Mametz Wood (2005)

Owen Sheers

For years afterwards the farmers found them –  
the wasted young, turning up under their plough blades  
as they tended the land back into itself.

A [chit](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/31933#eid9526248) of bone, the china plate of a shoulder blade,  
the relic of a finger, the blown  
and broken bird’s egg of a skull,

all mimicked now in flint, breaking blue in white  
across this field where they were told to walk, not run,  
towards the wood and its nesting machine guns.

And even now the earth stands [sentinel](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/176070#eid23617184),  
reaching back into itself for reminders of what happened  
like a wound working a foreign body to the surface of the skin.

This morning, twenty men buried in one long grave,  
a broken mosaic of bone linked arm in arm,  
their skeletons paused mid dance-[macabre](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/111744#eid38450868)

in boots that outlasted them,  
their socketed heads tilted back at an angle  
and their jaws, those that have them, dropped open.

As if the notes they had sung  
have only now, with this unearthing,  
slipped from their absent tongues.

Owen [Sheers](http://www.sheerpoetry.co.uk/gcse/owen-sheers/mametz-wood) wrote the poem “Mametz Wood” after visiting the site of a World War I battlefield on the Somme in France. He made the visit on the occasion of the eighty-fifth anniversary of a battle that took place there in 1916. About four thousand soldiers of the 38th Welsh Division lost their lives during the battle. Walking through the field, Sheers noticed that shells, pieces of barbed wire and fragments of human bones were still to be found coming to the surface after so many years. He also saw a newspaper article with a photograph of a war grave that had recently been discovered near [Mametz](http://www.anthology.aqa.org.uk/index.asp?currmenu=sheers) Wood; he found the photograph very moving. His experiences during that visit to France inspired him to write the poem “Mametz Wood.”

In the opening lines of “Mametz Wood,” Sheers reveals that the site of the battle reverted to farmland and that the farmers found remains of soldiers' bodies long after the war had ended. “The wasted young” shows that most of those who died had barely reached adulthood. Sheers comments in line 3 that the farmers “tended the land back into itself,” trying to rid the fields of associations of war and allow it to be restored to its original state.

Reminders sprang up, however, in the form of fragments of corpses. In the second stanza, Sheers uses metaphors to describe these fragments, starting with a “chit of bone” in line 4; a chit can be a brief note or letter, so the image created is one of a small piece that nevertheless conveys a message. In the same line a shoulder blade is described with the metaphor “a china plate,” as though it is hard but also fragile and perhaps precious. In line 5 a finger is merely a “relic,” as it has no use now. Sheers uses enjambment to link line 5 to line 6 and extend slightly the metaphor in “the blown / and broken bird's egg of a skull.” The image of the shattered bird's egg emphasises the fragility of the skull, and the alliteration with the “b” sound intensifies the description.

The human remains are “all mimicked now in flint,” a phrase where the assonance of the short “i” adds life to the image at the beginning of the third stanza. Sheers echoes the alliteration of the previous stanza in the phrase “breaking blue in white,” describing the colours of the fragments that are pushing through the surface of the earth. The last two lines of the stanza focus on how the soldiers were ordered to walk towards the wood, unaware of the guns that were waiting to fire on them. Sheers describes the machine guns as “nesting” in the wood, once again using an image related to birds, almost as though the guns belonged among the trees.

At the start of the fourth stanza, Sheers returns to the present time, personifying the earth as it “stands sentinel,” creating the impression that it is watching over the field and the remnants of the battle. It is “reaching back into itself for reminders,” an alliterative phrase that personifies the land, conveying the idea that it cannot let go of the memories of the war. Sheers packs imagery into this stanza, using both a simile and alliteration in the last line. He compares the field to a “wound working a foreign body to the surface of the skin,” as though the fragments of bone are alien and need to be pushed up and then removed from the soil.

The last three stanzas of “Mametz Wood” concern the photograph that Sheers saw in a local newspaper of a war grave that had only just been discovered at the time of his visit to France. Twenty soldiers had been buried together, “a broken mosaic of bone linked arm in arm.” It is a poignant image showing how the men were physically connected, dying together, but the “broken mosaic” means that their remains are now fragmented. Sheers closes the fifth stanza with the description of the skeletons that appear to have been stopped in the middle of a “dance-macabre,” a medieval dance of death.

The fifth stanza runs into the sixth, where Sheers mentions the soldiers' boots that have had a longer life than their owners. He goes on to describe the skulls of the soldiers, although not all of them were intact. Those that remained were “tilted back at an angle” with jaws wide open. In the seventh and final stanza Sheers conveys the idea that the soldiers' skeletons appeared to be singing, but that the sound of their voices was not heard until the grave was discovered years later. “Sung” and “tongues” at the end of lines 19 and 21 create a half-rhyme, and this is the only instance of rhyme in the poem apart from “run” and “guns” in lines 8 and 9. These half-rhymes have more impact since there are only two pairs throughout the poem.

His visit to the battlefield and the photograph of the war grave both obviously had a profound effect on Owen Sheers. Although it is not a personal account of war, Sheers has created a moving description of the way in which reminders of the horrors of war are still present and visible many years later. The imagery is very rich, and the persistence of the relics of war is clear. The sight of so many skeletons together in a grave must have stirred up genuine emotion. Sheers' references to dancing and singing create a contrast to the horrific image seen in the photograph, and perhaps accentuate the feeling of wasted lives. The work of poets who actively fought in World War I may be more personal, but “Mametz Wood” highlights the fact that eight-five years later reminders of soldiers' deaths were still very much present.

Brief notes:

* Inspired by a trip to the battle field on the 85th anniversary of the battle of the Somme.
* Battle of Mametz wood was in July 1916.
* Placed name is used because people know that it was real, creates sympathy, people may have connections with the people who fought.
* Enjambment is used in the poem to reflect the never-ending nature of war.
* consists of 6 stanzas, each with 3 lines. This represents the strictness of military life and how war always happens in the same way and we never learn from it.
* The poet is looking back at what has happened.
* There are themes of: violence, memory and place.
* 'For years afterwards' creates interest for the first line, represents how even 85 years later it still effects us.
* 'farmers found' soft alliteration creates a calm atmosphere, juxtaposing the previous warfare the poet is reflecting on.
* 'the wasted young' a pun for how the soldiers shouldn't have died?
* 'they tended the land back into itself' nurturing imagery, contrast to what has happened. Suggesting they should have been nurtured more by the Generals?
* 'the china plate of a shoulder blade' represents the fragile nature of humans and peace.
* 'broken birds egg of a skull' alliteration is used with plosive B's (mimicking…