

THIS YEAR marks the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II. The following poem pays tribute to those who carry the legacy of that war.

Thus we see

The memories of war are embodied forever. I wrote this poem some months after a 65-year-old man consulted me in the mid-1980s complaining of a band of chest pain that two cardiologists had investigated without diagnosis. As a Polish prisoner-of-war in World War II, he had been enslaved in a German coalmine, starved and inadequately clothed. He described to me how, as winter progressed, he and his fellow prisoners would wire the decaying pieces of their clothes together. His shirt was reduced to a band of fabric around the middle of his chest. His current chest pain was in the same anatomical zone as that covered 45 years before by the remnants of his shirt.

Thus we see and sew and save
the triangular, square or without form,
coloured bits of fabric
that keep us warm.

Thus we see
the landscape under snow,
“the infected winter of our condition”,
and in seeing, know.

Thus we sew,
as freezing prisoners of war,
the remnants of the clothes we wear,
Dole. Too rough:
thread of repair is not enough
to make us whole.

Thus we save,
as lining for our trap,
flotsam rescued from the wave,
the storm, from life’s enthralling
compromise —
worn and wet rags
to fill the gap —
we have only man’s eyes.

Stephen Leeder

Professor of Public Health and Community
Medicine, School of Public Health
University of Sydney, NSW; and Director
Australian Health Policy Institute
steve@med.usyd.edu.au