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Devaluation

I looked at the penny in my hand,
Eighteen-eighty-two,
Three years before my grandmother was due.
You were the penny my great-grandad spent
Tossing you proudly while you blinked,
My grandfather clenched you in his clammy fist
Sent scuttering for a bag of broken biscuits,
Father stuck you in one eye
Feigning, for friends, Lord Fauntleroy.
Now you blink no longer, being blind,
Time opened your eyes to blow in thorns and sand.
Time lifted your lids to search, and saw
Complacency grown fecund,
Thrust in three wars, the Boer, the Great, the Second.
Great-grandad tossed his grenade at a Boer,
Grandfather clenched curdling throats seared with gore,
Father stuck bayonets through fat and through thin,
Until they in turn smacked the dust in death's grin;
While you passed from pocket, to purse, till and shelf,
Marking the years with your dumb vagrant self,
While you stayed pretty, for thoughts and round,
Wise, plain, honest and in for a pound.

I looked at you lying there in my hand,
Should I accuse you? I asked.
Accuse you for making it all seem such a farce?
For passing through what you had not planned,
For waiting against the wailing and the dying,
Against the tearing, bleeding, crying?
Can I accuse the water for reflecting
Flying birds, as I do you, for passively accepting?

Nevertheless,
You are mnemonic of our guilt,
Eighteen-eighty-two;
I crouch, and dig a hole and bury you.

KEITH BARNES.

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