

# A SECOND LOOK

William Trowbridge

"The researcher unearthed a bit of doggerel that had circulated among troops in the Pacific and even Europe: 'Say a prayer for your pal on Guadalcanal.'"

Andrew Ferguson in the *Washington Examiner*<sup>1</sup>

"Doggerel" seems the wrong word for this haunting little poem—which has survived long after other World War II graffiti and catchphrases have been forgotten. The reference is, of course, to one of the earliest and bloodiest island battles American troops, mostly Marines, fought in against Imperial Japan. Though the poem has only eleven syllables, it's comparable in a few significant ways to a Haiku: it's a short, muscular poem featuring a turn or "volta" toward an end that functions as an emphatic tag line.

The pal it's addressed to is, by implication, a fellow soldier who's not on Guadalcanal. The choice of "pal," as opposed to "brother" (e.g. "Brotherhood of Heroes," "Band of Brothers"), is less formal, more folksy sounding—something you might call a fellow soldier you like but don't know that well. In the case of the poem, it's most likely a fellow soldier you've never met. But a more compelling sense is that this soldier, whom you've never met, is your pal because he's taken the place that, but for the luck of the draw, could have been yours.

You're asked to "say a prayer" for him. But the prayer doesn't seem so much a religious expression as a statement of helplessness: that nothing else can be said or done for this pal who's now in a kind of hell he may not survive.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Andrew Ferguson's tribute to George H.W. Bush and his World War II service in the *Washington Examiner*, December 1, 2018. Bush invoked the Guadalcanal verse under examination here in a speech at the Iwo Jima memorial in 1992. For more context, see Ferguson's article: <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/magazine/1604508/george-h-w-bush-1924-2018/>.

The rhyme produces a shock effect, jolting the reader from the short, light “pal” to the long, ominously heavy “Guadalcanal.” The meter is predominantly anapestic, with a single iamb midway. Anapests tend to communicate a sense of lightness as they gallop along. But halfway through, the single iamb trips the reader into the ominous half of the poem. So, as opposed to a piece of doggerel, this poem employs rhyme and meter not just for themselves but to support what’s going on in the poem. As Alexander Pope said, “The sound should seem an echo to the sense,” so should the meter.

Finally, there is an additional way in which this poem can be taken: as a metaphor, with us being asked to say a prayer for any soldier thrust into combat in any war. That soldier is our pal, who’s taken what could have been our place in history’s dark roulette game.

**William Trowbridge’s** tenth poetry collection, *Father and Son*, was published by Wayne State College Press in April 2024. His poems have appeared in more than 45 anthologies and textbooks, as well as in *The Writer’s Almanac*, *American Life in Poetry*, and in such periodicals as *Poetry*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Plume*, *Rattle*, *The Iowa Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Epoch*, and *New Letters*. He is a mentor in the University of Nebraska-Omaha Low-residency MFA in Writing Program and was Poet Laureate of Missouri from 2012 to 2016. For more information, see his website, [williamtrowbridge.net](http://williamtrowbridge.net).