

# Four Poems by Owen Lowery

## The arrival of SS Ohio, 15 August 1942

*Ohio* hobbles to the Grand harbour  
with tugs and destroyers struggling through the noise  
beside her, coinciding, colliding with  
the *Santa Marija*. The sight rings  
the church-bells hoarse. Her course churns  
behind, heels over. The smothering  
blue resumes. Already, we're grooming  
the miraculous, attaching or confusing the two  
events, even before the food  
staggers into the cargo bays and the grey  
ache of hunger breaks. *Ohio*  
dawdling in and the Madonna's Feast Day,  
despair and deliverance, drift on bearings  
converging beneath the surge of belief  
on the quayside. Then the release of pent up  
ecstasies. Hats flexing the flat  
colours of the desert and its duty fall  
off their arcs. A starched loft  
of sky erupts like couples in the twilight  
world of the shelters. A wealth where there would  
have been a poverty of lovers leans  
for a better view, renewing and resetting  
themselves and what they've seen walling  
them in for months. Miracle mingles with  
a fair lump of luck when they look  
at the state the tanker's in turning to stone  
walls and sea-floor. Holed by sprees  
of bombs and torpedoes, she comes in pulsing  
water through her hull, heavy with fuel  
and with the crew hidden. It happens like a crash  
in a dream, suspended unendingly on a lens,

with act and consequence as reflections under  
and over meniscus. The noise shoving  
steel to its appointed place stands  
watching and listening to the light washing  
and kissing the wall. Words like 'welcome'  
magnify to the point they appear disjointed,  
as ridiculous as a drag Madonna. The dust  
of the latest Stukas lingers on as Valetta  
lifts and collapses and lifts again.

9 January, 2013

### **Division of bread**

(From Robert Antelme's *The Human Race*)

The blind guy takes his bread from his pocket  
and cuts it into three, giving the first  
to one of his two friends, before knocking  
the other friend with his elbow. Bread bursts  
out of nothing. The two friends are woken  
together by the gift of its broken  
reality. Each takes what's offered them  
between the seeing thumb and finger-ends  
before carving it into cubes, lending  
them gravitas denied the birds coughing

and swallowing life over and over  
in the fields outside the Lager. Each man,  
aware of what this means, will discover  
his own way of eating. For the two friends  
it has to be made to last, staving off  
the worst of the bone-gnawing hunger. Soft  
compliance follows the rough grudge of crust  
at a rate they measure against the pain  
and each other. For the blind guy the gain  
is in large pieces he can feel muscle

on his tongue, in lying down with the weight  
inside him. The two friends are contracted  
to making sure neither is left waiting  
longer with nothing in hand, neither hacked  
by that envy want breeds. Once it's finished  
the possibilities, even of bins  
and of chunks turning to stone, of bread green  
with wasting, dry up. Only the needing  
remains, amplified by the thought bleeding  
through the times they've watched the kitchen, they've seen

potatoes carried in and out, or seen  
the guards gorge themselves drowsy. They begin  
to think in bread-hours, the number between  
a man alive and not. News hinted at  
the day before, altering patterns drawn  
and re-drawn past the wire, becomes the lawns  
and houses they left behind. The bread shines  
and flickers out. The three men will resume  
the rhythms of work and sleep on the straw  
and stone of the church floor. When tomorrow  
slides open, they'll ache for bread in the gloom.

12 January, 2013

### **Jacques, medical student**

(From Robert Antelme's *The Human Race*)

Jacques betokens a future each of those lost  
shapes of men will become. A month, a couple  
down the line, they'll be that bit closer to him  
as he looks in his skin among them now. Snaps  
keeping watch on the walls they left behind them  
will have drifted a little further off shores  
wearing each of their former boot or foot-prints  
out. The lovers who walked or got escorted  
clean away are the bug-eyed swollen-bellied  
cartoons filling the papers. Fathers grow new

faces, yellows and greys, the feel of taut cloth  
if their kids were around to test them. Model  
in-mates, therefore, in that respect, their bodies  
will be Jacques's, and his body theirs. Reflections  
fixing life to a rail or pool of water  
hardly know them from Adam. Jacques will know too  
well, exactly the way the process works them  
down. His medical training bridges both worlds,  
joining hands with itself across the lit wire  
slicing time. For the guards, the same reduction  
gives them purpose, confirming how the human  
splits between a them and an us at arms-length  
stretching crusts and a watered soup. Appearance  
blurs the edges of men who might or might not  
be as good or as bad as those they were. Jacques  
knows he'll not be the man who'll gladly pilfer  
life from caches behind the sleeping bone-bags  
after work. Maintaining that part of him means  
active choice, a refusal going unseen  
born of having his own distinctive ethic  
uncorroded, demanding less of others  
than himself, and then holding on to that rule  
as the medics pronounce him just as hopeless  
as the ones they condemned the day before. Jacques  
grows, refines, becomes more and more iconic  
out of what he's been brought to. Those expecting  
Jacques at home as he walks between the roses  
will be faced with a saint. The man they wanted  
back will stare from their photos unaffected.

21 January, 2013

### **Brian McCabe of HMS Whitesand Bay**

(Guarding the Olympic flame, 1948)

Pictures with his head inclining  
to different sides want him defined  
with his time either staring

back at him, or extending out  
towards the old man whose young shout  
returns doubting its way there

off the sea. The same mouth softened  
in the second fills again, coughs  
its forgotten world alive  
in the fullness of first colours  
knocking with the waters faint pull  
at the hull. His ship revives

the figure of an athlete bronzed  
to the bone, and bearing the sun  
in his once in a lifetime's  
right hand, the flame dancing darker  
on the harbour where Corfu starts  
and ends. Stark as the whitening

of temple-stone, he hands the fire  
to the sailors and then retires  
for that far off he too might  
finally set against himself  
in time. Leaving the ship to swell  
with the wealth of it, to bite

at that cleaner water breaking  
its web of blue and light, making  
it re-make to a dirt foam,  
and at some point touching Bari  
with the same unextinguished star  
in its heart. In coming home

to grow by rings into his new  
and his older selves, the two tunes  
his day threw together move  
in the same uniform, evolve  
the same colours. Their ship hovers  
where the mauve shadows dissolve.

12 October, 2012

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Owen Lowery was born in 1968. Formerly a British Judo champion, he suffered a spinal injury while competing and is now a tetraplegic. He has a Master's Degree in Creative Writing from The University of Bolton, where he is completing his PhD on Second World War soldier and poet, Keith Douglas. His poetry has appeared in *Stand* and *PN Review*, and has been listed in the Bridport Prize, the Welsh Open Poetry Competition, the Virginia Warbey Prize, and the International Sonnet Competition. Owen's first major collection, *Otherwise Unchanged*, was published in December 2012 by Manchester's Carcanet Press, and includes many poems touching on the subject of warfare and its effects, as well as poetry of a more personal nature.