

B A R B A R A P R E S N E L L

How to Cuss in French

St. Lo, France, July 26, 1944

Army issue dictionary
thin as the soles of his boots

kicked off and lying in grass.
Ten-minute break, blister coming

on his right toe. He's stretched out,
helmet off, head on his bedroll,

studying words he should have learned
in school that now might mean

the difference, words as simple
as *Américain* or *Je suis un ami*.

Those days in back row French class, staring
out the window at the dusty ball field

or two seats up at Margaret's oaky brown hair,
what was there to do but scribble away

the long inside hours, inking boredom
up and down the margins

and across his book's cover:

*How to Cuss in
The Elements of French*

Endless those days seemed, endless
these. Here in the Normandy orchards,

cussing means you put one foot in front
of the other and keep going.



BARBARA PRESNELL'S poetry collection, *Piece Work* (CSU Poetry Center, 2007), won the Cleveland State University Poetry Center's First Book Prize. Her work also appears in three award-winning chapbooks, and in *The Southern Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Connotation Press*, *Prime Number*, *Listen Here: Women Writing in Appalachia*, *Women's Realities*, *Women's Choices*, and other journals and anthologies. She teaches writing at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.