

# Ten Poets,

Selected by *Will Hochman*

*Elizabeth Weber*

*Johnathan Alexander*

*Russell Thorburn*

*Virgil Suarez*

*H. Palmer Hall*

*Elizabeth D. Samet*

*Mario Petrucci*

*Lee Passarelli*

*Gary Mills*

*Jeffrey C. Alfier*

*Elizabeth Weber*

## Dreaming of Bill: September 5, 1994

It's your birthday and the field across the street  
swarms with monarchs  
drawn by flowering golden rod.  
As children, we stunned them with baseball bats  
and carried them back home  
to fill our living room  
with the fury of their wings  
as they fluttered back to life.  
There were always a few  
that didn't make it.  
We never thought of their pain.

In my dreams, you're always twenty,  
skin smooth, your face  
blank as that lake with no wind.  
Even your shirts are twenty years old,  
button down collars and pin stripes,  
the same old white jeans and penny loafers.

Today, rain fell, a slow drizzle.  
My breath catching  
on the drops that fell before me  
I ran out into it and on the path  
stumbled across a box turtle.  
A pattern of yellow and black diamonds,  
it drew itself back  
into its shell and hissed at me.  
It was the most beautiful thing

I'd seen that day, and I wanted it  
off that path and under ferns  
where no sniffing dogs could find it.

That last time you came home  
unexpected and on leave from the Army,  
you stood by the big picture window  
not a ghost but a near ghost,  
playing the bass guitar and trying  
to look brave and not as if you were  
on your way to war in a week.  
That was another fall,  
another falling of leaves  
turning the world red, burning the world.  
I always thought of you as the flunk-out king  
with the "Live for today  
for tomorrow you die" motto.  
The boy I caught missing his biology final  
to attend a rock concert.  
Not the hero you later became,  
the one, who shot twice and dying,  
kept radioing for help.

Each morning this fall I read about men and women  
ripped apart, their bodies shredded  
like the water balloons  
we tossed at each other in fun.  
I read about children killed  
for reasons not understood,  
men who fight for a mark where the land ends,  
for the right to tell who to do what.  
Serbs impregnating Croat women  
so they will be cast out by their families in shame.

What was it like in that country  
you went to  
where people looked at you  
with eyes like those of that dog we once found,  
its bloody neck caught in a wire snare?

It snapped at anything that got close.  
Perhaps that's what you became.

These days a Vietnamese family lives  
down the alley. They grow cabbages  
and zucchini in a large field out on Mullen Road.  
I see the oldest daughter walking  
the irrigation ditches and carrying buckets of water.  
Yesterday in the grocery store, her mother squatted  
on the floor in front of me in the check-out line  
and dug in her purse for money.  
The cashier looked at her as if she were a cockroach  
just crawled out from beneath the spinach.  
I had to close my eyes.  
All I could see were the villages you wrote about,  
how you went through pulling out old men,  
women and children from the places they hid  
and burned their huts.  
All I could see were their dead bodies  
sprawled in a ditch and in a road beside a rice paddy.  
That moment I was glad you were dead.  
I wanted to lift the woman from the floor.  
I wanted to throw her down.  
I wanted to rip her money from her still living hand  
and scatter it like so many lost seeds.

**Elizabeth Weber** teaches Creative Writing at the University of Indianapolis. Her poetry has appeared in many journals.

*Jonathan Alexander*

## Anthem for Wilfred Owen

At seventeen, I knew nothing  
of war, but I could read between

the lines of your poems: foreheads of  
youth and innocent tongues, strange

meetings and smothering dreams,  
limbs full nerved but too hard to

stir, and the hanging face, sick of  
sin—but whose sin was it that kept you

dreaming? What stuttering vision  
choked on the old lie?

*In all my dreams  
he plunges at me . . .*

This is not their war. They would not  
know it as you exploded with the brush

of a boy, barely seventeen, drowning  
in floating fire. Some truths lie too deep for

taint. Death leaked around you like  
poison gas, but you stopped to notice

the clumsy youth fumbling his  
helmet and coughing up a prayer,

or the dark-haired boys dying as  
cattle while the holy glimmers of

blondes fought at your side for king  
and country and a smile from their

captain. You nursed the tenderness of  
patient minds and recorded

futility, a simple request:  
“Move him into the sun . . .”

But all the while the old lie kept  
you marching in your sleep

while others would see you  
drowning.

**Jonathan Alexander's** most recent work appears in *Blithe House Quarterly*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Heart Quarterly*, *Salt River Review*, and *Chiron Review*. He teaches writing at the University of Cincinnati.

*Russell Thorburn*

## Reese at the Asylum in the West of Ireland

The interns hogtie a shrieking private  
who disassembles dreams until there's a fragment  
of sky in his blue left eye. "No talking today,"  
he cries as they shove his head between  
his legs, kick him for good measure.

His naked body is returned for delousing,  
his analyst from the war board  
waiting to copy notes, if he'd only  
say what happened in that pillbox  
where the squad located him, the grenade pin  
holding back an explosion in his hand  
and the lieutenant staring up at concrete;  
but Reese imitates a sea gull  
in flight, rolls his eyes, makes  
a popping sound, and there's no way he's  
going to talk about the pillbox in France,  
or whisper coherently about mortar  
fire that kept him from leaving that damn box,  
or how the young blonde in a dirty chemise  
didn't wait for the German, but slid  
from the dust and chipped concrete,  
holes where you could put a fist, and died  
in cold fire without another breath.

There's no way he can tell what happened  
next, when he unloaded his weapon  
into Germans, who raised their hands.

He might have looked at blue sky,  
 heard a cricket sing before the smoke cleared,  
 read poetry in cornfields  
 before the tractor bumped by to pick him up,  
 his father leaning to the side, asking.  
 "What the hell is that?"  
 And Reese would have told him it's a book.

The young blonde in a heap seen  
 outside the pillbox. The priest  
 who absolved him drinking wine  
 beside three German corpses  
 who would never break bread again.  
 And Reese measures blue sky through  
 the window, glancing first at the analyst,  
 then the dimensions of a wired cross,  
 as the interns curse him, point to the chair  
 where they want to tie him to the rungs,  
 so his veins will grow large and purple,  
 and the horn-rimmed analyst can ask, "When  
 did you first think you could fly like a sea gull?"

## After the Second Mortar Shell Punched Its Fist through the Chapel Wall

twenty coats of gesso were licked off the icons  
 by fire. And two American soldiers  
 crouched by the altar. Heaven descended  
 from above in the plaster. Reese and I  
 coughed; we ducked our heads and saw the priest  
 smother the canvas of Jesus walking on the water.  
 His arms spread out, as if he were swimming  
 with the frail arithmetic of a saint's body.  
 A cigarette and a look at the icons was all we had  
 wanted before the mortars measured us:  
 to study how Jesus' hand  
 frozen in a gaze of rabbit-skin glue  
 could make a sinner search for his soul.

A blonde girl undressed to a dirty chemise  
 and a smirk eating cheese while the priest's words  
 floated us up a ladder, miles away  
 from garroting Germans in a wheat field,  
 or the talk about Jimmy Dorsey.  
 Reese asked if the eyes of the priest's saints  
 were daubed with coffee; he had drunk  
 that sinister grace before; and that was  
 when God or the Germans spoke,  
 what was the difference, who could tell  
 one voice from the other, while mortar shells crumbled  
 in thunder and fire? Reese pulled out the blonde  
 and I dragged the priest by his heels toward  
 the wine cellar.

## Apollinaire Explains to Mephistopheles

How he never read Aristotle  
 but pretended to know the heaviness  
 in each word; what life meant  
 after the doctor shakes his head.

We axe a part of others' lives,  
 that lie blown out like labored breath:  
 the unthinkable: why we are placed on earth.  
 Mephistopheles' words this wrinkle of air,

his nakedness showing from the armor  
 he wears in tribute to the dead.  
 And the poet on the divan, windows  
 to the flutter of sound below,

feels he cannot breathe  
 through another hour, and says  
 we are always dying, it's strange  
 to find we are living a minute more.

His forehead swept clean of moist hair,  
dark as the Devil's glistening eyes  
who blows out another lie: to die  
is to know you are nothing.

**Russell Thorburn** is an NEA fellow who has published two volumes of poetry, *Exposed Splendor* and *Approximate Desire*.

*Virgil Suarez*

## Yes, Cubans Fought on Both Sides of the Vietnam War

from the post-revolution island (as military advisors), and young Cubans whose parents lived in exile in the United States, drafted

and sent, and each waited in their own side, aware of the rain, monsoon season, heat, humidity, how birds they could never see

cackled in mocking from the distant trees, mosquitos and other insects, familiar and strange at the same time, one didn't

know the other was hiding in the bush, their breathing almost audible, like thunder rolling over a blanket of clouds over the rice

paddies, just like what they remembered of home, sugar cane fields, tobacco, rice, then the sound of music, recognizable beat, rhythm,

*"Tu que me decias que el yayabo no salia mas,"* music, metallic and resonant, so unmistakably Cuban, carried over from the enemy lines

and its sounds like home, an invitation, this music of conga drums and claves, and the Cuban American soldier recognized

the tune, and what else was there to do than  
to lay down the rifle, remove the backpack,  
and get up and dance, right there behind

the sandbags and barbed wire, and the other  
soldiers looked up in disbelief, their own music  
lost to them now, as if all had been taken

from them, but his rhythm rose and the Cuban  
soldiers danced on both sides, not knowing  
that each had come from the same hard place.

## The Cuban in Vietnam

he sits in the dark of trees, hunched,  
his legs numb like his eyes, the rain  
pelting his poncho, and he thinks

of crickets, a praying mantis, caterpillars  
that will only turn to dust, his father  
back home telling him not to enlist,

that this business of duty and patriotism  
was the language of the lost, not good  
Cuban boys like him, boys who loved

their mothers, anything so he wouldn't  
go, but he is here now in the stillness  
of his life, somewhere nearby a frog

calls out, like the ones in Miami used to,  
toads that leapt at him when he mowed  
the grass, these creatures well-acquainted

with the night, and the rain doesn't let  
up, and he remembers the downpours  
of his childhood, how his grandmother walks

through the emptiness of rooms,  
 calls out she's made a *colada*, for everyone  
 to come have a sip. "It is good

for you," she tells him, her yellow frayed  
 bedroom slippers soft-scratching tiles,  
 and he closes his eyes now, listens to rain,

how the sounds of things falling settles  
 his heart, his mind, he opens his eyes  
 long enough to see an opening in the sky,

clouds mouthing a huge O, and the stars  
 wink finally, tomorrow he moves on,  
 his thoughts like dead insects on the dirt

where he sat and pondered what the hell  
 he was doing here in Vietnam,  
                   so close to the end.

## Vertical or How Halved Gourds Glazed with Rain Water Reflect Atomic Clouds

It's one of those blistering desert days,  
 not a cloud in the sky other than the one  
 mushrooming behind you. You stand

in uniform, arms akimbo, a smile  
 on your face like you wish it were always  
 this safe to stand in the middle of a desert

somewhere and pretend what rises behind  
 you isn't deadly. On the horizon a train  
 or what looks like a caravan or trucks,

wagons on their way to the slaughter house,  
 two power line poles, their cables like hair  
 almost invisible, your own shadow cowers

beside your dusty, black boots, a wind  
sweeps down from snow-capped mountains,  
all along the explosion behind you blooms,

emptying like rain-filled gourds behind you,  
it's a blistering hot day and everything wants  
to melt, suffocates under the taunted forces

of nature, physics, what we've come to know  
thus far, all that can destroy us, make us vanish.  
If you listen closely, you can hear the heat zing.

**Virgil Suarez** has published several books of poems. His most recent, *In the Republic of Longing*, was published by Arizona State University's Bilingual Review Press. The poems printed here are part of an upcoming collection, *Caliban Ponders Chaos*.

*H. Palmer Hall*

Father Buddha

I walked two clicks down Le Loi Street  
to a school yard, a buddha broken in the dust  
shattered by a rocket meant for us,  
and saw you sitting in his hand  
tossing carved pieces of the statue's feet,  
not even caring where they'd land.

What mattered was that I did not want to be  
where and what I was and saw  
that you had also had no choice. Some law,  
legal in my case, chance in yours,  
with no way out that you or I could see,  
gave me a twelve-month, you a lifetime, tour.

We shared a cigarette and watched the smoke  
rise into the red dust Pleiku air.  
You grinned, blew smoke rings with the flair  
that comes only when you're very young.  
You told me I was on the Buddha's throat  
and should beware the Buddha's tongue.

I remember that once, when the war was calm,  
we laughed and played with shattered stone,  
and know there can be no way to atone  
for all the death, the wounds, the pain.  
If you still live, rest quietly in Father Buddha's palm;  
if not, sleep peacefully with all the dead.

## Russian Roulette

—*imitations of fantasy (for the names on the Wall)*

They thought a little game might be nice—  
An American version of Russian Roulette,  
but no bullets in a pistol, only a wire-  
mesh barrel, revolving slowly, filled  
with ping-pong balls, tumbling, rolling,  
every 30 seconds another ball falls out,  
birthdates professionally printed, falling  
into numbered slots.

Like the Texas  
lottery, only you win, you lose, and the only  
thing you bet's your life. That's how  
the game works. Only, they forgot  
the props. The big-bosomed woman  
in the red, white and blue bikini. She  
was supposed to smile for the cameras,  
read out the numbers could she count  
that high. That high: 1,2,3, . . .120  
should have been okay. 120, you don't  
have to go, can have a party, celebrate,  
drink beer, smoke grass, tell the government  
to blow it out its ass, moon them all.

And they forgot to have a winner there,  
like NBA draft day, lined up to grin  
and walk up on the stage. A real  
killing for #1: all-expense-paid vacation  
to the mysterious East, exotic women,  
big game hunting. They could have plastered  
that on the walls, found a way to make  
the day appeal to everyone, perhaps even  
the players.

But it was a government  
party: no props, no bimbos, just  
a turning barrel, wire mesh, a voice  
(perhaps Georgie Jessel's?) calling  
numbers, one by one, winners and  
losers.

## The Sentinel Trees

Morning, bright sun and warmth, the beginning of a new century  
 But “dying” seems the one right word. We sit in the back yard,  
 Tall loblolly pines looking on, whispering to each other  
 As the wind picks up and the so long dead come back to visit.

Earlier at the first hint of approaching sunlight, I  
 Ventured out beneath the trees, pushed  
 Back the thick undergrowth that separates the lawn from  
 All that wonderment of persimmon, palmetto, mustang grapes

And ventured down to a perfect lake of green algae,  
 Cypress knees, water tupelos, a small overhang just  
 A few feet above the swirls of green, below tall  
 Cypress trees standing alone, guarding snakes

And armadillos, lamenting, perhaps, their own dead,  
 At the base of the forest slope, and wetting their roots  
 In the shallow water leading to the slow moving river.  
 And there, I mourned my dead from an old war

Left over from a time when I was young. I see  
 Their names on the black gash on a tourist mall,  
 See their faces in the stagnant, teeming with life,  
 Water that sits quietly beside tall trees. Jesus God,

Watch over them, I pray, before turning back  
 To Adirondack chairs to talk of other days, people I do  
 Not know but who make up the generations of my life.  
 My aunt, whose husband died just three weeks ago

Today, joins us, fresh tears added to the old. “When  
 A man and a woman have been married 54 years,”  
 She says, “God should let them go out together  
 Instead of leaving one behind to weep.”

A long century, adding up to you and me,  
To tall trees that speak of us and all who went  
Before, to still waters with green molds washing  
the base of everything we can see.

**H. Palmer Hall's** most recent book is *Deep Thicket & Still Waters*. His recent poems have appeared in *Best Texas Writing 2*, *Ascent*, *Concho River Review*, and *Rattle*. "Father Buddha" was originally published in *The Practice of Peace* (Sherman Asher Publishing, 1998).

*Elizabeth D. Samet*

## Grant in Mexico

*for Tony Hartle*

To educated Henry Adams  
he was proof  
of devolution,  
to Melville a cigar,  
smoking always and alone,  
on a ridge  
in Tennessee.  
But how visible  
four years ago  
to the eyes of that coyote—  
coyote poised,  
so Buber tells us,  
between the spirit's venture  
and vegetable security—  
coyote pushing further south,  
too far from the Catskills,  
unhappy in the Bronx, arriving  
on the Heights between  
the Doric columns  
of a shabby mausoleum cicatrized  
by garbage trucks  
and spray paint fusillades?

Unquiet,  
in that tomb  
as he had been  
in Mexico,  
the war of politics

he so mistrusted.  
By then, of course,  
Point Pleasant  
had receded,  
West Point too,  
where,  
unapologetic  
and unbidden,  
he read novels—  
all of Marryat and Cooper,  
excelled in nothing  
save for math  
and horsemanship,  
indulged the playful  
premonition he would,  
one day,  
be a general.

In Mexico  
he studied generals:  
Scott with saber, aiguillettes,  
Taylor nonchalant,  
seated sideways  
on his horse.

At Palo Alto  
he watched a cannon ball  
tear off Page's jaw.  
At Monterrey he crouched—  
his horse on loan  
to a dead man—  
in a field of cane beneath  
the Black Fort's batteries;  
and two days later,  
September 23rd,  
(almost to the plaza,  
but low on ammunition)  
he volunteered  
to ride unfriendly streets

(the horse his shield)  
 one boot hooked  
 around the cantle,  
 as he said,  
 one arm  
 about the neck,  
 exposed.

Later,  
 with a troop of voltigeurs,  
 he would tote the pieces  
 of a mountain howitzer  
 along San Cosme road;  
 still dripping from the ditch  
 that lay between  
 them and the church,  
 he would knock  
 hard upon the door,  
 persuade the priest  
 of what he ought to do  
 in Spanish  
 (broken Spanish),  
 till shells dropped from the belfry.

Veracruz,  
 Churubusco,  
 Cerro Gordo and Chapultepec.  
 Allied with those who  
 would oppose him:  
 with Pemberton and Lee,  
 with Buckner,  
 most uneasy  
 most steadfast,  
 his banker and his  
 friend who, in the end,  
 would come again  
 to Mount McGregor.  
 On furlough in the spring  
 of '48—that surreal

climbing party  
of incipient  
Confederates,  
up volcanic Popocatepetl,  
through the caves  
of Cuernavaca.  
Grant adding  
even then (as he wrote)  
to his book and to his coffin.

**Elizabeth D. Samet** is an Assistant Professor of English at West Point. She has recent work appearing in the *Connecticut Review* and *English Literary History*.

*Mario Petrucci*

## Negatives

*(Photographic Archive, Imperial War Museum)*

You'd think an unnamed General, on glass,  
safe? But some Private washed him improperly  
in the Somme, so he just keeps on developing.  
His forehead, bluffed with craters.

Gelatin's no better. Too warm, too moist,  
and there's a precise species of mould ready  
to bombard its plane. Vegetation's lowest order  
reclaims these trenches.

Even envelopes rebel. Acid leaches  
from each pore, syringes out its silver  
to spatter the illusion or roll time's gas.  
The stumbling, enveloped again.

Sudden heat is fatal. Wipes each  
slate clean, each little foursquare pane.  
Images peel. Their quantum flakes detach—  
a miniature snowstorm in black.

So it's all kept cool. Under control.  
In the darkroom's Martian light another face  
gets half-way saved. The General's two  
pressed dimensions, dying to explode.

**Winner of the Bridport Prize**

## Soldier, Soldier

We, no common ground?

Once, we strolled brine in brine  
over silt and sediment. Entwined

our tails of incandescent blue  
between cackling clouds. Pressed

as one we were, in time's book:  
poppies of phosphorus, iron, zinc.

I, the boxfish kissing your coral.  
You, the olive branch bearing

my ancestor. Friend, everything came  
together to make us upright, warm.  
Hold firm—soil looking on soil.  
We will never happen again. Brother

of the same sun, how on earth withhold  
an embrace? Or guide the bayonet home?

This headlong dustwardness is flesh  
blind to itself, our dissolving

the forced hand of love.

## Trench

Sniper, Sniper, in your tree—  
has your eye closed in on me?  
Did your sights hot-cross my head  
before you chose young Phil instead?  
If looks could kill, would I be dead?

Sniper, Sniper, the one you get  
 doesn't hear your rifle crack.  
 They're saying here that you've the knack.  
 They're telling me I've lost a bet—  
 they say I'm dead. I just don't know it yet.

Written for the proposed IWM Residency. *Poetry Hunt*.

## D-Day Ferry

They served, sailed, smoked. Stood. Sank. Waited, half-bent  
 under the ceiling shrapnel made, head-height.  
 Now, so short of breath, is it waste of breath  
 to remind? Few, they advance, denying time  
 to cross slicker channels, recall lost friends.  
 Stuck with the sweet stench of taken chances  
 they join, hand on shoulder, that queue of men  
 time trails far behind. Fumbling with glasses  
 they home to a corner of a beached field  
 echeloned with foreign stone. One by one  
 they disembark—their war as far removed  
 as ours—and will not tax our memory long,  
 for our century will be tongueless, stone—  
 deaf, disarmed, once the last of them is gone.

### Broadcast on BBC2 TV

Mario Petrucci has nearly 400 poems in print internationally, collected in *Shrapnel and Sheets*, *Lepidoptera*, and *Bosco*. He is poet-in-residence at London's Imperial War Museum.

*Lee Passarella*

—from *Swallowed up in Victory*

Petersburg  
August 1, 1864

All quiet, the air a black miasma, the stench  
a thing you lug around with you, like the corpse  
they'd strap to the villain's chest in Bible days. . . .

This morning, both sides called a truce so the dead  
could be removed. Drew burial duty, worked  
among a bunch of Yanks as thunderstruck  
as I. Dear God, to think that man could come  
to so reduced a state as those dead beasts  
we carried off, black with putrefaction,  
blown with noxious gas, like the gullet of a frog  
or bladder of a fish! There's no humanity  
about those noisome things. I wept to see  
such degradation—many did.

I've been  
in battles now one crueler than another,  
but the one on Saturday was desperate  
beyond all measure. Bayonets, clubbed muskets,  
fire at range so close you saw the blood  
and brains fly, saw the man you shot go down.

I'd been on picket duty half the night  
and was asleep, down in my rabbit hutch.  
I started bolt upright; the ground was shaking  
like a railway train or herd of cattle

thundering overhead. I thought these jaws  
of mine (that generally have so little to grind on)  
'd break! I ran "upstairs" in time to have  
a hail of mud and lumber fall on me.

"G\_\_\_\_\_n it!" someone yelled across the way.

I found out later it was Reds Mabry,  
who's my old pard—somebody's severed leg  
had brushed right past his shoulder, raining daubs  
of blood on him as it went by! Awful  
that was, but we saw worse thereafter—God!  
much worse. . . .

The Yankees followed up the blast  
with pounding salvos—every howitzer,  
Napoleon, and ordnance piece they owned  
was trained on us. Most fled toward the rear.  
Old Bushrod was so far behind the lines,  
at breakfast like a man of leisure, that he didn't  
know till after sunup what had happened  
hereabouts.

It slowly dawned on us  
the Yanks would soon be spilling through that hole  
their bomb had blown. We tried to form up ranks  
with fumbling, cussing inefficiency.  
But Colonel Fitz was thinking on his feet, he got  
what boys were left assembled fairly quick.  
We ran to what had been the salient, now  
a scene of devastation beyond belief.  
The slabs of still-warm flesh that lay about,  
together with the shards of every sort of gear,  
from coats and hats and haversacks to cannons!  
God, if ever I inclined toward  
belief in the Good Book's Lake of Fire, why, here  
was what it must, in small, look like!

We joined  
with little Bill Mahone's boys, fought our way  
back up to the crater's edge. When we got there,  
we ran smack into colored troops! Some whites  
went wild, they clubbed and bayoneted niggers  
left and right, and even ones who hoped

to surrender. "Kill the niggers! Spare the whites,  
and kill the niggers!" God in heaven, I hear  
them shouting, still! I couldn't help but think  
of Daddy's blacks at home, like Ed and Boss,  
that I grew up with. They're men certainly  
as any backwoods Alabamian,  
no matter what their color! Jesus, how  
could anyone treat men like that. . . ?

We fought

around that crater till the Yankees called  
it quits, till maybe 12 or 1 o'clock.  
We found out later on that half our men  
were hurt or killed before the battle had  
begun. Sergeant Blankenship was killed,  
and so were Metts and Whiting. Reds was wounded—  
arm ripped up a bit—though he'll be fine.  
But General Elliott is hurt so bad,  
he'll soon see home again—his Heavenly,  
if not the other. God be with him, then! . . .  
The 18th Regiment's done for, about—  
most blown to pieces when the fort went up.

For once, the Reverend Burket's nearly speechless.  
Saw him on the killing ground, as white and haggard  
as a hungry prophet in retreat. Wednesday last,  
he preached at weekly meeting and took his text  
from Matthew 24. I couldn't help  
but think there was significance in such  
a choice. For when I saw that crater filled  
with its ghostly waste, its warring specters lost  
in smoke and wrack, I thought about those times—  
in Jesus' words—when two will be in the field,  
one taken, the other left behind.

Old friend,

you know I may make light of parsons and their truck,  
but God's Word speaks aloud to me at times  
like these. Perhaps this *is* a vision of the end,  
these works and trenches stretching far as the eye  
can see, the endless browns and grays of mire

and hewn-down trees. The world we knew before might just as well be sunk beneath this present hell, and in the wings, new earth and heaven awaiting birth, as in the Word. Yet God appears so far away. . . .

A private in our mess inherited a jug from some poor soul who won't require its services again this side of Glory—shared it with us all. It went down well today, you can believe. The pity is, we couldn't requisition half a dozen more!

Virgil J. Cabell  
Corporal, 17th South Carolina

**At Petersburg**  
**October 4, 1864**

*Lieber* Martin:

*Grusse aus Virginien!* I am well and hope that you are too. I know you're safe, at least, 400 miles behind the lines, there in your Papa's offices. But were the war to ever come as far as Broadway, we can count on you, I'm sure!

There's not much time for correspondence, you can guess. This is the first chance that I've had to write, so I will use it to advantage—make you squirm with envy.

On the 30th last, I finally "saw the elephant," which is to say I fought in my first battle. I can tell you it is nothing like the books I've read, where heroes have the luxury of time and thinking space to plan great acts of valor. I could only concentrate on these two things: my sergeant,

and my own beloved arse! (which I'll explain if you read on a space). Of course in war, you wait around for things to happen, meaning you've more time to fret. So when the order came to move, my knees were limp as potted jelly. There is blessed little question of heroics with your limbs all trapped in aspic!

Anyhow,

that day, l e i s u r e l y, locked arm to arm, we moved across a space of half a mile toward these Rebel breastworks near a farm. And all we ever heard was "Steady, steady!" (had to get in range before we fired) while every moment shells were crashing here and there. One landed in a tree above our heads. Big shreds of bark and limbs fell down. I looked with tender longing at the little hillocks that we passed, but it was "Steady!" still. And then a shell hit on my right, and two men fell. I couldn't help but look at them: One's arm was ripped off near the shoulder. There he lay, just like a tailor's dummy someone's tossed in a heap. His face all gashed and bloody, a flap of skin pulled back like he'd been scalped. You know, the boys who'd been through this before had told me, *keep eyes forward, don't take in the sights*, but who remembers good advice with grapeshot overhead? *Vor Gott*, I thought I'd shit myself! (The veterans told me later that if I had, I needn't be ashamed. They'd had their britches full a time or two themselves!)

I did a quick about face. Well, the next thing I knew, Sgt. Cornwell had my shoulder in a grip as mighty as a stevedore's. He shouted, "Damn you, boy, you'll not turn tail while *I'm* in charge of you!" and after that, I toed the mark. *Verflucht!* that rotten bastard scares me more than Rebel howitzers!

\* \* \*

Their muskets fired a volley, then once more.  
 A ball whizzed by my ear; I felt one graze  
 my coat sleeve. Sidelong glances told me men  
 were being hit and falling down the line,  
 but I was going nowhere if not forward!

The order came to fire. That volley would  
 have deafened you! I'd never heard its like  
 before. It was enlivening, I warrant!  
 We begun to shout and went at double-quick  
 (a kind of run) across those last few rods,  
 and then we started in to storm the works.  
*Ach*, what a sight! the flags a-flapping, while  
 that big blue line of ours descended on  
 the Johnnies like a floodtide threatening  
 to swallow up a beach!

We climbed the works;

I ran so fast, I knocked a Rebel down  
 with just the muzzle and flat of my bayonet,  
 not even trying to—but he stayed down!  
 When he came to, he learned he'd soon enjoy  
 the good sea air Fort Delaware affords!  
 The others broke and ran. What do you know?  
 My very first encounter, and a victory!  
 So now that *I'm* at the front, we'll make short work  
 of this ragtag Confederacy!

We seized

a gun (we just recaptured it was all,  
 for it was really ours but had been won  
 in earlier fighting) and some battle flags.  
 You're wrong if you think flags are only bits  
 of colored cloth, since color sergeants die  
 in droves to have the honor of toting them.  
 That's not my cup of tea, especially  
 the dying part, of course!

Well, here I'll say  
*aufwiedersehen*. Please remember me  
 to all the boys (and girls!) back home. Don't drink  
 too much, stay well, and make a pot of money!  
*Dein freund,*

August Kalkbrenner  
 Private, 146th New York

**Petersburg**  
**November 12, 1864**

It's been a while since I have penned my thoughts,  
 a hazard almost unavoidable  
 in this particular vale of tears. The 5th,  
 that schoolmarm Bushrod (maybe Anderson)\*  
 cooked up a plan to take the trench across  
 from us, at moonset—2 o'clock or so.  
 It was a good idea, if the Yanks had only  
 cooperated, which they did to some extent.  
 We took their pickets down without a fight,  
 though there was just enough commotion  
 that other Yanks were roused. But unprepared  
 for us, they fell in droves.

We cleared the front-line  
 trench and started to advance, but then the Bluecoats  
 came from everywhere. We scrapped with them  
 like banty roosters—even overmanned  
 as much as two to one. Usually,  
 I'd be the first to call it quits, but now  
 so many men were hurt, I saw that someone  
 had to cover the retreat. I held the Yankees  
 off with bayonet and musket butt  
 until our boys had cleared the trench. That's when  
 I caught a minie ball above the breast,  
 the fleshy part (so nothing vital was involved).  
 I didn't even know how bad it was  
 until I'd clambered back into our lines

and saw my blouse was sopping wet with blood.  
 I might have died right there, but Longwood clapped  
 his palm across the wound and held it till  
 he'd hauled me back to hospital.

That shot

had gone clean through, the hole was oozing like a spring.  
 So once he'd started in to work on me,  
 the sawbones knew he had as hard a row  
 to hoe as he had seen in quite a while.  
 His nerves were frazzled—as with all the docs  
 you see these days—from overwork. He cursed  
 and sweated like a teamster, seemed surprised.  
 “G\_\_\_\_\_n!” he swore. “I’m going to lose this man.”  
 “The hell you will! I’ll stick to you like plaster.”  
 Then he smiled and said, “I’m sorry, soldier.  
 Guess you doubt my skill right now.” I thought,  
*You’re all I have, man. You will have to do.*

That’s all that I remember, but he must  
 have kept at me like Jacob with the angel, holding on  
 till he’d been blessed. I know that’s how he felt,  
 for later, when he came to see me at the hospital,  
 he had this strange, proprietary air,  
 as if he had a lien up on my life.  
 In fact, I think you’d have to say he does! . . .

Virgil J. Cabell, Corporal  
 17th South Carolina

[\*Major General Bushrod R. Johnson, Division Commander  
 Lieutenant General Richard P. Anderson, Corps Commander  
 IV Corps Army of Northern Virginia]

**Petersburg**  
**January 31, 1865**

Dear Aunt Julie:

The last that I received from you was yours  
of 28 December. Sad to hear  
of Albert's passing. He was always kind  
to me when we were small and shall be missed.  
Of course my deep regrets to Hannah and the girls. . . .

I write with what we hope is great good news.  
Today, a peace commission that includes  
Vice President Stephens was permitted through  
the lines. They passed near where that Yankee mine  
went off, then sped for City Point. The town  
turned out in all the finery it could muster  
after four long years of want to wish  
them godspeed, wizened Mr. Stephens waving  
his old-fashioned beaver hat to us  
from the carriage window, the while our ladies waved  
their gloves and hankies with frantic gaiety.  
The few small children that remain in town  
ran following after, in their dust. A band struck up  
from over in the camps, the musicians playing thinly,  
as starved musicians might, the Bonnie Blue Flag,  
My Maryland, and other jaunty airs  
that, till quite lately sounded all too hollow.  
It recalled the happier, early days—  
Balls Bluff, Manassas, Fredericksburg—when we'd  
good cause to cheer.

We've heard of overtures,  
initiatives, before that came to naught,  
but I will cling to this slim hope since hope's  
as rare as hens, let 'lone those mythic hen's  
teeth of the proverb!

Jim came home on leave  
last week and looks to have aged a year, poor soul!

He's grieved to see the army starved, in rags,  
 as it is now. At hospital, I see  
 young men, grown old and helpless, die in droves  
 of children's ails—of colds and mumps and measles.  
 If once they get a cut upon their hands,  
 their arms become infected, gangrenous,  
 then phagadenic (or necrotic or whatever doctors  
 call it). Death ensues within a week,  
 perhaps, of the time that they fall sick, and no  
 recourse to medicine can save them. Though  
 of course, there *is* no medicine.

I think

that God inures us to our griefs, or we'd all die  
 of broken hearts. But as it is, I'm deadened  
 so to hurt. I feel a callous brute  
 at times. Well, better that than hope beyond  
 all compass. May God grant us peace. If not,  
 at least a saving cynicism—which  
 you well might think I have enough of now!

I'll write as I learn more. Be well and safe.

Your favorite niece,

Amelia Willis Dettmold

**Petersburg**  
**April 3, 1865**

Dear Aunt Julie:

Though I can't say how I shall *ever* post  
 this letter, I will write it just the same.  
 So much to tell—my Lord, so many sorrows!  
 Yesterday, the army all withdrew  
 from Petersburg and Richmond. As they left,  
 they fired the warehouses in town—munitions  
 and tobacco. All last night it seemed the town

would surely be consumed. But since, they've put  
 the fire out, and it is deadly quiet,  
 something we've not known in months. I've heard  
 that Grant and that—*orangutan* in tailcoat,  
 Father Abr'ham, haunted our poor city  
 with their devilish presences, though they're now gone.  
 I meant to walk defiantly downtown,  
 to see our base tormentors, but could not  
 find strength to do so. Jane and I've not left  
 the house in days.

Dear Aunt, I *had* believed  
 and hoped my Jim was with the army, fleeing west.  
 But just before the troops withdrew, a boy  
 came to the house to say he's heard that Jim  
 was captured at Stedman! "God, it couldn't be,"  
 I said. "Jim is an engineer. How could  
 they ever capture him in such an action?  
*We* attacked the Yanks, not otherwise!"  
 The boy assured me what he said was true,  
 that Jim had asked to be assigned to the squad  
 of sappers who went first to clear the way  
 before the assault was made. And when I asked,  
 incredulously, why he'd do a thing  
 so rash, the boy replied he guessed because  
 Jim felt that's where he'd do the greatest good!  
 My God, the man has always thought the South  
 would fall if not for his noble sacrifice!  
 And now, if what the boy has said is true,  
 he's given all—or nearly so—for what?  
 The Confederacy's in shards, those wraiths who follow  
 Lee have every bit as little hope  
 of freedom as Actaeon running from his hounds. My poor,  
 dear gallant fool! Aunt Julie, pray for me!  
 You know I love that d\_\_\_\_d fool man of mine  
 and crave his safe return—and nothing more!

Your loving niece,

Amelia Willis Dettmold

**Lee Passarella** is the Literary Editor of *Atlanta Review*. His poetry has appeared in *The Formalist*, *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, *Chelsea*, *The Sun*, *Cream City Review*, *Blueline*, *Antietam Review*, and *Black Dirt*. The poems printed here are from a collection about the siege of Petersburg, entitled, *Swallowed up in Victory*.

*Gary Mills*

## Drink with the Ball Turret Gunner

Wracked, short and thin, outcast of no corporate wealth,  
I drink with the ball turret gunner. What else but to his health?  
He leans confidently on the counter: Coffin for beer-splintered glass.  
I drink to you, ball turret gunner. What else but to the last?

Consuming dram air and elixirs he swiftly swivels to-and-fro.  
I wait with the ball turret gunner, scanning silently we aching know,  
engaged in spent-link conversation, a skill triggered by fright.  
I weep with the ball turret gunner, covenant anointing our flight.

Time for the call, turret gunner, reluctance chemically in check.  
Listen by the numbers, turret gunner: Static, muffles, regret.  
To sup this evil communion, a map of life fit for none,  
I've seen my gunner possum, his name and fate well wrung.

Ascension! Angelic departure, hellishly divine last scene.  
Pray all turret gunners: comfort for you from this planet's poison dreams.  
I drink to the ball turret gunner: DRINK Drink drink till i forget.

Gary Mills is Assistant Professor of English at the United States Air Force Academy. He was design director for *Andre Dubus: Tributes* (Xavier Review Press, 2001).

*Jeffrey C. Alfier*

## The Kursk: A Valediction

Amusing some dark mistress of silence,  
one poet sang the mirth of shipwrecks. But  
witnessing the irreducible lives  
sink beneath the wake of the ship of State,  
your orison ends, 'I am writing blind' . . .

**Jeffrey C. Alfier** is a U.S. Air Force officer serving in Arizona. He holds an MA in Humanities from California State University. His work has been published in several journals including *Military Review*, *CrossConnect*, *Pif Magazine*, and *Southern Cross Review*.