POEMS FOR REMBRANCE DAY, NOVEMBER 11

Anthem for Doomed Youth
By Wilfred Owen, September-October 1917

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
   Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
   Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
   Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, --
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
   And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
   Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
   The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
   And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

September-October 1917
Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

"Anthem for Doomed Youth" was written between September and October 1917, when Owen was a patient at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh recovering from shell shock. The poem is a lament for young soldiers whose lives were unnecessarily lost in the First World War. While at hospital, Owen met and became close friends with another poet, Siegfried Sassoon. Owen asked for his assistance in refining his poems rough drafts. It was Sassoon who named the start of the poem "anthem", and who also substituted "doomed" for "dead"; the famous epithet of "patient minds" is also a correction of his. The amended manuscript copy, in both men's handwriting, still exists.

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

Owen died in an assault over the Sambre and Oise Canal, near Cambrai in northeast France. His biographer Jon Stallworthy writes that "he was at the waters edge, giving a hand with some duckboards, when he was hit and killed. He was only twenty-five. In Shrewsbury, the armistice bells were ringing out when the Owens' front doorbell sounded its small chime, heralding the telegram that they had dreaded for two years."