Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Beating for Light

Written by Geoff Akers

Published by Juniper Books

All text is copyright Geoff Akers 2006

First published 2006 by Juniper Books, 16 Foulis Crescent, Edinburgh EH14 5BN The right of Geoff Akers to be identified as the author of the work has been asserted heron in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 All rights reserved

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

BEATING FOR LIGHT…..

PRELUDE: SUMMER 1917..

My Dear Marsh,

We are camping in the woods now and are living great. My feet are almost healed and my list of complaints has dwindled down to almost invisibility. I've written some lines suggested by going out wiring or rather carrying wire up the line on limbers and running over dead bodies lying about. I don't think what I've written is very good but I think the substance is, and when I work on it I'll make it fine.

Isaac Rosenberg stopped writing for a moment and eased back against the bole of a large beech tree. He'd left his tent ten minutes ago, tempted outside by the warmth of the early morning sun. Slowly placing pen and paper on the grass, he ran exploratory fingers over the half-healed sores dappling his rib-cage. The problem of lice had eased off recently, perhaps because everything was so much drier now, making it possible to wash clothes and hang them out to dry. An examination of his feet revealed a similar improvement, although discoloured patches around the heels and the dark, swollen appearance of both big toes testified to the pain he'd endured for months on end.

Sending poems to his patron, Edward Marsh, was always a frustrating exercise. Isaac desperately sought the approval he knew from past experience was unlikely to materialise. Fierce criticism generally accompanied any grudging admission that the poem under scrutiny had potential if carefully reworked. Recent praise from a fellow poet had provided some encouragement, but, deep inside, he knew that none of his correspondents could ever possibly

understand the difficulties of writing at the front. The gulf between the two worlds was just too wide to bridge. Isaac rarely mentioned the hardships he experienced. What was the point? Since arriving in France, he'd sought to minimise the rigours and maximise the few advantages the situation bestowed.

Only when his health almost gave out at the turn of the year had he asked for help. Despite Marsh contacting the War Office and writing a letter to Isaac's captain, nothing had come of it at first. The battalion doctor insisted on declaring him fit for duty, even though his hands and feet were in a dreadful state and his chest giving cause for concern. Major Alexander prided himself on his ability to detect malingerers, and, as far as he was concerned, Isaac fitted the bill. Nothing could persuade him - not Marsh's efforts nor Captain Normoy's personal intervention - to send the private to the field hospital for a fuller examination. Eventually, he was reassigned to the divisional works battalion and the slightly improved conditions behind the front led to a partial recovery of his strength.

Like most trench fighters, Isaac subscribed to the philosophy of "grin and bear it" as a way of coping with the burden of existence; but an unflinching resolve to reveal the true horror of the war through his poetry provided the strongest motivation to persist. People must be moved to ponder why nations priding themselves on the extent of their civilised accomplishments were able to tolerate barbarity on such an immense scale. Turning a line over in his mind from his most recent poem, he reflected for a moment on the extremes of life in this terrible place: "*What of us, who flung on the shrieking pyre,"* With a sigh, he resumed his letter:

"Bottomley told me he had some very old poems in The Annual but, of course, it's too bulky to send out here. Your extract from his "Atlantis" is real Bottomley-ian. The young Oxford

poets you showed my things to, I've never come across yet and I'll soon begin to think myself a poet if my things get admired so…"

Again, he ceased writing and contemplated the rutted track snaking its way through the camp-ground, up over the wooded ridge and down towards the front-line. Only a few miles from here thousands of men gazed at each other through their gun-sights, productive farm land lay devastated, and human remains, uprooted from temporary graves, festered and bloated in the warm sunshine. It was sometimes hard to imagine what Marsh's young Oxford friends, and those back home with no direct experience of conditions at the front, would ever make of his poetry. This sort of speculation was, he realised, self defeating. He must never succumb to the sense of futility which, of all the forces ranged against him, was by far the most dangerous. The struggle to remain intact had tested his resolve on many occasions, but, so far, he'd refused to compromise.

He returned to the letter with an effort; his mind was for ever wandering off in different directions, however much he tried to focus on specific tasks. He realised it was this failure that got him into so much trouble with his superiors.

"I'm writing to my sister to send you the lines as she will type several copies."

Mention of his sister brought fresh guilt flooding back. How his family, especially his mother, was coping constantly troubled him. His decision to join up had hit them all badly. With a pang, he recalled the fateful day he'd packed a few things and sneaked out of the house to join the newly formed Bantams - the only battalion prepared to accept men of his diminutive stature. He tried to dismiss the disturbing thought and added a p.s. asking after his patron's job at the Colonial Office.

Isaac folded the paper, rose to his feet and slowly stretched his thin body. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a harsh voice broke the back of his reverie.
“Rosenberg, where the fuck do you think you are? This isn’t some sort of bleedin’ holiday camp you know! Get your uniform back on now and report to me at nine hundred hours. Maybe some more pack drill will learn you respect for regulations.”

He watched forlornly as Sergeant Jackson disappeared in the direction of the latrine. The army was full of such small-minded bullies who liked nothing better than to put the men through it. Isaac had always taken a lot of flak from NCOs on account of his forgetfulness and “unsoldierly” demeanour. The fact that he was regarded as eccentric and found it hard to mix with the other men also marked him out as an obvious target. Being caught like this was rotten luck but his own fault. Jackson was particularly vigilant, at least where he was concerned, and failing to dress properly before leaving the tent had been foolhardy. The pack drill would break into his quiet time, threatening the only real opportunity he had to write without interruption. The prospect extinguished the warmth of the sun, and his rare sense of well-being popped like an oversize bubble.

*

The following morning, while most of the wiring company slumbered in their tents, Isaac prepared to work on what he hoped would be the final version of *“Dead Man’s Dump”*. He’d already sent a second copy to his sister Anna for typing before forwarding to Marsh.

Writing the first draft of any poem was, of course, the most traumatic part of the whole

business. What followed, although necessary, was thoroughly tame by comparison. In this instance he'd found it particularly hard to contain himself and exert control over the process. Swept along on a fierce riptide of exhilaration, his racing pen barely able to keep up, he'd found himself dumped on an unfamiliar hinterland, confused and disorientated.

He recalled a fragment from a letter to Marsh where he'd tried to convey something of the ordeal involved.

"If you are not free, you can only, when the ideas come hot, seize them with the skin in tatters raw, crude, in some parts beautiful in others monstrous."

This summed up his latest experience, but, try as he might, he could never make Marsh understand, obsessed as his patron was with inherited tradition and technique. These conventions, however important to the people who championed them, were useless when it came to articulating the horrors of modern warfare. He had no choice but strive for a more powerful means of expressing himself. He throttled his long-standing bitterness and tried to focus on the job at hand.

Reading through the poem, he recalled the mood of the evening when the first, stark images had broken through.

*

Dusk was gathering beneath the trees when the limbers were finally loaded up and ready to move. Isaac's mind, unusually restless, lent a heightened awareness to everything. With a shiver of excitement, he sensed his muse hovering close by. Resting a quivering arm against one of the thick wheel spokes, he began to perceive the piled up mass of rough cut stakes and

rusting screeds of barbed-wire in an entirely new way. The flicking tails of the tethered mules, the clouds of flies swarming round their bowed heads and gaunt rumps, the impatient stamp of hooves, all assumed an added significance. He was soon struggling to contain a swirl of images.

On Sergeant Jackson's command, the convoy lurched forward, bumping slowly along the track. In Isaac's waking vision, an ancient tyrant - the image of the hopelessly corrupt God he'd reviled so often in the past - shook his sceptre menacingly as armies tramped past, en-route to distant battlefields.

The cart dipped in and lurched out of an unusually large pot hole. Isaac, immersed in another world, was almost thrown off. His companion grabbed his arm, steadying him just in time.
"For fuck-sakes, man, 'old on! If the sarg sees ya, you'll be for the 'igh jump."
He muttered his thanks, but already another harrowing image was unfurling in his mind's eye: corpses, hurtling through the air, crashed into the scorched earth and smashed into dozens of shard-like pieces. Then, slowly, terrifyingly, fiery holes began to open in the ground, like mouths flicking red tongues of flame. The human fragments slid inside and the apertures closed back leaving a blasted landscape devoid of life.

The limbers trundled over the ridge and down a long slope towards an area recently laid waste by the retreating German army. Gradually the surface began to widen and flatten out as other tracks flowed in. The marching feet of countless soldiers had compressed the soil and they gained speed, the crashing hooves of the mules and the creaking of boards and harness adding a frenzied accompaniment to his racing thoughts. Lines from an earlier poem flashed through his mind: "*But a subtler brain beats iron/ To shoe the hoofs of death./ (Who paws*

dynamic air now.)”

In a effort to calm himself, he attempted to focus on the job at hand. Barbed wire barriers, erected to hinder movement across no-man’s-land, sustained considerable damage each day and had to be restored during hours of darkness. Although much less hazardous than manning frontline trenches, or even labouring behind the front line, the work was by no means free from danger. At any moment soldiers could be torn apart by exploding shells, or targeted by enemy snipers. The prospect sobered him and his muse retreated for a while.

Although the horrors of this place were virtually impossible to describe, many of the sights had become so common-place that he and his companions hardly reacted to them at all. Decaying corpses, caught in the dim glow of the side lanterns, barely merited a glance. Often the wheels lurched over these gruesome remains, and, despite his apathy, Isaac winced at the sound of crunching bone.

Almost all of the bodies were German in origin. Many enemy soldiers cut down during the strategic withdrawal to the heavily fortified Hindenburg line back in February, and hastily interred in temporary graves, had been thrown up by the pitiless shells. No one seemed particularly interested in reburying them, although the stench of rotting flesh and the bloated flies and rats attracted to the feast must, Isaac suspected, be creating problems for the infantry battalions now manning the adjacent trenches.

As they threaded their way through the network of reserve trenches, a green flare arced into the sky, lending a sinister lustre to the surrounding landscape. Jackson’s voice suddenly erupted out of the darkness.

“Right lads, look lively. Start unloading and no skiving about or you’ll feel the toe of my boot up your arse. Do you hear me, Rosenberg?”

Things went well that particular night. Nobody was killed or even injured. Only a few shells dropped despite the continual rise and fall of the flares. On their return to camp, while the others stretched out to sleep after the exhausting night’s work, Isaac began to write, striving to shape and sequence the torrent of words.

*

Now, studying the first draft and subsequent alterations, he wondered how the thing as a whole might be improved. The prospect of Marsh’s inevitable censure spurred him on. Were there any words or lines in the poem which could be amended or dropped altogether? Was there anything obscuring or interfering with the clarity of the whole? Maybe he shouldn’t have sent off the amended copy so quickly to his sister, but always felt he had to in case something happened to him. Somehow his own fate seemed less important than preserving the lines he dashed off.

He was immediately faced with the agonising dilemma side-stepped during his first revisitation. What to do with stanza eight? A decision would have to be made; there could be no more putting it off. With a pang of regret, he realised few would understand his agonised appeal to *“Maniac Earth!”* Even he felt somewhat bewildered reading over the lines, and Marsh would doubtless dub them grotesque. There was certainly no denying the verse was intrusive, breaking up the *“stretcher bearer*” sequence, but, then again, it powerfully expressed something of the savage extremes of war. With a sigh, Isaac finally scribbled it out

and began to carefully copy out the remainder of the poem, pausing now and again to make amendments to the original holograph.

Several minutes later, the sound of heavy boots clumping up the track returned him to reality. Remembering his recent clash with Jackson, he slowly sunk down into the grass, unwilling to be seen or interrupted at such a crucial stage. Whoever it was passed by, unaware of his presence. Anger and frustration swept through his mind like storm clouds blotting out the sun. It was utterly intolerable he was forced to write under these conditions. As a means of dispelling the darkness, he reread the verse just copied out:

"None saw their spirits' shadow shake the grass,
Or stood aside for the half used life to pass
Out of these doomed nostrils and the doomed mouth,
When the swift iron bee
Drained the wild honey of their youth."

To his surprise, warm tears welled up and spilled down his cheeks. Dashing them impatiently aside, he inwardly cursed this dangerous overflow of sentiment. Objectivity must be maintained at all costs; emotional involvement, he knew, would irretrievably mar the process.

Finishing, he read through the piece once more in order to satisfy himself that the alterations had resulted in the desired improvement. Several lines in the ninth stanza caught his eye and drew him down into their ominous core:

Their sinister faces lie

The lid over each eye,

The grass and coloured clay

More motion have than they,

Joined to the great sunk silences.

He suddenly felt the immunity of the seasoned soldier stripped away. Not for the first time, he wondered whether he would soon be one of these *sinister* corpses stiffening at the side of a track, ignored by the jaundiced eyes of those still endowed with *vigorous life*. As usual, his reaction was ambivalent - dread and allurement grappling on the battlefield of his tortured imagination. For the moment, the allure was eclipsed by a potent vision of his soul *beating for light*, like an injured bird striving to regain its former grace and mastery.

After carefully signing and dating what he hoped would be the final copy, Isaac folded the sheets away and crept back to his tent. His two companions were still fast asleep, their breathing deep and regular. He was amazed how peaceful they looked, as if they had found a haven in their dreams far removed from the rumour of war. He, on the other hand, was unable to free himself from the fear the poem had released. His chest felt tight, and the irregular beat of his heart worried him. Praying the condition would ease, he forced himself to breath slowly and deeply. He must snatch some sleep. In less than five hours he'd be back on his feet loading up the limbers all over again, and, after that, Sergeant Jackson would be enforcing his latest round of punishment drills. Most days were the same, but, in comparison to the trenches last winter, he felt his lot to be wonderfully improved. This sustained him, as did the satisfaction of finally completing a piece which, he believed, conveyed something profound and important.