

There were three great themes in Dad's poetry, often interwoven.
We will begin with:

A Few Short Poems of William Fred Kitchens
Written from Europe During WWII

A Soldier's Grave

We left him on the road to Verdun,
In a shallow grave where the noonday sun
Can beam through the trees and warm his bed.
We stuck his bayonet at his head.
On it we hung his helmet to dangle in the breeze,
On the road to Verdun in a clump of maple trees.

From the poem *When Sparrows Fall*

A Frenchman Returned to His Bombed Out Village

He gazed upon the rubble
That once had been his home,
All around was desolation
From house to temple dome.

He paused and brushed away a tear.
He shrugged and whispered,
"C'est la guerre".

His soft words joined the echoes,
Along the broken street,
Of ancient voices speaking
Of hopeless, vain, defeat.

He paused and brushed away a tear.
He shrugged and whispered,
"C'est la guerre".

There was a definite progression in Dad's poetry during the War. Early on, before being shipped out, they were all the passion of patriotism, perhaps a naive patriotism; something that was natural for a country boy from Mississippi. The following untitled piece falls into that category.

Red, white, and blue emblem,
Flaming in the sky,
Symbol of freemen,
We'll keep it there or die.

The enemy bomb and strafe us,
Pat, Jim and John are dying.
They whisper, Bub, we done our best.
Old Glory's still a flying.

When the noise of battle's past, and the air again is clear,
Tell the folks we gave somethin,
To keep our flag up there.

I pledge my life to guarantee,
The future of democracy,
And to pass down to posterity,
The principle of equality.

I pledge my wealth to exterminate,
The rule of brutality and hate,
And to repudiate,
The totalitarian state.

Later on came this one:

Of Death and Duty

Fevered eyes stared upward from
A rest of pillow white.
Colorless cheeks were hollowed
And thin lips drawn tight.

Here lay a veteran of war,
hardship and misery wise,
With the battle story written
In his glittering eyes.

The thin lips parted slowly,
Mumbling words to frame,
“We didn’t take our objective,
But no one is to blame.

We gave our best with all we had,
But our best was not enough.
Our lives were all that was left to give.
That kind of giving is tough.

I am not complaining, mind you,
I have always done my share.
I want no man to do my dying.
I want no man my pains to bear.

We forged on from hill to hill,
over our wounded and dead,
To take that everlasting highground
that lay just up ahead.

In battle there is always a place to take,
Some ground higher than where you are,
And the enemy is always up there,
With his everlasting fire.

They hit us with machine guns and mortars,
Death came like wind-blown hail.
Our men were like wheat before a reaper,
But to die is not to fail.

We knew we couldn’t take that hill,
Our company was almost gone.
But we had to try, we had to die,
For our commander urged us on.

The last time I saw the major,
He was crawling among the dead,
Urging each silent form to move
Against the hill ahead.”

The soldier lay quiet on his pillow of white,
From his eyes fled the glittering light.
Like a soldier he obeyed the last command.
Like a soldier, he broke off the fight.

The next selection are love poems written to his wife, Iva after a long, lonely separation.

Four Leaf Clover

To my wife,

I saw you vaguely as through a mist,
Step blithely along a garden path.
You stooped and with a graceful sweep
Plucked a tender four-leaf clover,
And smiling stretched it back toward me.
I reach for it, but there came between us
The wildly lashing sea.

Fred

Written in France, 1944

A Normandy Night

I feel for you in the Normandy night.
I cry for you in the purple dawn,
But the emptiness of days, ah weeks and months,
Mocks my futile cries.

How I envy the peasant man,
With his wife on his high wheeled cart.
He has little of worldly goods,
But he is richer than I.
Oh, little bird so sweetly singing
In your Norman tree.
You cannot know, simple thing,
The loneliness in me.

Your mate is near, to hear, to hear,
My mate is far away.
If only I could chant of love
To my fair one today.

I want be at home
When the violets come out this year.
Will you meet them for me, dear?
Will you listen for me, dear, this spring,
When the mocking birds begin to sing.

Did you come to me in the night,
And stand dreamily by my bed,
Looking down at me in the light,
Then gently move my head,
To make room for yours on the pillow,
In the moonlight soft and mellow.

I lay beneath a Norman tree
And dreamed of piney hills,
Rising blue against a sky,
Where thunderheads float idly by
Like grazing sheep.

I heard again the piping birds,
In fence-row, hedge and tree
Fill the bursting Southern air,
Piping here and piping there
With delirious glee.

I saw her in the garden,
(She is oh so dear to me).
Caressing each little flower
Like a kissing bee.
Oh, gently blow you Southern winds.
Blow lightly through bush and bough,
Finger at her willful hair,
And kiss her sweet, sweet brow.

A Lad and A Maid

When first my eyes on you I laid,
I was a lad, and you a maid
Of blue, of white, so slim, with hair
That matched full ripened sage.

I knew that I had seen my wife
Step from the earth into my life.
Hand in hand we could take
The dusty road and laugh together.

Full well we have laughed, we too,
And cried some together it is true.
Our laughing tears and those of sorrow mingled
Make a lovely stream.

If I could tell our story here
As other poets have, my dear,
In burning phrase. It would make
A lovely tale.

But I will say the simple words,
The words that ever will be heard
Where love is, the whispered words,
I love you still.

On a different note – this one.

Pass to Paris

I got a pass to Paris,
An' I went down to raise some hell.
I had a pocket full of franks,
An I knew a madmazelle.

But the gen'ral had the idee
That all the Com Z brass
Wasn't getting property courtesy
From doughfeet back on pass.

He said, "We've got a heap of rank
With nothin' else to do.
We'll teach them slinkin' dogfaces,
A military thing or two."

So shavetails, captains, majors,
All went on patrol,
On the Champs and everywhere
The G.I.'s loved to stroll.

I promenades down a boulevard
With my arm aroun' a madmazelle.
Until I met a major,
Everything was goin' swell.

I don't care what you're holdin'
It don't matter how cute.
If you meet an officer
You'd better, by gum, salute.

The second great theme of Dad's poetry was recollection of his boyhood, roaming the woods and swamps of rural Mississippi. A boy from a large, and apparently happy, though dirt poor itinerant Baptist Preacher's family. This is only one short selection of that genre, which has its charms.

My Brothers and I

We traced the ground hog to its den.
We watched the flight of the Indian hen.
We gathered mast from the great beech tree,
And followed the course of the homeward bee.
We found the clustering, wild grapevine,
And gathered the pungent muscadine
To brew our tepid, forbidden wine.

We set traps for the muskrat pest,
And found where the robin built its nest.
We knew the place where the sunperch lurked,
And where the reddest earthworms worked.
We tracked the rabbits in the snow,
And wondered where the fieldlarks go
When the cold northwind begins to blow.

We knew when the violet bared his head,
And when the daisy came back from the dead.
We learned the timid bobwhite's call;
Where it hid its young in the broomsage tall.
We sat in the forest dark and still,
To catch a glimpse of a whip-poor-will,
While the moon crept over a distant hill.

William F. Kitchens

The third great theme of Dad's poetry was religious, and specifically Christian. He looked beyond the visible War, to see it as the theater of spiritual warfare and wrote great epic poems along that line. But that spiritual warfare had its personal dimension also; the spiritual battle of Jesus for each man's soul.

The Gardens of Heaven

The Gardens of Heaven are blooming
With countless flowers rare.
And I have an invitation
to walk with Jesus there.

I will walk in the gardens with Jesus
When I am through this world of strife,
And He will give me a blossom
From the evergreen tree of life.

Jesus is waiting in the Garden
With outstretched hand for me
And He will show me the wonders
My heart so years to see.

There will be no dying in the gardens
No wilting or fading away,
All joy and gladness
For an eternal day.

William F. Kitchens

