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INFLUENZA 1918

The Army Private

Dearest: I awoke in a furnace this early autumn morn.
Around me, husky lads, late of farm and town, cough, groan,
Like old grandpas back home. My throat so dry
I could drink the seven oceans. Doc says the Spanish flu
Goes round this camp like wildfire, and a fire it is.
Surely I will not be consumed, but fight to hold
Your precious hand again. This cot my trench, I fear.
I came to battle the Hun. Yet here I lie, hotter
Than a Kansas August, each muscle aflame.
The boys say they'd rather have the mustard gas
Than fill their lungs with flu. "The gas don't kill."
I shall dream only of you, love, though my sleep
Be restless. Home I will come, in one piece,
To your silky arms. Promise. Love, Bill.

The Army Doctor

I studied at the finest schools, from Switzerland to Hopkins,
And yet no training could prepare for these horrific scenes:
Rows and rows of dying men, once strong and swift and bold,
Now lay like burning skeletons, their stories still untold.
Young lads from every little burg, united in the fight
For their country and their God now cannot stand upright.
This new infection seems unlike I've ever seen before:
It comes on fast, a hound from Hell, causing ceaseless gore.
Can it be bacterium that causes this new scourge?
Or a virus yet, still unnamed, that plays this deathly dirge?
We need a Koch, a new Pasteur to concoct a key solution
For as of now, I have no salve, no respite or resolution.
This Spanish flu kills quickly, some in one day or two.
The fever mounts, the lungs fill up, with a frothy bloody brew.
Then black go the feet: The end comes then, it's easy to predict.
Coffins fill, we daren't run out, the carpenter works quick.

The Mother

I watch and I wait and I know nothing great
Will come of this. Boys who played with fate
As they played with toy soldiers on the rug
Now tire of the endless graves they've dug.
I've lost two sons: one to that Spanish flu,
One to the Kaiser. What difference to
Me here? I grow deaf from the quiet.
The "supreme sacrifice." Who could deny it?
I gave them over: to a fever and a bullet.
Alive I remain (*why?*) still I wait, yet I sit.

The Pacifist

The fever for war rages in history's tale like a crazed virus,
Infecting men in every generation, passed on without fail
By words, sweeping across continents, growing insidiously
In the young. Fully grown, they take up arms in the battle
Promised in wondrous youth, turn savage in dress uniform.
My ears pound with artillery—or is it death's dark rattle?
It is time for answers and time now for the truth:
Humanity is delirious.
Surely an inoculation is needed for this pandemic
Of prejudice, pride, and folly. What soulful medic among the sick
Will halt the ravages of feuds, bring peace and heal,
At last, the bloody body politic.

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