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Article:

Malone, M. (2016) 4 PhD thesis-related poems from Stand. *Stand*, 14 (2). pp. 75-78. ISSN 0038-9366

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DEAR REVISIONIST

Thank you for your neo-concern
that we grasp the full facts
of this complicated matter;
for sending out, once again,
the officer class to explain
the subtle difference between
Blackadder and the nation's history,
the one being truth the other comedy;
for pointing out our parents' mistake
in taking *Oh What A Lovely War!*
to be anything but a sixties musical
and not how it really was. Thank you
for assuming our poetry stops at Owen;
for sending out the privately-educated
to explain that confusion in the ranks
between your national story
and literature's false history,
as if, not royal families, but poetry
tips men into war graves.
Saxe-Coburg, be advised, your poppy
is not mine.

I'm grateful to you for letting me hear
Paxman attempt the phrase *wor canny bairns*.
And I do appreciate your engagement
with those events which legitimise
the contemporary state of affairs,
or, as you put it on a recent visit
to a sink school, *make pride cool again*.
I appreciate, as you say, the need
to understand the popular thinking
of the day; how those words you're trying
to re-claim meant something real
to my grandfather right up to that morning
the Liverpool Regiment came unstuck
at Hermies, on the road to Cambrai.
As if history can make some
long term sense of the losses
and every lesson to be learned
is, once more, yours.

SHOTS

Odd
how the angle of shot
eases you towards
an allegiance.

As if
your eye seeks
 beyond the frame
for the horizon
 and sees in it
an unattainable tomorrow;
the *Kraken* of old charts;
its own lid closing
 on *terra incognita*?

Black & white
 only increases affinity
for the rear view of crouching men
edging forward into partial middle distance;
some running, one falling forward,
always away from you.

Before me
their various exits:
stage left, Tommy Atkins
to his Great War,
 stage right
 Frontschwein
to *Der Erste Krieg*
 whilst upstage
Le poilou drops face down
into myth-embracing Verdun mud.

And none of them can look you in the eye.

THE TURNIP WINTER

When nostalgia is a healthy tayter,
you know you're in for a hard winter.

So, the war bread squats mud-frog before us,
the clay of stars grown cold on prayer

refusing its miracle of change. Soon
we open up our own front on farmsteads

and orchards, each victory celebrated
in apples, *brötchen* or the medal of an egg,

the shrapnel of lost husbands briefly gone
in a ruckus of fed children. Field-grey ghosts

say grace at our table and turnip,
turnip, turnip, heavy as bad news,

becomes this gall weevil grief that gnaws
through the wire of our days. Swede soup

for breakfast, swede chops for lunch, swede
cake for dinner. Dried turnips ground for drink

so *ersatz* we forget what it's meant to be
to a life that's likewise approximate.

One day I shall steal home enough bacon
in my bloomers to be again their mother.

One day, the blockade will lift and gobbets
of you will go towards a counterfeit father.

NOTE: *The harsh winter of 1916-1917, known in Germany as "the Turnip Winter" ("Steckrübenwinter"), was one of extreme food shortages, social unrest and civilian suffering.*

MR. WILLETT'S SUMMERTIME

An Act to provide for the Time in Great Britain and Ireland being in advance of Greenwich and Dublin mean time respectively in the summer months. Date of Royal Assent: 17th May 1916.

Where do you begin with time? There's just so much
to go on, with its indefinable something of a lover

and what you most adore, sharing the bed
but somehow always beyond your certain touch.

You rise early, saddle a horse and ride out to Petts Wood.
The morning, incandescent with summer, is running over

itself to get at it and it and it and daylight is everywhere
wasted upon the sleepers beyond drawn down blinds.

It's for toil and lovers you would save this, though the times
beat you to it, grab the minutes for coal and zero-hours

that fuel a different summer. Now we've time to die
over and over before our letters reach home

and afterwards doesn't always come behind before,
if at all. So the barman calls 'Time!', the whistle sounds

and, after synchronising our watches, we move off
around the point you notice that loosening cough.

1916, and, like many a medal, your moment arrives
post-mortem, the blinds still drawn in Petts Wood.