

Tommy

You know, I never learned to shoot worth half a damn
but I could tote a bucket with the best.
The Flanders mud was firm to me beside Fermanagh glaur,
and in my hands those canvas buckets
rested light and easy as the feed for calves.

The dawn was clear that day, First of July.
That night we'd lain in No Man's Land
we dreamed the things of home:
the Twelfth, the cattle, and the turf,
the first hay to be mown.

We woke to screaming shells.
The bugle blew, we ran through where the wire had been cut
(The lads had done their part)
to where the sun was rising
and the shells still burst.

I got there first.
I crossed that crooked trench in one long stride
while Frank and Charlie, close behind, the bayonet men
dropped down to do their work –
“Cleaning the sheugh,” they said.

The shelling stopped a moment.
In the calm, a sparrow sang.
The Thrower (och, I never could recall his name –
Portora boy, and good at games, he had ‘the bowling knack’)
whispered, “Grenades!” – held up his hands.

So then I placed two there and ran ahead, counting to five,
fell flat to shelter from the blasts, thankful to be alive
While on the hill behind,
Beyond the fall of shell
The German guns replied.

Men fell, my friends
Black crows impaled upon a maze
Of barbs and mud.

Then, when the shaking stopped,
I rose, I heard a groan come from the the trench below
Cut short as Frank
Or Charlie
Did their work.

Again, I handed out the bombs
and ran above the trench,

and sheltered from the blast
and rose again.
Again.

Then? Then I ran too near, could see inside.
The men in terror there, who looked me in the eye,
said, "Kamerad!"
One lad, his ears stuck out
Just like young Duncan of the Glen.

The Thrower cried "Why have you stopped?
We have no time!
Grenades!"
And I?
I handed them.

They sent me home to work my farm.

Now nearly sixty years are gone, young lads
Who never knew of War except for what they read
In Hotspur or Commando
Still are wishing that they were
As I was then.

Yet, having heard of bombs
In beer kegs and in cars
Pour scorn on me,
Who carried in my time
Bombs by the bucket.

Aye, and still have the scars.

Jenny Brien