Letter from France, 1917

When we sailed out from Seaforth Sands to France
a thousand hungry white birds flew behind.
I was found fit for G.S. and six days
after, I was back over here on the ground.

With Jones as O.C. and young Bowes second,
a half-wit platoon to die at my word.
The men like both because they're friendly; I think
their plan of attack will do us all in.

Six months and these new ones will be gone, too;
already one company melted away,
the last, left one by one in wet shellholes.
Did you hear about old Frankie Travers?

Two months in trenches, while snipers thin us,
then south of Arvas they said to pull out:
muddy woods, muddy roads, muddy clothes,
and a smoky tent in this grey rest camp.

Horne is dead, and so is old Markening,
and Bandley killed in a bombing mishap.
In ten days, all our old friends gone under.
For running from sudden enemy fire,
the squad's best boxer and the most graceful
athlete waits in Rouen for court-martial.

Noise comes now and then from the cathedral,
where the rose windows fall one at a time;
its drafty naves now are remob centers,
its sanctuary where men return from leave,
and there's an orchard across the road here and
O Jesus, send me a wound, now, O please.

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