

War Poems by Kathleen Montgomery Wallace

Interval: Front Row Stalls

Over the footlights the ankles caper,
The grease paint glistens, the fringed eyes glance;
The last note shrills, and the curtain runs.

The man beside me opens a paper:
“Bitter weather – three mile advance –
Heavy losses – we take the guns.”
And between my eyes and the crimson lights
Move the ranks of men who sat her o’ nights,
And now lie heaped in the mud together,
Stiff and still in the bitter weather.

Chestnut Sunday

From end to end of Cambridge town
The chestnut boughs move up and down,
And rain their petals on the grass
And on the busy folk who pass.

Their foaming sweetness drops in showers
Under a sky like gentian flowers;
White as a bride’s is their array,
The chestnuts keeping holiday!

Oh, in your dreamless sleep, my dear,
I know, I know you see me here,
Between the voices and the sun,

And petals pattering, one by one.

I never feel you watch me weep,
Nor din or battle breaks your sleep,
But I am sure you woke this hour
To see your chestnut trees in flower!

Walnut-Tree Court

The court below drowns in an emerald deep
Of dusk, all murmurous
With things the river whispers in its sleep;
I, leaning outward thus
From this high window, over the silence, hear
Your voice, your laugh, and know
Down in the dusk, and infinitely near
You stand below....

Yesterday

The winds are out tonight,
Strange winds, blown from a far-off troublous sea,
Rending the sky over the chimney pots,
Into a writhing web of jade and pearl –
And lashing my sedate black London trees
All into wonder and a breathless maze.

I wonder if you hear?
From your still bed under Flanders soil,
I wonder if you know the winds are out?
For, if you do, I know across you sleep

There comes the dream that's tugging at my heart
Alone here with the lamplight and the fire,
And the day dying over London roofs:

The thin white road
Leaping between the fenlands, where the sky
Swoops down to meet the fields, the flat brown fields,
With never a hill's curve, only poplar boughs
Like spires out of the mist at the day's edge.
And all the mad winds of the world full cry
Careering through the dusk into the town.

And down the narrow streets,
Under the gray towers and serene gray walls,
Under the yellowing elms along the Backs,
The winds went rollicking and dancing still;
Swaying the chain of lights down King's Parade
And driving purple cloud-wrack down the sky
Running red flame behind the spires of King's.

And so they came to us
Beating with wild wings in the court below,
Rocking the room, breaking the fire in gusts,
Filled with the spice of dead leaves and wet boughs,
Just as they come to me, alone, tonight.

... My dear, they say they will rebuild the world
Out of the soil where you and yours lie dead;
But not, I think, the free, the careless hours

That knew no shadow of purpose, but were glad,
When the glad winds raced under Cambridge walls.

Died of Wounds

Because you are dead, so many words they say,
If you could hear them, how they crowd, they crowd;
“Dying for England – but you must be proud” –
And “Greater love, honour, a debt to pay”,
And “Cry, dear”, someone says; and someone, “Pray!”
What do they mean, their words that throng so loud?

This, dearest; that for us there will not be
Laughter and joy of living dwindling cold,
Ashes of words that dropped in flame, first told;
Stale tenderness, made foolish suddenly.
This only, heart’s desire, for you and me,
We who lived love, will not see love grow old.
We who had morning time and crest o’the wave
Will have no twilight chill after the gleam,
Nor for any ebb-tide with a sluggish stream;
No, nor clutch wisdom as a thing to save.
We keep for ever (and yet they call me brave)
Untouched, unbroken, *unrebuilt*, our dream.

Unreturning

Under these walls and towers
 By these green water-ways,
Oh the good days were ours,
 The unforgotten days!

Too happy to be wise

When the road used to run
Under such maddening skies

Headlong to Huntingdon.
Paths where the lilac spills

Blossom too rich to bear;
Gold sheets of daffodils

Lighting the Market Square;
Shimmer of gliding prows
Where the shade is cool,
Tea under orchard boughs,
Smoke-rings by Byron's Pool.

Sunset at back of King's
Behind the silver spire,
Talk of uncounted things
Over a college fire –

Red leaves above your door,
Gray walls and echoing street
Whose stones will never more
Ring to your passing feet;

Strange! To think that Term is here,
Life leads the same old dance,
While you lie dead, my dear,
Somewhere in France ...
