

V-

LETTER

KARL SHAPIRO

V-

LETTER

AND OTHER POEMS

REYNAL & HITCHCOCK, NEW YORK

INTRODUCTION

All of the poems in the following pages with a few exceptions were written in Australia and New Guinea, under the peculiarly enlivening circumstances of soldiering.

Since the war began, I have tried to be on guard against becoming a "war poet." I remember reviewing some works of certain of the Georgian writers during my first weeks in the army; at the time I was shocked to discover that there were men whose recollections of an old war remained the most cogent experiences of their lives. A year later, ten thousand miles from home, I understood better what it was they persisted in reliving and re-writing: the comparison of the old peace with the old war seemed to be the expression of their fate rather than their wish.

There is no need to discuss the private psychological tragedy of a soldier. It is not the commonplace of suffering or the platitudinous comparison with the peace, or the focus on the future that should occupy us; but the spiritual progress or retrogression of the man in war, the increase or decrease in his knowledge of beauty, government and religion.

We know very well that the most resounding slogans ring dead after a few years, and that it is not for poetry to keep pace with public speeches and the strategy of events. We learn that war is an affection of the human spirit, without any particular reference to "values." In the totality of striving and suffering we come to see the great configuration abstractly, with oneself at the center reduced in size but not in meaning, like a V-letter. We learn that distances and new spatial arrangements cannot disturb the primordial equation of man equals man and nation. We learn finally that if war can teach anything it can teach humility; if it can test anything it can test externality against the soul.

I have not written these poems to accord with any doctrine or system of thought or even a theory of composition. I have nothing to offer in the way of beliefs or challenges or prosody. I try to write freely, one day as a Christian, the next as a Jew, the next as a soldier who sees the gigantic slapstick of modern war. I hope I do not impersonate other poets. Certainly our contemporary man should feel divested of the stock attitudes of the last generation, the stance of the political intellectual, the proletarian, the expert, the salesman, the world-traveler, the pundit-poet. Like the jaded king in the fairy tale we should find our

clothes too delicately spun for the eye to see; like the youngster in the crowd make the marvellous discovery that our majesty is naked!

KARL SHAPIRO
New Guinea

EDITOR'S NOTE

Because for the last twenty-six months the author has been on active duty in the southwest Pacific area, where all of these poems except "Satire: Anxiety" were written, the selecting, editing and arranging of them for this volume have been done without his direction.

EVALYN KATZ

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ASIDE

Mail-day, and over the world in a thousand drag-nets
The bundles of letters are dumped on the docks and
beaches,

And all that is dear to the personal conscious reaches
Around us again like filings around iron magnets,
And war stands aside for an hour and looks at our faces
Of total absorption that seem to have lost their places.

O demobilized for a moment, a world is made human,
Returns to a time that is neither the present or then,
But a garland of clippings and wishes of who-knows-
when,

A time of its own creation, a thing of acumen
That keeps us, like movies, alive with a purpose, aside
From the play-acting truth of the newsreel in which we have
died.

And aside from the candy and pictures and books we receive,
As if we were patients whose speedy recovery were
certain,

There is proof of the End and the lights and the bow
at the curtain,
After which we shall smile at each other and get up to leave.
Aside from the play in the play there is all that is fact,
These letters, the battle in progress, the place of the act.

And the optimal joy of the conflict, the tears of the ads
May move us or not, and the movies at night in the
palms

May recall us or not to the kiss, and on Sunday the
psalms

May remind us of Sunday or not, but aside from the lads
Who arrive like our letters still fresh from the kiss and the
tear,

There are mouths that are dusty and eyes that are wider than
fear.

Say no more of the dead than a prayer, say no more of the
land

Where the body is laid in the coral than that it is far;

Take your finger away from the map of wherever-we-
are,

For we lie in the map of the chart of your elderly hand;

Do not hasten the future; in agony too there is time

For the growth of the rose of the spirit astir in the slime.

For aside from ourselves as we are there is nothing alive

Except as it keeps us alive, not tomorrow but now,

Our mail-day, today of the blood of the sweat of our
brow,

The year of our war to the end. When and where we arrive

Is no matter, but *how* is the question we urgently need,

How to love and to hate, how to die, how to write and to
read.

HILL AT PARRAMATTA

Just like a wave, the long green hill of my desire
Rides to the shore-like level here to engulf us all
Who work and joke in the hollow grave and the shallow mire
Where we must dig or else the earth will truly fall.

Long as a comber, green as grass, taut as a tent,
And there far out like specks the browsing cattle drift,
And sweet sweet with the green of life and the downhill
scent,
O sweet at the heart such heavy loveliness to lift!

And you know best the void of the world, the blue and green,
And the races departing single file to the west to die—
But all your memory shines on the tiny deaths you have seen
No more nor less than the point of light in the tear of my
eye:

So proud of the wave, my womanly hill, to lean on the shore
And tumble the sands and flatness of death with your silent
roar.

MELBOURNE

The planted palms will keep the city warm
In any winter, and the toy Yarra flow
With boats and lovers down the grass. From walls
The flowers spring to sack the very streets
And wrought-iron tendrils curl upon the air.
The family's sex is English, and all their pain
More moderate than a long-expected death.

Yet the lipstick is poor, the girls consent
To loose their teeth and hips, and language whines
Raising the pitch to shrill humility.
At five o'clock the pubs roar on the world
And milk bars trickle pardon, as the mobs
Lunge, worse than Chicago, for the trains
Dispersing life to gardens and to tea.

Also in suburbs there is want of vice,
And even the dogs are well-behaved and nice.
Who has extracted violence like the fang,
Leaving in early minds the simile
Castration? Who watching at night the film
Suffers the technicolor King to spread
Exalted, motionless, into their dream?

For blue and diluted is this nation's eye,
Wind-worn with herding and great distances
That were not made for cities. This was a land
Laid for the park of loneliness of Earth,
And giant imagination and despair.
Who reared this sweet metropolis abides
By his own error, more profound than war.

Only my love can spare the wasted race
That worships sullenly the sordid sheep.
She shall be governor with her golden hair!
And teach the landscape laughter and destroy

With her free naked foot the matchwood quay:
Buildings themselves shall topple where she dances
And leap like frogs into the uproarious sea!

SYDNEY BRIDGE

Though I see you, O rainbow of iron and rivetted lace
As a dancer who leaps to the music of music and light,
And poised on the pin of the moment of marvellous grace
Holds her breath in the downfall and curve of her motion-
less flight;

Though you walk like a queen with the stays of your womanly
steel

And the pearls of your bodice are heavy with sensual pride,
And the million come under your notice and graciously
kneel,

As the navies of nations come slowly to moor at your side;

Yet your pace is the pace of a man's, and your arms are out-
spread

In a trick of endurance to charm the demand of the bays,
And your tendons are common—the cables are coarse on your
head,

You are marxist and sweaty! You grind for the labor of days;
And O sphinx of our harbor of beauty, your banner is red
And outflung on the street of the world like a silvery phrasel

TROOP TRAIN

It stops the town we come through. Workers raise
Their oily arms in good salute and grin.
Kids scream as at a circus. Business men
Glance hopefully and go their measured way.
And women standing at their dumbstruck door
More slowly wave and seem to warn us back,
As if a tear blinding the course of war
Might once dissolve our iron in their sweet wish.

Fruit of the world, O clustered on ourselves
We hang as from a cornucopia
In total friendliness, with faces bunched
To spray the streets with catcalls and with leers.
A bottle smashes on the moving ties
And eyes fixed on a lady smiling pink
Stretch like a rubber-band and snap and sting
The mouth that wants the drink-of-water kiss.

And on through crummy continents and days,
Deliberate, grimy, slightly drunk we crawl,
The good-bad boys of circumstance and chance,
Whose bucket-helmets bang the empty wall
Where twist the murdered bodies of our packs
Next to the guns that only seem themselves.
And distance like a strap adjusted shrinks,
Tightens across the shoulder and holds firm.

Here is a deck of cards; out of this hand
Dealer, deal me my luck, a pair of bulls,
The right draw to a flush, the one-eyed jack.
Diamonds and hearts are red but spades are black,
And spades are spades and clubs are clovers—black.
But deal me winners, souvenirs of peace.
This stands to reason and arithmetic,
Luck also travels and not all come back.

Trains lead to ships and ships to death or trains,
And trains to death or trucks, and trucks to death,
Or trucks lead to the march, the march to death,
Or that survival which is all our hope;
And death leads back to trucks and trains and ships,
But life leads to the march, O flag! at last
The place of life found after trains and death
—Nightfall of nations brilliant after war.

CHRISTMAS EVE: AUSTRALIA

The wind blows hot. English and foreign birds
And insects different as their fish excite
The would-be calm. The usual flocks and herds
Parade in permanent quiet out of sight,
And there one crystal like a grain of light
Sticks in the crucible of day and cools.
A cloud burnt to a crisp at some great height
Sips at the dark condensing in deep pools.

I smoke and read my bible and chew gum,
Thinking of Christ and Christmas of last year,
And what those quizzical soldiers standing near
Ask of the war and Christmases to come,
And sick of causes and the tremendous blame
Curse lightly and pronounce your serious name.

NEW GUINEA

And see thou hurt not the oil and the wine

Geography was violently dead,
Hairline and parallel, Mercator, torn,
Brushed by a finger from the finespun map
As one might desecrate a spider's web;

And now like Moses was our will again
To part the sea and push all distance back
To cross the dry land of your wavy roads
In plotted days exuberantly home;

Witness like him our enemy engulfed,
Churned hideous-eyed in coiling ocean-troughs,
Sucked down and drowned and beaten to the floor,
To justify the praises of our war.

We lived upon this chart, traded and sailed,
Made strong the latitudes with sailor's hemp,
Our cables mossy under deafening depths
And words in air. A world lay in your net.

And children learned a land shaped like a bird,
Impenetrable black. Here savages
Made shrunken heads of corpses, poison darts
Pricked sudden death, no man had crossed their hills.

It fell from Asia, severed from the East;
It was the last Unknown. Only the fringe
Was nervous to the touch of voyagers.
Business and boys looked close and would have come.

In war did come, crashing the gifts of iron
Crated on crazy trails where by our blood
The rat-toothed enemy is backward inched,
And forests bulldozed, busted into streets.

Morning I rise and marvel at the laden
Lush-abandoned branch and brush of soaked
Laocoons of trees in throes of ser-
Pent-tightening tendrils and air-clambering roots.

Awake, the largest snowiest butterfly
Floating with eyes of lavender between
The men strung heavily like weighted bats
And finishing, from tree to tree, their rest.

And soon awake the split-wing congeries
Of fliers driving in a line like bees
Shake loose the warming silences and storm
From every sleeper his last easy dream.

Surely the frontage of the world is up
When on the old cosmography and stars,
Mercator, we inscribe our whirl of wings
To roads instinctive as the climbing god's.

Presume our purpose high as flight, like yours,
Or charity in every gain implied,
Or joy of settlement for reason's sake;
See us confute logistics like a map,

Our space be balanced in the scales of light,
No longer his whose hideous horse he spurs
Into the dream of the common man, and prove
World-wide the knowledgeable heart of peace.

What happens to the dark primordial law
Of those whose home this is, happens to us
Seeing the preternatural fall of fire
Strike from the sky witchdoctors, villages;

Their desolation see us deeply trust
And never hurt their oil and their wine:
Peace to the science of these fevered woods,
Their attributes, their language and their gods.