

A Picture of the Old Man

Gale Acuff

I am not sure what comments I can make
about my father, who poses as the man
in this photograph from Egypt, '43,
and wears his fatigue cap with bill rolled back

upon his already retrenched hairline.
He's looking off into some distance—for
the record, either at the Pyramids
at Giza, or into the Sphinx's stare;

the image is so faded all to khaki
that Father, if Father then he was,
seems made of sand, his features smooth as wind,
chin and cheeks puffed like pouches, nose and lips

in profile like Sadat's or ancient Seti's.
I wonder if, and hope that he's on guard
for something like the enemy, say Rommel,
to drive across the desert toward his doom;

or whether he's anticipating family
—wife, two sons, two daughters, his career
(principal and teacher, saved by the bell
calling for impressment for Pearl Harbor).

Now, at eighty-one, he stands united
in the middle of the bedroom, between
the open window and his bunk-neat bed,
attentive to the picture at salute,

the past the only future that he looks to.

I stand in the doorway, per his command,
see him hold the memory at arm's length.

This time I don't battle that *the War was all*

for nothing. Trooper now, I don't question
that *we had to slap the Jap and halt the Hun*.

I cut out my tongue; with him I defend
the Maginot of duty, his and mine

—there are some hills he cannot take alone.

I surrender. And then he folds the flag
of handkerchief around the sergeant lost
—it's white but stained with honorable wear,

and so my father puts himself away
into the drawer, with his Good Conduct medal
and a shot of me, the son who bears his name.

This single tomb we share, retaking ground;

we have our orders, and they follow us.

Gale Acuff has had hundreds of poems published in several countries and is the author of three books of poetry. He has taught university English in the US, China, and Palestine, where he teaches literature and creative writing at Arab American University.