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**HERBERT  
READ**

**WORLD WAR 1  
1916 - 18  
POEMS**

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# NAKED WARRIORS

1916-18

*And there were some that went into the  
battle naked and unarmed, fighting only  
with the fervour of their spirit, dying  
and getting many wounds.*

KNEESHAW GOES TO WAR

I

Ernest Kneeshaw grew  
In the forest of his dreams  
Like a woodland flower whose anæmic petals  
Need the sun.

Life was for him a far perspective  
Of high black columns  
Flanking, arching and encircling.  
He never, even vaguely, tried to pierce  
The gloom about him,  
But was content to contemplate  
His finger-nails and wrinkled boots.

He might at least have perceived  
A sexual atmosphere;  
But even when his body burned and urged  
Like the buds and roots around him,  
Abashed by the will-less promptings of his flesh,  
He continued to contemplate his feet.

2

Kneeshaw went to war,  
And they set about with much painstaking  
To straighten his drooping back:  
On bleak moors and among harsh fellows  
He kissed the elemental.



But still his mind reflected things  
Like a cold steel mirror—emotionless;  
Yet in reflecting he became accomplished  
And, to some extent,  
Divested of ancestral gloom.

Then Kneeshaw crossed the sea.

Arrived at Boulogne  
He cast a backward glance across the harbours  
And saw there a forest of assembled masts and  
rigging  
Rather reminiscent of former abodes.  
And, like the sweep from a released dam,  
His thought flooded unfamiliar paths:

*This forest was congregated  
From various climates and strange seas:  
Hadn't each ship some separate memory  
Of sunlit scenes or arduous waters?  
Didn't each bring in the high glamour  
Of conquered force?  
Wasn't the forest-gloom of their assembly  
A body built of living cells,  
Of personalities and experiences  
—A witness of heroism  
Co-existent with man?*

*And that dark forest of his youth—  
Couldn't he liberate the black columns  
Flanking, arching, encircling him with dread?  
Couldn't he let them spread from his vision like a fleet*

*Taking the open sea,  
Disintegrating into light and colour and the fragrance  
of winds?  
And perhaps in some thought they would return  
Laden with strange merchandise—  
And with the passing thought  
Pass unregretted into far horizons.*

These were Kneeshaw's musings  
Whilst he yet dwelt in the romantic fringes.

3  
Then, with many other men,  
He was transported in a cattle-truck  
To the scene of war.

For a while chance was kind  
Save for an inevitable  
Searing of the mind.

But later Kneeshaw's war  
Became intense.  
Arras was a picnic;  
But Ypres. . . .  
That ghastly desolation  
Sank into men's hearts and turned them black—  
Cankered them with horror.  
Kneeshaw felt himself  
A cog in some great evil engine,  
Unwilling, but revolved tempestuously  
By unseen springs. . . .  
He plunged with listless mind  
Into the black horror.



There are a few left who will find it hard to forget  
Polygonveld.

The earth was scared and broken  
By torrents of plunging shells;  
Then washed and sodden with autumnal rains.

And Polygon beke  
(Perhaps a rippling stream  
In the days of Kneeshaw's gloom)  
Spread itself like a fatal quicksand,—  
A sucking, clutching death.

They had to be across the beke  
And in their line before dawn. . . .  
A man who was marching by Kneeshaw's side  
Hesitated in the middle of the mud,  
And slowly sank, weighted down by equipment  
and arms.

He cried for help;  
Rifles were stretched to him;  
He clutched and they tugged,  
But slowly he sank.  
His terror grew—  
Grew visibly when the viscous ooze  
Reached his neck.

And there he seemed to stick,  
Sinking no more.  
They could not dig him out—  
The oozing mud would flow back again.

The dawn was very near.

An officer shot him through the head:  
Not a neat job—the revolver.  
Was too close.

Then the dawn came, silver on the wet brown  
earth.

Kneeshaw found himself in the second wave:  
The unseen springs revolved the cog  
Through all the mutations of that storm of death.  
He started when he heard them cry "Dig in!"  
He had to think and couldn't for a while. . . .  
Then he seized a pick from the nearest man  
And clawed passionately upon the churned earth.  
With satisfaction his pick  
Cleft the skull of a buried man.  
Kneeshaw tugged the clinging pick,  
Saw its burden and shrieked.

For a second or two he was impotent  
Vainly trying to recover his will, but his senses  
prevailing.

Then mercifully  
A hot blast and riotous detonation  
Hurled his mangled body  
Into the beautiful peace of coma.

There came a day when Kneeshaw,  
Minus a leg, on crutches,  
Stalked the woods and hills of his native land.  
And on the hills he would sing this war-song:



*War through my soul has driven  
Its jagged blades:  
The riven  
Dream fades—  
So you'd better grieve, heart, in the gathering night,  
Grieve, heart, in the loud twilight.*

*The forest gloom returns,  
The wild black masts. . . .  
I grip my crutches and keep  
A lonely view—  
Grieve, heart, in the gathering night,  
Grieve, heart, in the loud twilight.*

*The body I gave to fear  
(The soul was gone)  
The bloodiest head that grieves  
Shall not condone—  
So grieve, heart, in the gathering night,  
Grieve, heart, in the loud twilight.*

### THE SCENE OF WAR

*And perhaps some outer horror,  
some hideousness to stamp beauty  
a mark  
on our hearts.*

H. D.

### I—VILLAGES DÉMOLIS

The villages are strewn  
In red and yellow heaps of rubble:

Here and there  
Interior walls  
Lie upturned and interrogate the skies amazedly.

Walls that once held  
Within their cubic confines  
A soul that now lies strewn  
In red and yellow  
Heaps of rubble.

### II—THE CRUCIFIX

His body is smashed  
Through the belly and chest,  
And the head hangs lopsided  
From one nailed hand.

Emblem of agony,  
We have smashed you!

### III—FEAR

Fear is a wave  
Beating through the air  
And on taut nerves impingeing  
Till there it wins  
Vibrating chords.

All goes well  
So long as you tune the instrument  
To simulate composure.

(So you will become  
A gallant gentleman.)

But when the strings are broken. . . .  
Then you will grovel on the earth  
And your rabbit eyes  
Will fill with the fragments of your shattered soul.



#### IV—THE HAPPY WARRIOR

His wild heart beats with painful sobs,  
His strained hands clench an ice-cold rifle,  
His aching jaws grip a hot parched tongue,  
And his wide eyes search unconsciously.

He cannot shriek.

Bloody saliva  
Dribbles down his shapeless jacket.

I saw him stab  
And stab again  
A well-killed Boche.

This is the happy warrior,  
This is he. . . .

#### V—LIEDHOLZ

When I captured Liedholz  
I had a blackened face  
Like a nigger's,  
And my teeth like white mosaics shone.

We met in the night at half-past one,  
Between the lines.  
Liedholz shot at me  
And I at him;  
And in the ensuing tumult he surrendered to me.

Before we reached our wire  
He told me he had a wife and three children.  
In the dug-out we gave him a whiskey.  
Going to the Brigade with my prisoner at dawn,  
The early sun made the land delightful,  
And larks rose singing from the plain.

In broken French we discussed  
Beethoven, Nietzsche and the International.

He was a professor  
Living at Spandau;  
And not too intelligible.

But my black face and nigger's teeth  
Amused him.



## VI—THE REFUGEES

Mute figures with bowed heads  
They travel along the road:  
Old women, incredibly old,  
And a hand-cart of chattels.

They do not weep:  
Eyes are too raw for tears.

Past them have hastened  
Processions of retreating gunteams,  
Baggage-wagons and swift horsemen.  
Now they struggle along  
With the rearguard of a broken army.

We will hold the enemy towards nightfall  
And they will move  
Mutely into the dark behind us,  
Only the creaking cart  
Disturbing their sorrowful serenity.

## MY COMPANY

*Foule ! Ton âme entière est debout  
dans mon corps.*

Jules Romains.

I

You became  
In many acts and quiet observances  
A body souled, entire. . . .

I cannot tell  
What time your life became mine:  
Perhaps when one summer night  
We halted on the roadside  
In the starlight only,  
And you sang your sad home-songs,  
Dirges which I standing outside your soul  
Coldly condemned.

Perhaps, one night, descending cold  
When rum was mighty acceptable,  
And my doling gave birth to sensual gratitude.

And then our fights: we've fought together  
Compact, unanimous;  
And I have felt the pride of leadership.



In many acts and quiet observances  
You absorbed me:  
Until one day I stood eminent  
And saw you gathered round me,  
Uplooking,  
And about you a radiance that seemed to beat  
With variant glow and to give  
Grace to our unity.

But, God ! I know that I'll stand  
Someday in the loneliest wilderness,  
Someday my heart will cry  
For the soul that has been, but that now  
Is scattered with the winds,  
Deceased and devoid.

I know that I'll wander with a cry:  
" O beautiful men, O men I loved,  
O whither are you gone, my company ? "

That is a hell  
Immortal while I live.

2

My men go wearily  
With their monstrous burdens.

They bear wooden planks  
And iron sheeting  
Through the area of death.

When a flare curves through the sky  
They rest immobile.

Then on again,  
Sweating and blaspheming—  
" Oh, bloody Christ ! "

My men, my modern Christs,  
Your bloody agony confronts the world.

3

A man of mine  
lies on the wire.  
It is death to fetch his soulless corpse.

A man of mine  
lies on the wire;  
And he will rot  
And first his lips  
The worms will eat.

It is not thus I would have him kissed,  
But with the warm passionate lips  
Of his comrade here.

4

I can assume  
A giant attitude and godlike mood,  
And then detachedly regard  
All riots, conflicts and collisions.

The men I've lived with  
Lurch suddenly into a far perspective;  
They distantly gather like a dark cloud of birds  
In the autumn sky.

Urged by some unanimous  
Volition or fate,  
Clouds clash in opposition;  
The sky quivers, the dead descend;  
Earth yawns.

And they are all of one species.

From my giant attitude,  
In godlike mood,  
I laugh till space is filled  
With hellish merriment.

Then again I assume  
My human docility,  
Bow my head  
And share their doom.



THE EXECUTION OF CORNELIUS  
VANE

*Le combat spirituel est aussi brutal que la  
bataille d'hommes; mais la vision de la justice  
est le plaisir de Dieu seul.*

Arthur Rimbaud.

Arraigned before his worldly gods  
He would have said:  
"I, Cornelius Vane,  
A fly in the sticky web of life,  
Shot away my right index finger.  
I was alone, on sentry, in the chill twilight after  
dawn,  
And the act cost me a bloody sweat.  
Otherwise the cost was trivial—they had no evi-  
dence,  
And I lied to the wooden fools who tried me.  
When I returned from hospital  
They made me a company cook:  
I peel potatoes and other men fight."

For nearly a year Cornelius peeled potatoes  
And his life was full of serenity.  
Then the enemy broke our line  
And their hosts spread over the plains  
Like unleashed beads.  
Every man was taken—  
Shoemakers, storemen, grooms—  
And arms were given them  
That they might stem the oncoming host.

Cornelius held out his fingerless hand  
And remarked that he couldn't shoot.  
"But you can stab," the sergeant said,  
So he fell in with the rest, and, a little group,  
They marched away towards the enemy.

After an hour they halted for a rest.  
They were already in the fringe of the fight:  
Desultory shells fell about them,  
And past them retreating gunteams  
Galloped in haste.  
But they must go on.

Wounded stragglers came down the road,  
Haggard and limping  
Their arms and equipment tossed away.  
Cornelius Vane saw them, and his heart was beat-  
ing wildly,  
For he must go on.

At the next halt  
He went aside to piss,  
And whilst away a black shell  
Burst near him.  
Hot metal shrieked past his face;  
Bricks and earth descended like hail,  
And the acrid stench of explosive filled his nostrils.

Cornelius pitched his body to the ground  
And crouched in trembling fear.  
Another shell came singing overhead,  
Nowhere near.



But Cornelius sprang to his feet, his pale face set.  
He willed nothing, saw nothing, only before him  
Were the free open fields:  
To the fields he ran.

He was still running when he began to perceive  
The tranquillity of the fields  
And the battle distant.  
Away in the north-east were men marching on a  
road;  
Behind were the smoke-puffs of shrapnel,  
And in the west the sun declining  
In a sky of limpid gold.

When night came finally  
He had reached a wood.  
In the thickness of the trees  
The cold wind was excluded,  
And here he slept a few hours.

In the early dawn  
The chill mist and heavy dew  
Pierced his bones and wakened him.  
There was no sound of battle to be heard.

In the open fields again  
The sun shone sickly through the mist  
And the dew was icy to the feet.  
So Cornelius ran about in that white night,  
The sun's wan glare his only guide.

Coming to a canal  
He ran up and down like a dog  
Deliberating where to cross.  
One way he saw a bridge  
Loom vaguely, but approaching  
He heard voices and turned about.  
He went far the other way,  
But growing tired before he found a crossing,  
Plunged into the icy water and swam.  
The water gripped with agony;  
His clothes sucked the heavy water,  
And as he ran again  
Water oozed and squelched from his boots,  
His coat dripped and his teeth chattered.

He came to a farm.  
Approaching cautiously, he found it deserted.  
Within he discarded his sopping uniform, dried  
himself and donned  
Mufti he found in a cupboard.  
Dark mouldy bread and bottled cider he also found  
And was refreshed.

Whilst he was eating,  
Suddenly,  
Machine-guns opened fire not far away,  
And their harsh throbbing  
Darkened his soul with fear.

The sun was more golden now,  
And as he went—



Always going west—  
The mist grew thin.  
About noon,  
As he skirted the length of a wood,  
The warmth had triumphed and the spring day  
was beautiful.

Cornelius perceived with a new joy  
Pale anemones and violets of the wood,  
And wished that he might ever  
Exist in the perception of these woodland flowers  
And the shafts of yellow light that pierced  
The green dusk.

Two days later  
He entered a village and was arrested.  
He was hungry, and the peace of the fields  
Dissipated the terror that had been the strength of  
his will.

He was charged with desertion  
And eventually tried by court-martial.  
The evidence was heavy against him,  
And he was mute in his own defence.  
A dumb anger and a despair  
Filled his soul.

He was found guilty.  
Sentence: To suffer death by being shot.

The sentence duly confirmed,  
One morning at dawn they led him forth.

He saw a party of his own regiment,  
With rifles, looking very sad.  
The morning was bright, and as they tied  
The cloth over his eyes, he said to the assembly:  
"What wrong have I done that I should leave  
these:  
The bright sun rising  
And the birds that sing?"



# ECLOGUES

1914-18

## I—THE MEDITATION OF A LOVER AT DAYBREAK

I can just see the distant trees  
And I wonder whether they will  
Or will not  
Bow their tall plumes at your passing  
In the carriage of the morning wind:

Or whether they will merely  
Tremble against the cold dawnlight,  
Shaking a yellow leaf  
to the dew-wet earth.

## II—WOODLANDS

Pine needles cover the silent ground:  
pine trees chancel the woodland ways.

We penetrate into the dark depths  
Where only garlic and hemlock grow  
Till we meet the blue stream  
Cleaving the green  
Twilight like a rhythmic sword.

## III—PASTURELANDS

We scurry over the pastures  
chasing the windstrewn oak-leaves.

We kiss  
the fresh petals of cowslips and primroses.

We discover frog-spawn in the wet ditch.

## IV—THE POND

Shrill green weeds  
float on the black pond.

A rising fish  
ripples the still water

And disturbs my soul.

## V—THE ORCHARD

Grotesque patterns of blue-grey mould  
Cling to my barren apple-trees:

But in spring  
Pale blossoms burst like flames  
Along black wavering twigs:

And soon  
Rains wash the cold frail petals  
Downfalling like tremulous flakes  
Even within my heart.



VI—APRIL

To the fresh wet fields  
and the white  
froth of flowers

Came the wild errant  
swallows with a scream.

VII—THE WOODMAN

His russet coat and gleaming axe  
Flit  
In the blue glades.

The wild birds sing;  
But the woodman he broods  
In the blue glades.

VIII—HARVEST HOME

The wagons loom like blue caravans in the dusk:  
They lumber mysteriously down the moonlit lanes.

We ride on the stacks of rust gold corn,  
Filling the sky with our song.

The horses toss their heads and the harness-bells  
Jingle all the way.

IX—APPEAL

O dark eyes, I am weary  
Of the white wrath of the sea.

O come with me to the vernal woods,  
The green sap and fragrant  
White violets.

X—CURFEW

Like a faun my head uplifted  
In delicate mists:

And breaking on my soul  
Tremulous waves that beat and cling  
To yellow leaves and dark green hills:

Bells in the autumn evening.

XI—CHILDHOOD

I

The old elm trees flock round the tiled farmstead  
and their silver-bellied leaves dance in the wind.  
Beneath their shade, and in the corner of the  
green, is a pond. In winter it is full of water, green  
with weeds: and in Spring a lily will open there.

The ducks waddle in the mud and sail in circles  
round the pond, or preen their feathers on the  
bank.



But in Summer the pond is dry, and its bed is glossy and baked by the sun, of a beautiful soft colour like the skins of the moles they catch and crucify on the stable doors.

On the green the fowls pick grains, or chatter and fight. Their yellows, whites and browns, the metallic lustre of their darker feathers, and the crimson splash of their combs make an ever-changing pattern on the grass.

They drink with spasmodic upreaching necks by the side of the well.

Under the stones by the well live green lizards curious to our eyes.

And the path from the well leads to a garden door set in the high wall whereon grow plums and apricots. The door is deep and narrow and opens on to paths bordered with box-hedges; one path leads through the aromatic currant bushes, beneath the plum-trees, to the lawn where grows the wonder of our day-dreams, the monkey's puzzle-tree. On the other side of the lawn three fir-trees rise sharply to the sky, their dark shades homing a few birds.

And beyond is the orchard, and down its avenues of mould-smitten trees the path leads to the paddocks, with their mushrooms and fairy-rings, and to the flatlands that stretch to the girding hills.

And on a hill-top, cut clean against the sky, is the figure of a child, full of impatient gesture.

2

The farm is distant from the high-road half a mile;

The child of the farm  
does not realize it for several years;  
He wanders through the orchard,  
finds mushrooms in the paddock,  
or beetles in the pond.

But one day he goes to the high-road,  
sees carts and carriages pass,  
and men go marketing.

A traction-engine crashes into his vision  
with flame and smoke,  
and makes his eager soul retreat.

He turns away:  
The huntsmen are galloping over the fields,  
Their red coats and the swift whimpering hounds.

## XII—ON THE HEATH

White humours veining Earth,  
The lymphic winds of Spring  
Veil an early morning  
When on the hill



Men in cool sleeves dig the soil,  
Turning the loam or acrid manure  
With gripes that clink on stones.

Silently horses speed on the sandy track.

Lithe in white sweaters  
Two runners lean against a fountain.

### XIII—GARDEN PARTY

I have assumed a conscious sociability,  
Pressed unresponding hands,  
Sipped tea,  
And chattered aimlessly  
All afternoon,

Achieving spontaneity  
Only  
When my eyes lit at the sight  
Of a scarlet spider  
Running over the bright  
Green mould of an apple-tree.

### XIV—CONCERT PARTY

That white hand poised  
Above the ivory keys  
Will soon descend to  
Shatter  
The equable surface of my reverie.

To what abortion  
Will the silence give birth?

*Noon of moist heat and the moan  
Of raping bees,  
And light like a sluice of molten gold  
On the satiate, petitioning leaves.*

*In yellow fields  
Mute agony of reapers.*

Does the metallic horizon  
Give release?

Well, higher,  
against the wider void the immaculate  
angels of lust  
Lean  
on the swanbreasts of heaven.

### XV—CHAMP DE MANŒUVRES

This hill indents my soul  
So that I sag  
Like a silver mist about its flanks.

I dwell  
In the golden setting of the sun,  
While on the plain  
The illumined mists invade  
Leaf-burdened trees. . . .



And then  
The silent tides of melting light  
Assail the hill, imbue  
My errant soul.

The empty body broods  
One with the inanimate rocks. . . .

The last red rays are fierce and irritant.  
Then wakes my body on the lonely hill,  
Gathering to its shell my startled soul.

#### XVI—MOVEMENT OF TROOPS

We entrain in open trucks  
And soon glide away  
from the plains of Artois.

With a wake of white smoke  
We plunge  
Down dark avenues of silent trees.

A watcher sees  
Our red light gleam  
Occasionally.

#### XVII—WINTER GRIEF

Life so brief . . .  
Yet I am old  
with an era of grief.

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Finis