Bayonet Charge

Suddenly he awoke and was running – raw
In raw-seamed hot khaki, his sweat heavy,
Stumbling across a field of clods towards a green hedge
That dazzled with rifle fire, hearing
Bullets smacking the belly out of the air –
He lugged a rifle numb as a smashed arm;
The patriotic tear that had brimmed in his eye
Sweating like molten iron from the centre of his chest, –

In bewilderment then he almost stopped –
In what cold clockwork of the stars and the nations
Was he the hand pointing that second? He was running
Like a man who has jumped up in the dark and runs
Listening between his footfalls for the reason
Of his still running, and his foot hung like
Statuary in mid-stride. Then the shot-sliced furrows

Threw up a yellow hare that rolled like a flame
And crawled in a threshing circle, its mouth wide
Open silent, its eyes standing out.
He plunged past with his bayonet toward the green hedge,
King, honour, human dignity, etcetera
Dropped like luxuries in a yelling alarm
To get out of that blue crackling air
His terror’s touchy dynamite.

Ted Hughes

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**CONTENT**

- Ted Hughes grew up in Yorkshire and was greatly influenced by nature, animals and the fact that his father served in the First World War.
- This poem refers to soldiers ‘going over the top’ of the trenches during warfare. Hughes captures the fear and mindset of an individual, unnamed soldier as he runs with his bayonet over the top.
- This third-person poem focuses on a single soldier’s experience of charging towards enemy lines. Not only is the soldier afraid, the poem also progresses to show questioning of the patriotic ideals which he has previously held before the violence. This poem is dedicated to capturing the reality of war.

**LANGUAGE**

- “Bullets smacking the belly out of the air” – violent imagery and onomatopoeia – emphasising the impact of the shots and the soldier’s feeling of breathlessness (fear?)
- “Threw up a yellow hare that rolled like a flame” – metaphor and simile – links to an idea of cowardice (yellow) and feeling overwhelmed (hare), wanting to run away. Frantic movements of the soldiers.
- “King, honour, human dignity, etcetera” – positive list – the reasons that the men would go to war, followed by etcetera which devalues the ideas and suggests they aren’t worth listening to.

**STRUCTURE**

- 3 stanzas – tracks the change and development of the soldier, from uncertainty, to fear, to inevitability.
- Enjambment of lines is irregular, linking to the confusion and chaos
- Use of impersonal pronoun “he” throughout – highlights the universality of the soldier, that it could represent any soldier’s feelings in battle.

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