

A photograph of a stone corbel with a dragon-like head, mounted on a brick wall. The corbel is light-colored and has a dragon's head with its mouth open, facing right. The brick wall is on the left side of the image, and the background is a solid blue color. The title 'BY THE DAYS' is written in white, serif, all-caps font across the middle of the image.

# BY THE DAYS

SAM STARBUCK

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by Sam Starbuck

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The text of this book is set in Garamond.

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DEDICATION: PROSOPON

There is a face behind the mask  
Though rare is it revealed;  
Amplified by wood and stone  
But if once unconcealed,  
It gently speaks and shy consigns  
To all who wish them, these poor lines.

## **THE HISTORY LESSON**

Not Like Sherman

Time doesn't march –  
If it did, we could stop it.  
It quietly slips through our fingers:  
We drop it.

Alternates

Between "what is" and "never was"  
I much prefer "what could be"  
And yet I never err in this:  
What could not always should be.

How Much For Three?

History, that Hellene Sibyl, speaks  
In riddles, burns the pages, stays the price.  
Like Virgil, she recites and we misread;  
Unto *aeternitas* we grope for light.  
This stone and clay, papyrus, vellum tanned  
Which shows as time progresses what she was  
Is even so destroyed by that which reads  
The roots of our humanity. So thus  
We look on History's face through crystal eyes  
Surrounded by a thousand clacking gears  
Which keep a record of our scars on her  
In magnet tapes and discs. Down through the years  
Will little tape-wheel rounds read easier  
Than painted walls which heard Iskander sing?  
(Fate, History's sister, never promised us  
More kindness than she showed Etruscan kings.)  
Alas, the books which foolish Tarquin bought  
Burned on the Capitoline, and answer naught.

Because She Said History Is Dead

Not so; their ancient words are not forgot –  
Vesuvius the phoenix bodies show:  
Their bones undamaged by the waning sun  
Which our full faces and strong fingers know.  
More famous Virgil's measured words and lines  
Yet known to we who at the day's end lie  
Than all the short electric records kept  
Beneath an ever dissatisfied eye.  
Unblessed by knowledge we these later times  
Have sought and to our ruin unwise seen,  
Pompeii and Herculaneum sleep fast  
While wasteland where Hiroshima had been  
O'ergrows once more in tempered steel and glass –  
Far better to have died these centuries past.



Little Known Facts

If those whose words come down to us  
As canon or as measured verse  
Are quiet as the common man  
Regarding private thoughts, and words  
Unspoken over what they've done –  
The good deeds harnessed to the bad –  
Our view of them's a funny one.  
The public face is all we've had  
For those who took up fragile tools  
And softly tapped the infinite;  
Of what they felt about it all  
Betraying not a twitch or tic.  
If poets laughed dishonestly  
As people laugh and talk in crowds,  
If writers wept for private loss  
And never said a word aloud –  
In short if they felt as we feel  
(And who denies their human lives?)  
Then we can never really know  
Except for fictions left behind  
What makes a mind as bright as brass  
And our life seem as clear as glass.

The Archaeologist's Creed

All history is puzzle, all the space  
Between the written lines, behind the stones  
Who knows what stories slip through ready hands  
Interr'd, like good deeds are, deep with men's bones.  
Nor is it storyteller's place to weep  
For those lost tales, dead with their heroes' death;  
There's quite enough to fill our narrow books  
Between first cry and final dying breath.  
Why now regret the stories never known,  
When there are riches waiting for our ears  
When we have Troy, Thermopylae, and Rome  
The legends that fill up our empty years.  
Why quest for our forgotten history?  
An easy answer: love of mystery.

For Eimear, Overseas

My ancestors were restless wanderers.  
No family plot for them; their simple graves  
Are scattered over continents and isles.  
Some ashes in the wind. Some lie interr'd  
On that Atlantic outpost where you grew,  
And now you too have left. To yearn for home  
Is natural, though you may love the place  
Where you now find yourself. The language new,  
Strange manners, stranger food. But not disliked,  
despite it may feel traitorous to say.  
Or sometimes hated, for its strangeness burns.  
This long adventure spans a world too wide,  
and home and family seems so far away.  
But take it from the son of travellers,  
The travel's worth the cost. When you feel far  
From lands whose streets you've lost, where my kin's graves  
Sleep warmly in a deep unwaking grace,  
When winter slices keen down from the north  
Remember, where you come from still awaits;  
It keeps and saves when strangeness is your place.  
It has released you now to come away,  
To learn, to triumph, to become the one  
Who, in homecoming, makes the land more rich  
Than otherwise could be. Be well, be safe,  
Love the adventure, love the place you are,  
Be well, be safe, be wise. There's nothing more.

Visit Memory

I was a child, perhaps not more than six.  
My father's laughter still in echoed halls  
The disapproving click of heels on stone  
And time, as ever, subjugating all.  
A little time I had, in colonnades  
Arched slyly over walkways few will see.  
My father's world is books and wooden chairs  
A lifetime spent in peaceful academe.  
But passion spiraled down another path  
In dreams of books and chairs of different kind  
And fame unwanted crowned my sandy head  
The colonnades unfaded from my mind.  
Sometimes it longs for rich obscurity  
(My father walks with Tolkien and Belloc)  
But dreams of quiet contemplation yet  
Must wait for one more poem, one more book.  
Such silence as my father's study saves  
Awaits, as my inheritance, the grave.

The Old Cemetery

Where once the nodding mourning-horses trod  
Between the gravestone and the wooden cross  
There still extends the ceremonial sod  
The physical embodiment of loss.  
But now no black-plumed horses draw the hearse  
Nor stamp and snort in chill October frost  
And though we could dig up the frozen ground  
With our machines, its usefulness is lost.  
The ground is full; admit no more the dead,  
The new yard cross the town are where they lie  
Beneath such unremarkable plain plaques  
That make a great man frightened when he dies  
No beauty will attend his grave, no stones;  
Merely a plate to guard his mortal bones.

For Cathy, On Taking The Oath

*J'affirme solennellement  
que je serai fidèle et porterai sincère allégeance  
à Sa Majesté la Reine Elizabeth Deux,  
Reine du Canada, à ses héritiers et successeurs,  
que j'observerai fidèlement les lois du Canada  
et que je remplirai loyalement  
mes obligations de citoyen canadien.*

See there, the book, the oath, the flag, the clerk,  
"Now raise your hand, repeating after me.  
Say your name here, please – hand upon the book,  
Allegiance to Her Majesty the Queen."  
But these are only words, not real at that,  
We must have words where no real words may  
    sound.

You do a true and fearsome thing today,  
Go outside and stand barefoot on the ground.  
This ground is yours now. This air is your air,  
And you have solemn duties to uphold  
To guard the land and people that you chose;  
Choose leaders, choose your laws. Be wise and bold.  
Your children breathe your life, and to them too  
You bear the duties that the land contends –  
To raise them that they understand the gift  
You give this day. Good luck, new citizens.  
But all of this you knew, I think, and more;  
You chose this place. Now, welcome to its shores.

# REVOLUTIONS

Rare Free Verse Found on a Train

*Attention passengers:*

*We are delayed due to an individual*

*Who relieved himself*

*On the train in front of us*

*And has had to be removed from the carriage.*

There's always someone

Who's having a worse day than you are.



Eulogy for the Walking Dead

There is triumphant change in human life;  
The old begets the new in steady wheels.  
And those who fight for stasis are as like  
To bring down wounds that fester as that heal.  
No good has come of silencing a man  
Whose beauty, ripe for picking, shows itself.  
If truly it is beauty, it will stand  
Though hell and heaven bar the way with death.

And though you think the dead may not go on  
Yet bodies turn to dust and thus to earth;  
The transmutation comes to everyone  
Lives ending from the moment of our birth.  
So any who draw breath, fine girls and boys  
Your choice lies here before you, in your hand:  
Will you be soil for living human joy  
Or will your only gift to the good land  
Be when you lie beneath it feeding spring?  
All things are changing and all things will change  
And death, if meaningless, will yet still bring  
Fresh fodder for the yearly-dying grain.

You may plant joy, reap love, and beauty give,  
Or die alive and only dying, live.

For The Artist In Wartime

When he is hungry, fill his mouth with words;  
Teach her to recite while fever burns.  
Build something out of scraps, for little pay;  
At night the room's unheated; sleep in turns.  
"The money has all gone. There's no return  
On beauty, and we can't invest in joy.  
The dividends of war outnumber peace;  
If you want pay, go be a soldier boy.  
You want to live for art, then art you'll eat;  
Art will be your doctor, keep your books.  
Art will have to keep you warm at night."  
The moneymen won't give you second looks.  
But when the soldiers come all limping home  
Not cash nor goods will soothe their deadened eyes;  
And riots in the streets are the result  
Of those who live too narrow, too-small lives.  
The parents often starve to feed the young,  
But there will be a recompense at last  
And when they know you can't get love with guns  
The makers will be kings of all the lands.  
So bide a while and fill your mouths with words;  
Recite, recite, recite, while fever burns.

Book For Sale

My soul is not for barter; nor my eyes  
My lips and tongue, my hands, or any part  
Of me. A fortune cannot rent them; that  
Would nourish just the absence and the want.  
You little devils and you creeping imps,  
I know your myths; to you I can put names  
And having named you, know to banish you.  
Divinity I know as well, and will  
Not bend to less than any god but this:  
The frenzy that possesses from within,  
The channel in the soul that, yet unbought,  
Distills more pure than outer bodies show  
Or ever can be known. My words are mine.  
The sale of those is not the sale of souls.  
My hands have left their imprints on the clay  
And you may have the castings. Please yourself  
With them, by bargain or by gift or loan,  
So likewise pleasing me. All this above:  
My heart my own. Its workings, take with love.

The Spirit Light

The stage is dead; the cast has gone away;  
The crew is sweeping floors and counting time,  
Pounding boards with scuffs from costume shoes  
Like echoes of the actors in their lines.  
At last the work is done and tired hands  
Can catch the last train home with all at rights;  
A young man with a lamp atop a pole  
Has placed it center-stage and dimmed the lights.  
It is the spirit-light, left from the days  
When gas illumed the stage and must stay on.  
The actors say the lamp is there to guide  
The silent ghosts, unknown, who likewise come  
And walk the floors themselves, reciting lines  
Which long forgot still linger in dumb walls:  
Flitting shadow plays performed by night  
With silent accolades at curtain call.  
So I have often waited in the dark,  
When all the rest were gone, to see the ghosts –  
The more fool I. They saw me from the wings  
And knew I had no place yet in their host.  
I know life passes on, but in the night  
I know too that they see the spirit light.

By The Days

Everything that can be said has been.  
The train is poet's country, in the end.  
However grand or paltry you have done  
It matters little. Working, dreaming men  
have worked or dreamed according to their need  
When they are on the solid iron tracks –  
But even if your sowing brings no seed  
You still have done this much: have crossed the flats  
The rivers, roads, and gullies, passed the yards  
Built too-near to the stations. You have seen  
The poor in tar-tack houses fenced with wires  
And dreamers, what you witness, you have been.  
Let others take the faster, crowded ways;  
My heart prefers to travel by the days.

Fugue, Keyed for Snow and Wind

And now the snow has fallen, and the trees  
Strike nakedly against the winter sky –  
But that's not new. The seasons always turn  
And on time burns, all this in poets' eyes  
So often seen and writ. So what's to say?  
The ground's froze shut. Too cold to sow or reap,  
Though in this day and age there's still a crop  
Grown somewhere in the world. Thus, easy sleep!  
You will not starve if you have ready wits  
And two good hands, and solid thick-soled boots  
And in the chill can walk your easy way  
Delighting in the deep drumbeat of roots  
The struggle with the wind, the frozen sun  
That dryly burns above in the embrace  
Of clouds that break apart and form again.  
This the inheritance of all men's race.  
Thus though all round is death and winter's sting,  
Strive not for spring, but for the joy of things.

Dog

Had I the faith in me that has my dog  
I would be reckoned arrogant at best  
And yet what he can see in me is this:  
What I yet am, with all my sins redressed.  
The parts of me still possible to love  
He sees without the parts that others hate  
Thus I suppose he knows as gods might know  
Had they the mercy infinite they claim.  
Thus in his eyes I see a perfect man  
And strive to be much better than I am.

Not Much Consolation, I Know

Arthritis stiffens fingers  
And pneumonia causes coughs  
Rheumatism lingers  
All this science cannot solve;  
But if you fear time's passing might  
Infinity's dull drums  
Recall old age is not a right –  
Take heart! You might die young.

In Reply To Mr. Yeats

And why should some poor tethered bird  
Once-hooded, hear his master's call  
When now he has again been sent to wing?  
Things fall apart; thus ever is the way  
That we move upwards. Anarchy  
Does this at least: new things arise.  
I see no tides but that the moon pulls in  
A necessary ceremony, and most innocent.  
The best lack no conviction, but are young  
And we deride their passionate beliefs.

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Perhaps your second coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Vanity makes  
You certain of your own great destiny  
That some most fearsome god selected you  
To be our final prophet of the end.  
A shape with lion body and the head of an ass  
A gaze blank and hopeless without light  
You move your slow lips while all about  
Reel your disciples, shadows ignorant.  
The darkness drops again; but I have seen  
Twenty centuries of human life  
Are vexed the more by Prophets such as you.  
That rough beast slouching towards the eastern sky  
Is dawn, and nothing more, reborn each day.



Midwest

We didn't shoot off fireworks or shout,  
Dance in the street, tell strangers the news.  
We made no noise at all. It was  
Incredibly, eerily silent that night,  
The night this particular History was made –  
The way it is on Christmas, on Thanksgiving day.  
I joked we'd all already gone to bed.

Here in the open spaces our ancestors learned to be  
practical:  
Not to panic, nor to show too much pleasure,  
Turning impassive faces to the land,  
The rain, the shaking earth,  
The heat of summer and the snow.

I have seen us triumphant,  
Hundreds-thousands strong,  
But it is not the light or noise of others  
In other places.

*By The Days*

Instead I have seen a million stand,  
Watching, quiet in the dark,  
Waiting with half-smiles, drawn brows,  
With flags about our shoulders  
Or heroes reflected in our eyes,  
A sea of the pragmatic.

We know, like you, that people, times,  
Events are History.  
But so is the open land, the storm, the changing sky,  
And fire, plague, and death.  
The scars still furrowing our skins,  
We have learned to respect History.

And to be wary of it.

Among the Scientists

Until the measurements were made in full,  
Until I saw precision in a man,  
I did not know the value of the weights;  
The measures I had yet to understand.  
Until I saw machines that walked and worked  
And shook the hands of gods who made them well  
I did not comprehend why these things were;  
Their artistry I had not tongue to tell.  
One thinks machines and measurements are cold,  
One loves one's own art best, and that is right,  
But I have felt the warmth of students' hands,  
And heard them singing late into the night.  
Machines are also warm -- better by half,  
Machines are made by man, who loves and laughs.

Mathematical Threes

I stood once at a river delta's point,  
The perfect sum deducted circular  
And looked to see where branching water rolled  
Divided from the perpendicular.  
Then crouched upon the slick and fertile soil,  
And placed in each new branch a curious hand  
To see if one could already be told  
Apart from other, heaving down the sand.  
So we three in the sunlight through the trees  
In blue communion touching living flesh  
Comingled for one moment sweet and sure  
Unable to tell each one from the next.  
Thus two loves have I held in my hand's palm  
And found it not a trial but a balm.

Precession

For Nakki

Her hands are making circles in the air  
Describing arcs, parabolas --  
And moons, for all I know. No, I do care  
But I can't hope to fully understand  
The weight of stars, the spin of Earth,  
We wonder at these things together, and  
Entirely in separate, equal ways. The birth  
Of universes, circuits and machines,  
Robots, buildings, roads, all of these things  
She knows in ways which I don't have the means  
to see as she does. Mystic, intimate, she brings  
Her hands to know mathematics, formulae  
And I could never follow. I have ways,  
I can describe the arcs and moons in lies --  
Well, call them stories. All our days  
She'll understand why spinning tops  
Spin round in circles. What precession means,  
I cannot ever know, nor why it's so  
But circles intersecting, I can see:  
The poetry in spinning toys and coins.  
The differences between us long since died;  
her hands make truths and mine make honest lies.

**THE .DOC FILE OF  
J. ALFRED PRUFROCK**  
with deepest apologies to T.S. Eliot



*By The Days*

Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a laptop, put in sleep mode on a table  
Let us go through certain half-deserted streets  
The blinking-light retreats  
Of restless nights in free-wifi cafes  
And public libraries with internet  
Streets that follow like messageboard argument  
Of insidious intent  
To lead you to an overwhelming blog post  
Oh, do not ask, "What, yaoi?"  
Let us go and post an entry.

In the room the players come and go  
Talking of their scores on Halo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the Windows PC  
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the Macintosh  
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening  
Lingered upon the trackpads in their case  
Let fall upon its back the crumbs that fall to keyboards,  
Slipped by the flashdrive, made a sudden leap  
And seeing that it was a soft October night  
Curled once about the mouse, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time  
For the yellow smoke that slides along the desk,  
Rubbing its back upon the Windows PC;  
There will be time, there will be time



Sam Starbuck

To prepare a face to meet the icons that you meet;  
There will be time to murder and respawn  
And time for all the Chrome and Firefox  
That drag and drop a website on your plate;  
Time for .doc and time for .ppt  
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
And for a hundred fanfics and revisions,  
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the players come and go  
Talking of their scores on Halo.

And indeed there will be time  
To wonder, "Is this wanky?" "Is this fair?"  
Time to turn back and descend the stair  
With a comment on the level of your player  
[They will say: "How his server's lagging slow!"]  
My morning cosplay, collar mounting firmly to the chin  
My website rich and modest, but accessed by a simple  
login  
[They will say: "But how his content's growing thin!"]  
Do I dare  
Disturb the interwebs?  
In a minute there is time  
For fanfictions and revisions which Google Docs may  
reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all:—  
Have known the RPs, archives, messageboards

*By The Days*

I have measured out my life with usernames.  
I know the voices dying with a 404  
Beneath the music from a farther room.  
So how should I presume?

And I have known the mods already, known them all –  
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase  
And when I am banhammered, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am banned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin  
To spit out all the fragments of my browser cache?  
And how should I presume?

And I have known the sites already, known them all –  
Sites that are Web two-oh, white and bare  
[But on my cellphone, still given to fail!]  
It is the javascript impress  
That makes them so digress?  
Sites that stretch out like a table, or word-wrap like a  
shawl  
And should I then presume?  
And how should I log in?

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through archived files  
And watched the dialup sequences that blink  
No more from AOL in lonely Windows?

I should have been a line of ragged code,  
Scuttling through the compiler, breaking apps.

And the messageboard, the website, sleeps so peacefully!  
Smoothed by long fingers,  
Asleep...tired...or it malingers  
Returning 404, here in front of me.  
Should I, after iPhone apps and prices,  
Have the strength to force AT&T to crisis?  
But though I have wept and emailed, wept and played,  
Though I have seen my avatar brought in upon a platter,  
I am no hacker – and here's no great matter;  
I have seen the screen of my laptop flicker,  
And I have seen the eternal bluescreen hold my eye, and  
snicker,  
And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
After the games, social media, the blogs,  
Among the twitters, among some talk of IRC logs,  
Would it have been worth while  
To have bitten off the fandom with a smile,  
To have squeezed the internet into a ball  
To roll it toward some ass on Yahoo Questions  
To say, "I am Babbage, come from the dead,  
Come back to ban you all, I shall ban you all" –  
If one, sending a textmessage, autocorrected  
Should say: "That is not what I typed at all.  
That is not it. LOL."

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
Would have been worth while

After the LOLcats and the macros and the youtube  
clips,  
After the spambots, after the blog space, after LiveJournal  
trailing on the floor –  
And Digg, and so much more? –  
It is impossible to type just what I mean!  
But as if a new .avi threw the nerves in patterns on the  
screen:  
Would it have been worth while  
If one, texting or throwing back Red Bull,  
And turning towards the PC, should say,  
"That is not what I typed at all.  
That is not it. OH LOL."

No! I am not Lovelace,  
nor was meant to be,  
Am on some messageboard, one that will do  
To send things viral, start a meme or two,  
Edit the wiki, no doubt an easy tool,  
Deferential, glad to be of use,  
Pwning, sometimes, but anonymous,  
Filled with citations, all a bit obtuse;  
These edits, indeed, almost ridiculous –  
Can you not work Google?

I grow old... I grow old...  
I shall add some links to my blog roll.

Sam Starbuck

Shall I change my default pic? Do I dare to eat a peach?  
I shall play some World of Warcraft, and walk upon the  
beach.

I have heard the servers singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen cats talking in capslock on the web,  
All up in ur fridge, eatin' ur food  
When my laptop lights the darkness white and black.

We have lingered in the tubes of internet,  
By URLs wreathed with info, loaded-down  
Till cellphones ringing wake us, and we drown.

## **EPILOGUE**



What Are You Writing Now?

They ask their questions as if I could say,  
Sagelike, the mysteries of all the skies,  
Attendant galaxies and distant stars.  
I don't mind, though pretending to be wise  
Can wear a man towards the end of day.  
And then some hardy soul stands in the rear  
Asking what I cannot always know:  
"What are you writing now?" they wish to hear.  
What am I writing now. Words, words, and words!  
For every ten that reach the published book  
A hundred kept back out of guilty shame  
Not good enough to warrant second look.  
A novel on a Roman soldier's wife,  
An elegy for singing when I die,  
A play about a man from New Orleans,  
An ode to sing while I am yet alive.  
And now this poem, sir, written on you,  
Who innocent asks that – as if I knew.