

# ON GOING TO THE WARS

## An Ode to my Wife

RICHARD MILES

I do not go, my dear, to storm  
The praise of men; this uniform  
May shine less gay in gas and mud  
And be medallioned but by blood,  
While lips that know your lips will turn  
Uneasily to harlot worm.  
And war, it's true, fouls both the flesh  
Victorious and the flesh it slays.

Yet must we play the beast afresh  
To claw from wolves their power to craze  
The heirs of Raphael and the kin  
Of Bach, our friends the foe.  
I too, let's say, a travail owe:  
So that our son, who curls within  
The womb, may wake to brighter earth,  
I must not shrink from giving birth  
To death.

I go that he may stare  
Blue-eyed into Canadian air  
Unhaunted by the charnel birds  
That drop their excrement of death.  
I go that he may draw free breath  
To speak the rich and ancient words  
We use, and spell from books unburned,  
And teachers not from trueness turned.  
I march that he may learn from grass  
And rose what we have missed, the pass  
To quiet life, and never set  
The rendezvous my father met  
In vain.

I go that we may breast  
Again the Dorset Downs in zest,  
And walk the Kentish lanes where I  
Began a larger life in knowing  
You. Yet if from seething sky  
I win reprieve but by the slowing  
Crutch or whitened cane, my doom  
Will yet have helped to hold in bloom  
Old English orchards, and Canadian  
Woods unscarred by steel, Acadian  
And Columbian roofs unswept  
By flame. My mother will be kept  
From stumbling down a prairie road  
Illumed by burning barns and snowed  
By patterned death.

Is it so rash  
To seek to rank with men who saved  
Your English father from a lash  
In London streets, and bent head shaved  
Because his mother was a Jew  
Who starved last year in Lodz? And you—  
My dear, I'll not survive to see  
You bricked within a ghetto slum  
In Canada by booted scum.  
I pledge that if by chance I flee  
The blundering malice of the guns,  
I'll stand by those who strive to chart  
A world where peace is everyone's.  
A peace that does not rot the heart  
With hunger, fear, and hopeless hate,  
Nor rust the cunning wheels nor still  
The subtle fingers, peace that will  
Unlock to every man the gate  
To all the leaping joys his hand  
Creates. For no less prize I stand.

And now, my dear, since we may yet  
Delight in leaf uncrinkling, and  
In maple woods the violet,  
Then let us from the patient land  
Take strength, nor fail to share the charmed  
Routine of stars, or trysting keep  
With common things, with evening warmed  
By music, food, and love, and sleep.

For present solace these, but for  
Our hope we've nowhere else to look  
Except into our spirit's book.  
No hell unloosed by lords of war  
Upon the people's flesh has ever  
Parched the human heart's endeavour,  
The human will to love and truth.  
For one face mired in black unruth  
A score will signal us each day  
The sun unquenched within our clay.

Across the tundra of our dread  
We must beat on, windbitten, to  
The unseen cabin's light, and through  
The glooming western firwoods thread,  
In hope to pass the peaks terrific,  
And win the wide sundrenched Pacific.