

THE VETERAN

She helps at his undressing until,
Each item at odds, the creased bundle
of clothing is piled precariously on a chair
as mute testimony to his existence. Then
Burdening his dry bones with the once yearly
worsted, she stares with him into the mirror,
seeing only what is there. The oldest among
the old of this place, trembling through the
onslaught of vacancy. It would be preferable
that he stay here today, quiet, staring at walls,
"But he is one of so few," she is told,
"He is expected..."

Once, there had been a time of expectation,
Oh so near fruition, when the masses shook
off the curse of acceptance, girding themselves
with realization. But how blatantly was their
hour deflected by Kitchener's howling eyes,
the finger pointing from every wall, and the
white feather's sickness.

And now, sitting in an always depleted line
with other annual suits, he wishes only for
a dulling of the sun's glare. Not hearing the
drone of platitudes and doggerel as a battle
is fought again through the pinched mouths of
some uniformed bourgeoisie reliving their fathers' glory.

On his breast glints the row of rewards that
did not ease the blighted years of dissent that
followed at the heels of the imperialists' war,
where he died in his thousands, and saw bright
young officers straight from the drawing rooms

of Hampshire and Prussia, blow each other to
pieces with all the verve of a day at the butts,
in the great game that opened the vein of his
revolution, and kept the drawing rooms
though sometimes depleted - intact

Tetty Hetherington