

## Poetry & All Quiet on the Western Front: The Poems

The poems here have been chosen because they each reflect one or several of the experiences Paul Baumer underwent in Remarque's novel.

Read them and then fill in the table in the 'Poetry & All Quiet on the Western Front' document, comparing the experiences in these poems with those in the novel.

### 1. The Send-Off by Wilfred Owen

Down the close, darkening lanes they sang their way  
To the siding-shed,  
And lined the train with faces grimly gay.

Their breasts were stuck all white with wreath and spray  
As men's are, dead.

Dull porters watched them, and a casual tramp  
Stood staring hard,  
Sorry to miss them from the upland camp.  
Then, unmoved, signals nodded, and a lamp  
Winked to the guard.

So secretly, like wrongs hushed-up, they went.  
They were not ours:  
We never heard to which front these were sent.

Nor there if they yet mock what women meant  
Who gave them flowers.

Shall they return to beatings of great bells  
In wild trainloads?  
A few, a few, too few for drums and yells,  
May creep back, silent, to still village wells  
Up half-known roads.

### 2. The Bohemians by Ivor Gurney

Certain people would not clean their buttons,  
Nor polish buckles after latest fashions,  
Preferred their hair long, putties comfortable,  
Barely escaping hanging, indeed hardly able;  
In Bridge and smoking without army cautions  
Spending hours that sped like evil for quickness,  
(While others burnished brasses, earned promotions)  
These were those ones who jested in the trench,  
While others argued of army ways, and wrenched  
What little soul they had still further from shape,  
And died off one by one, or became officers,  
Without the first of dream, the ghost of notions  
Of ever becoming soldiers, or smart and neat,  
Surprised as ever to find the army capable  
Of sounding 'Lights out' to break a game of Bridge,  
As to fear candles would set a barn alight:  
In Artois or Picardy they lie - free of useless fashions.

### 3. Lamentations by Siegfried Sassoon

I found him in the guard-room at the Base.  
From the blind darkness I had heard his crying  
And blundered in. With puzzled, patient face  
A sergeant watched him; it was no good trying  
To stop it; for he howled and beat his chest.  
And, all because his brother had gone west,  
Raved at the bleeding war; his rampant grief  
Moaned, shouted, sobbed, and choked, while he was kneeling  
Half-naked on the floor. In my belief  
Such men have lost all patriotic feeling.

### 4. The Hero by Siegfried Sassoon

'Jack fell as he'd have wished,' the mother said,  
And folded up the letter that she'd read.  
'The Colonel writes so nicely.' Something broke  
In the tired voice that quavered to a choke.  
She half looked up. 'We mothers are so proud  
Of our dead soldiers.' Then her face was bowed.

Quietly the Brother Officer went out.  
He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies  
That she would nourish all her days, no doubt  
For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes  
Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,  
Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.

He thought how 'Jack', cold-footed, useless swine,  
Had panicked down the trench that night the mine  
Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried  
To get sent home, and how, at last, he died,  
Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care  
Except that lonely woman with white hair.

## 5. The Deserter by Winifred Mary Letts

There was a man, - don't mind his name.  
Whom Fear had dogged by night and day.  
He could not face the German guns  
And so he turned and ran away,  
Just that- he turned and ran away,  
But who can judge him, you or I?  
God makes a man of flesh and blood  
Who yearns to live and not to die.  
And this man when he feared to die  
Was scared as any frightened child,  
his knees were shaking under him,  
His breath came fast, his eyes were wild,  
with throbbing heart and sobbing breath.  
But oh! it shames one's soul to see  
A man in abject fear of death.  
But fear had gripped him, so had death;  
His number had gone up that day,  
They might not heed his frightened eyes,  
They shot him when the dawn was grey,  
He stood there in a place apart,  
The shots rang out and down he fell,  
An English bullet in his heart.  
An English bullet in his heart!  
But here's the irony of life,-  
His mother thinks he fought and fell  
A hero, foremost in the strife.  
So she goes proudly; to the strife  
Her best, her hero son she gave.  
O well for her she does not know  
He lies in a deserter's grave.

## 5. Spring Offensive [unfinished] by Wilfrid Owen

Halted against the shade of a last hill,  
They fed, and lying easy, were at ease  
And, finding comfortable chests and knees,  
Carelessly slept. But many there stood still  
To face the stark blank sky beyond the ridge,  
Knowing their feet had come to the end of the world.

Marvelling they stood, and watched the long grass swirled  
By the May breeze, murmurous with wasp and midge,  
For though the summer oozed into their veins  
Like an injected drug for their bodies' pains,  
Sharp on their souls hung the imminent line of grass,  
Fearfully flashed the sky's mysterious glass.

Hour after hour they ponder the warm field, -  
And the far valley behind, where the buttercup  
Had blessed with gold their slow boots coming up,  
Where even the little brambles would not yield  
But clutched and clung to them like sorrowing hands.  
[        ] they breathe like trees unstirred.

Till like a cold gust thrills the little word  
At which each body and its soul begird  
And tighten them for battle. No alarms

Of bugles, no high flags, no clamorous haste, -  
Only a lift and flare of eyes that faced  
The sun, like a friend with whom their love is done.  
O larger shone that smile against the sun, -  
Mightier than his whose bounty these have spurned.

So, soon they topped the hill, and raced together  
Over an open stretch of herb and heather  
Exposed. And instantly the whole sky burned  
With fury against them; earth set sudden cups  
In thousands for their blood; and the green slope  
Chasmed and steepened sheer to infinite space.

Of them who running on that last high place  
Leapt to swift unseen bullets, or went up  
On the hot blast and fury of hell's upsurge,  
Or plunged and fell away past this world's verge,  
Some say God caught them even before they fell.

But what say such as from existence' brink  
Ventured but drave too swift to sink,  
The few who rushed in the body to enter hell,  
And there out-fiending all its fiends and flames  
With superhuman inhumanities,  
Long-famous glories, immemorial shames -  
And crawling slowly back, have by degrees  
Regained cool peaceful air in wonder -  
Why speak not they of comrades that went under?

## 7. Recruiting by E.A.Mackintosh

'Lads, you're wanted, go and help,'  
On the railway carriage wall  
Stuck the poster, and I thought  
Of the hands that penned the call.

Fat civilians wishing they  
'Could go and fight the Hun'.  
Can't you see them thanking God  
That they're over forty-one?

Girls with feathers, vulgar songs -  
Washy verse on England's need -  
God - and don't we damned well know  
How the message ought to read.

'Lads, you're wanted! Over there,  
Shiver in the morning dew,  
More poor devils like yourselves  
Waiting to be killed by you.

Go and help to swell the names  
In the casualty lists.  
Help to make the column's stuff  
For the blasted journalists.

Help to keep them nice and safe  
From the wicked German foe.  
Don't let him come over here!  
Lads, you're wanted - out you go.'

There's a better word than that,  
Lads, and can't you hear it come  
From a million men that call  
You to share their martyrdom?

Leave the harlots still to sing  
Comic songs about the Hun,  
Leave the fat old men to say  
Now we've got them on the run.

Better twenty honest years  
Than their dull three score and ten.  
Lads you're wanted. Come and learn  
To live and die with honest men.

You shall learn what men can do  
If you will but pay the price,  
Learn the gaiety and strength  
In the gallant sacrifice.

Take your risk of life and death  
Underneath the open sky.  
Live clean or go out quick -  
Lads, you're wanted. Come and die.

## **8. Joining The Colours** by Katharine Tynan

There they go marching all in step so gay!  
Smooth-cheeked and golden, food for shells and guns.  
Blithely they go as to a wedding day,  
The mothers' sons.

The drab street stares to see them row on row  
On the high tram-tops, singing like the lark.  
Too careless-gay for courage, singing they go  
Into the dark.

With tin whistles, mouth-organs, any noise,  
They pipe the way to glory and the grave;  
Foolish and young, the gay and golden boys  
Love cannot save.

High heart! High courage! The poor girls they kissed  
Run with them : they shall kiss no more, alas!  
Out of the mist they stepped-into the mist  
Singing they pass.

## 9. The Target by Ivor Gurney

I shot him, and it had to be  
One of us, 'Twas him or me.  
'Couldn't be helped' and none can blame  
Me, for you would do the same

My mother, she cant sleep for fear  
Of what might be a-happening here  
To me. Perhaps it might be best  
To die, and set her fears at rest

For worst is worst, and worry's done.  
Perhaps he was the only son. . .  
Yet God keeps still, and does not say  
A word of guidance anyway.

Well, if they get me, first I'll find  
That boy, and tell him all my mind,  
And see who felt the bullet worst,  
And ask his pardon, if I durst.

All's a tangle. Here's my job.  
A man might rave, or shout, or sob;  
And God He takes takes no sort of heed.  
This is a bloody mess indeed.

## 10. The Falling Leaves by Margaret Postgate-Cole

Today, as I rode by,  
I saw the brown leaves dropping from their tree  
In a still afternoon,  
When no wind whirled them whistling to the sky,  
But thickly, silently,  
They fell, like snowflakes wiping out the noon;  
And wandered slowly thence  
For thinking of a gallant multitude  
Which now all withering lay,  
Slain by no wind of age or pestilence,  
But in their beauty strewed  
Like snowflakes falling on the Flemish clay.

## 11. In Flanders Fields by John McCrae

In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved, and now we lie  
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.

## 12. Perhaps (To R.A.L.) by Vera Brittain

Perhaps some day the sun will shine again,  
And I shall see that still the skies are blue,  
And feel once more I do not live in vain,  
Although bereft of You.

Perhaps the golden meadows at my feet  
Will make the sunny hours of spring seem gay,  
And I shall find the white May-blossoms sweet,  
Though You have passed away.

Perhaps the summer woods will shimmer bright,  
And crimson roses once again be fair,  
And autumn harvest fields a rich delight,  
Although You are not there.

Perhaps some day I shall not shrink in pain  
To see the passing of the dying year,  
And listen to Christmas songs again,  
Although You cannot hear.'

But though kind Time may many joys renew,  
There is one greatest joy I shall not know  
Again, because my heart for loss of You  
Was broken, long ago.

