

Classic Poetry Series

Joyce Kilmer

- poems -

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A Blue Valentine

(For Aline)

Monsignore,
Right Reverend Bishop Valentinus,
Sometime of Interamna, which is called Ferni,
Now of the delightful Court of Heaven,
I respectfully salute you,
I genuflect
And I kiss your episcopal ring.

It is not, Monsignore,
The fragrant memory of your holy life,
Nor that of your shining and joyous martyrdom,
Which causes me now to address you.
But since this is your august festival, Monsignore,
It seems appropriate to me to state
According to a venerable and agreeable custom,
That I love a beautiful lady.
Her eyes, Monsignore,
Are so blue that they put lovely little blue reflections
On everything that she looks at,
Such as a wall
Or the moon
Or my heart.
It is like the light coming through blue stained glass,
Yet not quite like it,
For the blueness is not transparent,
Only translucent.
Her soul's light shines through,
But her soul cannot be seen.
It is something elusive, whimsical, tender, wanton, infantile, wise
And noble.
She wears, Monsignore, a blue garment,
Made in the manner of the Japanese.
It is very blue --
I think that her eyes have made it more blue,
Sweetly staining it
As the pressure of her body has graciously given it form.
Loving her, Monsignore,
I love all her attributes;
But I believe
That even if I did not love her
I would love the blueness of her eyes,
And her blue garment, made in the manner of the Japanese.

Monsignore,
I have never before troubled you with a request.
The saints whose ears I chiefly worry with my pleas
are the most exquisite and maternal Brigid,
Gallant Saint Stephen, who puts fire in my blood,
And your brother bishop, my patron,
The generous and jovial Saint Nicholas of Bari.

But, of your courtesy, Monsignore,
Do me this favour:
When you this morning make your way
To the Ivory Throne that bursts into bloom with roses
because of her who sits upon it,
When you come to pay your devoir to Our Lady,
I beg you, say to her:
"Madame, a poor poet, one of your singing servants yet on earth,
Has asked me to say that at this moment he is especially grateful to you
For wearing a blue gown."

Joyce Kilmer

Alarm Clocks

When Dawn strides out to wake a dewy farm
Across green fields and yellow hills of hay
The little twittering birds laugh in his way
And poise triumphant on his shining arm.
He bears a sword of flame but not to harm
The wakened life that feels his quickening sway
And barnyard voices shrilling "It is day!"
Take by his grace a new and alien charm.

But in the city, like a wounded thing
That limps to cover from the angry chase,
He steals down streets where sickly arc-lights sing,
And wanly mock his young and shameful face;
And tiny gongs with cruel fervor ring
In many a high and dreary sleeping place.

Joyce Kilmer

As Winds That Blow Against A Star

(For Aline)

Now by what whim of wanton chance
Do radiant eyes know sombre days?
And feet that shod in light should dance
Walk weary and laborious ways?

But rays from Heaven, white and whole,
May penetrate the gloom of earth;
And tears but nourish, in your soul,
The glory of celestial mirth.

The darts of toil and sorrow, sent
Against your peaceful beauty, are
As foolish and as impotent
As winds that blow against a star.

Joyce Kilmer

Ballade of my Lady's Beauty

Squire Adam had two wives, they say,
Two wives had he, for his delight,
He kissed and clypt them all the day
And clypt and kissed them all the night.
Now Eve like ocean foam was white
And Lilith roses dipped in wine,
But though they were a goodly sight
No lady is so fair as mine.

To Venus some folk tribute pay
And Queen of Beauty she is hight,
And Sainte Marie the world doth sway
In cerule napery bedight.
My wonderment these twain invite,
Their comeliness it is divine,
And yet I say in their despite,
No lady is so fair as mine.

Dame Helen caused a grievous fray,
For love of her brave men did fight,
The eyes of her made sages fey
And put their hearts in woeful plight.
To her no rhymes will I indite,
For her no garlands will I twine,
Though she be made of flowers and light
No lady is so fair as mine.

L'Envoi

Prince Eros, Lord of lovely might,
Who on Olympus dost recline,
Do I not tell the truth aright?
No lady is so fair as mine.

Joyce Kilmer

Citizen of the World

No longer of Him be it said
"He hath no place to lay His head."

In every land a constant lamp
Flames by His small and mighty camp.

There is no strange and distant place
That is not gladdened by His face.

And every nation kneels to hail
The Splendour shining through Its veil.

Cloistered beside the shouting street,
Silent, He calls me to His feet.

Imprisoned for His love of me
He makes my spirit greatly free.

And through my lips that uttered sin
The King of Glory enters in.

Joyce Kilmer

Dave Lilly

There's a brook on the side of Greylock that used to be full of trout,
But there's nothing there now but minnows; they say it is all fished out.
I fished there many a Summer day some twenty years ago,
And I never quit without getting a mess of a dozen or so.

There was a man, Dave Lilly, who lived on the North Adams road,
And he spent all his time fishing, while his neighbors reaped and sowed.
He was the luckiest fisherman in the Berkshire hills, I think.
And when he didn't go fishing he'd sit in the tavern and drink.

Well, Dave is dead and buried and nobody cares very much;
They have no use in Greylock for drunkards and loafers and such.
But I always liked Dave Lilly, he was pleasant as you could wish;
He was shiftless and good-for-nothing, but he certainly could fish.

The other night I was walking up the hill from Williamstown
And I came to the brook I mentioned,
and I stopped on the bridge and sat down.
I looked at the blackened water with its little flecks of white
And I heard it ripple and whisper in the still of the Summer night.

And after I'd been there a minute it seemed to me I could feel
The presence of someone near me, and I heard the hum of a reel.
And the water was churned and broken, and something was brought to land
By a twist and flirt of a shadowy rod in a deft and shadowy hand.

I scrambled down to the brookside and hunted all about;
There wasn't a sign of a fisherman; there wasn't a sign of a trout.
But I heard somebody chuckle behind the hollow oak
And I got a whiff of tobacco like Lilly used to smoke.

It's fifteen years, they tell me, since anyone fished that brook;
And there's nothing in it but minnows that nibble the bait off your hook.
But before the sun has risen and after the moon has set
I know that it's full of ghostly trout for Lilly's ghost to get.

I guess I'll go to the tavern and get a bottle of rye
And leave it down by the hollow oak, where Lilly's ghost went by.
I meant to go up on the hillside and try to find his grave
And put some flowers on it -- but this will be better for Dave.

Joyce Kilmer

Delicatessen

Why is that wanton gossip Fame
So dumb about this man's affairs?
Why do we titter at his name
Who come to buy his curious wares?

Here is a shop of wonderment.
From every land has come a prize;
Rich spices from the Orient,
And fruit that knew Italian skies,

And figs that ripened by the sea
In Smyrna, nuts from hot Brazil,
Strange pungent meats from Germany,
And currants from a Grecian hill.

He is the lord of goodly things
That make the poor man's table gay,
Yet of his worth no minstrel sings
And on his tomb there is no bay.

Perhaps he lives and dies unpraised,
This trafficker in humble sweets,
Because his little shops are raised
By thousands in the city streets.

Yet stars in greater numbers shine,
And violets in millions grow,
And they in many a golden line
Are sung, as every child must know.

Perhaps Fame thinks his worried eyes,
His wrinkled, shrewd, pathetic face,
His shop, and all he sells and buys
Are desperately commonplace.

Well, it is true he has no sword
To dangle at his booted knees.
He leans across a slab of board,
And draws his knife and slices cheese.

He never heard of chivalry,
He longs for no heroic times;
He thinks of pickles, olives, tea,
And dollars, nickles, cents and dimes.

His world has narrow walls, it seems;
By counters is his soul confined;
His wares are all his hopes and dreams,
They are the fabric of his mind.

Yet -- in a room above the store
There is a woman -- and a child

Pattered just now across the floor;
The shopman looked at him and smiled.

For, once he thrilled with high romance
And tuned to love his eager voice.
Like any cavalier of France
He wooed the maiden of his choice.

And now deep in his weary heart
Are sacred flames that whitely burn.
He has of Heaven's grace a part
Who loves, who is beloved in turn.

And when the long day's work is done,
(How slow the leaden minutes ran!)
Home, with his wife and little son,
He is no huckster, but a man!

And there are those who grasp his hand,
Who drink with him and wish him well.
O in no drear and lonely land
Shall he who honors friendship dwell.

And in his little shop, who knows
What bitter games of war are played?
Why, daily on each corner grows
A foe to rob him of his trade.

He fights, and for his fireside's sake;
He fights for clothing and for bread:
The lances of his foemen make
A steely halo round his head.

He decks his window artfully,
He haggles over paltry sums.
In this strange field his war must be
And by such blows his triumph comes.

What if no trumpet sounds to call
His armed legions to his side?
What if, to no ancestral hall
He comes in all a victor's pride?

The scene shall never fit the deed.
Grotesquely wonders come to pass.
The fool shall mount an Arab steed
And Jesus ride upon an ass.

This man has home and child and wife
And battle set for every day.
This man has God and love and life;
These stand, all else shall pass away.

O Carpenter of Nazareth,
Whose mother was a village maid,
Shall we, Thy children, blow our breath
In scorn on any humble trade?

Have pity on our foolishness
And give us eyes, that we may see
Beneath the shopman's clumsy dress
The splendor of humanity!

Joyce Kilmer

Easter

The air is like a butterfly
With frail blue wings.
The happy earth looks at the sky
And sings.

Joyce Kilmer

Easter Week

1 "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
2 It's with O'Leary in the grave."
3 Then, Yeats, what gave that Easter dawn
4 A hue so radiantly brave?

5 There was a rain of blood that day,
6 Red rain in gay blue April weather.
7 It blessed the earth till it gave birth
8 To valour thick as blooms of heather.

9 Romantic Ireland never dies!
10 O'Leary lies in fertile ground,
11 And songs and spears throughout the years
12 Rise up where patriot graves are found.

13 Immortal patriots newly dead
14 And ye that bled in bygone years,
15 What banners rise before your eyes?
16 What is the tune that greets your ears?

17 The young Republic's banners smile
18 For many a mile where troops convene.
19 O'Connell street is loudly sweet
20 With strains of Wearing of the Green.

21 The soil of Ireland throbs and glows
22 With life that knows the hour is here
23 To strike again like Irishmen
24 For that which Irishmen hold dear.

25 Lord Edward leaves his resting place
26 And Sarsfield's face is glad and fierce.
27 See Emmet leap from troubled sleep
28 To grasp the hand of Padraic Pearse!

29 There is no rope can strangle song
30 And not for long death takes his toll.
31 No prison bars can dim the stars
32 Nor quicklime eat the living soul.

33 Romantic Ireland is not old.
34 For years untold her youth shall shine.
35 Her heart is fed on Heavenly bread,
36 The blood of martyrs is her wine.

Joyce Kilmer

Folly

(For A. K. K.)

What distant mountains thrill and glow
Beneath our Lady Folly's tread?
Why has she left us, wise in woe,
Shrewd, practical, uncomforted?
We cannot love or dream or sing,
We are too cynical to pray,
There is no joy in anything
Since Lady Folly went away.

Many a knight and gentle maid,
Whose glory shines from years gone by,
Through ignorance was unafraid
And as a fool knew how to die.
Saint Folly rode beside Jehanne
And broke the ranks of Hell with her,
And Folly's smile shone brightly on
Christ's plaything, Brother Juniper.

Our minds are troubled and defiled
By study in a weary school.
O for the folly of the child!
The ready courage of the fool!
Lord, crush our knowledge utterly
And make us humble, simple men;
And cleansed of wisdom, let us see
Our Lady Folly's face again.

Joyce Kilmer

Houses

(For Aline)

When you shall die and to the sky
Serenely, delicately go,
Saint Peter, when he sees you there,
Will clash his keys and say:
"Now talk to her, Sir Christopher!
And hurry, Michelangelo!
She wants to play at building,
And you've got to help her play!"

Every architect will help erect
A palace on a lawn of cloud,
With rainbow beams and a sunset roof,
And a level star-tiled floor;
And at your will you may use the skill
Of this gay angelic crowd,
When a house is made you will throw it down,
And they'll build you twenty more.

For Christopher Wren and these other men
Who used to build on earth
Will love to go to work again
If they may work for you.
"This porch," you'll say, "should go this way!"
And they'll work for all they're worth,
And they'll come to your palace every morning,
And ask you what to do.

And when night comes down on Heaven-town
(If there should be night up there)
You will choose the house you like the best
Of all that you can see:
And its walls will glow as you drowsily go
To the bed up the golden stair,
And I hope you'll be gentle enough to keep
A room in your house for me.

Joyce Kilmer

Love's Lantern

(For Aline)

Because the road was steep and long
And through a dark and lonely land,
God set upon my lips a song
And put a lantern in my hand.

Through miles on weary miles of night
That stretch relentless in my way
My lantern burns serene and white,
An unexhausted cup of day.

O golden lights and lights like wine,
How dim your boasted splendors are.
Behold this little lamp of mine;
It is more starlike than a star!

Joyce Kilmer

Madness

(For Sara Teasdale)

The lonely farm, the crowded street,
The palace and the slum,
Give welcome to my silent feet
As, bearing gifts, I come.

Last night a beggar crouched alone,
A ragged helpless thing;
I set him on a moonbeam throne --
Today he is a king.

Last night a king in orb and crown
Held court with splendid cheer;
Today he tears his purple gown
And moans and shrieks in fear.

Not iron bars, nor flashing spears,
Not land, nor sky, nor sea,
Nor love's artillery of tears
Can keep mine own from me.

Serene, unchanging, ever fair,
I smile with secret mirth
And in a net of mine own hair
I swing the captive earth.

Joyce Kilmer

Main Street

(For S.M.L.)

I like to look at the blossomy track of the moon upon the sea,
But it isn't half so fine a sight as Main Street used to be
When it all was covered over with a couple of feet of snow,
And over the crisp and radiant road the ringing sleighs would go.

Now, Main Street bordered with autumn leaves, it was a pleasant thing,
And its gutters were gay with dandelions early in the Spring;
I like to think of it white with frost or dusty in the heat,
Because I think it is humaner than any other street.

A city street that is busy and wide is ground by a thousand wheels,
And a burden of traffic on its breast is all it ever feels:
It is dully conscious of weight and speed and of work that never ends,
But it cannot be human like Main Street, and recognise its friends.

There were only about a hundred teams on Main Street in a day,
And twenty or thirty people, I guess, and some children out to play.
And there wasn't a wagon or buggy, or a man or a girl or a boy
That Main Street didn't remember, and somehow seem to enjoy.

The truck and the motor and trolley car and the elevated train
They make the weary city street reverberate with pain:
But there is yet an echo left deep down within my heart
Of the music the Main Street cobblestones made beneath a butcher's cart.

God be thanked for the Milky Way that runs across the sky,
That's the path that my feet would tread whenever I have to die.
Some folks call it a Silver Sword, and some a Pearly Crown,
But the only thing I think it is, is Main Street, Heaventown.

Joyce Kilmer

Martin

When I am tired of earnest men,
Intense and keen and sharp and clever,
Pursuing fame with brush or pen
Or counting metal disks forever,
Then from the halls of Shadowland
Beyond the trackless purple sea
Old Martin's ghost comes back to stand
Beside my desk and talk to me.

Still on his delicate pale face
A quizzical thin smile is showing,
His cheeks are wrinkled like fine lace,
His kind blue eyes are gay and glowing.
He wears a brilliant-hued cravat,
A suit to match his soft grey hair,
A rakish stick, a knowing hat,
A manner blithe and debonair.

How good that he who always knew
That being lovely was a duty,
Should have gold halls to wander through
And should himself inhabit beauty.
How like his old unselfish way
To leave those halls of splendid mirth
And comfort those condemned to stay
Upon the dull and sombre earth.

Some people ask: "What cruel chance
Made Martin's life so sad a story?"
Martin? Why, he exhaled romance,
And wore an overcoat of glory.
A fleck of sunlight in the street,
A horse, a book, a girl who smiled,
Such visions made each moment sweet
For this receptive ancient child.

Because it was old Martin's lot
To be, not make, a decoration,
Shall we then scorn him, having not
His genius of appreciation?
Rich joy and love he got and gave;
His heart was merry as his dress;
Pile laurel wreaths upon his grave
Who did not gain, but was, success!

Joyce Kilmer

Memorial Day

"Dulce et decorum est"

The bugle echoes shrill and sweet,
But not of war it sings to-day.
The road is rhythmic with the feet
Of men-at-arms who come to pray.

The roses blossom white and red
On tombs where weary soldiers lie;
Flags wave above the honored dead
And martial music cleaves the sky.

Above their wreath-strewn graves we kneel,
They kept the faith and fought the fight.
Through flying lead and crimson steel
They plunged for Freedom and the Right.

May we, their grateful children, learn
Their strength, who lie beneath this sod,
Who went through fire and death to earn
At last the accolade of God.

In shining rank on rank arrayed
They march, the legions of the Lord;
He is their Captain unafraid,
The Prince of Peace . . . Who brought a sword.

Joyce Kilmer

Mount Hovenkopf

Serene he stands, with mist serenely crowned,
And draws a cloak of trees about his breast.
The thunder roars but cannot break his rest
And from his rugged face the tempests bound.
He does not heed the angry lightning's wound,
The raging blizzard is his harmless guest,
And human life is but a passing jest
To him who sees Time spin the years around.

But fragile souls, in skyey reaches find
High vantage-points and view him from afar.
How low he seems to the ascended mind,
How brief he seems where all things endless are;
This little playmate of the mighty wind
This young companion of an ancient star.

Joyce Kilmer

Old Poets

(For Robert Cortez Holliday)

If I should live in a forest
And sleep underneath a tree,
No grove of impudent saplings
Would make a home for me.

I'd go where the old oaks gather,
Serene and good and strong,
And they would not sigh and tremble
And vex me with a song.

The pleasantest sort of poet
Is the poet who's old and wise,
With an old white beard and wrinkles
About his kind old eyes.

For these young flippertigibbets
A-rhyming their hours away
They won't be still like honest men
And listen to what you say.

The young poet screams forever
About his sex and his soul;
But the old man listens, and smokes his pipe,
And polishes its bowl.

There should be a club for poets
Who have come to seventy year.
They should sit in a great hall drinking
Red wine and golden beer.

They would shuffle in of an evening,
Each one to his cushioned seat,
And there would be mellow talking
And silence rich and sweet.

There is no peace to be taken
With poets who are young,
For they worry about the wars to be fought
And the songs that must be sung.

But the old man knows that he's in his chair
And that God's on His throne in the sky.
So he sits by the fire in comfort
And he lets the world spin by.

Joyce Kilmer

Pennies

A few long-hoarded pennies in his hand
Behold him stand;
A kilted Hedonist, perplexed and sad.
The joy that once he had,
The first delight of ownership is fled.
He bows his little head.
Ah, cruel Time, to kill
That splendid thrill!

Then in his tear-dimmed eyes
New lights arise.
He drops his treasured pennies on the ground,
They roll and bound
And scattered, rest.
Now with what zest
He runs to find his errant wealth again!

So unto men
Doth God, depriving that He may bestow.
Fame, health and money go,
But that they may, new found, be newly sweet.
Yea, at His feet
Sit, waiting us, to their concealment bid,
All they, our lovers, whom His Love hath hid.

Lo, comfort blooms on pain, and peace on strife,
And gain on loss.
What is the key to Everlasting Life?
A blood-stained Cross.

Joyce Kilmer

Poets

Vain is the chiming of forgotten bells
That the wind sways above a ruined shrine.
Vainer his voice in whom no longer dwells
Hunger that craves immortal Bread and Wine.

Light songs we breathe that perish with our breath
Out of our lips that have not kissed the rod.
They shall not live who have not tasted death.
They only sing who are struck dumb by God.

Joyce Kilmer

Prayer of a Soldier in France

- 1 My shoulders ache beneath my pack
2 (Lie easier, Cross, upon His back).
- 3 I march with feet that burn and smart
4 (Tread, Holy Feet, upon my heart).
- 5 Men shout at me who may not speak
6 (They scourged Thy back and smote Thy cheek).
- 7 I may not lift a hand to clear
8 My eyes of salty drops that sear.
- 9 (Then shall my fickle soul forget
10 Thy agony of Bloody Sweat?)
- 11 My rifle hand is stiff and numb
12 (From Thy pierced palm red rivers come).
- 13 Lord, Thou didst suffer more for me
14 Than all the hosts of land and sea.
- 15 So let me render back again
16 This millionth of Thy gift. Amen.

Joyce Kilmer

Roofs

(For Amelia Josephine Burr)

The road is wide and the stars are out
and the breath of the night is sweet,
And this is the time when wanderlust should seize upon my feet.
But I'm glad to turn from the open road and the starlight on my face,
And to leave the splendour of out-of-doors for a human dwelling place.

I never have seen a vagabond who really liked to roam
All up and down the streets of the world and not to have a home:
The tramp who slept in your barn last night and left at break of day
Will wander only until he finds another place to stay.

A gypsy-man will sleep in his cart with canvas overhead;
Or else he'll go into his tent when it is time for bed.
He'll sit on the grass and take his ease so long as the sun is high,
But when it is dark he wants a roof to keep away the sky.

If you call a gypsy a vagabond, I think you do him wrong,
For he never goes a-travelling but he takes his home along.
And the only reason a road is good, as every wanderer knows,
Is just because of the homes, the homes, the homes to which it goes.

They say that life is a highway and its milestones are the years,
And now and then there's a toll-gate where you buy your way with tears.
It's a rough road and a steep road and it stretches broad and far,
But at last it leads to a golden Town where golden Houses are.

Joyce Kilmer

Rouge Bouquet

In a wood they call the Rouge Bouquet
There is a new-made grave to-day,
Built by never a spade nor pick
Yet covered with earth ten metres thick.
There lie many fighting men,
 Dead in their youthful prime,
Never to laugh nor love again
 Nor taste the Summertime.
For Death came flying through the air
And stopped his flight at the dugout stair,
Touched his prey and left them there,
 Clay to clay.
He hid their bodies stealthily
In the soil of the land they fought to free
 And fled away.
Now over the grave abrupt and clear
 Three volleys ring;
And perhaps their brave young spirits hear
 The bugle sing:
"Go to sleep!
Go to sleep!
Slumber well where the shell screamed and fell.
Let your rifles rest on the muddy floor,
You will not need them any more.
Danger's past;
Now at last,
Go to sleep!"

There is on earth no worthier grave
To hold the bodies of the brave
Than this place of pain and pride
Where they nobly fought and nobly died.
Never fear but in the skies
Saints and angels stand
Smiling with their holy eyes
On this new-come band.
St. Michael's sword darts through the air
And touches the aureole on his hair
As he sees them stand saluting there,
 His stalwart sons;
And Patrick, Brigid, Columkill
Rejoice that in veins of warriors still
 The Gael's blood runs.
And up to Heaven's doorway floats,
 From the wood called Rouge Bouquet,
A delicate cloud of buglenotes
 That softly say:
"Farewell!
Farewell!
Comrades true, born anew, peace to you!
Your souls shall be where the heroes are
And your memory shine like the morning-star.

Brave and dear,
Shield us here.
Farewell!"

Joyce Kilmer

Servant Girl and Grocer's Boy

Her lips' remark was: "Oh, you kid!"
Her soul spoke thus (I know it did):

"O king of realms of endless joy,
My own, my golden grocer's boy,

I am a princess forced to dwell
Within a lonely kitchen cell,

While you go dashing through the land
With loveliness on every hand.

Your whistle strikes my eager ears
Like music of the choring spheres.

The mighty earth grows faint and reels
Beneath your thundering wagon wheels.

How keenly, perilously sweet
To cling upon that swaying seat!

How happy she who by your side
May share the splendors of that ride!

Ah, if you will not take my hand
And bear me off across the land,

Then, traveller from Arcady,
Remain awhile and comfort me.

What other maiden can you find
So young and delicate and kind?"

Her lips' remark was: "Oh, you kid!"
Her soul spoke thus (I know it did).

Joyce Kilmer

St. Alexis, Patron of Beggars

We who beg for bread as we daily tread
Country lane and city street,
Let us kneel and pray on the broad highway
To the saint with the vagrant feet.
Our altar light is a buttercup bright,
And our shrine is a bank of sod,
But still we share St. Alexis' care,
The Vagabond of God.

They gave him a home in purple Rome
And a princess for his bride,
But he rowed away on his wedding day
Down the Tiber's rushing tide.
And he came to land on the Asian strand
Where the heathen people dwell;
As a beggar he strayed and he preached and prayed
And he saved their souls from hell.

Bowed with years and pain he came back again
To his father's dwelling place.
There was none to see who this tramp might be,
For they knew not his bearded face.
But his father said, "Give him drink and bread
And a couch underneath the stair."
So Alexis crept to his hole and slept.
But he might not linger there.

For when night came down on the seven-hilled town,
And the emperor hurried in,
Saying, "Lo, I hear that a saint is near
Who will cleanse us of our sin,"
Then they looked in vain where the saint had lain,
For his soul had fled afar,
From his fleshly home he had gone to roam
Where the gold-paved highways are.

We who beg for bread as we daily tread
Country lane and city street,
Let us kneel and pray on the broad highway
To the saint with the vagrant feet.
Our altar light is a buttercup bright,
And our shrine is a bank of sod,
But still we share St. Alexis' care,
The Vagabond of God!

Joyce Kilmer

St. Laurence

Within the broken Vatican
The murdered Pope is lying dead.
The soldiers of Valerian
Their evil hands are wet and red.

Unarmed, unmoved, St. Laurence waits,
His cassock is his only mail.
The troops of Hell have burst the gates,
But Christ is Lord, He shall prevail.

They have encompassed him with steel,
They spit upon his gentle face,
He smiles and bleeds, nor will reveal
The Church's hidden treasure-place.

Ah, faithful steward, worthy knight,
Well hast thou done. Behold thy fee!
Since thou hast fought the goodly fight
A martyr's death is fixed for thee.

St. Laurence, pray for us to bear
The faith which glorifies thy name.
St. Laurence, pray for us to share
The wounds of Love's consuming flame.

Joyce Kilmer

Stars

(For the Rev. James J. Daly, S. J.)

Bright stars, yellow stars, flashing through the air,
Are you errant strands of Lady Mary's hair?
As she slits the cloudy veil and bends down through,
Do you fall across her cheeks and over heaven too?

Gay stars, little stars, you are little eyes,
Eyes of baby angels playing in the skies.
Now and then a winged child turns his merry face
Down toward the spinning world -- what a funny place!

Jesus Christ came from the Cross (Christ receive my soul!)
In each perfect hand and foot there was a bloody hole.
Four great iron spikes there were, red and never dry,
Michael plucked them from the Cross and set them in the sky.

Christ's Troop, Mary's Guard, God's own men,
Draw your swords and strike at Hell and strike again.
Every steel-born spark that flies where God's battles are,
Flashes past the face of God, and is a star.

Joyce Kilmer

The Apartment House

Severe against the pleasant arc of sky
The great stone box is cruelly displayed.
The street becomes more dreary from its shade,
And vagrant breezes touch its walls and die.
Here sullen convicts in their chains might lie,
Or slaves toil dumbly at some dreary trade.
How worse than folly is their labor made
Who cleft the rocks that this might rise on high!

Yet, as I look, I see a woman's face
Gleam from a window far above the street.
This is a house of homes, a sacred place,
By human passion made divinely sweet.
How all the building thrills with sudden grace
Beneath the magic of Love's golden feet!

Joyce Kilmer

The Fourth Shepherd

(For Thomas Walsh)

I

On nights like this the huddled sheep
Are like white clouds upon the grass,
And merry herdsmen guard their sleep
And chat and watch the big stars pass.

It is a pleasant thing to lie
Upon the meadow on the hill
With kindly fellowship near by
Of sheep and men of gentle will.

I lean upon my broken crook
And dream of sheep and grass and men --
O shameful eyes that cannot look
On any honest thing again!

On bloody feet I clambered down
And fled the wages of my sin,
I am the leavings of the town,
And meanly serve its meanest inn.

I tramp the courtyard stones in grief,
While sleep takes man and beast to her.
And every cloud is calling "Thief!"
And every star calls "Murderer!"

II

The hand of God is sure and strong,
Nor shall a man forever flee
The bitter punishment of wrong.
The wrath of God is over me!

With ashen bread and wine of tears
Shall I be solaced in my pain.
I wear through black and endless years
Upon my brow the mark of Cain.

III

Poor vagabond, so old and mild,
Will they not keep him for a night?
And She, a woman great with child,
So frail and pitiful and white.

Good people, since the tavern door
Is shut to you, come here instead.

See, I have cleansed my stable floor
And piled fresh hay to make a bed.

Here is some milk and oaten cake.
Lie down and sleep and rest you fair,
Nor fear, O simple folk, to take
The bounty of a child of care.

IV

On nights like this the huddled sheep --
I never saw a night so fair.
How huge the sky is, and how deep!
And how the planets flash and glare!

At dawn beside my drowsy flock
What winged music I have heard!
But now the clouds with singing rock
As if the sky were turning bird.

O blinding Light, O blinding Light!
Burn through my heart with sweetest pain.
O flaming Song, most loudly bright,
Consume away my deadly stain!

V

The stable glows against the sky,
And who are these that throng the way?
My three old comrades hasten by
And shining angels kneel and pray.

The door swings wide -- I cannot go --
I must and yet I dare not see.
Lord, who am I that I should know --
Lord, God, be merciful to me!

VI

O Whiteness, whiter than the fleece
Of new-washed sheep on April sod!
O Breath of Life, O Prince of Peace,
O Lamb of God, O Lamb of God!

Joyce Kilmer

The House with Nobody in It

Whenever I walk to Suffern along the Erie track
I go by a poor old farmhouse with its shingles broken and black.
I suppose I've passed it a hundred times, but I always stop for a minute
And look at the house, the tragic house, the house with nobody in it.

I never have seen a haunted house, but I hear there are such things;
That they hold the talk of spirits, their mirth and sorrowings.
I know this house isn't haunted, and I wish it were, I do;
For it wouldn't be so lonely if it had a ghost or two.

This house on the road to Suffern needs a dozen panes of glass,
And somebody ought to weed the walk and take a scythe to the grass.
It needs new paint and shingles, and the vines should be trimmed and tied;
But what it needs the most of all is some people living inside.

If I had a lot of money and all my debts were paid
I'd put a gang of men to work with brush and saw and spade.
I'd buy that place and fix it up the way it used to be
And I'd find some people who wanted a home and give it to them free.

Now, a new house standing empty, with staring window and door,
Looks idle, perhaps, and foolish, like a hat on its block in the store.
But there's nothing mournful about it; it cannot be sad and lone
For the lack of something within it that it has never known.

But a house that has done what a house should do,
a house that has sheltered life,
That has put its loving wooden arms around a man and his wife,
A house that has echoed a baby's laugh and held up his stumbling feet,
Is the saddest sight, when it's left alone, that ever your eyes could meet.

So whenever I go to Suffern along the Erie track
I never go by the empty house without stopping and looking back,
Yet it hurts me to look at the crumbling roof and the shutters fallen apart,
For I can't help thinking the poor old house is a house with a broken heart.

Joyce Kilmer

The Rosary

Not on the lute, nor harp of many strings
Shall all men praise the Master of all song.
Our life is brief, one saith, and art is long;
And skilled must be the laureates of kings.
Silent, O lips that utter foolish things!
Rest, awkward fingers striking all notes wrong!
How from your toil shall issue, white and strong,
Music like that God's chosen poet sings?

There is one harp that any hand can play,
And from its strings what harmonies arise!
There is one song that any mouth can say, --
A song that lingers when all singing dies.
When on their beads our Mother's children pray
Immortal music charms the grateful skies.

Joyce Kilmer

The Snowman in the Yard

Joyce Kilmer

The Twelve-Forty-Five

(For Edward J. Wheeler)

Within the Jersey City shed
The engine coughs and shakes its head,
The smoke, a plume of red and white,
Waves madly in the face of night.
And now the grave incurious stars
Gleam on the groaning hurrying cars.
Against the kind and awful reign
Of darkness, this our angry train,
A noisy little rebel, pouts
Its brief defiance, flames and shouts --
And passes on, and leaves no trace.
For darkness holds its ancient place,
Serene and absolute, the king
Unchanged, of every living thing.
The houses lie obscure and still
In Rutherford and Carlton Hill.
Our lamps intensify the dark
Of slumbering Passaic Park.
And quiet holds the weary feet
That daily tramp through Prospect Street.
What though we clang and clank and roar
Through all Passaic's streets? No door
Will open, not an eye will see
Who this loud vagabond may be.
Upon my crimson cushioned seat,
In manufactured light and heat,
I feel unnatural and mean.
Outside the towns are cool and clean;
Curtained awhile from sound and sight
They take God's gracious gift of night.
The stars are watchful over them.
On Clifton as on Bethlehem
The angels, leaning down the sky,
Shed peace and gentle dreams. And I --
I ride, I blasphemously ride
Through all the silent countryside.
The engine's shriek, the headlight's glare,
Pollute the still nocturnal air.
The cottages of Lake View sigh
And sleeping, frown as we pass by.
Why, even strident Paterson
Rests quietly as any nun.
Her foolish warring children keep
The grateful armistice of sleep.
For what tremendous errand's sake
Are we so blatantly awake?
What precious secret is our freight?
What king must be abroad so late?
Perhaps Death roams the hills to-night
And we rush forth to give him fight.

Or else, perhaps, we speed his way
To some remote unthinking prey.
Perhaps a woman writhes in pain
And listens -- listens for the train!
The train, that like an angel sings,
The train, with healing on its wings.
Now "Hawthorne!" the conductor cries.
My neighbor starts and rubs his eyes.
He hurries yawning through the car
And steps out where the houses are.
This is the reason of our quest!
Not wantonly we break the rest
Of town and village, nor do we
Lightly profane night's sanctity.
What Love commands the train fulfills,
And beautiful upon the hills
Are these our feet of burnished steel.
Subtly and certainly I feel
That Glen Rock welcomes us to her
And silent Ridgewood seems to stir
And smile, because she knows the train
Has brought her children back again.
We carry people home -- and so
God speeds us, wheresoe'er we go.
Hohokus, Waldwick, Allendale
Lift sleepy heads to give us hail.
In Ramsey, Mahwah, Suffern stand
Houses that wistfully demand
A father -- son -- some human thing
That this, the midnight train, may bring.
The trains that travel in the day
They hurry folks to work or play.
The midnight train is slow and old
But of it let this thing be told,
To its high honor be it said
It carries people home to bed.
My cottage lamp shines white and clear.
God bless the train that brought me here.

Joyce Kilmer

The White Ships and the Red

(For Alden March)

With drooping sail and pennant
That never a wind may reach,
They float in sunless waters
Beside a sunless beach.
Their mighty masts and funnels
Are white as driven snow,
And with a pallid radiance
Their ghostly bulwarks glow.

Here is a Spanish galleon
That once with gold was gay,
Here is a Roman trireme
Whose hues outshone the day.
But Tyrian dyes have faded,
And prows that once were bright
With rainbow stains wear only
Death's livid, dreadful white.

White as the ice that clove her
That unforgotten day,
Among her pallid sisters
The grim Titanic lay.
And through the leagues above her
She looked aghast, and said:
"What is this living ship that comes
Where every ship is dead?"

The ghostly vessels trembled
From ruined stern to prow;
What was this thing of terror
That broke their vigil now?
Down through the startled ocean
A mighty vessel came,
Not white, as all dead ships must be,
But red, like living flame!

The pale green waves about her
Were swiftly, strangely dyed,
By the great scarlet stream that flowed
From out her wounded side.
And all her decks were scarlet
And all her shattered crew.
She sank among the white ghost ships
And stained them through and through.

The grim Titanic greeted her
"And who art thou?" she said;
"Why dost thou join our ghostly fleet
Arrayed in living red?
We are the ships of sorrow

Who spend the weary night,
Until the dawn of Judgment Day,
Obscure and still and white."

"Nay," said the scarlet visitor,
"Though I sink through the sea,
A ruined thing that was a ship,
I sink not as did ye.
For ye met with your destiny
By storm or rock or fight,
So through the lagging centuries
Ye wear your robes of white.

"But never crashing iceberg
Nor honest shot of foe,
Nor hidden reef has sent me
The way that I must go.
My wound that stains the waters,
My blood that is like flame,
Bear witness to a loathly deed,
A deed without a name.

"I went not forth to battle,
I carried friendly men,
The children played about my decks,
The women sang -- and then --
And then -- the sun blushed scarlet
And Heaven hid its face,
The world that God created
Became a shameful place!

"My wrong cries out for vengeance,
The blow that sent me here
Was aimed in Hell. My dying scream
Has reached Jehovah's ear.
Not all the seven oceans
Shall wash away that stain;
Upon a brow that wears a crown
I am the brand of Cain."

When God's great voice assembles
The fleet on Judgment Day,
The ghosts of ruined ships will rise
In sea and strait and bay.
Though they have lain for ages
Beneath the changeless flood,
They shall be white as silver,
But one -- shall be like blood.

Joyce Kilmer

To a Blackbird and His Mate Who Died in the Spring

(For Kenton)

An iron hand has stilled the throats
That throbbed with loud and rhythmic glee
And dammed the flood of silver notes
That drenched the world in melody.
The blosmy apple boughs are yearning
For their wild choristers' returning,
But no swift wings flash through the tree.

Ye that were glad and fleet and strong,
Shall Silence take you in her net?
And shall Death quell that radiant song
Whose echo thrills the meadow yet?
Burst the frail web about you clinging
And charm Death's cruel heart with singing
Till with strange tears his eyes are wet.

The scented morning of the year
Is old and stale now ye are gone.
No friendly songs the children hear
Among the bushes on the lawn.
When babies wander out a-Maying
Will ye, their bards, afar be straying?
Unhymned by you, what is the dawn?

Nay, since ye loved ye cannot die.
Above the stars is set your nest.
Through Heaven's fields ye sing and fly
And in the trees of Heaven rest.
And little children in their dreaming
Shall see your soft black plumage gleaming
And smile, by your clear music blest.

Joyce Kilmer

To a Young Poet who Killed Himself

1 When you had played with life a space
2 And made it drink and lust and sing,
3 You flung it back into God's face
4 And thought you did a noble thing.
5 "Lo, I have lived and loved," you said,
6 "And sung to fools too dull to hear me.
7 Now for a cool and grassy bed
8 With violets in blossom near me."

9 Well, rest is good for weary feet,
10 Although they ran for no great prize;
11 And violets are very sweet,
12 Although their roots are in your eyes.
13 But hark to what the earthworms say
14 Who share with you your muddy haven:
15 "The fight was on -- you ran away.
16 You are a coward and a craven."

17 "The rug is ruined where you bled;
18 It was a dirty way to die!
19 To put a bullet through your head
20 And make a silly woman cry!
21 You could not vex the merry stars
22 Nor make them heed you, dead or living.
23 Not all your puny anger mars
24 God's irresistible forgiving.

25 "Yes, God forgives and men forget,
26 And you're forgiven and forgotten.
27 You may be gaily sinning yet
28 And quick and fresh instead of rotten.
29 And when you think of love and fame
30 And all that might have come to pass,
31 Then don't you feel a little shame?
32 And don't you think you were an ass?"

Joyce Kilmer

To Certain Poets

Now is the rhymers' honest trade
A thing for scornful laughter made.

The merchant's sneer, the clerk's disdain,
These are the burden of our pain.

Because of you did this befall,
You brought this shame upon us all.

You little poets mincing there
With women's hearts and women's hair!

How sick Dan Chaucer's ghost must be
To hear you lisp of "Poesie"!

A heavy-handed blow, I think,
Would make your veins drip scented ink.

You strut and smirk your little while
So mildly, delicately vile!

Your tiny voices mock God's wrath,
You snails that crawl along His path!

Why, what has God or man to do
With wet, amorphous things like you?

This thing alone you have achieved:
Because of you, it is believed

That all who earn their bread by rhyme
Are like yourselves, exuding slime.

Oh, cease to write, for very shame,
Ere all men spit upon our name!

Take up your needles, drop your pen,
And leave the poet's craft to men!

Joyce Kilmer

Trees

- 1 I think that I shall never see
- 2 A poem as lovely as a tree.

- 3 A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
- 4 Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;

- 5 A tree that looks at God all day,
- 6 And lifts her leafy arms to pray;

- 7 A tree that may in Summer wear
- 8 A nest of robins in her hair;

- 9 Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
- 10 Who intimately lives with rain.

- 11 Poems are made by fools like me,
- 12 But only God can make a tree.

Joyce Kilmer

Vision

(For Aline)

Homer, they tell us, was blind and could not see the beautiful faces
Looking up into his own and reflecting the joy of his dream,
Yet did he seem
Gifted with eyes that could follow the gods to their holiest places.

I have no vision of gods, not of Eros with love-arrows laden,
Jupiter thundering death or of Juno his white-breasted queen,
Yet have I seen
All of the joy of the world in the innocent heart of a maiden.

Joyce Kilmer

Waverley

1814-1914

When, on a novel's newly printed page
We find a maudlin eulogy of sin,
And read of ways that harlots wander in,
And of sick souls that writhe in helpless rage;
Or when Romance, bespectacled and sage,
Taps on her desk and bids the class begin
To con the problems that have always been
Perplexed mankind's unhappy heritage;

Then in what robes of honor habited
The laureled wizard of the North appears!
Who raised Prince Charlie's cohorts from the dead,
Made Rose's mirth and Flora's noble tears,
And formed that shining legion at whose head
Rides Waverley, triumphant o'er the years!

Joyce Kilmer

Wealth

(For Aline)

From what old ballad, or from what rich frame
Did you descend to glorify the earth?
Was it from Chaucer's singing book you came?
Or did Watteau's small brushes give you birth?

Nothing so exquisite as that slight hand
Could Raphael or Leonardo trace.
Nor could the poets know in Fairyland
The changing wonder of your lyric face.

I would possess a host of lovely things,
But I am poor and such joys may not be.
So God who lifts the poor and humbles kings
Sent loveliness itself to dwell with me.

Joyce Kilmer