Of Dreams that Dance and Die, Before the Drums

by Iain James Robb

At eight o' clock: as, drawn by many bells,
The patchwork congregation lopes and stalks,
To churches far from serenade of shells
To storms, we leave behind the windblown walks,
And sails of youth, to glide through liquid hells,
A temporal forgotten from all clocks-
In which we dance or fall each one, where slides
The music of white Death's retreating tides:

A saviour to the shell-shocked, void of ruth;
The susurration final, sum of man,
Shall cast our image out in lieu of truth
Immortal, capsized in our mortal plan.
For this the forward eons will need no proof,
That do not know this tragic rataplan,
Where all the threshed, in mock to limbs that sweep
Endurance, fall in queue to bleed and sleep,

No longer linked but animal, at stun
Of rueless bullets; where we glance upon
Our feet, we see a brother or a son
Surrendered to the hoofbeats of the Somme.
The moonlight, early when this squall begun,
Paints us its blank, unmagic omicron:
Illusioned scream for those who rise to die,
The prematures of Hell's liquidity.

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Anticipating rage of shriek or thud
Watch in the trenches seemed, though, far more bleak-
To Monty, seeing fear resolve past bud,
Though funny how its seasoned ceased to speak.
Now half his brains are missing in the mud,
The moon cannot resist at half its peak
A passing pink, more dreadful than the fall
Of tomblight, in the silence, of its hall

Amid the gates of clouds, that see no crime…
In slayers slain by rights, or by decree
Of those who stage this farcic pantomime-
The high put low by night's *necessity*:
The same as *ours*, whose forms lie under rime
Of sleeting showers, and feel no need to flee
The twitter-flights of Flanders, and the thrum
That greets our dreams that drown, before the drum-

That signals the last light, before the breakers
Bear man's blood away from his receding shore.
Like marionettes that reach to hands that break us,
We mourn the dark that, mournless as a door,
Throws dirt and dust alike on silent strafers-
And the ones who wait, to sight the gates nay more-
Of starfall's ferruled arcs, man's final, sum
Illusion of his blind Elysium.

Is this our lasting codex, do we run
To lend you interest by some sutured sign…
Of wounds that swept unnoticed by your sun?
Age breaks us through its prisms of decline.
Death rides a chrome horse darkly through the dun,
And speeds us forward into sleeping Time:
A race that, win or lose, is all we ply
Hymned on the distance of your finity.

No runners laurelled in the frozen race
Of flesh and metal marshalled to one call:
Our faces soon shall pass us out of place,
Bare photographs lined up against your wall…
Until you too are captured in the chase
Of detoured futures; even ghosts will fall,
But ours beat blind as breath whose first grey dowers
Were rendered to the arms, of chanceless hours

You will not share or keep. Again the knell
Of alien fire sounds out its flat carouse.
Hell's denizens at last will never tell
What iron laurels cross upon their brows…
What one bland night shall murder in its swell,
The limbs that beat and break upon its prows:
The laughing moonlight's silent oriole,
Brash songbird to the dawns, that skip and roll

Behind the eyes of those strange sunsets stun,
As eyes go out. You number us as words,
We sentinels of darkness' garrison,
Who sing through throats of pale, garroted birds.
If anything, then let us claim, as son,
Or image of our nameless last rewards,
A moment of the youth you wear, to free
Us from the triumph of our tragedy.

If I or this, or that one, may survive,
Halt seasons may consent again, to we,
A taste of what suggests to us we live,
Though lies on limbs a white infirmity:
Suggesting we recall again and give
Thoughts back to ash again, but leave me be;
Those ashen garlands also will be gone,

From other flowers the rain strakes, on our Somme.