

Pantoum for a Veteran of the Great War

Lily Jarman-Reisch

We were too young to serve, some of us.
Children turned into soldiers.
Broken by losing our buddies.
The look of the trenches in the eyes of the boys,
children turned into soldiers,
shaking at the whine of shells.
Look of the trenches in the eyes of the boys,
fumes and rot in our mouths,
shaking at the whine of shells.
Boy hit by a stick grenade,
fumes and rot in our mouths
left arm, left leg blown off.
Boy hit by a grenade,
eye dangling on his cheek,
arm and leg blown off
crying out for his mommy,
eye dangling on his cheek.
So I shot him
crying out for his mommy.
I had to....
I shot him.
A bugler blew Taps.
I had to...
his shrouded remains lowered in the dirt.
A bugler blew Taps.
A boy. Like my three brothers. Two killed in combat.
Shrouded remains lowered in dirt.
The third broken by losing his brothers.
Boys, my three brothers. Two killed in combat,
third took his life in the 30's,
broken by losing his brothers.
Too young to serve, some of us.

Poet Comments...

“Pantoum for a Veteran of the Great War” is a poem (a pantoum) that I crafted from quotes from First

World War British servicemen taken from interviews housed in the Imperial War Museum archives and

used in the 2018 documentary film, "They Shall Not Grow Old," directed and produced by Peter Jackson. I also drew content from a November 11, 2018 National Public Radio broadcast on the hundredth anniversary of the Armistice of November 11, 1918, which featured a recording of Fenton Caldwell, a World War 1 U.S pilot, describing what the Armistice meant to him: "Now I was free," he said, " from that ever-present ...knowledge that there was a chance of not living another day, the end to the sorrow of seeing close friends go down, and to those funerals I had gone to, hearing the mournful notes of Taps. The recording was made by Mr. Caldwell's niece, Joy Panagides, who described him as her favorite uncle. This, along with the broadcast and recording, resonated greatly with me, reminding me of my own favorite uncle's description of Armistice Day, July 27, 1953, when he was released from a North Korean prisoner of war camp after serving 13 months as a POW during the Korean War. With its pattern of repeated lines, a pantoum seemed to be a fitting form for conveying the vets' hauntedness, as well as my own reaction to their voices, their stories.

I have been a journalist in Washington, D.C., and Athens, Greece, and have held administrative and teaching positions at the Universities of Michigan and Maryland. My poems appear or are forthcoming in CALYX Journal, 3rd Wednesday, Snapdragon, The Fourth River, 1807, The Military Review, Route 7 Review, Rise Up Review, Light, Journal of Veterans Studies, The Dewdrop, Gleam, Mediterranean Poetry, and other international literary journals.