

All the Way Home

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*It will all be over one day, and
what a day it will be, won't it?*

Albert Auerbach (1894 – 1918)



Foreword

In April 2017 the Mary Evans Picture Library invited Jane Clarke to write a sequence of poems in response to the Auerbach family archive belonging to Patricia Aubrey and represented by the library. Consisting of family photos, documents and other items, the collection offers a unique insight into how the First World War affected the members of one family, in particular Patricia's uncle, Albert Auerbach, who died in action in September 1918, and her Aunt Lucy, who survived the war and lived on into the early 1970s.

Albert Auerbach and his elder sister Lucy were close and, alongside the photos, Albert's letters to Lucy from his overseas postings have been a particular source of inspiration for Jane, with their insight into the minutiae of a soldier's daily life.

Aged twenty, Albert joined up on 1st September 1914, the very first day of the war, as a private in the 20th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers. On 20th July 1915 he received his commission as 2nd Lieutenant in the 1st London Regiment. Albert's first posting was to Gallipoli in November 1915, where he was involved in the evacuation of Suvla Bay and Cape Helles. After a time in Egypt he was posted to France, from where he was invalidated home with shell shock and dysentery on 3rd December 1916. He spent some time in hospital, but returned to France on 20th June 1918. He was killed by a shell at Bouchavesnes, Péronne, on the Somme, in the early morning of 1st September 1918, exactly four years to the day of his joining up.

During the war Lucy worked at the War Office in London, but occasionally travelled to the Worcestershire village of Madresfield, near Malvern, to help with agricultural and dairy work. A gifted pianist, she made her living after the war as a piano teacher.

Albert was posthumously awarded the Military Cross, presented to his mother at Wellington Barracks, London, on 10th July 1919. His sister Lucy made her own personal pilgrimage to the Somme area in September 1920 to see where her brother had fought and died.

November 1918, a time of relief, happiness and peace for some, was a time of tragic bereavement for the Auerbach family, who had lost their eldest son just as the war was coming to an end.

Gill Stoker, Mary Evans Picture Library, April 2019



September

The week before he left for France
we leaned a ladder into the apple trees,

picked Cox's Orange Pippins,
Newton Wonders, Brownlee's Russets,

laid them one by one
on dusty floorboards in the attic,

then planted hyacinths and amaryllis for spring.
We sat out after dinner

and talked of how we loved
this time of year,

when hollyhocks are past their best
but still stand tall

in copper, pink and cream,
beside clematis and the last of the sweet pea.

Mortal Wound

The gunner recites his village
easing in for the night –

horse chestnut trees circling the green,
children on swings,

their mother's shout, *come in*
out of that or the púca will catch you,

a couple sitting close on a bench,
oblivious to everything,

someone calls *quiet* for the weather forecast,
no stars to be seen,

but sure as a loaf on the back of the stove,
the moon slowly on the rise.

The Game, St. Stephen's Day 1916

*from an eyewitness account by Fr. Browne,
chaplain to the Irish Guards.*

The goal posts were blown
to match sticks –

seven men wounded,
two defenders
and a keeper dead.

Still hot,
their bodies were stretchered
from the pitch.

Friends filled their places.
The ref blew the whistle again.