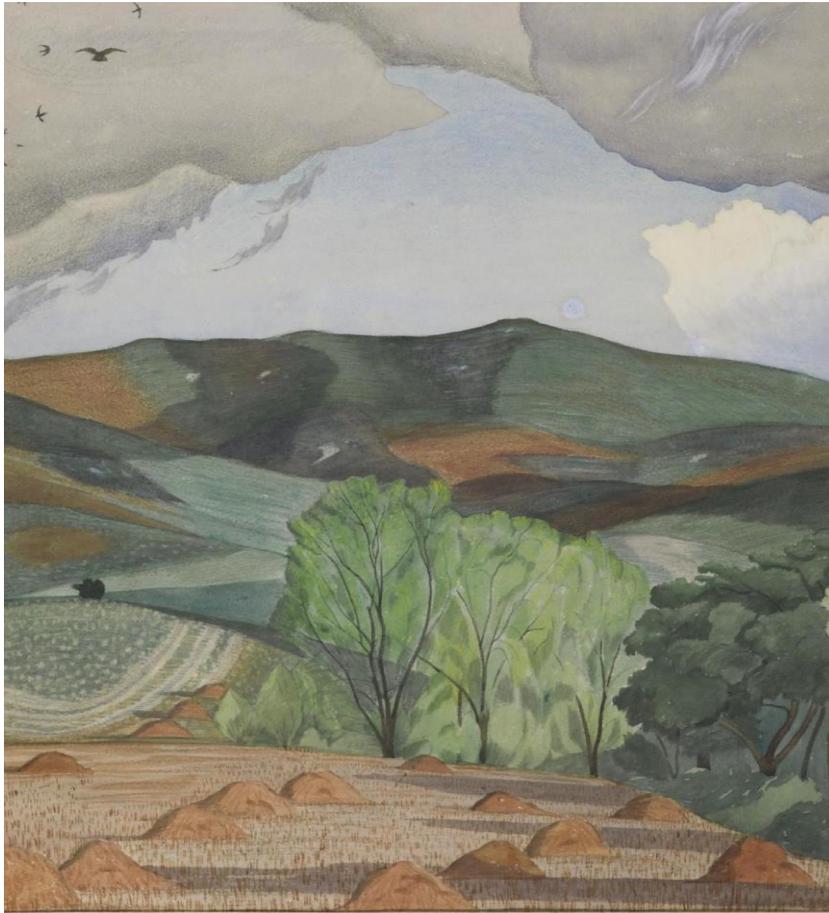


The High Hills



Dorset landscape by John Nash 1915

The high hills have a bitterness
Now they are not known,
And memory is poor enough consolation
For the soul hopeless gone.
Up in the air there beech tangles widely in the wind -
That I can imagine.
But the speed, the swiftness, walking into clarity,
Like last year's bryony, are gone.

Ivor Gurney



Ivor Gurney in his First World War uniform

This ‘lockdown’ poem was written when the author was incarcerated in an asylum. The poet and composer Ivor Gurney (1890-1937) was born in Gloucester, the son of a tailor. He won a scholarship in composition at the Royal College of Music, and volunteered at the outbreak of the First World War, where he served on the Western Front as a private from 1915-1917, and was wounded and gassed.

He published two volumes of verse, *Severn and Somme* (1917) and *War’s Embers* (1919). He set few of his own poems to music, but produced two A. E. Housman song cycles and a set of Edward Thomas songs.

After the war he became increasingly unsettled, working at various jobs, sometimes sleeping rough, and taking night-walks back to Gloucestershire from London. He was committed to a mental institution in 1922, and spent the rest of his life in care, dying of tuberculosis in the City of London Mental Hospital at the age of 47. His tombstone described him as “A lover and maker of beauty”.

Since his death, his reputation as a poet and composer has steadily risen. In 1985 Gurney was among 16 Great War Poets commemorated on a slate stone unveiled in Westminster Abbey’s Poet’s Corner.

Humphrey Clucas, who suggested this poem to us, is also a British composer and author. He has written a great deal of choral music, and like Ivor Gurney has set A. E. Housman’s poems as a song cycle.