

FOR THE  
IOWA DEAD

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*Paul Engle*

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*by Paul Engle*

STATE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

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FOR THE IOWA DEAD was written for a Service of Dedication (on March 25, 1956) at the State University of Iowa—a service dedicating the Memorial Honor Roll of students and alumni of the University who have given their lives in the armed forces of the nation.

The first eight lines of Sonnet II were cast in bronze and appear as a permanent part of the Honor Roll in the Iowa Memorial Union, along with tablets bearing the names of the State University of Iowa dead of World War I, World War II and the Conflict in Korea.

Sonnets II, III, XI and XXII were set to music as a Requiem for the Iowa Dead by Professor Philip Bezanson of the Department of Music, State University of Iowa, for performance at the Service of Dedication by choral and orchestral units of the Department of Music, conducted by Professor Herald Stark.

Sonnets, IV, VII and XII are reprinted from *Madoiselle*, Copyright, Street and Smith Publications, Inc., 1945.

I

On this wall, in this town, in their own state  
We name their individual names, to state  
That they were not just group, crew, squad, alone,  
But each one man, one mortal self, alone,  
Who fought the brutal frenzy of his time,  
Who touched with human hand this iron time.  
We give to them, who died in every weather,  
Grief like an old wound groaning with the weather.

They knew death as a family dog knows men,  
By whistle, touch, familiar smell of men,  
But still were cheerful, still could ask each morning,  
What do you know for sure on a new morning?  
Before death's final stammer in the throat  
Knew love's live stammer in the breathing throat.

## II

Some left an office, cornfield, factory,  
But these men left the study of mankind,  
Glory and gloom of mortal history,  
The wonder, madness, logic of the mind,  
The live cell, atoms cunningly combined.  
They closed their books, death closed their eyes, so we,  
The lucky Iowa living, still could find  
A future in our human liberty.

The wise and wicked past they came to study,  
Right and wrong, life loved like light, but turned  
Away from contemplation to the bloody  
Present, and in appalling action learned  
The old world's furious and deadly fact:  
Murder for justice is a moral act.

### III

Morning Sun, Stone City, Boone, What Cheer:

In the hysteria of history

These names for home rang in the homesick ear,

With the warm sound of friend and family,

Of Iowa, where winter cracks your skull,

Where summer floats on fields, green river flowing,

Where autumn stains your hand with walnut hull,

Spring shakes the land with a loud gust of growing.

But their true season was the one of dying.

Summer, autumn, winter, spring all ran

Into one flaming moment, doomed plane flying,

Sinking ship, exploding shell, edged knife:

For home is not birthplace, but the place a man

Dares a way of death, to keep a way of life.

#### IV

Most of their life was simply, to make life:  
The clover planted and the cattle bred,  
Each year the wheat field ripped by the plough's clean knife,  
The crust of earth cut like the crust of bread,  
The fat hogs slopped, the ludicrous, loud hogs,  
The skimmed milk saucered for the lazy cats,  
The careful mating of the hunting dogs,  
The oat bin plugged against the ravenous rats.

But then their life changed simply, to end lives:  
The strange men killed less quickly than the brown  
Beef steer by the sledge and the neat knives,  
The child's hand begging but without an arm,  
The cattle shelled in the defended farm,  
The crazed cat shot for luck in the taken town.

V

Not heroes, angels, merely men,  
Strong, weak, as any citizen,  
Caught between evil and hard good,  
Nail between hammer and hard wood,  
Caught between, in that black year,  
The hate of hate and fear of fear,  
Yet the hard courage they could bring  
Made the name *men* a mighty thing.

Like prophets in their innocence  
They had their vision of violence,  
And found in a shell-shattered place  
More than a dead boy's ruined face:  
Carved marble Christ head in the mud  
On whose cheek stone tears turned to blood.



VI

Some left green meadows for the greener ocean,  
Left the low rising, falling of that land  
For a more violent and reckless motion  
No landscaped brain and body could withstand.  
American bones beneath that brutal water  
Move in the cold and restless bed of sea,  
And have no dream of any woman's daughter  
Warm in another bed that will never be.

Darker than earth is the sea-depth where they died,  
A bitter grave in a salt and barren place  
For those whose loam had made yield after yield.  
Their chalk hand twitches but only with the tide.  
Now is the lean and cropward-looking face  
Gone from their skull like soil from a gullied field.

## VII

Say that in the end their life was one  
Quick autumn burning the leaves with their own blood,  
Say that they fought so there might be the sun  
Over their land, as they died in the mud.  
Not from an abstract sense of wrong and right  
But for the hill they fenced with aching arm  
They went to the unwilled war—and wrote one night,  
“It’s a lousy land and a hell of a way to farm.”

Say that for those who came from corn and flock,  
By inland rivers where the catfish hang  
In the dark pool, and the moccasin hides its fang,  
Where the warm milk is cooled in the old, gray crock,  
It was a tough, hard, bitter death as they sprang  
And poured their rich blood over the barren rock.

## VIII

Now in a later year  
When sky on farm and town  
Bleeds furious daylight down  
On faces bleeding fear,  
Let hope like a great blaze  
Rise when we speak the name  
Of those who died in flame.  
Take pride in simple praise:

Brave, bitter, or afraid,  
They won their appalling fight.  
Eternal sun has laid  
Its bending arm of light  
Over their shoulder blade  
And burned them into night.

## IX

Some chose to fight above the bloody ground,  
Above the keel-carved sea, a high third way.  
They measured murder on a map, and found  
Accurate death dropped from the bright bird-way.  
Loathing destruction, they were great destroyers.  
Flyers who wanted only to walk again  
As merchants, farmers, teachers, salesmen, lawyers,  
They brought an air-borne death to earth-born men.

They flew to kill and some of them were killed.  
They bombed the concrete fort and broke the city.  
They turned their armed, trained face to the enemy.  
Nothing is to be pitied here but pity.  
They did their job and saved a state. Their skilled  
Hands are shattered into history.

X

Do not merge all of them as "honored dead,"  
For they were individual men, one, one,  
Their grave a foreign word on a map in red,  
A name they saw in a book when child and son,  
Or knew first when they hit that beach and ran it.  
They only yearned to live in their own land,  
To keep a toe-hold on a twisting planet  
By job and sport and home and loving hand.

They hung their lives on the terrible wall of time  
Up which, with face hoping for hope, we climb,  
Face where accusing tears no longer fall,  
While in their old rooms on the trophied wall  
By rod, spiked shoe, girl's head, bent book, the dumb  
Mirror waits the face that will not come.

XI

They fought the mighty fury of mass hate,  
Uniform, party, group, replacing men,  
The tribe abstracted to the absolute state,  
Leaders like pigs locked in their filthy pen,  
Man a mere number raised to the nth power.  
Not only guns, the airman's faceless face,  
Tanks, armies, ships, they fought in their doomed hour,  
But all yet savage in the human race.

The brag of blood they fought, the brutal sneer  
Of racial pride that mocks our mortal feature,  
Good love of country heightened to great wrong.  
Against that shame, they said for the world to hear:  
We've had our human nature far too long  
To go back, now, to being merely nature.

## XII

Now in the fields ploughed by another's sweat  
The native corn is tall. They will not go  
To measure it with knee and thigh. But let  
No pity cover them like sudden snow.  
As Icarus in the fury of his fall  
Rose through time to immortality,  
So by their savage dying will they all  
Live in this long war's monstrous memory.

But they would scrap that little fame to work  
One hard hot day under the Kansas glare,  
In Illinois where the low hay mowers jerk,  
In Iowa where corn grows fat on the heat,  
Or in the north Red River valley where  
The blond Norwegians harvest the blonder wheat.

XIII

Contrary century

Where men of plain good will

Must cry out—Enemy!

And teach their hands to kill,

Where earth explodes in space

Shamed with its human life,

Where live tears tear the face,

Where wound slashes the knife,

Where men of peace fought back

War-wanting men, and died

Attacking their attack:

As if on those old sands

The spear leapt from Christ's side

To cut the soldier's hands.



XIV

War was evil and they loathed the sight it  
Gave to decent men, but worse than war  
Was to know evil, and yet not to fight it.  
They wanted life, but their own country more.  
So learned the killing skill, its bloody ways,  
Writing home, when heart and hand were numb:  
Heaven and hell we have now in our days,  
Earth and the simple living are to come.

So learned, and proved it by death's final scar,  
That what we love is what, as men, we are:  
Wonder of woman, child and friend, the least  
Human good and glory that we try for.  
God in the body of a thinking beast,  
We are all things we hate, we love, we die for.

Star-staggerer, old earth, through sullen space,  
Lost in looking for some absolute light,  
Remember, as history lurches toward its night,  
The noblest flame is still a human face.  
Searching for their lives' terrible truth, they ran  
Over earth's water, air and bloody ground,  
On ruthless hill and ravaged city found  
Another word for suffering was—man.

A tree stands up, has branches, birds and leaves.  
A man stands up, has children, wars and grieves.  
Yet anguished, daily life is consecrated  
Where men die to defeat an evil hated.  
Such death makes luminous the looking eye,  
And makes more radiant God's appalled sky.

XVI

Surely when Adam walked through the first trees  
The Garden was astonished that a thing,  
Upright, with glancing eyes, glad mouth, should tease  
Innocent air with a live voice that could sing.  
Surely when that first, mortal man had died  
Death was astonished that he had a friend  
To comfort when he came there terrified,  
To give food, drink, on whom he could depend.

But surely death, like these men, is astonished  
To find how much hard dying it has taken  
To keep a country free, alive, unshaken,  
Merely to keep a brutal world admonished  
That there are always men willing to die  
To keep a plain life, under an open sky.

XVII

War leapt at them—to its astonishment  
These men who breathed peace like the common air  
Fought back savage and magnificent.  
They brought fear to the force that tried to scare.  
Animal war they beat down till it whined.  
They won that fight although they did not want it.  
They beat that beast, as if in sleep the mind  
Terrified the dream that came to haunt it.

They battered war by making war, war,  
Defeated death, because their dying, dying,  
Gave to their country more life, more, more.  
Drenched with daylight where the sun dips, dips,  
We hear their warning voices crying, crying:  
World is a cave where the dark blood drips, drips.

XVIII

Now let our memory of these men make  
No form in marble where an artist stood,  
But lived-out, rounded rib-cage of a snake  
Found perfect in the winter-ruined wood:  
Image of nature beautiful in bone  
Whose pure curve praises the abandoned breath,  
No image like a stutter of bright stone,  
But life-delighting shape denoting death.

Remember now their names and their hand's daring,  
Whose eyes defied stiff death and left him staring.  
Our future life is their memorial  
And not bronze language bolted to a wall.  
We praise their death by living, not by art,  
By proving a free mind and loving heart.

XIX

Casualty, calculated loss,  
Dog tag, division, number, date,  
The abstract death in triplicate:  
From these big words what comes across  
Is not men in their natural kindness,  
But soldiers, sailors, pilots who,  
By chart and luck in the flared night, flew  
The bombers in their accurate blindness.

Our words corrupt reality.  
The worn, quick syllable of *war*  
Proves no blood, terror, agony.  
The name of *sorrow* has no more  
Night-weeping anguish than the look  
Of petals dried in an old book.

XX

Now in the century of clever knowledge  
Where the trained mind measures true evidence,  
Common sense is still the oldest college:  
Wisdom is knowledge of our ignorance.  
We trick the atom and teach birds to fly,  
Make marvelous machines to make machines,  
Cut with our cunning knives the living eye,  
Tell the scared mind what each mad terror means.

Yet if these men returned and had their will,  
Now, when dark earth through space-like-water dives,  
In the great night of the future, they would still  
Triangulate the star-drift of their lives  
By those fixed points of home they died for: wives,  
Table for bread, loved children laughing or ill.

## XXI

Rivers were places where they learned to swim,  
To fish, to dive for the sand-crawling clam,  
But Rhine, Rapido, were places where they learned  
To ferry, firing, under fire, to die.

Small towns were places where they learned first names,  
Each street and house, and knew the yapping dogs,  
But Anzio, St. Lô, were where they learned  
Streets could explode and every house could kill.

They learned that war reverses: what was good,  
A gentleness, became a deadly flaw,  
And what was bad, primitive lust to slay,  
Became an honest virtue to be praised.  
For our still living grief, it is as if  
The scar came first and then the screaming wound.



Heart of the heartland, where the deep-plowed fields  
Lie in huge harvest or the winter-wait,  
Where human hope and food are the rich yields,  
And nothing there to hate but mortal hate;  
Marvelous, hearty, middle country, when  
Winds of the world blow dark and full of warning,  
Recall, in your great fulness, these dead men,  
Homesick for one more live midwestern morning.

So, in a time of fear, have no dejection,  
Remember these men on whose lives you stand.  
Recall their name, face, human imperfection,  
How their death gave life to this lucky land,  
For memory is mortal resurrection,  
Light as sun rising or a loving hand.