

Two Poems

David Stanford Burr

War at Home

Why can't my life be better—why just me,
woman of woman born, mere second class
or less? Distaff chores are not a full life:
wife, mother, domestic drudge, then off he
is sent for a shilling a day, perhaps
to death, while I'm here with the kids, needing
to find care for them, while working ten hours
a day in the munitions factory,
fortnight on then fortnight off in his stead,
me earning less than him. He sends his pay
back to us—where'd he spend it anyway?
Gambling, booze, Armentières trollops when
behind the lines while waiting to go up,
with nary a thought of us here fighting
on the home front in this new total war.

And then there is my yellow skin and hair,
a regular "Canary Girl" I am,
mixing by hand TNT into the shells.
Me scraping by, our two sons muddling through,
my sister watching them when I am working,
with her own three small ones and husband killed
on that first bloody day of the Somme.
I hope there's no such war in their future,
in twenty years the lads will have to go,
assuming this Great War comes to an end....

Food has become so dear with the U-boats
sinking so many Merchant Marine ships,
long queues for butcher, baker and grocer
and the prices soaring. Early this year
the entire potato crop failed. Soon,
they say, with less to eat, food rationing
will begin. Well, they also say that things
have to get worse before they get better....

Shell Shocked

*Paralysis, rather than destruction, is the true aim in war,
and the most far-reaching in its effects.*

—Captain B. H. Liddell Hart

They say soldiers like me have gone right off
our heads, off the rails, beyond the pale,
driven to wit's end, off the deep end, round
the bend, dotty, unhinged, unbalanced, not
right in the mind, end of our tethers.

We're called the Great War service lunatics,
hopeless cases, imbeciles, barking loonies,
stark staring mad, wankers and daft buggers,
nutty as a fruitcake ex-servicemen.

We are shell shockers, shakers, weepers, twitchers,
tremblers, stammerers, total wrecks, idiots,
mental defectives, maniacs, barmy pariahs,
deranged, broken half-men, dissociated, war worn,
nerve-shattered specimens of men with spastic
and dragging gait, mad saluters and laughers,
hysterically mute, blind and or deaf.

Traditional Army vernacular
condemned us as fakers, malingerers
swingers of lead, loafers, skivers, scoffers,
shirkers, dirty sneaks, feigners, simulators,
congenital weaklings, sham lunatics, lily livers,
degenerate constitutions, shell-shy, sorely lacking
in patriotic pluck, cowards, cravens, lowly
deserters deserving to be shot by firing party.

And some of us were shot, denied defence
grounds of shell shock at courts martial, often
short affairs, even if previously
hospitalized for windy nerves. Hundreds
would be summarily fated. We thought
the war would be our very making, while
others chose suicide as last resort
to end the suffering of their suffering.

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The alienists add to the spectrum
of psychological trauma assessments:
Not Yet Diagnosed Mental to a gamut
revised and re-revised: neurasthenic,
psychotic, neurotic, hysteric,

melancholic, depressive suffering
confusional, delusional, moral
insanity with combat neuroses
and manic-depressive psychoses—we are
DP (Dementia Praecox), GPI
(General Paralysis of the Insane).

* * *

How did I come to such a pretty pass?

In the front-line for days on end and cut
up by Jerry's bombardments we kept down
in the trench, hanging on for relief. Then
blown up by shell-bursts—*crumped* and concussed—
I, *hors de combat*, was found jibbering when
dug out from under exploded earth
by stretcher-bearers, they carried me, my
broken arm and the shrapnel in my legs
to regimental aid post, borne further
to advanced dressing station, where my arm
was splinted and legs tourniqueted, bandaged,
then motored to a field ambulance
where shrapnel was removed and the wounds sewn
up and dressed, then triaged and sent on to

casualty clearing station for transport
by ambulance train to the coast to board
a hospital ship at Calais then back
to Dover and into a mental ward.

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In time my bodily injuries healed
but partial paralysis due to mental
trauma brought on by shell shock required "rest,"
"quiet," "peace," "calm" and "time" for any mending.

* * *

Many nights I was haunted by the "Horrors,"
nightmares from the trenches, bolt up in bed
screaming, shaking, soaked in cold sweat and urine.
My mind ravaged by the dead and dying,
I became a living automaton.
My tremors were aftershocks from the big guns'
detonating shells, deafening banshees,
the quaking earth a hell-hole on earth turned
over and over—almost buried me for good.
I avoided the strait jacket, padded
cell, the scourge of indolent orderlies.

Shell shock was my exit ticket from war
and those Flanders trenches, my Blighty wound.
I was transferred to Colney Hatch Asylum,
a "special place"—we named our booby hatch
"Sunken Gardens"—to warehouse mental
inmates in crowded wards, freakish sideshows
kept from public view, where for many, known
as "career lunatics," the only hope
to be at large, except for on-grounds paroles,
was a one-way ticket to that last trench,
which we nicknamed the "Long Grave Asylum."

Diet, baths, hypnosis—for tough cases,
faradic and galvanic current therapy,
not welcome treatment. The "talking cure" helped
me the most—and not being stigmatized
with the label "Certified," dishonour
to me and my family would have preyed
on me and I would have abandoned hope.

We were mad soldiers sentenced to madhouse,
asylumdom by officialdom's fiat.
I was an infantry captain, public school,
good family and was classified with
"generalised anxiety syndrome"

while a working-class private with my same
symptoms rated "hysterical neuroses."
Officers were segregated from other
ranks and as I had regained some good cheer—
but not my mind—I was sent to the country
which quietened down my twitchy nerves as
did our occupational therapy
of rug making. We were respectable
nerve cases, wearing a suit and tie while
weaving away—glad we were not assigned
to the poultry farm or to boot repair.

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I am told I am progressing well, soon
to be granted an appeal hearing.
I am holding out hope I will regain
society by being deemed "recovered"—
a Bedlamite who went through and came out....

* * *

The Hun is on the run, so this war can
not go on much longer and I want out
to cheer in our victory and get back

to my wife and daughter. It is borne in
on me I am a dead man resurrected.
I have won through and will make a go of it
on civvy street. I chuckle a bit now,
reminding myself that to expect such
is not a delusion of grandeur brought
on by hallucinations, not a flight
of fancy. I am sane as I once was.

David Stanford Burr authored *Ledger Domain* (poems) and *The Poet's Notebook: Inspiration, Techniques, and Advice on Craft*. His poems have appeared in dozens of periodicals such as *Poetry*, *Barrow Street*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*, and in 3 anthologies. David taught at New York University as an adjunct associate professor, leading poetry workshops, for 25 years; was a managing editor at Macmillan Publishers for 36 years; and has edited 297 poetry books, including the last 17 *Best American Poetry* series annuals. His Great War poems are seeking a home between covers. See his Poets & Writers profile: https://www.pw.org/directory/writers/david_stanford_burr.