

Poems of John McCrae

In Flanders Fields

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

Slumber Songs

I

Sleep, little eyes
That brim with childish tears amid thy play,
Be comforted! No grief of night can weigh
Against the joys that throng thy coming day.

Sleep, little heart!
There is no place in Slumberland for tears:
Life soon enough will bring its chilling fears
And sorrows that will dim the after years.
Sleep, little heart!

II

Ah, little eyes
Dead blossoms of a springtime long ago,
That life's storm crushed and left to lie below
The benediction of the falling snow!

Sleep, little heart
That ceased so long ago its frantic beat!
The years that come and go with silent feet
Have naught to tell save this — that rest is sweet.
Dear little heart.

Isandlwana

Scarlet coats, and crash o' the band,
The grey of a pauper's gown,
A soldier's grave in Zululand,
And a woman in Brecon Town.

My little lad for a soldier boy,
(Mothers o' Brecon Town!)
My eyes for tears and his for joy
When he went from Brecon Town,
His for the flags and the gallant sights
His for the medals and his for the fights,
And mine for the dreary, rainy nights
At home in Brecon Town.

They say he's laid beneath a tree,
(Come back to Brecon Town!)
Shouldn't I know? — I was there to see:
(It's far to Brecon Town!)
It's me that keeps it trim and drest
With a briar there and a rose by his breast —
The English flowers he likes the best
That I bring from Brecon Town.

And I sit beside him — him and me,
(We're back to Brecon Town.)
To talk of the things that used to be
(Grey ghosts of Brecon Town);
I know the look o' the land and sky,
And the bird that builds in the tree near by,
And times I hear the jackals cry,
And me in Brecon Town.

Golden grey on miles of sand
The dawn comes creeping down;
It's day in far off Zululand
And night in Brecon Town.

The Song of the Derelict

Ye have sung me your songs, ye have chanted your rimes
(I scorn your beguiling, O sea!)
Ye fondle me now, but to strike me betimes.
(A treacherous lover, the sea!)
Once I saw as I lay, half-awash in the night
A hull in the gloom -- a quick hail -- and a light
And I lurched o'er to leeward and saved her for spite
From the doom that ye meted to me.

I was sister to `Terrible', seventy-four,
(Yo ho! for the swing of the sea!)
And ye sank her in fathoms a thousand or more
(Alas! for the might of the sea!)
Ye taunt me and sing me her fate for a sign!
What harm can ye wreak more on me or on mine?
Ho braggart! I care not for boasting of thine --
A fig for the wrath of the sea!

Some night to the lee of the land I shall steal,
(Heigh-ho to be home from the sea!)
No pilot but Death at the rudderless wheel,
(None knoweth the harbor as he!)
To lie where the slow tide creeps hither and fro
And the shifting sand laps me around, for I know
That my gallant old crew are in Port long ago --
For ever at peace with the sea!

The Night Cometh

Cometh the night. The wind falls low,
The trees swing slowly to and fro:
Around the church the headstones grey
Cluster, like children strayed away
But found again, and folded so.

No chiding look doth she bestow:
If she is glad, they cannot know;
If ill or well they spend their day,
Cometh the night.

Singing or sad, intent they go;
They do not see the shadows grow;
"There yet is time," they lightly say,
"Before our work aside we lay";
Their task is but half-done, and lo!
Cometh the night.

The Unconquered Dead

". . . defeated, with great loss."

Not we the conquered! Not to us the blame
Of them that flee, of them that basely yield;
Nor ours the shout of victory, the fame
Of them that vanish in a stricken field.

That day of battle in the dusty heat
We lay and heard the bullets swish and sing
Like scythes amid the over-ripened wheat,
And we the harvest of their garnering.

Some yielded, No, not we! Not we, we swear
By these our wounds; this trench upon the hill
Where all the shell-strewn earth is seamed and bare,
Was ours to keep; and lo! we have it still.

We might have yielded, even we, but death
Came for our helper; like a sudden flood
The crashing darkness fell; our painful breath
We drew with gasps amid the choking blood.

The roar fell faint and farther off, and soon
Sank to a foolish humming in our ears,
Like crickets in the long, hot afternoon
Among the wheat fields of the olden years.

Before our eyes a boundless wall of red
Shot through by sudden streaks of jagged pain!
Then a slow-gathering darkness overhead
And rest came on us like a quiet rain.

Not we the conquered! Not to us the shame,
Who hold our earthen ramparts, nor shall cease
To hold them ever; victors we, who came
In that fierce moment to our honoured peace.