

I Never Talked About it After the War

Lily Jarman-Reisch

I never talked about it after the war.
They wouldn't believe me anyway.
Not sure I know what the hell it was for.
No one back home saw the medals I wore,
honors heaped on me for the lives I saved.
Never talked about it after the war.
"Great courage in battle," "uncommon valor,"
this fuck-up in high school who wouldn't obey.
Not sure I know what the hell it was for.
Taken and tortured as prisoner of war
with six of my men who I couldn't save.
Never talked about it after the war.
Dragged from my cage to witness the gore:
a teenage private stripped naked and flayed.
No longer know what the hell it was for.
Silver Star hidden in a bottom drawer.
Six good men gone by Armistice Day.
Never talked about it after the war.
No longer know what the hell it was for.

Comments from the poet...

"I Never Talked About it After the War" is a villanelle about my uncle, a Korean War veteran whose POW status and valor as a U.S. Army sergeant in U.N. Special Forces during the war were unknown until after he died. With its pattern of repeated lines, a villanelle (the poetic form used by Dylan Thomas in "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night") seemed to be a fitting form for conveying my uncle's haunted memories of his Korean War experience, as well as my own lingering emotions when I discovered the truth about them.

My uncle was like a father to me and my brother after our father (my uncle's older brother) died at age 39. I was devoted to my uncle throughout my life. I long to honor his memory and military service by telling the story of his harrowing experience in the war, perhaps best captured in my poem about it.