

Thomas Dukes

Writing Daddy

Mama whispered bedtime stories of your Korean letters
hidden in a locked cedar casket, your myth kept
out of reach, though I knew early you could barely write
or read the word *impediment* that Mama made from your
misfired Cracker vowels. Later, in some Carolina
woods of wild pines, you aimed your malaria
against my boyhood, the worst a man could get,
you said, so you voted for Stevenson, twice.

Recruited at school, I cracked the secret code
of language, not knowing I had crossed our DMZ.

Angry, you moved Army words against me,
and I learned the maneuver named *goodbye*
on an educational deferment: what else
could protect us so well as *furlough*?

After this truce, you fell first, then Mama
began her great retreat, and I policed the past:

Waiting for her final orders, I took the
forbidden letters to the nursing home cafeteria,

I betrayed the lock with a dying bobby pin
and read your romance, Daddy. Who knew
how dull wartime illiteracy could be?
Cold misspellings, hungry loneliness,
a convoy of *I love you's* crossing the Pacific.
Now, a few years later, the silver and china

rationed to relatives, I have stationed the letters
at my desk, the base archive. When I need to, Daddy,

I hold this cease-fire of love and wonder
What were you trying to say?

Thomas Dukes is Professor of English and Assistant Department Chair at The University of Akron. He has written literary criticism and articles on writing pedagogy; his poetry has appeared in such journals as *Poetry*, *The South Dakota Review*, *Jabberwok Review*, etc. His father was a mess sergeant in the US Army for fourteen years, serving in the Pacific Theater during WWII and in the Korean Conflict.