

## **Aristocrats**

**By Keith Douglas**

The noble horse with courage in his eye  
clean in the bone, looks up at a shell burst:  
away fly the images of the shires  
but he puts the pipe back in his mouth.  
Peter was unfortunately killed by an 88;  
it took his leg away, he died in the ambulance.  
I saw him crawling on the sand, he said  
It's most unfair, they've shot my foot off.

How can I live among this gentle  
obsolescent breed of heroes, and not weep?  
Unicorns, almost,  
for they are falling into two legends  
in which their stupidity and chivalry  
are celebrated. Each, fool and hero, will be an immortal.

The plains were their cricket pitch  
and in the mountains the tremendous drop fences  
brought down some of the runners. Here then  
under the stones and earth they dispose themselves,  
I think with their famous unconcern.  
It is not gunfire I hear, but a hunting horn.

It's a remarkable poem in its emotional directness, its historic ranginess and mixture of emblem-making and reportage. There are **vivid contrasts of tone as well as image**: the ironical eloquence of the dying Emperor Vespasian, source of the epigraph; and the mixture of high, grieving oratory ("How then can I live...") and scathing vernacular ("stupidity", "fool") in the third stanza. Douglas avoids moral judgement, a characteristic of his work noted in this Poetry Foundation essay.

Interestingly, Douglas wrote two versions of this poem; the one printed here is the earlier. The later, revised poem is called "Sportsmen" and, as we'll see, makes some small but significant changes to the last two stanzas.

Aristocrats begins with "the noble horse", standing its ground during the shelling. There seems to be no doubt that Douglas is portraying a real animal. But the third line smuggles in a quick-change of subject, and in the fourth there's a sudden, surreal jolt:

“but he puts the pipe back in his mouth.” No, the masculine pronoun here obviously can’t refer to the horse. However, the rider is so abruptly introduced, the images remain superimposed. It is half-comical, but hints at the horrible ways organisms are twisted into grotesque coalescence by violent warfare. Did Douglas know of Picasso’s Guernica? For a moment we might be in that painting, but it’s a fleeting moment. There’s a strong suspicion that the man himself is being identified with the horse – “clean” and integrated in response, conditioned to act bravely, but showing some want of intelligence.

The next stanza presents a sharp, brilliantly local scene. “Peter”, perhaps a specific individual, is also an everyman in war: an insouciant, selfless – and dying – hero. **Understatement** predominates as Peter under-estimates the fatal leg-wound delivered by the tank-mounted gun, making light of it as “most unfair”. The reporter has foreshadowed this in his own more formal understatement of regret (“unfortunately”). The **tone changes** dramatically in the third stanza.

In the revised version of the poem, entitled Sportsmen, the lineation changes, so that the last three lines of this stanza read, “Unicorns, almost. For they are fading into two legends/ in which their stupidity and chivalry are celebrated;/ the fool and the hero will be immortals.” The longer third line is less jagged than the truncated original – but the original remains stronger; it gives those disruptive words greater breathing space and heightens the ironical connection between the two beasts, the war-horse and the once-mythological unicorn. That the contemporary, human “unicorns” are “falling into two legends” recalls military terminology (“falling into line”) and the state of being “fallen”.

By comparison, “fading into” has a more predictable, elegiac focus. In “Sportsmen,” the last stanza is as follows:

*“These plains were a cricket pitch  
And in the hills the tremendous drop fences  
Brought down some of the runners who  
Under these stones and earth lounge still  
In famous attitudes of unconcern. Listen  
Against the bullet cries the simple horn.”*

The transposition of sporting images to the battlefields is common to both versions – and both have the stomach-lurching image of the “tremendous drop fences”, originating in steeplechasing. I prefer, in the earlier version, “mountains” over “hills” and the specific “hunting horn” over “simple horn,” since both emphasise the reference to The Song of Roland and such tales of ill-fated knightly chivalry. The additional detail about the runners who “loung[e] still/ in famous attitudes of unconcern” is effective, though, depicting the dead bodies with a trace of the visual shock found in the opening stanza.

Rowland Smith in The Dalhousie Review makes a good case for preferring the final stanza of Aristocrats. Douglas might have revised the poem further, or reverted to his earlier version, had he survived to see his collection through the press (he died in Normandy in 1944). It seems reasonable to make room for both versions – all the better to let the poet’s questions about chivalry persist and worry in an age of drones and air-strikes.

## **Vergissmeinnicht**

**By Keith Douglas**

Three weeks gone and the combatants gone

returning over the nightmare ground

we found the place again, and found

the soldier sprawling in the sun.

The frowning barrel of his gun

overshadowing. As we came on

that day, he hit my tank with one

like the entry of a demon.

Look. Here in the gunpit spoil

the dishonoured picture of his girl

who has put: Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht.

in a copybook gothic script.

We see him almost with content,  
abased, and seeming to have paid  
and mocked at by his own equipment  
that's hard and good when he's decayed.

But she would weep to see today  
how on his skin the swart flies move;  
the dust upon the paper eye  
and the burst stomach like a cave.

For here the lover and killer are mingled  
who had one body and one heart.  
And death who had the soldier singled  
has done the lover mortal hurt.

**Persona** -- A soldier who, upon returning with his fellow soldiers to a scene of battle three weeks after the conflict, finds a dead German soldier rotting in the sun. By the dead soldier is a picture of the soldier's sweetheart, Steffi, who has autographed the picture with her name and the German message 'Vergissmeinnicht', 'forget me not'.

Douglas said in another of his poems that he was simply repeating what Isaac Rosenberg had said. Rosenberg, for Douglas, had perfected **war poetry** in the previous global conflict, the First World War. And certainly the matter-of-factness that characterises Rosenberg's finest work, such as his celebrated poem 'Break of Day in

the Trenches', is also found in Douglas' poetry, especially in 'Vergissmeinnicht'. There is no sentimentality here, nor is there even much pity, that staple emotive feature of Wilfred Owen's work.

But one thing which Douglas may have taken from Wilfred Owen is the use of **pararhyme**, that off-rhyme falling somewhere between free verse (no rhyme) and full rhyme. Owen frequently deploys this device in his poetry, by 'rhyming' 'killed' with 'cold', for instance. But in 'Vergissmeinnicht', Keith Douglas doesn't employ pararhyme regularly, instead varying between full rhyme and pararhyme throughout the poem. The effect of this is to unsettle our understanding of the poem's tone, since we cannot be sure sometimes whether we are being offered a quatrain or a pair of couplets in a stanza:

The frowning barrel of his gun  
overshadowing. As we came on  
that day, he hit my tank with one  
like the entry of a demon.

Although 'gun' rhymes with 'one' here, and 'came on' with 'demon', the presence of **pararhyme** in the previous stanza (gone/sun) disturbs any clear distinction between 'gun', 'on', 'one', and 'demon', so that 'gun' and 'on' might almost as easily go together, just as 'one' and 'demon' chime as pararhyme. Similarly, because the first stanza had rhymed *abba*, and not *abab*, we might expect such a rhyme scheme in the second stanza, only to be brought up short just as the soldiers are taken aback by the sight of the decomposing enemy soldier. Then, in the third stanza we get a different 'rhyme'

scheme again, with pararhyme giving us *aabb*. In the final stanza, rhyme and pararhyme are placed side by side as the full rhyme of 'mingled' and 'singled' (two words which complement each other only by looking in opposite directions) is juxtaposed with the pararhyme of 'heart' and 'hurt'. This lends the poem a finality, like the couplet at the end of a **Shakespearean sonnet**, but a muted finality, given that the last line completes a pararhyme, on the chilling word 'hurt'.

Then there is the **syntax** of the poem, which is actually odder than it might first seem (given Douglas's direct and plain manner of addressing us), and shows what a linguistic innovator Douglas was: The frowning barrel of his gun overshadowing.

Overshadowing what? And where is the main verb in this 'sentence'? 'We see him almost with content' is a similarly troubling phrase, at first leading us into familiar Wilfred Owen territory (the idea that the dead soldier is at peace at last, sleeping and free from all the horror of war), until we realise that 'with content' does not apply to 'him', the dead soldier, but to 'We', the living soldiers who are gazing on him. This borders on *Schadenfreude*, that distinctly German word which English refuses to allow to be Anglicised ('gloating' is the best we have), with Douglas and his fellow soldiers glad the man is not only dead, but rotting, his stomach 'burst open like a cave', in the sunshine.

'Vergissmeinnicht' is a chilling poem partly because of its directness and its refusal to sentimentalise the scene it describes, or treat the dead soldier with much pity. The only pity is vicariously present in the imagined mourning of Steffi, the girl whom the soldier leaves behind. Douglas offers not 'the pity of war' in any obvious sense but a more detached, analytical view.

### **Identify Persona and Word Choices**

**The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner"** (Also refer to pages 625-627 in literature text)

is a five-line poem by Randall Jarrell published in 1945. It is about the death of a gunner in a Sperry ball turret on a World War II American bomber aircraft.

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,

And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.

Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,

I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.

When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.