

Small Pain in My Chest by Michael Mack

The soldier boy was sitting calmly underneath that tree.
As I approached it, I could see him beckoning to me.
The battle had been long and hard and lasted through the night
And scores of figures on the ground lay still by morning's light

"I wonder if you'd help me, sir", he smiled as best he could.
"A sip of water on this morn would surely do me good.
We fought all day and fought all night with scarcely any rest -
A sip of water for I have a small pain in my chest."

As I looked at him, I could see the large stain on his shirt
All reddish-brown from his warm blood mixed in with Asian dirt.
"Not much", said he. "I count myself more lucky than the rest.
They're all gone while I just have a small pain in my chest."

"Must be fatigue", he weakly smiled. "I must be getting old.
I see the sun is shining bright and yet I'm feeling cold.
We climbed the hill, two hundred strong, but as we cleared the crest,
The night exploded and I felt this small pain in my chest."

"I looked around to get some aid - the only things I found
Were big, deep craters in the earth - bodies on the ground.
I kept on firing at them, sir. I tried to do my best,
But finally sat down with this small pain in my chest."

"I'm grateful, sir", he whispered, as I handed my canteen
And smiled a smile that was, I think, the brightest that I've seen.
"Seems silly that a man my size so full of vim and zest,
Could find himself defeated by a small pain in his chest."

"What would my wife be thinking of her man so strong and grown,
If she could see me sitting here, too weak to stand alone?
Could my mother have imagined, as she held me to her breast,
That I'd be sitting HERE one day with this pain in my chest?"

"Can it be getting dark so soon?" He winced up at the sun.
"It's growing dim and I thought that the day had just begun.
I think, before I travel on, I'll get a little rest

And, quietly, the boy died from that small pain in his chest

I don't recall what happened then. I think I must have cried.
I put my arms around him and I pulled him to my side
And, as I held him to me, I could feel our wounds were pressed
The large one in my heart against the small one in his chest.

Summary

Stanza 1: The narrator comes across a soldier who is presumably sitting peacefully under a tree. As he approached, the soldier gestured to him to come closer, and that is when the narrator saw dead bodies of fallen soldiers lying strewn all over the place. The battle ground was a scene of intense fighting from the day before when soldiers had fought a long and difficult battle throughout the night and had finally succumbed to their injuries. The solitary soldier, who had motioned for the narrator to come closer lay drained of all his energy and slumped on the ground under the tree. He had been grievously wounded under the soft morning Sun which had by now bathed the dead bodies in its gentle glow.

Stanza 2: Barely managing to smile through his pain, the soldier told the narrator that he was very thirsty, and begged him for some water. He informed him about how grueling the fighting had been the night before and how the non-stop fighting had sapped all his energy and had left a “small pain in his chest.” It was an understatement. The soldier had been grievously wounded in his chest, but he chose to play it down.

Stanza 3: The narrator looked at his fallen comrade and noted that his shirt was blood-stained reddish- brown with dirt and his uniform was soiled. All this pointed to the fact that the soldier had endured a savage fight. The soldier must have noticed the sadness on his eyes because he stoically made light of his own injury and declared that he was lucky to have survived with just a ‘small pain in the chest’, where as all his fellow soldiers had fallen dead. It was a remarkable show of defiance and grit. With astounding courage, he concealed his excruciating pain and put up a brave face.

Stanza 4: The young soldier was fast losing his vitality, but his mind was not ready to give up. He narrated how his contingent of 200 men had managed to climb atop a hill the previous night. As they began to descend, the enemy rained bullets on them and in an explosion almost all of them were instantly killed. It had been a very bloody encounter. Then while the soldier looked within, he felt cold although the Sun shone brightly. His limbs had become numb and insipid and a creeping feeling of doom had overtaken his mind. He felt he was nearing his dotage due to his fatigue. But, his spirit was hardly scarred. He wanted to believe that it was the fatigue of the hard-fought battle that made him feel low then. Smiling wryly, he reiterated that his injury was minor.

Stanza 5: The young soldier shared some more details of the encounter. He stated how, in the aftermath of the encounter, he had looked around to help some of his comrades but it was all in vain. All that he saw was deep bomb craters and the corpses of his fellow

soldiers. Undaunted by the catastrophe, he continued to fire at the enemy until the ‘small pain in his chest’ made him to sink down onto the ground.

Stanza 6: The narrator handed over the water to the young soldier. The latter drank it, and smiled brightly, happily and very gratefully while his face reflected the deep joy and peace within him. Then he bemoaned the fact that a strong and stout soldier like him could be down on his knees amidst the fury of the battleground. He lamented the fact that a ‘small pain in the chest’ had done him in. It was a show of herculean courage to describe a fatal bullet wound as a ‘small pain in the chest.’

Stanza 7: Then the young soldier began to introspect how his near and dear ones would judge his reluctance to fight. His wife might regret that her large-framed husband who she had assumed had great courage and energy was indeed a timid soul from within. His mother, who reared him to manhood, might be ashamed to see her son capitulating to the enemy just because of a ‘small pain in the chest.’ The young soldier obviously knew the regard and reverence with which his family and society looked at him. He was ashamed that their trust had been belied.

Stanza 8: As his life started to leave his body, the young soldier saw the sun growing dim and darkness descending all around engulfing the day which has just begun. He looked at the Sun and couldn’t figure out how dusk could fall so soon. Oblivious of his impending death, the young unflinching soldier had hoped to resume fighting after a brief rest. But, it was a vain day dream. He departed quietly within moments.

Stanza 9: For the narrator, it was a deeply moving experience to see a young soldier signing off from life with all guns blazing. He had defied death, lived the life of a real hero, and left a trail of inspiration and glory. Overwhelmed with emotions, the narrator put his arms around him, and pulled him into an embrace. The real wound in the heart of the deceased soldier had carved a far bigger wound in the narrator’s heart. Sadness laced with pride, anguish mixed with admiration, and empathy lined with reverence gripped his ‘wounded’ heart. He was deeply agonized by the suffering and ultimate of the young soldier.

Analysis

In this poem the narrator meets a dying soldier who in spite of grave injuries had a smile on his face. The soldier had fought the battle relentlessly and shared his experiences with the narrator. The agony of the soldier deeply disturbed and traumatized the narrator. This poem is an anti-war poem which shows us the side effects of war & the effect it has in the lives of people. Hence, advising us to understand the real agony of people involved in war which had never given happiness to people or the nations fighting it.

Death follows a soldier at every step of the way in the battlefield. Yet, a valiant soldier lumbers on, braving the enemy bullets and the injuries to his body. Death often comes slowly inflicting excruciating pain on the wounded solitary soldier. As the Sun sets in his life, he finds no one to bring him succor or solace. Finally, he breathes his last. But, the gutsy soldier dies for a cause – the call to defend his country. Some unflinching steadfast soldiers, the refusal of their limbs to continue fighting brings lament and remorse. In the present case, what hurt the dying soldier more is the fear his mother and wife might assume that he capitulated before the enemy before shedding the last drop of blood. It is a hugely inspirational song that sings the praise of a fatally wounded soldier bemoaning not his death, but his inability to carry on fighting. He dies defying death. For generation to come, his story of valor and dedication will imbibe the never-say-die spirit in countless soldiers.

Small Pain in My Chest by Michael Mack was read to more than 5000 people, at the funeral of the first Blackhawk helicopter pilot, who was shot down in Iraq. It is also traditionally read at the Vietnam Veterans meetings. The poem shows the pain suffered by the soldiers in a war and It also portrays the human spirit in times of war and crisis.

The main theme of this poem is to avoid wars and to bring peace among nations. This poem described the background of the Vietnamese war and this brings to the reader's notice, the agony experienced by soldiers. The soldiers are also more often than not likely to be affected by PTSD-post traumatic stress disorder.

This poem tell us the experiences of a soldier, who fought hard and is now feeling guilty since he is unable to move because of the "small pain in his chest". He also gives reasons as to why he was feeling tired or worn out and asks for a sip of water and though it quenched his thirst, he began to feel guilty at the thought of disappointing his family. He wanted to take a little rest before moving on but instead he ended up resting for eternity. This poem is very sentimental towards the end because the poet is very touched by the brave soldier and was devastated that he could do nothing to help the dying man.

About the poet

Michael Mack is an American Poet who grew up in Missouri and served the Air force for 5 years. He is a member of the Florida State Poetry Association and continues to give readings and teach poetry appreciation at the county outreach centers. His famous poems include- The last Words of Mary Dodd, Counting Clouds, The Hallways of my mind, False Reality and the Robot.

Questions

a. How did the young soldier get wounded?

The young soldier was part of a 200-strong contingent who climbed a hill in course of a battle somewhere in Asia. During the descent, they ran into unexpected and heavy bombardment by the enemy. The fight continued overnight. Suddenly, a huge explosion took place which caused all of his fellow soldiers to die instantly. He survived, but with a grievous wound in his chest.

b. What did he do soon after the explosion?

True to his training, he attempted to assist his fellow soldiers but it was in vain since his compatriots had all died. He was undaunted by the huge craters around him created by the savage bombings and continued to fire at the enemy until he became too weak to continue and he finally collapsed under a tree.

c. Why was he so full of remorse?

He felt sad that he was unable to continue and felt that his wife and his mother would take a dim view of his virtual capitulation. Though the soldier in him urged him to press on, he was too drained to continue and this made him remorseful.

d. What qualities of the soldier make him stand apart?

The soldier was stoic, courageous and very committed to his duty. He was defiant in the face of death and wanted to press on despite the excruciating pain he suffered due to the wound in his chest. He ignored the suffering calling it a small pain in his chest. Such determination to fight even when death knocked on his door made him a truly astounding soldier.

e. How did the author-narrator feel when the soldier died?

He was shattered to see the young soldier dying before him. His heart was filled with grief, admiration and love for the young fighter who died defying death. He fell in the battle like a true hero and departed from this world with all guns blazing.

Symbolism

1. The title itself is a brilliant example of symbolism. The author has sung the praise of the young valiant soldier who despite his fatal wound in the chest, defies death and rues his inability to continue fighting. The author has succeeded in underlining his message quite effectively by describing the lament of the dying soldier not in groans and curses but in words conveying stoicism, pride and defiance.

2. “Can it be getting dark so soon?” He winced up at the sun .“ It’s growing dim and I thought that the day had just begun”, these lines are another example of the author resorting to symbolism to describe the soldier sinking into the last throes of death. This is why everything looks dim and dark to him even though the sun was shining brightly. Yet, valor is still palpable in the soldier who would breathe his last very soon. The lines juxtapose the gloom of the soldier’s life with his never-say-die-spirit.

3. “And, as I held him to me, I could feel our wounds were pressed. The large one in my heart against the small one in his chest” Again in this exquisite example of symbolism, the narrator is not physically wounded at all but the death of the brave soldier saddened him and moved him to pain.