

PHILLIP PITTS

Nursing Home at the Veteran's Hospital

Col. Smith lies still while a nurse polishes
his skin with antiseptic soap. She hums
as he enjoys the way she bumps against him.

Residents enter the cafeteria after a field trip.
They recall the billboards along I-75
advertising messages from God.

Doctors on lunch break eat cheeseburgers
and fries as they ignore news of Syria.
They discuss treatment for erectile dysfunction.

A silent woman disguised in scrubs slips
into Mr. Sleaf's room and steals the fentanyl patch
from his thigh—kissing his forehead first.

Across the hall, a married couple argues
over who gave who chlamydia. The husband straightens
the bronze star hanging from his chest.

Old men gather around the rec room's
piano, and like Odysseus, tell variations
of war stories, shipwrecks, homecomings . . .

packing list

we pack light when flying home
everything we own
we carry

how the smell of a soldier
shot in the head
smells like freshly caught fish

how skull fragments
found in the sand
look like dull, broken pearls

we carry artillery bombs
lighting up the sky in Morse code
while Muslim prayers cry on loudspeakers

images of children
playing in line with our front-site posts
their images blurred by cars in focus

the smell of copper balls
that punctures our armor
innocence and souls

as much as the letters from home do
the one where a wife or girlfriend
says goodbye forever

we pack the playful whistle
of incoming mortars falling down
day after day after day

we pick up our heaviest item
when landing in Dallas
this packing list is weightless

PHILLIP PITTS is a U.S. Army Veteran who currently lives and works in Gainesville, Florida with his wife and two children.