

The Maid of Gettysburg

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Creative Writing: Poetics

Research Week 2023

Influences/Background

- Because I wanted to wrestle with the ordinary, monumental moments, and history, I chose poetry as the medium of this project. Poetry is the art of the **everyday**, but it can also showcase **monumentality**.



Fig. 1. Crierie, Ryan. “ T9A0985.” 3 July 2013. Photograph. Flickr. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/63014123@N02/11411159325/in/photolist-fiVNzM-ionb7i-ionb3-G-ionRox-ionexA-ionfyU-6AEUQq-5t7xAk-6AEZy5-6AEZ3j-6AAQDg-6AEUyj-6AAL5X-6AARsv-6AARJB-6AARjZ-6AARyX-6AF16Q-6AEZd7-6AARa8-6AEQLN-ionceu-6AEUJb>. Accessed 1 March 2023. CC BY-N.C. 2.0.

Research Questions

- Can the ordinary and monumentality really mix?
- How does a single moment define how we are remembered?
- Did Jennie feel her death coming like the build of a summer rainstorm?



Fig. 2. kjarrett. "Gettysburg Trip." 17 August 2013. Photograph. *Flickr*. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/kjarrett/9599046792/in/photolist-fCeCbL-yYdug-8sZcs3-yYdwB-fCeBAW-cNQFWG-fBZgEv-fCeB8W-fCezzQ-fCeAyu-fBZhtX-a79gr5-yYdvU-fBZgBe-fCeBru-9wx6nV-fBZgM6-4QyM4K-fCeAej-fBZgQP-fCeC51-fBZgJ6-fCeBMQ-fBZiRT-fBZjbg-fCeARj-8a7fhr-fCeAnw-4QyExc-4QD7H9-a797Aq-4QCXdo-4QyRz4-4QCThj-4QDi8Y-4Qz5uc-4QyKhD-4QCU31-fBZhLF-fCeBwj-fCeBcU-fCezTd-fCeA1C-fBZi1R-fCeBFA-4Qz2yV-8a7sj8-a76cTH-8aatGL-fBZhbf>. Accessed 1 March 2023. CC BY-N.C. 2.0.



Fig. 3. Forbes, Edwin. *Illustration of Battle of Gettysburg, 1896*. Painting. *Britannica ImageQuest*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 25 May 2016. https://quest-eb-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/search/Battle-of-Gettysburg/1/300_347596/Illustration-of-Battle-of-Gettysburg-1896.

Methodology: Poetry from Research

- **Research:** traditional and sensory research
- **Chronological descriptions** of the battle from Jennie's perspective
- Ghost voice in italics – **Dramatic Monologue**
- **Narrative free-verse poetry** and the form of the **villanelle**

“The Last Days - June 30, 1863”

As if twin poles drew the other in,
our own Union friends arrived with the noon heat.
North they went, along Washington Street,
past our great Theological Seminary.

Soon, the whole of our swells swarmed with soldiers
like blue ants crowding a fine summer picnic.
John had said before that our little town
is the hub of a large wagon wheel,
with roads leading men to our city on a hill,
drawing them like scattered moths to a flame.
“See, them hills around us,” he said.
“They’re well-suited for defense.
In the south, around Cemetery and Culp’s Hill.”

That day, while I was kneading bread,
watching the boys in blue head north,
Did you know them Did they die too
I wonder if the Lord above destined this
for our town hugging the southern border.
As if He shaped the earth this way,
carved the dirt and mounds just for war.

“The Last Days - June 30, 1863”

Fate was no matter, though, then,
for I had bread and a house to attend.
Mother was off with George's new babe,
born the same day the Rebels made a fuss.
*Poor nephew, youngest veteran of the battle,
did this legacy of mine ever haunt your years*

But in my thoughts, under the skin of the town,
I felt something brewing like the whistle of tea,
building like a storm across the sea.
coming, coming, rising like bread
These events haunt me even now,
on the hot eve of this last day of June.

As I lay down in the darkness of the night,
the smells of campfire strangely reach me.
And I imagine all those roads, the spokes
of our wagon wheel leading from north and south,
from east and west, lit with a thousand fires
to warm the hard hands of the armies.

A thousand fires to light the way to our town,
all the roads to the harmony of God.
What is to become of us,
coming, rising like bread
of our little town of Gettysburg?

“Portrait of a Soldier”

What words exist to color in the faces of the soldiers
who knock on the door, wanting for food?
They come in a steady stream, shadows of men
in the noonday heat, the July summer heat.
Men with black eyes, deep like marbles,
shaggy hair glistening wet at the ends
and under their Union blue caps.
Some boys with bare faces, some men with
days' old stubble and cord-like beards.
All coming for some water to the door,
for some bread other thanhardtack.
*That inevitable bread, did you
want for bread while the wounds
chewed through your bones and marrow*
They come, lips chapped into canyons.

I fill their empty canteens with a pail,
those cavalrymen stationed in the yard.
“Tough day for the Blue,” they say.
When the clock turns to afternoon,
the stream is a flood from north and west,
troops retreating to Cemetery Hill.
Back to the well, dip the pail,
drenched wet from the waist down,
to fill the endless procession
of empty canteens and thirsty eyes.
*I hope someone did for you even on enemy soil,
that hot, heavy Virginia soil*
“Those Rebs are pushing us like a tide,”
a soldier says, licking the rim of his canteen.
“Forward, forward for God’s sake if we can.”

“Portrait of a Soldier”

As evening approaches, the hell in the hills
comes for us like hungry dogs.
Bullets from enemy guns litter the yard
with Union bodies, sharpshooters finding their marks.
Bullets from enemy guns ping George’s house,
and the babe wails along with the wounded.
What words exist to color in the faces of the soldiers
scattered like weeds among the grass
and the shadows of the dying sun?
They died like the sun They died like us

I bring them water. I bring them biscuits and bread.
Cheer when I can to make them forget
the firing, the moaning, the booms coming close.
It’s not enough, I know *but it’s you*
I see, covered in blood in the grass, alone
but I do what I can for our boys in blue.

“My Jack”

*The life we lived ended before it shaped.
Is it grace, knowing this fate, all we know?
The great war is past, but we won't escape.*

*You answered the call and signed yourself away,
went to suffer and die, but you didn't know so.
The life we lived ended before it shaped.*

*I died for bread, you to uphold the Union name.
“My country needs me, Mother;” you said. “May I go?”
The great war is past, but we won't escape.*

*You gave Wes a message for me, your Jennie Wade.
Then, Wes died, buried, where flowers now grow,
killing the life we lived before it shaped.*

*What we could've been if that picture filled the frame,
but our time stilled while the world's still flowed.
The great war is past, but we won't escape.*

*Don't we both live on through history's fame?
Jack, my love, your face before me still glows,
but the life we lived ended before it shaped.
The great war is past, but we won't escape.*

“Angels”

*George made that quilt when she was five,
but they wrap my body careful, as if I'm still alive.
On me, they find only a photo of you and the house key.*

*The rains eventually come, breaking free
once the battle ends to wash the stains of war.
The ever-darkening shades of Pennsylvania skies
close the curtain on the fields and grass seas,
but the memories remain, ones of smoke
breaking over the green groves.
If only I got to say goodbye before it ended,
before the rising boiled over and sent me away.*

*Here, upon the open fields, like tight sheaves
lay the dead in crevices of rocks,
behind fences, farms, homes, and trees,
by walls and hedges and streams,
screaming that men die too easily.
Rain, fall forever as if there's no ground
to wash the dirt from the dead men's hands,
clenched fast, clenched tight,
left forever in the battle-storm's tides.*

“Angels”

*We both died by the bullet, my dear Jack.
You died in a Confederate hospital, following me,
without ever knowing our fates were linked.
I wonder if you too thought
how a moment stretches to a thin infinity,
how our ordinary became our great legacy.*

*It's no matter now, for we're buried in the ground.
In Evergreen Cemetery, only 70 yards apart,
forever together in our silent eternity.
Sometimes, I hear the whispers
of what we've left behind:
“She gave all she had,
she did her best.
Angels could do no more.”*

*After, Mother made 15 loaves with the dough
I kneaded before the bullet struck my heart.
I hope that soldier was well-fed.
I hope he lived to taste that living bread.*

“The Maid of Gettysburg”

*The gold-split sunset, all the colors of the sky.
Running in the green, sewing by little light.
How the haunting smell of summer never dies.*

*Jack and I sitting beneath the hill's highs.
Laughing with George at her baby's first sight.
The gold-split sunset, all the colors of the sky.*

*How I lived every moment, an ordinary life.
Crying in the dark over Father's winless fight.
How the haunting smell of summer never dies.*

*How a moment stretches into a thin forever line.
Seeing the sunrise with Harry, ever bright.
The gold-split sunset, all the colors of the sky.*

*I did my best, what Mother called living wise.
Watching autumn turn bronze by evening's light.
How the haunting smell of summer never dies.*

*We could've lived full, but our memories still fly.
Never falter, only live before dark brings the night.
The gold-split sunset, all the colors of the sky.
How the haunting smell of summer never dies.*

Conclusion

- I hope this collection challenges your notions about **history**, **legacy**, the **ordinary**, and what **defines** us when we **die**.



Fig. 4. ninniane. "Jennie Wade." 26 July 2009. Photograph. Flickr. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/ninniane/3789505932>. Accessed 1 March 2023. Creative Commons BY-N.C. 2.0.

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