

HENRY CRAWFORD

Remembering 100 Years of the First World War

Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina: It is after 4:00 pm. The conference rooms are deserted. People are putting away their laptops. A group of three are making plans for the night. A bearded student is checking his phone. The breakout room has a sign announcing, The Hermeneutics of World War I Poetry. The poet makes his way to the podium. He taps the mic. There's a little feedback. He is the last presenter. "I'd like to read one final John Doe poem. This one comes out of the Battle of the Somme. The soldier could not be identified. In his pocket was a paper containing this poem:

Soldiers Song¹

My tools are few. I have only a pen.
Its tip is cracked. My ink is caked with dirt.
My gloves shaking. Too many holes to mend.
No desk. But the shell of my helmet works.
I am reading poems about this war.
One has a line that starts: "We are the dead"².
But I can't speak that language anymore.
While I was here I lived. Let that be said.
All across the night are lights exploding.
Bursts of ground. Winds of fire. Lead in sheets.
Siren sounds. Then all the earth's undoing.
The screams. The body-shock of life's retreat.³

We're moving out now. I take my weapon.
It's time for me to sing my soldier's song.⁴

A technician signals from the mixing board in the back of the room. A well-dressed couple look in by mistake. They walk away shyly. The screen is booting down. The lights are going on. The poet reads the footnotes.

¹The Battle of the Somme lasted from July to November, 1916.

²A reference to the poem *In Flanders Fields*, by John McCrae.

³Over 1,000,000 soldiers were killed or wounded in the Battle of the Somme. Now, all the combatants are dead.

⁴I think he had a song. That is, he was thinking of a song, he'd almost forgotten where he'd heard it; in a music hall, in the summer, his friends, they were all singing, he sung louder, he wanted the girl with the wire-thin glasses to hear him, she turned, her lips held open a note, he joined her, they sang well into the night until it became late and the musicians one-by-one disappeared and the piano finally stopped.

HENRY CRAWFORD is a poet living and writing in the Washington, DC area. His work has appeared in several journals and online publications including *Boulevard*, *Copper Nickel*, *Folio*, *Borderline Press* and *The Offbeat*. He was a 2016 nominee for a Pushcart Prize for his poem "The City of Washington" appearing in *District Lit*. His first collection of poetry, *American Software*, was published in 2017 by CW Books.