

Military Portrait
by Robert Penfold

How can you willingly crawl under
That burlap shroud? The last person
I saw do that was Jenkins. We all agreed
He went immediately to the angels,
His death grimace easily brightening to a rictus grin,
Beatific in our puny, self-serving memories.

As your hand emerges from the shroud
I instinctively duck for cover. Momentary panic
Triggers a flood of memories of the trenches.
But now I realize you're not clutching a grenade
To lob between my clay-clogged feet. It's only
The rubber bulb you squeeze to snap the photo.

So I hold this erect, heroic pose,
Hoping Mum and Dad will read confidence
Where really I feel numb and crumpled
Beneath the skin. I know the eyes have it,
Especially in a portrait, so I'll stare down
The tripod balancing your box camera,
Reminiscent of a Bosch machine gun.

This may be the last glimpse anyone gets
Of my living form. So read here the valiance
Of the hardened soldier of the line,
Not yet glazed to the weapon's sharpness,
But velvet around the edges, liquid inside
For fallen comrades and family back home.

Phosphorous explosion. Let me out of here!