

THE PHILOLEXIAN FOUNDATION



Trees and
Other Poems

Joyce Kilmer



Forward by Thomas Vinciguerra

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PHILOLEXIAN SOCIETY EDITIONS

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FORWARD

A Tree Grows, and Grows

By Thomas Vinciguerra

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For more than half my life, I have been party to the ongoing burial of a literary reputation. Strangely enough, I don't think my victim entirely deserves it.

One hundred years ago, in the August issue of Poetry magazine, Alfred Joyce Kilmer published "Trees." This stubbornly enduring work needs no introduction. Even the smallest schoolchild can lisp: "I think that I shall never see / A poem lovely as a tree." Come Arbor Day, every two-bit garden club recites "Trees" as it plants a sapling; Alfalfa Switzer crooned it — or rather, whined it — in a memorable "Our Gang" short.

Of course, "Trees" is a notoriously awful poem. It is singsongy and saccharine. Its imagery is preposterous. As Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks pointed out in their book, "Understanding Poetry," any anthropomorphic flora "whose hungry mouth is prest / Against the earth's sweet flowing breast" as it "looks at God all day, / And lifts her leafy arms to pray" would be "strangely deformed" indeed.

The thing has yielded innumerable parodies. “I think that I shall never see / A billboard lovely as a tree. / Indeed, unless the billboards fall / I’ll never see a tree at all,” Ogden Nash wrote in “Song of the Open Road.” In “Chee\$e,” Thomas Merton tweaked his fellow Trappists for trading briskly in their popular foodstuff: “I think that we should never freeze / Such lively assets as our cheese.” He signed his spoof “Joyce Killer-Diller.” In the movie “Superman II,” when Valerie Perrine declares, “I like ‘Trees,’ ” Gene Hackman responds, “So does your average cocker spaniel.”

I have been a member of that critical chorus since 1985. That was when I revived an ancient Columbia University literary society called Philolexian, whose alumni include Jacques Barzun (class of 1927), Allen Ginsberg (1948), Merton (1938) and Kilmer himself (1908). One of my accomplices in this enterprise, Michael Kaufmann — now a respectable professor of English at Temple University — joked that we should conduct a wretched poetry competition in Kilmer’s honor.

And so we have. Every fall, up to 300 Columbia students pack Philolexian’s annual Alfred Joyce Kilmer Memorial Bad Poetry Contest to hear original doggerel composed by their classmates that is intended to produce laughter, cringes or sheer disbelief. Here’s a fragment from “The Ballad of Sweet Donna Lee,” by Everett Patterson, which took the laurels in 2003:

A great swell of music arose in his breast
His heart, like an alien, leapt from his chest

His soul, like a joy-bomb, exploded with joy
At that moment, gladdest of all freshman boys.

The evening culminates in a thunderous group chant of Kilmer's magnum opus, with particular emphasis on "Poems are made by fools like me" — which Heywood Broun called not only "a wholly spurious humility" but also "the most insincere line ever written by mortal man."

Had poor Kilmer never published anything besides "Trees," the modernist intelligentsia would still have pilloried him for its 80 trite words alone. As it is, he turned out several volumes of verse before he was killed on the Western Front on July 30, 1918, at age 31. Most of his work, like "Trees," was simplistic and sappy. In "Delicatessen," Kilmer finds that merely by plying his humble trade, a deli owner is somehow angelic: "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."

Note the halo. Central to both Kilmer's work and the prevailing disdain of it is his deep Catholicism, to which he converted after his daughter Rose contracted infantile paralysis. Most of his efforts fairly drip with piety, even when the subject is as mundane as New Jersey mass transit. The train in "The Twelve-Forty-Five" is an instrument of the Devil ("I ride, I blasphemously ride / Through all the silent countryside"), disturbing the peaceful faith of the Garden State ("Why, even strident Paterson / Rests quietly as any nun"). In the end, though, the wicked locomotive receives

absolution (“My cottage lamp shines white and clear. / God bless the train that brought me here”).

This sort of stuff was unlikely to survive the arrival of Prufrock.

Yet in his heyday, Kilmer was a rising literary star. He made it into *Who’s Who* at 25, around the time he joined the staff of *The New York Times Magazine*. The corresponding secretary of the Poetry Society of America, he was published in *Town & Country*, *The Smart Set* and *The Nation*. He ran the poetry departments of *Current Literature* and *The Literary Digest*; the latter eulogized him as “a very gallant gentleman who never wrote a line that was not pure, and sweet, and clean.” Reviewing his posthumous two-volume “*Poems, Essays, and Letters*” here, Charles Willis Thompson, an editorial writer for *The Times*, declared: “The German bullet that slew Joyce Kilmer at the Ourcq slew a brilliant promise. It could not slay a brilliant partial fulfillment.”

It is quite possible, even probable, that if that bullet hadn’t cut Kilmer down in his prime and enshrined him as a martyr, he would not have achieved immortality. Still, no poet who could warrant a namesake forest in North Carolina, or a park in the Bronx, or a service area on the New Jersey Turnpike can be wholly without merit.

Every year it falls to me as “Avatar” of Philolexian to kick off the Kilmer event by presenting a biographical sketch of the man. By now, I have my routine down pat. After outlining Kilmer’s life and enumerating his poetic sins, I ask, “But was he really bad?”

Invariably the audience shouts, “Yes!” And I roar back, “You’re wrong!”

Kilmer, I inform the snarky undergrads, is what George Orwell in his essay on Kipling called a “good bad poet.” After dismissing most of Kipling’s verse as “horribly vulgar,” Orwell concedes it nonetheless is “capable of giving pleasure to people who know what poetry means.” Admit it, Orwell says. Unless you’re “merely a snob and a liar,” you get at least some enjoyment out of something like “Mandalay.” That’s because it’s a good bad poem, which Orwell defines as “a graceful monument to the obvious. It records in memorable form — for verse is a mnemonic device, among other things — some emotion which very nearly every human being can share.”

That’s a fair take on much of Kilmer. Yes, he was proof of Oscar Wilde’s pronouncement that “all bad poetry springs from genuine feeling.” But he could still touch certain chords with crude, shameless offerings like “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.

If you insist on rejecting this admittedly hokey notion utterly, never musing that “only God can make a tree” upon beholding a

particularly soaring oak . . . well, take your pick. Are you an Orwellian snob or an Orwellian liar?

I thought so. So here's wishing you a happy 100th birthday, "Trees," in all your inane glory. I just hope that when my spirit finally communes with that of your creator, he will evince the Christian charity by which he lived his short life and forgive some impious upstarts for making sport of him, assured that it is their own peculiar form of homage.

Thomas Vinciguerra is a Philolexian, Class of 1984 and the editor of "Backward Ran Sentences: The Best of Wolcott Gibbs From The New Yorker."

Trees and Other Poems

*“Mine is no horse with wings, to gain
The region of the Spheral chime;
He does but drag a rumbling wain,
Cheered by the coupled bells of rhyme.”*

Coventry Patmore

To My Mother

Gentlest of critics, does your memory hold
 (I know it does) a record of the days
 When I, a schoolboy, earned your generous praise
For halting verse and stories crudely told?
Over these childish scrawls the years have rolled,
 They might not know the world's unfriendly gaze;
 But still your smile shines down familiar ways,
Touches my words and turns their dross to gold.

More dear to-day than in that vanished time
 Comes your nigh praise to make me proud and strong.
In my poor notes you hear Love's splendid chime,
 So unto you does this, my work belong.
Take, then, a little gift of fragile rhyme:
 Your heart will change it to authentic song.

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Trees and Other Poems

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.

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.

Trees

For Mrs. Henry Mills Alden

I think that I shall never see

A poem lovely as a tree.

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest

Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;

A tree that looks at God all day,

And lifts her leafy arms to pray;

A tree that may in Summer wear

A nest of robins in her hair;

Upon whose bosom snow has lain;

Who intimately lives with rain.

Poems are made by fools like me,

But only God can make a tree.

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.

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.

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!

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 choiring 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).

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.

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!

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!

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.

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.

To a Young Poet Who Killed Himself

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

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

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

“Yes, God forgives and men forget,
And you’re forgiven and forgotten.
You might be gaily sinning yet
And quick and fresh instead of rotten.
And when you think of love and fame
And all that might have come to pass,
Then don’t you feel a little shame?
And don’t you think you were an ass?”

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.

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.

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.

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!

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!

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!

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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!

Easter

The air is like a butterfly

With frail blue wings.

The happy earth looks at the sky

And sings.

Mount Houvenkopf

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.

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.

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.

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.

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!

About Joyce Kilmer

Joyce Kilmer was born at New Brunswick, New Jersey, December 6, 1886, and graduated Columbia University in 1908, attaining the distinction of vice-president of the Philolexian Society. After a short period of teaching he became associated with Funk and Wagnalls Company, where he remained from 1909 to 1912, when he assumed the position of literary editor of *The Churchman*. In 1913 Mr. Kilmer became a member of the staff of the *New York Times*. His volumes of poetry are *Summer of Love* (1911), *Trees, and Other Poems* (1914), and *Main Street and Other Poems* (1917).

Kilmer died in France in 1918, felled by a sniper's bullet at the Battle of the Marne.

Colophon

This edition of *Trees and Other Poems* by Joyce Kilmer, with a forward by Thomas Vinciguerra, was set in EB Garamond and Cormorant Garamond and composed at a trim size of five by eight inches.

The text of the poems follows the original edition of 1914, now in the public domain. The forward, “A Tree Grows, and Grows,” first appeared in the New York Times on August 16, 2013, and is reprinted here with the permission of the author.

