

Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy's tribute to the fallen of World War 1

LAST POST

*In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.*

If poetry could tell it backwards, true, begin  
that moment shrapnel scythed you to the stinking  
mud...  
but you get up, amazed, watch bleed bad blood  
run upwards from the slime into its wounds;  
see lines and lines of British boys rewind  
back to their trenches, kiss the photographs from home-  
mothers, sweethearts, sisters, younger brothers  
not entering the story now  
to die and die and die.  
Dulce- No- Decorum- No- Pro patria mori.  
You walk away.

You walk away; drop your gun (fixed bayonet)  
like all your mates do too-  
Harry, Tommy, Wilfred, Edward, Bert-  
and light a cigarette.  
There's coffee in the square,  
warm French bread  
and all those thousands dead  
are shaking dried mud from their hair  
and queuing up for home. Freshly alive,  
a lad plays Tipperary to the crowd, released  
from History; the glistening, healthy horses fit for  
heroes, kings.

You lean against a wall,  
your several million lives still possible  
and crammed with love, work, children, talent, English  
beer, good food.  
You see the poet tuck away his pocket-book and smile.  
If poetry could truly tell it backwards,  
then it would.

(July 2009)