Steven Peterson

Iliad in Suburbia

for my father and his friends, born in 1925

My father let me stay up late at night
When his old high school buddies came to town.
They'd sit out in the backyard getting tight
On cold canned beer and watch the sun go down.
There I would sit, a quiet boy ignored,
Hoping they'd talk about a world at war.

It didn't happen every time. It's true
That soldiers who had seen the worst stay mum.
But sometimes something in the summer drew
Their memories from the dusk, cut through the hum
Of mortgages or baseball games they'd seen,
And call them back to when they were nineteen.

One said he wore a Red Cross on his sleeve.
The toughest thing he said he did: Triage.
One met a nurse one warm Pacific eve
Who gave him — *what?* I think he said massage.
One served with Patton on his great advance
And singlehandedly drank up all France.

And one, at Anzio with his recon squad,
Got trapped behind the German lines. They starved
A week until by chance or maybe God
They found a burnt-out tank. Inside they carved
The ration cans from three burnt men before
They ate their fill, then puked, then ate some more.

Tales like that last one tended to be rare.
Whenever one was told the men grew still.
I'd look from face to face. Each would stare
Down at the ground or in his beer until
A tired joke or subject leveled light
Brought grown men back to present day that night.

My dad and all his friends have passed away,
Their stories not in books or on the screen.
Achilles, Hector, Stan and Mike and Ray:
The warriors in our midst retreat unseen
As we who heard their tales recall our finds
To busy ears and soon-forgetting minds.

Elvis at Graceland, 1958

His mama died, the woman he adored.
Everyone said they never saw a boy
so devastated — weeping, sobbing, wailing
for days while crying out, *She's all I lived for*.

The boy was twenty-three years old, the king
of rock and roll, a sudden millionaire,
yet still at heart a Mississippi child
who grew up poor, who wanted everything.

He bought his mama and his daddy this —
a Memphis mansion on an oak-groved hill.
Now half a million people come each year
to file past the glamor and the glitz.

Some stand in awe, his greatness verified.
Some smirk at what they see as tackiness.
But then we see at last the bedroom that
his mama used, unchanged from when she died:

Here, simple country dresses, pink and blue,
are seen hung in her closet, just a few,
these simple dresses telling us the tale
much better than the glitz will ever do.

The Tongue Is a Deadly Arrow

Penny Knepper, my fifth-grade teacher,
standing at the front of our classroom
told me to be quiet, just be quiet,
stop being the class clown,
and I shot back: Okay, *Penny*,
or maybe: Whatever you say, *Penny*.

I can't recall exactly what I said
but I vividly do recall
more than fifty years later
that when I used *Penny*
in such a way, with such an expert,
mocking tone of voice at age ten,
she suddenly burst into tears
and left the classroom.

That moment hung in the air,
the blackboard clouding with chalk dust,
my heart beating, the wall clock ticking,
as my classmates sat silent, heads bowed,
none of us knowing what to do,
and I could feel them scared of me,
impressed by me, or hating me
for a power I didn't know I possessed,
and it thrilled and scared me too.

Penny Knepper, forgive me,
wherever you are.
You taught me better than you know.