

MARCIA PHILLIPS MCGOWAN

“Have I No Sanctuary to Defend?” The Great War Sonnets of Mary Borden

Feminist scholars have long argued for the inclusion of women writers in the Great War literary canon. Mary Borden’s stories from *The Forbidden Zone*, recently reissued in London by Hesperus Press, reveal her close proximity to the frontlines in a hospital unit that she founded and in which she cared for the wounded. These modernist stories, in which Borden graphically describes the wounds of war, have in themselves earned her the right to be included in the revisionist Great War canon. Moreover, the stories in *The Forbidden Zone*, when it was initially published in 1929, were followed by an epilogue of five free verse poems in which, as Nosheen Khan notes in *Women’s Poetry of the First World War*, the “extent of realistic detail” sets them “beside the works of any of the trench poets” (123).

In the papers of Borden’s husband Major-General Sir Edward Spears in the Churchill Archives at Cambridge University, there is a cache of previously unpublished, mostly holograph, sonnets written by Borden to Spears during their wartime love affair. These sonnets, in which love and war are inextricably intertwined, are highly passionate representations of the existential anguish of a speaker trying to embrace love and sex as an anodyne to pain and death. Although the poems are deeply personal, they offer insight into the psychological conflicts of many women at the front who experienced difficulty reconciling the pleasures of love and sex with the duties and dangers of war. It is at the intersection of physical

love and physical trauma that Borden's sonnets are positioned. On the basis of these unpublished sonnets, which are reproduced below, I believe that Borden's poems should at last be recognized as worthy of standing beside the canonical Great War poetry of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Rupert Brooke.

In order to appreciate Borden's sonnets fully, it is necessary to construct a biographical and critical context for them. At the outbreak of the war in 1914, American heiress Mary Borden was an amateur painter and Vassar educated novelist (under the pseudonym Bridget McLagan) who expatriated to England when she married George Douglas Turner, a missionary who had served in India. Borden's immense wealth and belief in women's equality allowed her indulgence in a Bohemian life style, in which she associated with such writers as Ford Madox Ford, Violet Hunt, Bernard Shaw, and with Wyndham Lewis, whose mistress and patron she eventually became.¹ Her friend Juliette Huxley noted that she was a "brilliant hostess" (qtd. in Meyers 72). During the period before the war, Borden, who had been a suffragette, felt trapped in a dull marriage and wanted to live as an artist, but "Wyndham Lewis had warned her that her social position would make this difficult to achieve" (Egremont 62). It was Borden's passionate devotion to causes in which she believed that led to her founding, funding, administering and nursing in a hospital close to the line of fire, in the area she called a "'Forbidden Zone' because the strip of land immediately behind the zone of fire where I was stationed went by that name in the French Army" (FZ Preface).² It is for the collection of stories in *The Forbidden Zone* that Borden is best known.

However, in 1929 when Borden initially published *The Forbidden Zone*, the stories were followed by an epilogue of five free verse poems, and it is on the basis of these poems, including the oft-quoted "Song of the Mud," that Nosheen Khan asserts that Borden "emerges as the most impressive female poet of the battlefield among those who wrote out of direct experience of it" (123). Janet Montefiore also argues on the basis of these poems that Borden is "the only woman poet[...] to write directly of the surrealist landscape of the Western front. . ." (61). It is truly unfortunate that these poems—"The Hill," "The Song of the Mud," "Where is Jehovah?" "The Virgin of Albert," and "Unidentified," which form the poetic epilogue to *The Forbidden Zone*, have been eliminated in the recent reissue of this collection by Hesperus Press (2008), as has Borden's brilliant and gripping Preface, in which she calls her modernist stories and poems "fragments of a great confusion" and accuses herself of having "blurred the base reality of facts and softened the reality in spite of myself".³ Few who have read Borden's experimental stories and poems can agree with this self-assessment, for the graphic, raw nature of the images,

the close identification with the injured *poilus*, and the edgy, deadened tone of both the stories and poems prevented them from being published without censorship⁴ until 1929—the year in which *Goodbye to All That*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Journey's End* and *Testament of Youth* all appeared.

Although it is my intention in this paper to address Mary Borden's unpublished sonnets, I feel it necessary to speak to an element in the stories that informs my reading of these poems; in particular, the nurse-narrator's speaking in "Blind" of being in a "dream-hell" (164) wherein the nurses, on a "second battlefield" (155) are "doing the fighting now, with their real enemies" (155)—pain, dismemberment, death. In order to fight this battle (as in "Moonlight"), the nurses' hearts have been numbed, their bodies de-gendered: "She [the nurse] is no longer a woman. She is dead already, just as I am—really dead, past resurrection. Her heart is dead. She killed it" (63). Laurie Kaplan alludes to the "un-manned nature of soldier an un-(wo) manned nature of the nurse" (36) in this story and contends that Borden's stories, in general, illustrate "the truth: war de-sexes men and women, and the machines of war truncate, dismember, and atomize" (36). Because Borden's frontline stories reflect the realities of war from a woman's point of view, paradoxically denying gender in the process, she is currently treated by critics as an accurate literary purveyor of the effects of war trauma on women at the frontlines.

Yet, ironically, there is an alternate, autobiographical persona to the traumatized, depersonalized, de-gendered nurse-narrator in *The Forbidden Zone* which is depicted in the sonnets that Borden wrote to her lover Major-General Edward Spears during the time of their affair in 1917-18—a liaison that led eventually to a contentious divorce from George Douglas Turner and to marriage with Spears. These sonnets, all but two of them in holograph form, are, as previously mentioned, in the Spears papers in the Churchill Archives at Cambridge University.⁵ And though they are sonnets in which love and war co-exist uneasily, it is hard to imagine that the creator of the depersonalized, deadened, and de-gendered voice in the stories could also have written in the frankly sexual, gendered voice that propels the sonnets.

However, the sonnets themselves are not more "feminized" than Borden's modernist prose or war poems, nor do they attempt to create within the sonnet tradition an *écriture féminine*. Although a woman's sexual pleasure, so often absent from male discourse, is bravely (and "unwomanly" according to the gender norms of the Great War era) incorporated in the sonnets, it is a temporary and troubled response to the darkness and death of war. There is no new language in which to express sexuality in and of itself. In fact, the poems are no less reliant on what Laurie

Kaplan calls the “sense-laden imagery” (38) of the stories and war poems. If in *The Forbidden Zone* Borden’s nurse-narrator “asks existential questions about meaning and futility” (Kaplan 41) in the midst of dealing with the horrific wounds and numberless casualties of the Great War, the sonnets present a single speaker trying to embrace love and sex as their anodyne. There is no “we” voice in the sonnets, as there is in the stories. Yet the reader cannot help speculating that the voice in the sonnets is representative of that of many young women who were desperate to preserve their relationships with the men in the trenches despite the odds that favored their dying at the front.

When Mary Borden Turner and Edward Spears first met at her hospital unit at Bray-Sûr-Somme on 25 October 1916, he was “‘very astonished’ to find women so near the front” (qtd. by Egremont 50). She had opened the door of a room that “reeked of gangrene” in a “bloodstained apron” (Egremont 59). Spears was covered in mud and accompanied by an Alsatian dog. Understandably, each made a great impression on the other. It is clear from their correspondence that by April 1917 Borden and Spears were meeting often and that by May they had become lovers. Her love letters and the poems they began exchanging, though undated, are a testament to the exhilaration, risk and pain of love in the face of iconoclasm. The voice of Borden’s sonnets, when contrasted with the depersonalized voices in the stories of *The Forbidden Zone*, suggests that women writers “were like men in employing all the different modes of response at the time—from Fussell’s ‘Great War rhetoric’ to modernist irony” (Goldman 77). What Claire M. Tylee has called “the protective withdrawal of automatism” (197) and Santanu Das terms “the absolute crushing of female subjectivity” (193) necessary to the war nurse is completely absent in the sonnets. Instead, what we witness in the poems, as well as in the stories, is what Angela K. Smith describes as “the power to write and to create *through* the war, even if [women’s] status within it is illusory” (92). Jane Marcus has noted of female nurses and ambulance drivers, who, like Borden, had been involved in the women’s movement in England which was practically destroyed by the war, that they “wrote the body of war, the wounded soldier’s body and their own newly sexualized (only to be numbed) bodies” (128). This “newly sexualized” body is clearly present in the sonnets.

Santanu Das’s extraordinary study *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* provides an important context in which to consider Borden’s passionate and highly intimate sonnets. Das explains through implication why Edward Spears was surprised to see Borden’s hospital so close to the front lines. As Das points out, “A look at the names listed under just the first two letters of the alphabet in

the Roll of Honour of British Nurses gives on some idea of the considerable death toll among the female nursing community” (183). Spears’ chivalric impulse (he was called Beaucaire by his men and nicknamed B. by Borden) must have signaled him that she and the other V. A. D.s were voluntarily endangering their lives. His first glimpse of Borden, described above, revealed that she worked in horrific conditions and could be (and was inevitably) exposed to shelling as well as to the infections transmitted by the wounded *poilus*.

Thus, as previously mentioned, the sonnets are positioned at the intersection of danger and physical love. There is some evidence in the Spears archive that Borden intended to publish at least two of the sonnets—the first two that I shall include below. There is a typescript title page, “Sonnets to a Soldier and a Song by Mary Borden (Bridget McLagan),” followed by the sonnet which begins “The patients wounded in their narrow beds . . . , which is numbered II.⁶ The sonnet beginning “Because we know. . .” is numbered III. The fact that there is no number I and that no further sonnets follow number III may indicate that Borden was undecided about how to sequence these sonnets, or that she ultimately thought them too intimate to publish, or that after the war she became so involved in writing novels that she put them aside, meaning to return to them at a later date—or that Spears did not want them published. It is also possible that, although Spears’ papers are meticulously arranged, further fragile typescripts may have gotten misplaced or lost during the war or after. All of this is, of course, pure speculation. A more literary and feminist rationale applied to women’s poetry of the Great War in general is offered by Anthea Todd in *Women’s Writing in English: Britain 1900-1945*. Todd explains that women poets at the time had “particular difficulties [. . .] in positioning themselves within the poetic culture” and that “It is not possible to discuss them in terms of groups or movements, but as a list of individuals modestly cultivating what riches were available within the poetic tradition” (79-80). The sonnet form would certainly have occurred to a woman educated in the early twentieth century at Vassar College as a rich vehicle for expressing love and longing.

The two sonnets that were numbered by Borden are followed by the songs “Glad Knight I and II”—the result of a pact between Borden and Spears to write poems to and for each other. None of Borden’s letters or sonnets is dated, and this presents a dilemma for the scholar attempting to trace their sequence. It is evident that some of these poems were written in response to poems by Spears, though there are fewer poems by him in the Churchill Archives. In a hand-written letter to Spears obviously penned early in their relationship, Borden states, “It is a long time since anyone drew poetry out of me. It’s partly the war—but mostly you”⁷ This statement

directly accounts for the blended subjects of love and war in the sonnets. In another letter Borden declares,

I suppose the 'font' of ambition is the desire not to be forgotten—I would like to right [*sic*] poems for you that will make you the subject of thought and dreams, years after we are gone—Abellard and Eloise [*sic*] have never been forgotten—Dante's Beatrice is still alive—Why not my lover, who will be remembered for his services to his country, why should he not be known too, because of me?

This statement indicates clear intent to publish, magnifying the mystery about why this was not done. Lest we think it an hubristic declaration, it should be understood that the correspondence between Spears and Borden conveys an understanding between them that they would each record their own unfiltered perceptions of the war.⁸

The letters between Borden and Spears are full both of commentary on each others' written work and sexual innuendo, and they provide an important context for the sonnets. Letters from Spears to Borden refer to her as his wife long before they are married, and Borden addresses him as "my husband whom I adore" and tells him that in his absence, "My bed is a lonely, chilly place—It is not amusing getting undressed." Ever conscious of the war, she says, "[If] I should never see you again I would be glad of what we've had. I could die quietly." During this period Borden was ill and miscarried, though both of them desperately wanted a child for the relationship, in Borden's words, to "be complete." Indeed, Borden was sick and exhausted, though heroically carrying on her duties at the hospital as well as nursing this passionate love affair, during much of this correspondence of 1917-18. She was also extremely anxious about her husband George Douglas Turner and their three children and about Spears' long absences from her. The letters mostly concern Borden's love for Spears and their relationship, unlike Spears' letters, which speak of love but also chronicle his military life outside the relationship. During Borden's own surgery in Paris, her husband—to her consternation—was sent for, and she wrote to Spears bitterly: "It is almost more than I can bear—not having you with me & not having the right to command your presence—our not having the right to be together." Devastated at Spears' not coming, she feels, even in the hospital, "waves of loneliness ... gusts of longing—winds of desire." Astonishingly, during this time (fall 1917) she has written a play to be produced in London, though it is "a world that no longer interests me." She has also revealed to Douglas Turner

her intent to divorce him, and she writes to Spears, “I have done it because before God, I was born to be yours and you mine—and this is the only way to be true... I destroy one life in order to create another—our life B. We must make it fine.” Clearly Borden was not like the “unrebellious” women of the period from the 1890s to the 1920s who, as Nicola Beauman notes, “accepted the convention that they did not feel sexual desire, must not assert themselves, must not think of any occupation except living at home or vanishing into matrimony” (44). Extroverted and proactive in her artistic endeavors, her military service, and her love affair with Spears, Mary Borden recorded her rebellion against these cultural stereotypes in her letters and her poetry.

Before presenting Borden’s extraordinary sonnets in their entirety, it is important to note that the sonnet form was also utilized by the more celebrated and indisputably canonical male Great War poets. Rupert Brooke’s patriotic sonnets were enormously popular during the war and are still quoted widely in England. Even after satirical poet and war hero Siegfried Sassoon’s confinement to Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh for shell shock because of his protest against the war,⁹ he continued to utilize the sonnet to convey irony in such poems as “Banishment” and “Remorse.” Wilfred Owen had also utilized the sonnet form before meeting Sassoon at Craiglockhart, and he continued to use it afterwards to great effect in “Anthem for a Doomed Youth.” Remnant of Victorian and Georgian romantic convention though the sonnet may have been, the war poets nonetheless employed it to convey their conflicted sentiments. Borden was no exception.

As the holograph manuscripts offer no clues to the order in which Borden might have placed the sonnets had she published them, I have taken the liberty of positioning them initially according to the order in which Borden placed the two which exist in the typescript format referred to above, and secondly, according to image, theme and tone.¹⁰ The images in the first poem move, as in convention, from darkness towards light— from the “burning eyes’ and “darkness” in the hospital ward toward the constantly reflected light of love on the nurse’s face:

The patient wounded in their narrow beds
Welcome me and smile as I go by
Down the long wooden buildings where they lie,
Wan weary rows of helpless haggard heads
Mysterious burning eyes that seem to gaze
From a great distance, gaze but do not know
Why they are glad to see me come and go.

Sometimes with feeble hands as in a daze
They beckon me, poor things¹¹ that vaguely grope
Out of great darkness toward a distant light,
And from the unknown woman dressed in white
Seem in some strange way to gather hope.
They do not know that in this shadowed place
It is your light they see upon my face.

As in the story “Blind” in *The Forbidden Zone*, the patients are dehumanized through synecdoche—“helpless haggard heads,” rather than individuals. The metonymous “woman dressed in white” alike loses her identity; she is “unknown” to the very people she is caring for, depersonalized to everyone but the beloved to whom the poem is addressed, offering at least a modicum of hope.

In contrast to the poem above, the structure of the sonnet numbered III in the typescript seemingly reverses—the backdrop of war offering little hope for ultimate light. The poem has, understandably, a *carpe diem* theme, alternating fleeting images of precious time against the inevitability of early death:

Because we know that there will never be
Any more time when this our time is done;
Because we know there is for you and me
No other place under another sun
And that our day is bounded by a night
Impenetrably dark, boundlessly deep;
Let this our fearful day be full of light
Let this our day be sweet.
Let us be lovers for our little time
More glad than lovers ever were before
And let us fashion the sublime
Within the ghostly chasm of the war;
Standing together in the sounding gloom
At peace before our undisputed doom.

The movement of the poem thus reverses, as the images flow from the visual “day full of light” toward the auditory “sounding gloom.” Paradoxically, although the speaker acknowledges “undisputed doom,” she is at peace because of the presence

of her lover. There are few hints in the typescripts of the existential loneliness that the speaker will allude to in the holograph sonnets.

As previously mentioned, the two typescript poems above are the only sonnets we can be sure that Borden meant to publish. The holograph poems, however, are just as meticulously crafted—the images just as striking, the tone and theme just as dramatic. In addition, the repetition of words and phrases appears more often than in the typescripts, and caesura is used to greater effect. The alliterative sounds of the words are just as carefully attended to in the holograph sonnets as in the typescripts.

The first holograph sonnet reproduced below echoes, along with the passion in both of the typescript sonnets, the sense of limited time and personal desperation evident in the sonnet reproduced directly above.

See how the withered leaves lie shivering
Along the gutters of the autumn street
They are the souls of women; quivering
Shrivelled souls of women who once were sweet
To the desiring lips of hungry men.
Now they adorn the road where pleasure rides
Poor withered things—Yes, kiss me once again
Who knows what bitterness the future hides?
Kiss me until you've kissed my mouth away
Wear out my flesh with your enamoured hands
Drink up my heartbeats, one by one and say
That I have satisfied your fierce demands—
Ah look, the frightened leaves are fluttering
Before the wind, the wind that's muttering.

For the speaker in this sonnet, there is no certainty in a world gone mad with slaughter. She sees that the women who “once were sweet” are now “quivering / Shrivelled souls.” They are desexualized and de-gendered, as in the story “Moonlight,” lingering ghost-like in the surreal landscape of war. The gendered speaker, on the other hand, clings to her sexuality and yearns for escape. The dramatic wish for annihilation through sex exists in the context of fear of the “bitterness the future hides.” The beloved is equated to a predator to whose demands she wishes to adhere, as if doing so can keep her own soul from becoming “shrivelled” like the souls of those other women who surround and haunt her. The increased use of caesura

seems to reflect the psychic distress and fragmented reality of a speaker torn between duty and love. This sonnet is brave for its time in its clearly sexual imagery, but is disturbingly masochistic as well.

In the images of the following sonnet, the speaker's constant fear of becoming a "withered," walking figure of death is again strikingly conveyed:

No, no! There is some sinister mistake.
You cannot love me now. I am no more
A thing to touch, a pleasant thing to take
Into one's arms. How can a man adore
A woman with black blood upon her face,
A cap of horror on her pallid head,
Mirrors of madness in the sunken place
Of eyes; hands dripping with the slimy dead?
Go. Cover close your proud untainted brow.
Go quickly. Leave me to the hungry lust
Of monstrous pain. I am his mistress now.
These are the frantic beds of his delight—
Here I succumb to him, anew, each night.

The imagery in this sonnet is highly reminiscent of that in the story "Moonlight," in which Pain, personified as female, is the "monster bedfellow" (*FZ* 65), the mistress of all those wounded men who call to nurses constantly: "In the dark, in the dark she [Pain] takes them; she takes them to herself and keeps them until Death comes, the gentle Angel" (*FZ* 67). In this sonnet, however, pain is personified as a male figure to whom Borden must succumb, though she might wish for a different, consensual annihilation, as in the previous poem. The dehumanized speaker in this sonnet is not even "a thing to touch" because her eyes mirror madness and her hands drip with gore. More scholarly work needs to be done on the effect of trauma on Great War nurses and women in battle situations generally. Post-traumatic stress is only beginning now to be given the care and attention it deserves. During the Great War, it unjustifiably marked men as cowards, but it was completely ignored in women, whom it clearly marked as well. Borden's sonnets, as well as her stories, overtly demonstrate the emotional effects of trauma during war.

The previously unpublished sonnets also reflect the often referred to "death of God" which marked many poems of the modernist period. Borden, who was raised by a deeply religious evangelical mother, and whose first marriage was to

a missionary, questions all she has previously believed in because of the trench line horrors she has witnessed in the following sonnet:

Is the world small because there is no God?
Is the adventure dull, because I must dispense
With vanity's astonishing¹² recompense
My immortality? Am I a clod
Of stupid flesh, because I know despair?
Does duty make less terrible demands
Does pity hold out less imploring hands,
Have I less reason and less right to dare
To follow truth? Why fail before the end?
Does love no longer live with mystery;
Passions no longer plead for poetry;
Have I no sanctuary to defend?
This torch of mine, shall I not hand it on?
Will it not burn, long after I am gone?

Here, a desperate Borden questions whether trauma and despair have destroyed all of her pre-war beliefs. Unlike the previous sonnets, this is not a poem directed to her beloved but is a personal, existential statement of doubt. If the world has shrunk to a battlefield, if there is no hope of immortality, can she dare to pursue the truth she once was certain she could find? Can there be mystery in love, passion in poetry? Will the torch of her art burn out for lack of "sanctuary" or anyone to whom to pass it on? These rhetorical questions are posed by a woman in crisis. They are similarly addressed by the trench poets, though less commonly approached in poetic form by the majority of women poets of the Great War period. Rhetorical questions, often used in Borden's stories and poetry, are particularly effective in this caesura- and angst-ridden sonnet.

All of Borden's sonnets are extraordinary, not solely for their skilled use of rhetorical tropes and imagery, but for their attempt to wrest some sort of personal salvation out of despair. Borden, however, is no less fearful for her soldier-lover than for herself, as she indicates in the following sonnet, the only one which she titled:

Sonnet—To a Soldier—

If you this very night should ride to death

Straight from the piteous passion of my arms;
If you still breathing in the sobbing breath
Of my desire, still faint with my alarms
Should come upon the vast immensity
Of nothingness, my last poor trembling kiss
Upon your lips, should face eternity
And gaze full conscious into the abyss;
You would not falter at the last my friend
Nor put to shame your clear courageous mind
Under the menace of the desolate end;
But with one lighted look for me, behind,
You'd take the leap, with a last challenge, cry
That there is no beyond, and thus superbly, die—

Again, while the sensuality of this sonnet immediately grabs the reader's attention, it is the doubt—both the speaker's and her lover's—of any heaven beyond that which momentarily lies in the lovers' arms that dominates the poem. The speaker clearly has no doubt about her lover's courage to face death, but implicit in the sonnet is her fear ("alarms") that beyond his death there is "nothingness" for both of them. This poem, ironically, is both hortatory and nihilistic. Despite the fact that the lover will die "superbly" while attempting to look for light *behind* him [my emphasis], this sonnet, like many of Borden's sonnets, ultimately ends in death and darkness.

The poet's admiration for her warrior-lover's courage—and her fear of the loneliness it may ultimately lead to—are also evident in the next sonnet.

Since I can never face the world with you,
Conquer the world alone! Avenge the wrong
That fate has done the one who would belong
To your ambitions, share what you will do
In every field of fine activity.
Meet the world proudly, that I may be proud,
Put your will upon the anarch crowd;
Direct the powers of your destiny.
Make for the highest lights, go far. Go far.
Leave me behind and in my loneliness
Send me the echoes of superb success,

Ride out alone after your rising star.
Do this for me; you whom I shall adore
When you've forgotten why—Do this and more.

The first line of this sonnet indicates that it may have been written during the period before Borden had decided to reveal her love affair with Spears to her husband George Douglas Turner. Or it may have been penned during the period of illness and miscarriage of her first child with Spears, when she feared the possibility of her own death. Either way, there is a tone of self-pity, which is atypical of Borden's Great War writing. Again, there is a hortatory message for Spears, but the sub-text is Borden's own fear that she will be left alone. The word "loneliness," which appears repeatedly in the sonnets, is emblematic of this fear which Borden was unable to display in the wards but felt free to reveal to her lover.

The constant use of caesura in all of these sonnets seems to echo the forced interruption of thought and feeling that must have been a part of Borden's experience both as nurse-administrator and lover in the years 1917-18. Even when, accompanied by her lover, she has taken a break from her duties and is able to enjoy a day in the French countryside away from the lines of battle, she is haunted by a constant sense of menace. The following sonnet presents a bucolic scene in which the speaker tries hard to deny the background of pain and death from which she has temporarily escaped—but once again fails to do so.

Ah the dear world, it was so sweet today,
The windy fields so fresh, the sky so blue,
The fragrant blushing clover beds were gay
With butterflies and where the hawthorn grew
Down by the dimpled stream, I heard the sound
Of laughing elves. How could I be afraid
Lying with you on that enchanted ground?
I saw no horror lurking in the shade
Of the pale woods. No guilty shiver ran
Among the silver birch trees of that place.
There was no menace in the perfect spanse
Of the clear sky. The flowers kissed my face.
But look—beyond the sunsets [*sic*] dying light
Desaster [*sic*] walks the terrace of the night.

The first six lines—romantic, pastoral, and reminiscent of Georgian poetry before the war—are interrupted, again through caesura, by allusion to the fear that constantly haunts the speaker. Borden's need to banish and deny that fear, however temporarily, informs lines six through twelve. The brief period of "lying with" her lover and the bucolic fantasy that she tries to build with him collapses in the final couplet, where once again, light is extinguished by the personified "Disaster" that awaits the lovers upon their return to their wartime duties.

The final sonnet (in the sense that I have chosen to place it last) is the only one which is dated by day and month (16 April) and signed with Borden's initial, *M*. It is written on hospital stationary, as is the previous sonnet, and returns to the theme of existential loneliness, expressed herein as "solitude." There is also a strong sense of helplessness, which certainly exists in the other sonnets as well, but is magnified in this one.

High on the dreadful mount of solitude
Upon the eve of the stupendous day,
High where the agonies of heaven brood
Above the vast invisible array
Of spellbound armies crouching in the dark,
Watching the licking lurid light that runs,
Along the wounded earth, I stand and hark
To the gigantic prelude of the guns.
Somewhere out in the breathless throbbing night
Under the palpitating stars, you wait
The awful dawning of this pallid light
That will decide a panting nation's fate.
And you will go to death or victory
While I attend upon our destiny.

The speaker is in a passive position, watching and waiting. This image and that of the "spellbound armies crouching in the dark" evoke similar images in the poems published at the end of *The Forbidden Zone*. In the prose-poem "The Hill," for instance, the speaker is once again positioned on the top of a hill: "It was evening. The long valley was bathed in blue shadow and through the shadow, as if swimming, I saw the iron armies moving" (FZ 185). But these "monstrous" regiments appear as "Obscene crabs, armoured toads, big as houses" (186). Probably because of the modernist impulses of the free form prose poem and restrictions

of the lyric, metrical, and structural form of the sonnet, Borden allowed herself wider latitude for grotesquerie and criticism of the war in the more experimental war poems. Though similar imagery can be found in the sonnets, we see a different Mary Borden through them—a woman whose love for a soldier has allowed her to let loose her lyricism to celebrate her love and her lover, while all the while expressing her fear that the small world they have created together will be engulfed in a “panting nation’s fate” and that the “sanctuary” she seeks for them will not be found.

I should like, finally, to note that there is another unpublished typescript of a free verse poem entitled “Escape” in the Borden papers in the Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University which shows, by contrast, the more conventional constraints she was under in using the sonnet form. In this poem (which I will not quote in its entirety), seeking escape as in the sonnets, the speaker urges her lover to come away with her, to be happy “in spite of the war.” In contrast to Borden’s hortatory message to her lover in the sonnets to “Conquer the world,” in “Escape” she urges, “Leave your soldiers in the trenches,” for “After all, there’s just a row of tired men on their side, / The same as ours—”¹³. She criticizes the mindlessness of the war strategy:

It’s merely stupid if you think of it that way,
Two rows of men in deep ditches full of mud,
Where’s the glory?
Where’s the sense?

She coaxes her lover to come to her, continuing, as in the sonnets, with a series of questions:

Haven’t you had enough of mud and rain and cold?
Aren’t you weary of the wide unsheltered sky?
Aren’t you tired of the dead that lie about?
Doesn’t the fear of being afraid begin to pall?

However, the poem ends with the following stanza, whose *carpe diem* message is almost lost within the jolting imagery :

Let us be happy a little while—defy the war,
Say yes, Oh weary man—

Steal an hour away from France—
Where's the shame?
God won't care—
Leave your men and let them die in the mud—
Who will tell?
I so long to have you mine—
I would pay—
I would drink with my own lips all the blood that would stain you if
you came—

Borden's desperation for flight from the horrors of the "forbidden zone," so notable in the sonnets, is certainly evident in the questions and images of this poem. In contrast to the sonnets, however, the thematically entitled "Escape" has greater shock value not just because of its more experimental, eccentric form, but because the speaker asks her lover to desert his men and surrealistically presents a vampire image in the final line. Perhaps it was the shock factor that prevented her from publishing this poem. Nonetheless, whether one prefers the free verse poem "Escape" and those in the epilogue to *The Forbidden Zone*, or the formally constructed sonnets, it is clear that a desperate longing for flight from the horrors of trench warfare informs all of the unpublished poems addressed in this essay.

In Borden's *London Times* obituary on 3 December 1968, because so much of her poetry remained unpublished, she was referred to solely as a novelist and was compared to Edith Wharton in "likeness of circumstance" as well as in subject matter (55). Her novels were said to be "stamped by a certain conventionality of outlook" (55). Obviously, her eulogist was unacquainted with the Mary Borden who wrote the unconventional stories and poems in *The Forbidden Zone* or the sonnets that would lie undiscovered for years in archives. It is time for the reading public and the scholarly community to become acquainted with *that* Mary Borden.

In Great War literature, Borden occupies a liminal position. An American who became British, then helped the French and English in two world wars, she felt equally at ease with modernist prose and poetry, the romantic novel, drama, and the English sonnet. The reason for her abandonment of poetry after the Great War for the sake of prose was partly, no doubt, the loss of her fortune in the stock market crash of 1929, but it may also have been that the great subject of her poetry—the existential loneliness she felt during wartime conditions despite a passionate love affair—dissipated with the Armistice and with her eventual long marriage to Major General Sir Edward Spears. Borden's feminist sense of independence,

however, continued throughout the World War II, when she co-founded and served in the Hadfield-Spears multi-national mobile hospital unit.¹⁴ Like Wilfred Owen, Borden's great subject was war. Any revisionist look at the poetry of the Great War should include all of Borden's war poetry, as it was she who captured the conflict between love and duty more poignantly than any other female poet of the Great War.

Notes

1. For an account of this relationship, see Jeffrey Meyer, *The Enemy: A Biography of Wyndham Lewis*, pp. 72-74.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from *The Forbidden Zone* will be to the 1930 edition and will be cited parenthetically as *FZ*.
3. Borden had published other poems as well, under the pseudonym Bridget McLagan, in *English Review*. In the July 1916 edition, in a section entitled "War Vignettes," "Bombardment" and "Rousbrugge" appeared. In the August 1917 edition of *English Review*, under the name Mary Borden Turner, her poems "Where is Jehovah?," "Song of the Mud" and "The Hill," later included in the poetic epilogue to *The Forbidden Zone*, were published under the heading "At the Somme." In December 1917 "Unidentified" appeared, also under the name Mary Borden Turner. This poem was also included in the *The Forbidden Zone's* poetic epilogue. My thanks to the archivists at the National Library of Ireland for making these editions of *English Review* available to me.
4. *N. B.*: One of the *Forbidden Zone* manuscripts in the collection of the Gottlieb Archives of American Literature at the Mugar Library at Boston University, has clearly been read by censors, and many pages are stamped "censored." My thanks to the staff of the Gottlieb Archives for making these materials available to me.
5. I would like to thank the Churchill Archives for their assistance with this research and, especially Duff Hart-Davis, Mary Borden's grandson, who has graciously allowed me to quote from her work, both published and unpublished.
6. This typescript may be found in the Churchill Archives, Cambridge University in the box labeled SPRS 11/1/11.
7. All of the holograph letters and sonnets subsequently referred to are in boxes labeled 11/1/1 and 11/1/2 in the Churchill Archives.
8. This continued through World War II when Spears was sent to the Levant and each of them published a separate book concerning that experience, as well as Spears' assistance to Charles De Gaulle in his escape from France and Borden's service in the Hadfield-Spears multi-national hospital unit.
9. Sassoon's protest against the war was read in Parliament on 30 July, 1917. His friend Robert Graves argued for him to be assigned to Craiglockhart rather than being court-martialed and shot.

10. The holograph manuscripts, though not difficult to read, may reflect a few alterations in punctuation. The ink Borden used was thick, and she often utilized dashes which are nearly indistinguishable from periods. I have taken signals from those sonnets which exist both in holograph and typescript form in which there are no dashes, and from the letters, in which the dashes are more clearly delineated. Hence, my reproduction of the sonnets may be more conventionally punctuated than Borden's handwritten drafts could indicate them to be in the eyes of another reader.
11. The holograph version substitutes "prisoners' for things.
12. This word could also be "astounding," although "astonishing" seems the more likely choice.
13. The full typescript of "Escape" may be found in Box 1 in the Gottlieb Archives. My thanks to the Gottlieb Archival Research Center and to Duff Hart-Davis for permission to quote this poem.
14. *Journey Down a Blind Alley*, Borden's eloquent memoir of her service in the Hadfield-Spears Mobile Unit is, unfortunately, out of print.

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MARCIA PHILLIPS MCGOWAN is Distinguished Professor of English and Director of Women's Studies at Eastern Connecticut State University. She is co-editor, with Sandra Boschetto-Sandoval, of *Claribel Alegria and Central American Literature* and has published articles on Alegria, Mary Borden, Edith Wharton and Women's Studies pedagogy.