schlachtfelds gelang es ihm, sich einen bemerkenswerten Sinn für Landschaften und Orte zu erhalten: Er blieb im Herzen stets ein Pastoraldichter.

Bei der Arbeit an diesen Vertonungen war mir sehr daran gelegen, neben der unvermeidlichen Dürsterkeit auch die grundlegende Sanftheit Blundens herauszustellen. Das erste Gedicht beschreibt eine trostlose, vom Krieg geschundene Landschaft, doch die Stimmung kündigt eher von Edelmut als Bitterkeit. Der zentrale Teil ist der Todestanz; die Bildersprache des Gedichts lässt einen objektiven Eindruck des Kriegs entstehen, in vielleicht gewollter Distanz zum persönlich Erlebten. Ein kurzes Zwischenspiel für Streicher und Harfe leitet den letzten Teil ein; es handelt sich zwar um kein explizites Kriegsgedicht, doch die idyllische Kindeitslandschaft verwandelt sich ganz allmählich in eine Art Alptraum. Ich schwächte die furchterregende Vision von Blundens letzter Strophe etwas ab, indem ich die Stimmung des Anfangs wiederkehren ließ und eine Reminiszenz an die herzerreißend schöne vierte Strophe einfügte.

Blundens (Prosa-)Memoiren erschienen unter dem Titel *Undertones of War*. Mit dem von mir gewählten Titel, *Aftertones*, beziehe ich mich bewusst auf Blunden und seine Welt und verweise auf die ‚Nachklänge‘ einer gar nicht so weit zurückliegenden Vergangenheit. *Aftertones* ist

Martyn Brabbins gewidmet, der die Uraufführung dirigierte, sowie der Huddersfield Choral Society. Der Solo-Part im dritten Teil war ursprünglich für Mezzosopran geschrieben, ist aber für die Stimme von Roderick Williams überarbeitet worden.

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CROSSING THE ALPS

Mahlers Musik hat mich fast durch mein ganzes musikalische Leben begleitet, und so nahm ich diese Auftragsarbeit mit größter Freude an¹. Neben einer so monumentalen Sinfonie zu bestehen, war allerdings ein wenig einschüchternd. Ich beschloss deshalb schon früh, trotz der Verlockung durch Mahlers grandiose Orchestrierung, ein Werk für unbegleiteten Chor zu schreiben. Ich hatte schon länger gehofft, einmal mit dem Hallé-Chor zusammenzuarbeiten. Anstatt Mahler nachzuahmen, wollte ich seiner Auferstehungsode eine essenziell humanistische Botschaft gegenüberstellen.

Crossing the Alps ist eine Komposition in acht Teilen für Chor. Obwohl die Harmoniesprache an sich nicht komplex ist, driftet sie in unerwartete Richtungen, sodass ich das Gefühl hatte, es müsste als Basis noch ein Orgelpedal hinzukommen (sowie ein optionaler Part auf dem Manual). Das Stück wurde zwischen Juli und Oktober 2009 komponiert und ist ungefähr sieben Minuten lang.

Der Text stammt aus der Sequenz der Alpenüberquerung in Buch VI von Wordsworths *The Prelude*, wobei ich mir die Freiheit erlaubt habe, die Versionen von 1805 und 1850 zu vereinen. Der Text handelt von der Befreiung des Geistes, und der entscheidende Moment (jedoch nicht der Höhepunkt des Stücks) wird von den Worten markiert: „Our destiny, our nature, and our home, Is with infinitude, and only there“. (Unser Schicksal, unsere Natur und unsere Heimat liegen in der Unendlichkeit, und nur dort). Paul Driver schlug mir diesen Text vor, und ihm ist das Werk auch gewidmet.

Colin Matthews © 2010

NO MAN'S LAND

Nach meiner sehr positiven Kollaboration mit Christopher Reid, aus der das Stück *Alphabicycle Order*² hervorging, folgt mit ein paar Jahren Abstand nun eine weitere gemeinsame Arbeit. No Man's Land begann mit einem Anruf von Richard Hickox im November 2008. Mit typischem, übersprudelndem Enthusiasmus schlug er eine Auftragsarbeit für die Proms vor, zur Feier des vierzigsten Geburtstags des City of London Sinfonia-Orchesters 2011. Er starb nur drei Tage später; wie alle war ich schockiert von seinem plötzlichen Tod. Richard hatte 1983 meine erste Proms-Aufführung dirigiert, und so war es für mich selbstverständlich, das Werk seinem Andenken zu widmen. Darüber hinaus schien es mir nötig, von seiner ursprünglichen Idee einer Festtagskomposition abzuweichen und dem Werk eine andere Ausrichtung zu geben.

Der Erste Weltkrieg fasziniert mich schon seit vielen Jahren, lange bevor das hundertjährige Jubiläum aktuell wurde (unter anderem weil mein Großvater an der Somme ums Leben gekommen war). Musikalisch lässt sich das Thema allerdings nicht so leicht handhaben. Abgesehen von meiner Umsetzung von Gedichten Edmund Blundens in *Aftertones* habe ich es bewusst vermieden, andere Kriegsdichter zu vertonen – und dabei immer das Beispiel von Britten und Wilfred Owen im Hinterkopf gehabt. Als ich Christopher Reid bat, einen Text zu schreiben, schwebte mir als Konzept ein Soldat vor, der sich mitten im Krieg befindet und kaum begreift, in was er da hineingeraten ist. Letztendlich schuf er mit seiner Gedichtsequenz etwas Anderes und Unerwartetes: Wir hören die Geister zweier Soldaten, die im Stacheldraht hängen, irgendwo im Niemandsland. „To pass the time, we let the wind/rummage in the hollows of our skulls/for memories and scraps of song and whisps of rhyme“. (Um uns die Zeit zu vertreiben, lassen wir den Wind in den Höhlen unserer Schädel wühlen, nach Resten von Liedern und Spuren von Reimen).

Es gibt in dem Stück zwar dialogische Elemente – die gegen Ende in einem gemeinsamen Gesang zusammenkommen –, doch der Krieg wird von diesen beiden Stimmen überwiegend aus unterschiedlichen Perspektiven betrachtet. Dem nachdenklichen Captain Gifford gegenübergestellt ist der bodenständige Sergeant Slack, wobei der Kontrast zwischen den beiden sowohl in der Sprache als auch der Musik ausgedrückt wird. Der

Sergeant singt in einem erfundenen Jargon Originallieder und -märsche aus der Zeit, darunter auch Aufnahmen aus dem Jahr 1914.

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Übersetzung: Katja Klier

AFTERTONES

The Estrangement

Dim through cloud veils the moonlight trembles down
A cold grey vapour on the huddling town;
And far from cut-throat's corner the eye sees
Unsilvered hogs'-backs, pallid stubble-leas;
Barn-ridges gaunt and gleamless; blue like ghosts
The knoll mill and the odd cowls of the oasts,
And lonely homes pondering with joys and fears
The dusty travail of three hundred years.
In the ashen twilight momentarily afield,
Like thistle-wool wafting across the weald,
Flickers a sighing spirit; as he passes,
The lisping aspens and the scarfed brook grasses
With wakened melancholy writhe the air.
In the false moonlight wails my old despair,
And I am but a pipe for its wild moan;
Crying through the misty bypaths; slumber-banned;
Impelled and voiced, to piercing coronach blown:
A hounded kern in this grim No Man's Land,
I am spurned between the secret countersigns
Of every little grain of rustling sand
In these parched lanes where the grey wind maligns;
Oaks, once my friends, with ugly murmurings
Madden me, and ivy whirs like condor wings:
The very bat that stoops and whips askance
Shrills malice at the soul grown strange in France.

The Aftermath

Swift away the century flies,
Time has yet the wind for wings,
In the past the midnight lies;
But my morning never springs
Who goes there? come, ghost or man,
You were with us, you will know;
Let us commune, there's no ban
On speech for us if we speak low.
Time has healed the wound, they say,
Gone's the weeping and the rain;
Yet you and I suspect, the day
Will never be the same again.
Is it day? I thought there crept
Some frightened pale rays through the fog,
And where the lank black ash-trees wept
I thought the birds were just agog.
But no, this fiction died before
The swirling gloom, as soon as seen;
The thunder's brow, the thunder's roar,
Darkness that's felt strode swift between.
O euphrasy for ruined eyes!
I chose, it seemed, a flowering thorn;
The white blooms were but brazen lies,
The tree I looked upon was torn
In snarling lunacy of pain,
A brown charred trunk that deadly
cowered,
And when I stared across the plain
Where once the gladdening green hill
towered,
It shone a second, then the greed
Of death had fouled it; dark it stood,
A hump of wilderness untreed
Where the kind Dove would never brood.

Death of Childhood Beliefs

There the puddled lonely lane,
Lost among the red swamp shallows,
Gleams through drifts of summer rain
Down to ford the sandy shallows,
Where the dewberry brambles crane.
And the stream in cloven clay
Round the bridging sheep-gate stutters,
Wind-spun leaves burn silver-grey,
Far and wide the blue moth flutters
Over swathes of warm new hay.
Scrambling boys with mad to-do
Paddle in the sedges' hem,
Ever finding joy anew;
Clocks toll time out not for them,
With what years to frolic through!
How shall I return and how
Look once more on those old places!
For Time's cloud is on me now
That each day, each hour effaces
Visions one on every bough.
Stones could talk together then,
Jewels lay for hoes to find,
Each oak hid King Charles agen,
[Ay] nations in his powdered rind;
Sorcery lived with homeless men.
Spider Dick, with cat's green eyes
That could pierce stone walls, has flitted –
By some hedge he shakes and cries,
A lost man, half-starved, half-witted,
Whom the very stoats despise.

Trees on hill-tops then were Palms,
Closing pilgrims' arbour in;
David walked there singing Psalms;
Out of the clouds white seraphin
Leaned to watch us [fill our bin].
Where's the woodman now to tell
Will o' the Wisp's odd fiery anger?
Where's the ghost to toll the bell
Startling midnight with its clangour
Till the wind seemed but a knell?
Drummers jumping from the tombs
Banged and thumped all through the town,
Past shut shops and silent rooms
While the flaming spires fell down;-
[Now but dreary thunder booms.]
Smuggler trapped in headlong spate,
Smuggler's mare with choking whinney,
Well I knew your fame, your fate;
By the ford and shaking spinney
Where you perished I would wait,
Half in glory, half in fear,
While the fierce flood, trough and crest,
Whirled away the shepherd's gear,
And sunset wildfire coursed the west,
Crying Armageddon near.

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CROSSING THE ALPS

Imagination, – lifting up itself
Before the eye and progress of my song rose
Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,
At once, some lonely traveller. I was lost as in a cloud,
Halted without a struggle to break through;
But to my conscious soul I now can say –
'I recognise thy glory:' in such strength
Of usurpation, when the light of sense
Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
The invisible world, does greatness make abode,
There harbours whether we be young or old
Our destiny, our nature, and our home
Is with infinitude, and only there –
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be.
Under such banners militant, the soul
Seeks for no trophies, struggles for no spoils
That may attest its prowess, blest in thoughts
That are their own perfection, and reward –
Strong itself, and in the access of joy
Which hides it like the mighty flood of Nile.

William Wordsworth
from *The Prelude*, Book VI

Compiled from the 1805 and 1850 versions

NO MAN'S LAND

AIRS & DITTIES OF NO MAN'S LAND

CAPTAIN GIFFORD/SERGEANT SLACK

CAPT: There are two skeletons –
SGT: We are two skeletons –
BOTH: two skeletons
hanging on wire in no man's land.
CAPT: Hanging on wire, you understand,
because no stretcher party can approach us.
SGT: Enemy fire.
CAPT: Hanging and silhouetted against the sky
like a pair of scarecrows,
ragged, mocked and tormented by the wind.
SGT: Crucified!
CAPT: That's blasphemy, sergeant.
SGT: With respect, sir, there was two thieves
hanging by our Saviour's side.
CAPT: I stand corrected.
SGT: You stand, I stand –
BOTH: we both stand
unburied and unresurrected.
So, to pass the time, we let the wind
rummage in the hollows of our skulls
for memories and scraps of song and wisps of rhyme,
as follows.
CAPT: Before divine creation,
the world was without form,
and void, the Bible tells us,
and so it is this evening
after the battle-storm.
Where shells fell, earth erupted
in fountains of black clay;
ancient trees somersaulted

and broke their backs; a landscape
jumped up and ran away.
How brave of two tired armies
to seek to nullify
our Maker's first-day handiwork,
obliterating geography
and cancelling the sky.

SGT: An old crow settled
on an observation tree
and looked through field-glasses
to see what he could see.
He saw rolling acres
of rubble and of mud,
sown with shells and bullets,
watered with men's blood.
He said, 'I'm no farmer
and maybe shouldn't talk,
but this new-fangled agriculture
ain't going to work.
'More to the purpose,
there's nothing for me to eat.'
At that, he relinquished
his uncomfortable seat,
and flapped off smartly
to the nest from whence he came.
And if I had a pair of wings,
I'd do the same.

CAPT: Snug in my dug-out, I hear Brother Rat settling down in his.
When we pass in the trench, I can barely smother a
disgusted shudder.
I know where he's dined and what he's dined on. I know his
mind.
Obscenely replete, he carries his corpulence on fleet little
feet.

And is it so fanciful to detect the sneer of the war profiteer?
He owns this environment more than I do; he likes living
here.
He regards our inferno as his private club, where he gets
good grub – and lots of it.
Everything's plentiful! Everything's profit!
So, if I see him, I give him the widest possible berth.
But when night falls and we've both gone to earth, I feel
differently.
We're both creatures who have burrowed deep to snatch our
brief sleep.
Like those cheery fellows in *The Wind in the Willows*, we
could be friends!

CAPT: I'll tell you something, Sergeant Slack,
I wish they'd told me long before:
the tunes that march men off to war
are not the same as march them back.

SGT: You're quite right, sir. I for one
never heard the band strike up
for the benefit of some young pup
being packed off home with both legs gone.
They ought to write a few new marches
in five-four time and clashing keys
for chaps with shrapnel in their knees
staggering out the gate on crutches.
'A Blighty One', 'Stretcher Cases',
and 'Toodle-oo' would be good titles
for men with shrapnel in their vitals
and missing limbs and blown-off faces.
And for the blokes who've swallowed gas –

CAPT: Thank you, sergeant, that's enough.
Pipe down now and save your puff
for the enemy's wind, percussion and brass.

SGT: Fritz is my friend:

when I lob a grenade
over the top,
he lobs one back –
it's a fair swap.
When a bullet bounces
off my tin hat,
I shoot at him,
obeying the law
of tit for tat.
As systems go,
it works pretty well.
No one's left short:
he gives me hell,
I give him hell.
Yes, I rub along fine
with my friend Fritz,
because we both know
that at the end,
when I've killed him
and he's killed me,
we'll be quits.

CAPT: Someone takes up his mouth-organ and starts
to breathe an old tune into it, or fingers out
something almost forgotten on his penny whistle,
or nudges his squeezebox for a sequence of chords
that carries a melody that carries words
that carry a meaning different for each of us,
and the entire company stops to listen,
as if listening, too, were a form of music,
and our assembled silence, as big as an orchestra.

CAPT: I know a village some way away,
where there's a little estaminet:
the wine is filthy and the songs are flat,
but the women are women, thank God for that!

BOTH: The women are women, thank God for that!

CAPT: You drink your wine and you sing your song –

SGT: neither activity takes very long –

CAPT: then you climb the stairs to a room overhead –

SGT: and there's a woman, and there's a bed.

BOTH: There's a woman, and there's a bed.

CAPT: You pay some money, but it's not too much
for the infinite heaven of a woman's touch.

SGT: It's infinite for a minute or two,
then you're back downstairs with merci beaucoup.

BOTH: Back downstairs with merci beaucoup.

CAPT: Another song and another glass of wine
will send you merrily up the line –

SGT: where you spend all day and night in a trench –

CAPT: thinking of women –

SGT: and practising your French.

BOTH: Thinking of women and practising your French.

SGT: I was sharing a smoke
with the quarter-bloke,
when a lump of lead
took off most of his head.
I was having a chat
with some brass hat,
when a sniper's bullet
passed clean through his gullet.
The Padre and me
sat drinking tea,
when a five-nine shell
nobbled him as well.
Now, when I suggest cards,
my mates run yards
and I have to play patience –
all on account of those previous occasions
when I chanced to be near.
Do you call that fair?

CAPT: In my dream last night, two generals passed by,
neither appearing to be in a great hurry.
They stopped and looked down into the trench where I
and other men stood in a waist-deep slurry
of mud and sewage and stinking human rot.
The senior general said, 'Don't worry
about this insignificant little lot:
they're not being punished for something they did wrong;
they're just a company that HQ forgot
and have been festering in this pit so long,
to pull them out now would be too much bother.
Think of the bloody red tape! Think of the pong!
Best leave them be. I can show you some other,
much more interesting stuff. Come, follow me - '

SGT: I went to bed in a bath,
and the bath was dirty at that.
Now tell me, how stupid was that,
to go to bed in a bath
that was not just dirty but cold?
So I lay in the freezing mud,
till I woke up the colour of mud
and with a diabolical cold.
But never mind: tonight
I'll sleep in the open air,
under a blanket of air
that will keep me snug all night.
The wind will sing me to sleep
with its howling lullaby,
and in the sweet by-and-by
I'll either be dead or asleep.
And death is as good as a sleep,
don't you think?
Don't you think
death is as good as a sleep?

CAPT: They are drunken -
SGT: but not with wine -
CAPT: they stagger -
SGT: but not with strong drink -
BOTH: the men who go over the top,
the men who go over the brink.
SGT: They shout -
CAPT: but not from high spirits -
SGT: they fall -
CAPT: but not in a swoon -
BOTH: the men who go into no man's land
and won't be back soon.

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