

Merry-Go-Round
(after Mark Gertler's painting)

I cannot recall how we came to the fair;
I suppose that in our half-drunk state
We were drawn to the distant glow
And the tinkling music that flowed and sparkled
Like the beer we'd been drinking all day.

There were three of us now:
The soldier, the sailor and the airman,
A music hall joke out on the town.
But Bert was never far away.
When our laughter was loudest
He tore through it with a bayonet thrust,
Gouging a brief silence
Before we drank again to his memory
And coaxed the laughter back.

Dizzy and brazen with drink,
We watched the crowds troop on to the heath:
Loud matrons looking for fun,
Girls made anxious by our uniforms,
An elderly drunk shouting:
"We're proud of you lads, well done!"
We joined their ranks and marched
Past stalls and sideshows
To the heart of noise and light,
A gaudy carousel
Inviting us to board.

Small movements filled the nervous calm,
A red tunic brushed,
Backs straightened,
Hands reaching out to touch
Softly and secretly
Between gunmetal flanks.
There's comfort in the closeness
Of bodies ready to share a thrill.

From mechanical canter to gallop,
Brave shouts and false squeals of fright,
Breath snatched in heavy gun recoil,
Eyes blind in electric blue flight.

The world moving too fast to scream
Until, for one frozen second, as in a dream,
Spun to stillness by our velocity,
I saw Bert astride a lone horse
And around him,
Around us all,
Open-mouthed expressions
Of horror and joy.

By Trevor Breedon