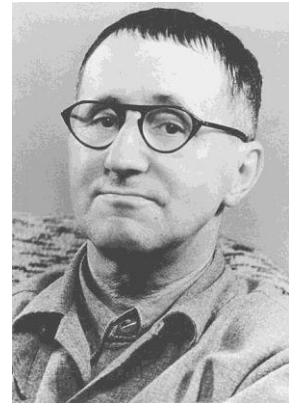


Three War Poems from the Second World War

The God of War

"I saw the old god of war stand in a bog between chasm and rockface.
He smelled of free beer and carbolic and showed his testicles to adolescents,
for he had been rejuvenated by several professors. In a hoarse worldfish voice
he declared his love for everything young.
Nearby stood a pregnant woman, trembling.
And without shame he talked on and presented himself as a great one for order.
And he described how everywhere he put barns in order, by emptying them.
And as one throws crumbs to sparrows, he fed poor people with crusts of bread
which he had taken way from poor people.
His voice was now loud, now soft, but always hoarse.
In a loud voice he spoke of great times to come, and in a soft voice he taught the women how to cook crows
and seagulls. Meanwhile his back was unquiet, and he kept looking round, as though afraid of being stabbed.
And every five minutes he assured his public that he would take up very little of their time."



Bertold Brecht 1898-1956 (trans. by Michael Hamburger)

from **Still Falls the Rain** (The Raids, 1940: Night and Dawn) by Edith Sitwell (September 6, 1941)



Still falls the Rain -
Dark as the world of man, black as our loss –
Blind as the nineteen hundred and forty nails upon the Cross.

Still falls the Rain
With a sound like the pulse of the heart that is changed to the hammer beat
In the Potter's Field, and the sound of the impious feet.

On the Tomb:
Still falls the rain
In the Field of Blood where the small hopes breed and the human brain
Nurtures its greed, that worm with the brow of Cain.

Still falls the Rain
At the feet of the Starved Man hung upon the Cross,
Christ that each day, each night, nails there, have mercy on us –
On Dives and on Lazarus:
Under the Rain the sore and the gold are as one.

Still falls the Rain –
Then – O Ile leape up to my God: who pulles me doune –
See see where Christ's blood streames in the firmament.
It flows from the Brow we nailed upon the tree
Deep to the dying, to the thirsting heart
That holds the fire of the world, – dark-smirched with pain
As Caesar's laurel crown.
Then sounds the voice of the One who like the heart of man
Was once a child who amongst beasts has lain –
"Still do I love, still shed my innocent light, my Blood, for thee."

Naming of Parts

Today we have the naming of parts. Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And tomorrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But today,
Today we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens,
And today we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see of
When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel,
Which in your case you have not got. The branches
Hold in their gardens their silent, eloquent gestures,
Which in our case we have not got.

This is the safety catch, which is always released
With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me
See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy
If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms
Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see
Any of them using their finger.

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this
Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it
Rapidly backwards and forwards : we call this
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards
The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers ;
They call it easing the Spring.

They call it easing the Spring : it is perfectly easy
If you have any strength in your thumb. Like the bolt,
And the breech, and the cocking-piece, and the point of balance,
Which in our case we have not got, and the almond-blossom
Silent in all of the gardens, the bees going backwards and forwards,
For today we have naming of parts.

Henry Reed (1914-1986)



Brecht was vilified in Germany for most of his life, either as a radical thinker and writer in 1930's or as a Communist after the war. The language and imagery of his poem are striking and violent. He left Germany the day after the burning of the Reichstag, 1933, the same year that Hitler was appointed as German Chancellor.

"Naming of Parts" is one of the most poignant poems of the war. Everything in life, especially all pleasure and joy, are subjected to the war effort, the desperate need to survive as a person, as a nation, and the poet puts the message across with precision and unerring accuracy.

Neil Richardson