

Steven Peterson**Battlefield Tourist**

I've seen enough of them:
Verdun and Shiloh,
Bastogne and the Somme,
the thin defense that couldn't hold
in Singapore,
the start or end of things
at Concord Bridge and Waterloo.

Now green and tidy as a golf course,
here the silent soldiers speak
in ranks of crosses on parade,
a Star of David on some graves
above the beach called Omaha,
the names of many Muhammads
on the Menin Gate at Ypres.

Yes, I have seen enough,
and though I am civilian
I hear the beat of marching men,
the thunder of the drum,
and watch without surprise
as nations go to war again.



Caedmon and the Experts

The experts say it surely can't be true:
A herdsman, so ashamed he couldn't sing,
Suddenly found a voice—and verses too.

According to old Bede, that song was new
And flowed from Caedmon like a gushing spring.
The experts say it surely can't be true.

What's more, the song was English through and through,
The first we have, our language taking wing
Once Caedmon gave it voice—and verses too.

A monastery abbess, Hilda, knew
Rumors of Caedmon, told her monks to bring
Him to her. Experts say it can't be true.

Like soaring birds his words to her now flew
In praise of our creator, heaven's king.
The abbess loved his voice—and verses too.

So Hilda said to Caedmon, "Join my few
Dear brethren, let your voice forever ring."
The experts say it surely can't be true.
But they can't hear that voice—or verses too.



Mother Gone

We didn't hear from you. I called.
They checked. They called: "We have bad news."
My flight to Florida is cheap.
Beside a flat and boatless Gulf
Your town lies empty, snowbirds flown.
It's June. Hot clouds rise white as bone.

My rental car blows chilly mist.
The guard who guards your condo gate
Checks off my name, expecting me.
I stand before your door and pray
This key dug from my keepsake box
Will turn. Thank God, the door unlocks.

From books on war I know this smell,
Always described as "sickly sweet."
You lay three days a crooked ball.
According to a local cop,
"By then your mom was pretty stiff,"
A quote as bad as what I sniff.

But now you're gone. You're bagged away.
Some kindly people on the phone
Answer my questions: What comes next?
The men I "Sir," the women "Ma'am,"
But none of them choose to confess
It's not their job to clean the mess.

Now on my knees, I scrub your life
From carpet where they found you dead.
I say, "So, Mom, it comes around:
You cleaned my shit, now I clean yours."
You would have smiled a little bit
Then told me I should not say shit.

My mind replays our last two calls.
"Mom, please," I begged you on the phone,
"You need to see your doctor now;
Your memory issues seem much worse."
"Okay," you said, "I promise to.
I'll see my doc then I'll call you."

You didn't call. I rang again:
"So, Mom, what did your doctor say
About those little memory slips?"
You answered, "I forgot to ask!"
We laughed about it, ha, ha, ha—
That tricky lady's last hurrah.

That's when I stop and call your doc.
I ask him how you seemed last week.
Your doc goes quiet, then he drops
The double punch line of your joke:
He checks his records and I hear
He hasn't seen you in two years.

So all this time you lied to me?
Lying in Happy Sunshine Land?
I sit down on your soggy carpet
But then from somewhere comes a sight
Remembered from when I was small
And you were—where?—behind a wall,

A wall of glass, a hospital
Contagious room when I had croup
At five years old and almost died.
Behind a soundproof wall of glass
You stood there, reaching out to me,
Calling me, crying, silently.

That image from the past comes back
So vividly the strangest thing
Occurs: the wall of glass is gone
And I can finally hear your cries
Of desperate love—that's when I find
That calling voice I hear is mine.

