

# POEMS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

## **The Oasis Selection**

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## Henry Reed

### *Lessons of the War (To Alan Michell)*

*Vixi duellis nuper idoneus  
Et militavi non sine gloria*

#### *I - Naming of Parts*

Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday,  
We had daily cleaning. And to-morrow morning,  
We shall have what to do after firing. But to-day,  
To-day we have naming of parts. Japonica  
Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens  
And today we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this  
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see  
When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel,  
Which in your case you have not got. The branches  
Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures,  
Which in our case we have not got.

This is the safety-catch, which is always released  
With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me  
See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy  
If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms  
Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see  
Any of them using their finger.

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this  
Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it  
Rapidly backwards and forwards; we call this  
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards  
The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:  
They call it easing the Spring

They call it easing the Spring; it is perfectly easy  
 If you have any strength in your thumb: like the bolt,  
 And the breech, and the cocking-piece, and the point of balance,  
 Which in our case we have not got; and the almond-blossom  
 Silent in all of the gardens and the bees going backwards and  
 forwards,  
 For today we have naming of parts.

## Vernon Scannell

### *War Song*

A lesson that their children knew by heart  
 Where it lay stonily in that September.  
 Conscripted man, anonymous in hot  
 Brown or blue, intoned his rank and number.  
 The discs, strung from his neck, no amulet  
 Against the ache of loss, were worn in darkness  
 Under grave blankets in the narrow cot  
 After the bugle's skirmish with night's silence.  
 In trembling cities civil sleep was probed  
 By the wild sirens' blind and wounded howling;  
 White searchlights hosed the sky; black planets throbbed;  
 All night all buildings put on total mourning.  
 And when dawn yawned, the washed skies were afloat  
 With silver saveloys whose idle motion  
 And conference with puffed clouds appeared to mock  
 Bereaving night and morning's lamentation.  
 And then, down country lanes, the crop-haired sons  
 And nephews of the skeletons of Flanders  
 Made séance of their march, as, on their tongues,  
 The old ghosts sang again of Tipperary,  
 Packing kit-bags, getting back to Blighty,  
 But soon, bewildered, sank back to their graves  
 When other songs were bawled – a jaunty music  
 With false, bragging words: The Siegfried Line  
 Transformed with comic washing hanging from it,

## Henry Reed

### *The Place and the Person*

The place not worth describing, but like every empty place.  
 So much like other empty places, you yourself  
 Must paint its picture, who have your own such places,  
 Which lie, their whitening eyes turned upwards to the sky,  
 On the remoter side of a continent.  
 Under a burning sun. Their streets and hovels  
 Have lost all memory, and their harbours rot.  
 Paint it, and vary it as you like, but only  
 Always paint this: the solitary figure,  
 Who lies or squats or sits, facing the sun,  
 Now in bewilderment or a vacant calm,  
 In filthy rags, the ancient garb of exiles,  
 The casual mixture of others' memories,  
 Legacy or theft; and the mind perplexed and eroded.  
 In such a one, at the edge of his world, desire  
 Is buried or burned in lust, and love is banished  
 Beyond the creeping jungle; in the noontime heat,  
 Since even these can be lost, they are far away.  
 You will know all this, and can paint it as suits you best,  
 But paint alone the central figure faithfully;  
 His surroundings do not matter: they are yours or mine,  
 The walls perhaps with greying notices  
 Of the bygone sales of heifers, or the concourse  
 Of a troupe of vanished singers, singing there,  
 The carrion birds shuffling upon the roof,  
 The empty expanse of ocean confronting him,  
 The harbour steps, the empty sands below,  
 And the movement of water on the harbour bar.  
 And from the emptiness, still mute but moving,  
 Emerge the dancers who will not be still.  
 Nearest at hand two scuffling figures, who  
 Saunter a little and scuffle again and dance,  
 Or lie on the paving-stones and yawn at each other,  
 A daily ritual; if not with them, with others.  
 This is a dance, with ritual and celebration.

Others join in its windings as the day  
 Passes through noon and afternoon and evening  
 And wave on wave of heat and sunlight fall,  
 Illuminating and transfixing, and at last  
 The dreadful pattern of their lives disclosing.  
 From out of rocks and paths they come, the dancers:  
 One who walks solitary and shuns the gaze  
 Of the scuffling pair, now languid in the heat,  
 Until, withdrawn, he looks about and secretly  
 Seizing a dead shark's jawbone out of air,  
 Makes it a trap with stones and vegetation  
 For yet another who walks on the level beaches.  
 They congregate, beseeching or resentful,  
 Till the empty place is crowded with silent ghosts,  
 They are intangible, but he is one with them,  
 As with their proud, vindictive admonitions,  
 And sensual taunts, and gestures of possession,  
 They separate, part, return, link arms again,  
 Familiarly, yet not with reconciliation.  
 And, one with them, he cannot turn away,  
 Or forget in the motions of song and prayer and dance  
 The great dried fountains of their sombre eyes.

Fed on such visions, how shall a man recover  
 Between the dancing dream and the dream of departure?  
 For the dancers go, and their silent song and prayer  
 Go with them; and the ship goes from the harbour,  
 Vanishes in sea, or drowns in air, but goes.  
 The waves of noon can barely reach the shore,  
 And the jungle approaches always a little nearer.  
 This is the captive. And paint him as you will.  
 These are my images. The place not worth describing.

**John PUDNEY:** Born 1909. Gresham School, Holt, Norfolk. *News Chronicle* 1937-40. RAF Squadron Leader, 1940-5. Book Critic, *Daily Express*, 1947-9; Wrote 'For Johnny' on back of envelope during London air raid 1941. Official Historian on Battle of Malta. Died 1977.

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