

A man in a military uniform is sitting on a couch, reading a book. He is looking down at the book with a focused expression. The room has a window in the background, and there are other books and papers scattered on the couch. The lighting is warm and natural, coming from the window.

Afterwords

ON COMMON GROUND

VETERANS WRITING WORKSHOP

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*This book is dedicated to all veterans of the United States
armed services, including the members
of the Veterans Writing Workshop.*

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Afterwords: On Common Ground*, the second anthology of writing from the Veterans Writing Workshop, and the first from the Common Ground Veterans Residence in Montrose, NY.

For two hours every Monday night in a conference room on the second floor of Building 13, the veterans at the Common Ground Residence found their voice as writers, sharing their stories and showing each other the kind of good-humored, unconditional support that veterans are known for.

Writing is more than self-expression. It's also hard work. It's about getting organized and staying organized, making plans, setting goals and achieving them—valuable skills not just in writing, but also in life. The men in the Monday night workshop are more than up to the task.

The stories and poems they've written are a lesson in what it means to stay human under the most challenging of circumstances—remembering family and home, dealing with grief felt for fallen comrades, witnessing horrific human tragedy, and finding moments of peace in the solitude of nature.

I've been especially impressed and moved by how these veterans see their writing as helpful not only to themselves, but to others as well. They like knowing that other veterans who they may never meet will read this book and identify with their experiences and feel understood. "That's what it's all about," one of the workshop members said, "You tell your story and maybe it'll help somebody else."

I'd like to thank Howard Charton and Bryant Keyes of Common Ground for their support and enthusiasm. My thanks also to Yanice Farrar and Tony McFadden and the entire staff of the Common Ground Veterans Residence for welcoming me and for the important work they do every day. My thanks also to Bonnie Marcus of Poets & Writers Readings/Workshops Program for making this workshop possible. And thanks, as always, to Dan Griffin for introducing me to Common Ground and for opening the doors of the veterans' community to me.

Most of all, my thanks to the members of the Monday night workshop for stepping up and telling their stories bravely and honestly. This book is for them.

— *David Surface*



A PRAYER FOR THE FALLEN

by Robert Benedetto

We were at Arlington National Cemetery in D.C. It was an extremely hot day to be walking around, but we were determined. We were brothers brought together to build up our broken down lives. This trip was going to help that process.

We planned to visit Section 60 A of Arlington National Cemetery. It was where recently fallen vets were brought home and laid to rest, a very emotional place.

We'd been briefed on what feelings might arise during the trip. We'd watched DVDs and listened to staff's input on the history of the historic site. The pre-trip coaching lasted two weeks. I just wanted to get on with it. Let us feel for ourselves.

A small group of us, seven in all, made our way through the cemetery without a guide. We were walking blindly around looking for Section 60 A. The temperature was rising; it was high noon.

We found Section 60 A, half with tombstones, the other half empty, waiting for the fallen to come home. All around us were fresh graves of recently buried soldiers. We paid our respects, then proceeded.

We came across a tranquil place, a section of 60 A with no head stones—yet. To my astonishment it was an area that suited me best; it had small Gulf War and Somalia memorials. I was in both campaigns.

We stood looking down at the memorials, unsure of what to do, when all of sudden one of the guys yelled out, “*Attention.*” The four of us snapped our heels at the same time like we were in boot camp.

We presented arms, then went into parade rest. One of the guys proceeded to lay a pair of boots at one of the memorials for a fallen friend. Another fellow laid a model helicopter, the same type he lost his buddy in during a crash. He was also in the crash—his buddy died in his arms.

This was an unrehearsed ceremony, but somehow we didn’t miss a beat. We said a prayer for the fallen, had a moment of silence. Attention was ordered, then left face and finally forward march.

All of a sudden, before anyone could comment on our ceremony, a loud *thud, thud, thud* came from overhead. One of the guys yelled, “It’s got to be God.” He took that thought right from my head, as I laughed and cried. Two helicopters made a fly-by, an unexpected salute from above. Then they flew off into God’s sky.





THE RED DOOR THAT COULD BE HOME

by Angel Ramos-Lopez

While climbing the four stories up to the door of my apartment, the sunlight streaming with the disco music through the open frosted window that was on every half-landing, I thought, “I wonder what’s for dinner tonight?” I’d just gotten back from the library and walking the eleven blocks from there to my block really gets me hungry. But I still have to wait at least an hour for dinner. My mom usually has dinner ready at six o’clock the earliest. The mouth-watering smells from the kitchen answered my appetite’s expectations as I got to our apartment’s red door. It was the usual—rice and beans.

There were many memories attached to that red door—painted that way, I guess, because it went well with the cream colored stucco walls of the small hallway and stairwell inside the tenement building. Before knocking, I gently placed my palm, the right one since I held the books I borrowed with my left hand, to touch it. For some reason, doing this reassured me that I really had a home—that it wasn’t wishful thinking.

It was only a year ago that we, meaning me, Mom, and my three brothers, had no place to go except to her best friend’s apartment to avoid my Dad’s rage because of the divorce. We stayed long enough to the point

where we'd grown a deeper bond with Aunt Judy and her two daughters while, at the same time, to the point where, if we'd stayed any longer, we would've killed each other due to getting into each other's way. It's true what they say about familiarity—it does breed contempt.

But now we have a place. No more having to fight over who is going to use the bathroom first. No more having to share a bedroom with two girls who obviously resented three boys in their personal sister-space. Also, last but definitely not least, no more going through the aches of a budding interest in teen-female anatomy. It's not that I didn't like girls. I liked them a lot but, lately, I was still trying to figure them out and I didn't want to die emotionally from that painful stab wound called rejection. Especially from two junior high school girls who were on the fringes of being recognized as family. Not only would that be devastating, it also had all of the elements of everything that's considered as being 'unlawful' by the red-haired man who taught catechism by Saint John of-the-Golden-Tongue on Hoe Avenue. After erasing those thoughts from my mind, helped by the increasing weight of my library books, I closed my palm into a fist and knocked on my red door to the tune I borrowed from an Abbott & Costello episode; "Shave and a haircut, two bits."

The door was opened by my younger brother. Both of my brothers share the same first name—David and the only way anyone could tell which brother was which was when, if any of them did anything wrong, my mother would yell out their full names. Her doing so immediately warned any one of us that Mom was on the warpath and scalps will definitely be collected—if only, instead of a tomahawk, in the form of a heavy leather belt. If you asked me, my Mom and Dad should've named them "Thing 1" and "Thing 2" from the "Cat in the Hat" cartoon we usually saw

on our black and white TV set during the holidays. They caused just as much trouble as those characters did except we couldn't change the channel every time they caused some sort of mayhem. Going with that line of thought, I made a compromise with myself and mentally tagged them as "Dave-1" and "Dave-2." It was "Dave-1" who answered the door.

"Dave-1" is my so-called "Irish twin;" a really screwed-up term to describe two siblings whose birthdays are less than a year apart. But that is as far as the 'twin' reference goes. Though anyone can tell that we're related, "Dave-1" has a darker complexion than me. A handsome 'milk-chocolate coating' as one of my mom's sisters was known to say about him while she suffocated the poor kid with her enormous breasts as she lovingly hugged him—also during the holidays. Only eleven months apart, "Dave-1" always felt that I've gotten more attention than he did. Later on, when I started reading the Bible as a book for the first time, I made an immediate empathetic connection with God when He had to deal with Lucifer who, like my brother, couldn't deal with being number two either. In any case, "Dave-1" didn't seem to be in the middle of any mischief when he let me into the apartment. The only thing he said was "Hi Stephanie" as soon as I passed him at the threshold. I responded by punching him in that skinny bird chest of his. Hard enough to make him wince but not too hard to where he punked out and yelled for Mom to rescue him.

"No le das punos a tu hermano Stefan!" my mom Aida yelled. It was just my luck that she happened to be in the master bedroom, her bedroom, which is located right next to the apartment entrance. This also meant that she actually saw me give my brother his well deserved 'love

tap' for making fun of me. "He started it!" I told her but it was no use. Her rule of 'brothers should not fight one another' was one she strictly enforced but not able to totally stick with anyone of us because, when we could get away with it, we fought each other in secret. As I turned to Mom to continue my defense for hitting my brother, I realized that there was someone else besides her in her room. But I thought I was only seeing things before it dawned on me who that person was. It was Dad.

Dad was dressed in the fashion of the times—a beige Cuban sports shirt with the collar opened to the third button, brown slacks, and matching loafers. The open collar revealed the gold neck chain that held his medallion. It was three inches in diameter and was also made of eighteen carat gold. On the face of it was a bas relief of the Madonna and Baby Jesus holding a chalice. Instead of wine, a small ruby to represent His Precious Blood was placed above the chalice—a mere drop which I felt was not enough to cover up the pile of sins he committed since my parents brought me here at the age of eighteen months. Well, at least that's what my Mom always told us in between comments on how stupid we were when we didn't get our chores done as good as she liked.

Also, like most of the other dads who lived on our block, Dad was very hairy. This was obvious because the medallion which sat on his barrel-chest looked like a museum piece displayed on a bed of curly black wool. When my parents were still living together, Mom, at one time, grooved on Dad's good looks, but all of the years of pain, embarrassment, and betrayal she had suffered because of him had destroyed that pretty illusion. Nowadays, Mom's gaze was lukewarm with a touch of distaste that flashed whenever my Dad didn't catch himself when he described

how things were good back then. That look was on her round plump face when me and Dave 1 interrupted their conversation.

“Hello mijo, “ Dad said between drags from his Winston cigarette. “How’s school?” “Good Papi,” I answered while Dave-1 mimicked my response with his whiny punk voice. I elbowed him in his stomach and Dave-1 countered with a slap to the back of my head. “Ay Dios mio! There goes my Three Stooges again,” Dad remarked behind a blue cloud of cigarette smoke. “That’s enough!” my Mom yelled again. “Stay in your room and watch TV with your little brother. Papi and me are still talkin.” “Okay Mami,” we said. Both of us turned and scurried into our bedroom. There were no doors separating any of the rooms from the hallway which led down to the living room and kitchen so, if any of us wanted to hear anything that anyone said to Mom, we could hear them as long as we kept the TV volume down low enough.

“Hey! I’m watching that!” whined Dave-2 who, like any kid, would be highly upset if anyone, except for Mom of course, did anything to the TV set while we were watching our cartoons. “Be quiet!” Dave-1 and me whispered as Dave-1 lowered the volume. “You can still watch ‘Tom and Jerry’. We just wanna hear what Mami and Papi are talkin’ about.”

“Papi’s been here since Joe and me got back from school.” Dave-2 said. “Maybe he’s comin’ back to stay with us again?” ‘Joe’ happens to be Dave-1’s nickname since his middle name was Jose while Leopoldo was Dave-2’s. Mom and Dad nicknamed him ‘Leo.’ “I really don’t know,” I said, still whispering. “That’s why we wanna hear what they’re sayin.”

“Oh man, Stef, I hope so. I want him to stay,” Dave-2 whispered back. Dave-2 was the baby of the family for eight straight years and was hurt more than any one of us when Mom and Dad split up. His rule as

'King Baby' ended when Mom gave birth to Denis. 'Little Deni' was only four years old and was Mom's only act of indiscretion to answer Dad's bunch. Like Dave-1, Dave-2 didn't like competition either.

With the volume turned down enough to not give us away, we tried hard to hear what Mom and Dad were saying but they were talking so softly that, if we turned down the volume any lower, they would know that we were listening.

"Dammit!" Dave-1 whispered in frustration. "How're we gonna hear them?"

"Dunno," I said. "I guess we have to wait."

Dave-2 had that 'little lost boy' look on his face again. He put on that look whenever anything he wanted didn't turn out the way he thought it would. Ever since the split, Dave-2, except when he was watching his cartoons or reading his 'Curious George' books, seemed to be constantly on the verge of tears.

"Don't worry 'Leo,'" I told him. "Maybe Papi will hang out with us and tell us what's going on." Though this cheered him up a little, I still felt like a jerk because a good part of me knew that what I just told him was possibly not true.

The 'Tom and Jerry' cartoon was almost over when Mom called out, "Stefan! Venga aqui!"

Our hearts stopped. "Why is she calling you?" Dave-1 said in a voice which I could've sworn had a sneer hidden in it.

"How should I know?" I answered, a bit surprised. I was still feeling too bad about lying to Dave-2 to even care about Dave-1's jealous whining.

"Stefan!" Mom yelled again. "Come here! Now!"

Looking at both of them, I said, “Listen guys, I’d feel a lot better if you came with me so that we can know what’s goin’ on.” Dave-1 and Dave-2 quickly nodded and followed me as I walked towards Mom’s bedroom.

“There goes my Three Stooges,” Dad smiled at us through the thick smoke of his second cigarette. “Hope you did give Mami any problems.”

“No Papi. We been good,” we said together while Mom, as she looked at us, rolled her eyes up to her bedroom ceiling—probably thinking that God in his heaven was rolling on the floor laughing at her expense since He knows that it was her and her alone who took care of us. Of course, that’s her words. Not ours.

Nervously I asked, “What’s up, Mami?” As I stood there, my mind raced trying to see if Mom found out about anything bad that I did. Bad enough for my Dad to finally come back from exile in order for them to deal with it. I kept coming up blank.

“Por que tu esta nervioso, mijo?” Mom asked. “You did nothing wrong.”

“Si papito,” Dad added. “Like Mami said, you did nothing wrong. I just wanted to come by and see how you and your brothers are doin’.”

“Oh, okay,” I said but I still felt uptight. “It’s nice to see you too, Papi.” I really wanted to yell out, “I miss you too! Please stay!” But that wish had to be squashed because I didn’t want my insides to show out like Dave-2’s. *He’s only a little kid, I thought to myself. He can afford to act like a baby. But not me.*

“Well Stefan,” my Mom said as she lit her own cigarette. “Me and Papi were talkin’ about you. Do you remember Abuela ‘Cili’?”

“Yeah. Sure I do.” My grandmother Cecilia, ‘Cili’ being her nickname, is Dad’s mom. “How’s she doin’?”

“As your father tells me, she’s doin’ fine. In fact,” Mom added as she stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray, “Papi tells me that she really wants to see you again.”

“Wha’?” All three of us said as one again. Neither me nor the Daves could believe what we heard. Out of all three of us, only me and Dave-1 had ever seen Grandma and the last time we’d seen her was when Dad took us to Puerto Rico with him eight years ago. Unlike Dave-1 and me, Dave-2 was born in The Bronx and never met Grandma.

“We gonna see Grandma?” Dave-2 asked with a smile. Both Daves looked at Mom and Dad as if they were still together again. Their eyes were shining with hope.

Noticing this, Dad quickly looked down at his loafers as his right hand dug into his front pocket groping for another cigarette while Mom gave him ‘the look’ again.

“Well, that wasn’t what Mami meant to say,” Dad said with his lips pressed around the cigarette filter as she fished in his pockets for a matchbook. Mom then tossed her matchbook at him. It sailed through the air and hit him right on his big chest—barely missing Baby Jesus’ golden curls by a quarter inch.

“But whadda you mean?” Dave-1 asked. Everyone in the room heard the hurt in his voice. “Don’ she want to see us?”

Both Mom and Dad looked at each other. “No! No! Please, Joe. Abuela still loves you very much!”

Dad was visibly upset while Mom, though concerned that her boys were confused by all this, couldn’t help herself from feeling victorious as

her former husband became uncomfortable in front of the kids he abandoned five years ago. As for me, I was still trying to take in what was just said. So I asked myself again, *What's going on?*

"Stefano," Mom said evenly to Dad. "I think you better let the boys know what's goin' on. They deserve to know."

"Si, Aida," Dad replied. "I will. Can I sit down here?" he asked pointing to the corner of Mom's queen-size bed.

"Sure Stef," she nodded regally. I almost turned to answer her since me and Dad share the same name but again I stopped myself.

"Venga aqui mi musketeers," Dad asked us and hearing the love in his voice, we gathered around him.

"Bendicion, Papi," each one of us said as we followed tradition and asked him for his blessing.

"Que Dios te bendiga," Dad said as he kissed each one of us on the cheek and gave us our blessing. We all knew that this was really serious when Dad asks us to gather around.

"Lissen to me, boys," Dad said. Though I heard what he said, I couldn't take my eyes off of his medallion. "I need to 'splain somethin' to you."

Go ahead Papi," Dave-1 told him. "We're lissenin'."

"Well," Dad went on. "I went last year to visit Abuela and she asked me about all of you and how she wanted to see all of you. But, though as much as I wanted to, there was a problem..."

Dad paused for a minute as if what he wanted to tell us wasn't as good as we originally thought.

"Go ahead, Stef," Mom said with a smile. "Tell your boys how your 'corteja' made those arrangements."

My ears pricked up when she said that word and I think Dave-1's did too. The only other time I ever heard her say the word 'corteja' was about a month after we moved in with Aunt Judy. It was on a Saturday afternoon as Mom and Aunt Judy, along with a couple of other relatives, were hanging out in the kitchen. When the older guys said it, it was with a sneer and a chuckle. The women, on the other hand, ranged between deep hatred to silent guilt. I found out from one of my cousins that 'corteja' meant 'girl on the side' or, in simple terms, 'whore.' That meant she was referring to Dad's new wife.

"Aida, please don't start this," Dad pleaded softly. "How do you think I feel about this?"

"De que carajo eso me importa a mi?" Mom said softly through her smile. "Like I said, the boys have a right to know."

"Okay, okay," Dad said. "Okay." He then turned to us. "Look, kids, as I was sayin', there was a small problem. I did buy the plane tickets so that it was possible to see Abuela but I only had one ticket left to use for one of you."

Me and the Daves looked at each other and thought the same thing:
Who did he pick?

There was a short pause. Everyone in the room was trying to grasp what Dad had just said. Dave-2 innocently asked, "So who's goin' Papi?"

Mom just looked at Dad, her dark eyes shining like black pearls. They seemed to focus on Dad's face as if attempting to burn right through it. And from the look on Dad's sweaty face, it seemed to be working.

"Well, Leo, when I told Abuela that I could only afford one ticket, I said to her, "Why don't you pick which one of them you want to see this Christmas?"

“Okay!” Dave-1 said a bit louder than I thought he meant to. “So... who did Abuela pick?”

Dad looked at Mom once more and then said, “Stefan.”

As soon as Dad said this, Mom just shook her head and went into the right front pocket of her white jean shorts to pull out a beaten up pack of Winston cigarettes. If I hadn’t seen her light up the cigarette with her matches, I could’ve sworn that it was her hot black gaze that lit it.

“Not fair! Not fair!” cried Dave-2. “I never saw Grandma! I thought it would be my turn!” Dave-2 then ran to Mom and started sobbing into her lap. He did it so quickly that he almost burned himself on Mom’s lit cigarette.

“An’ why does he get to go?” Dave-1 also cried, his finger pointing accusingly at me like it was my fault. As for me, I was numb. I really thought it was something like why me and my cousin-in-name-only Magaly were in the bathroom longer than we were supposed to. I didn’t expect going to Puerto Rico to see Grandma again.

“Boys, you don’ understand!” Dad pleaded. “Things are not the same as they used to be. It’s different now.”

“Why does it have to be different?” Dave-2 cried again with the tears and hurt look on his face. “I thought you were comin’ back!”

“Comin’ back?” Dad then turned to Mom. “Aida,” he said. “Didn’ you ‘splain to the boys the ‘agreement’ we made since we couldn’t live together?”

“Of course I did,” she answered. “But you see what happens. It’s better that you tell them too.”

“Oh crap,” Dad whispered to himself. At this point, I almost felt bad for Dad. When Mom explained to us about the divorce, I kind of knew

what she was talking about. It only meant that though Mom and Dad weren't living together, it didn't mean that he didn't love us anymore. And it looks like that Dad had started a new family too. Then, I realized why Dad only had one free ticket. His new wife and my new half-brother were going in place of the Daves.

"Leo! Joe! Take it easy!" Dad said. "This don't mean Abuela don't love you no more. It just that she want to see Annie and her kid too since I live with them now. Abuela still loves you."

"But why him, Papi?" Dave-1 asked Dad, pointing at me again with his face also wet with tears. "Why always him?"

"Whadda you mean 'always him?'" Dad asked. "The reason why Abuela pick your brother Stefan was that he passed junior high school and just now started high school. But wait a minute!" Dad stopped talking and dug into his back pocket to pull out a folded letter. As Dad started unfolding the letter, Dave-1 stopped accusing me, began biting his lip, and started to look the way I looked when this whole thing started.

"You see dis letter Joe?" Dad asked Dave-1 as he waved the letter around with his right hand while his left held the envelope it came in. "Dis is the letter I got from your school tellin' me that you playin' hooky for a week straight."

"Da teacher's lyin'!" Dave-1 said defiantly. "You don't care about da way he treats me! You only sayin' that so that you can leave me behind for your stupid 'corteja!'"

"Joe!" both my parents yelled. Mom looked embarrassed while Dad looked surprised. Dave-1 never yelled at Dad before and absolutely never ever said the 'C' word in front of them before either.

“Wha da hell, Aida! You been sayin’ stuff in fron’ of them again?”

Dad whispered but it sounded more like a hiss from the living room radiator to me.

“Hell no!” Mom hissed back. “I wouldn’ say nothin’ like that in front of my bebes!”

Dave-2 had just stopped crying long enough to have that look of bewilderment return to his face as he heard Mom and Dad talk. Meanwhile, I’m still standing in front of my mom’s queen-size bed and had almost gotten knocked down by Dave-1 as he stormed back to our bedroom crying, “I hate you! I hate you!” to both me and Dad. If our bedroom had an actual door, Dave-1 would’ve slammed it so hard that it would’ve fallen off its hinges.

After all of the commotion was over, Mom and Dad, the Daves, and me ate dinner together. And why not? After all this, Dad had to stay for dinner or else Dave-2 would never fall asleep and Dave-1 would’ve started picking a fight with me since I became the ‘chosen one’ again. But as I bit into the second pork chop Mom gave me (both Daves only got one), I knew that everything had changed. Us sitting together at the table was only another pretty illusion of what once was, but, in spite of being fractured, we were still a family.



SPLINTERED LOVE

By Edwardo Padilla

My eyes wide shut, couldn't see
You were hiding in plain sight
Waiting there, patiently
To draw first blood, at first bite
You went in deep, that's how you do
And it's your beauty, I have learned
Hold on tight, no need to fight!
The sting will soon turn to a burn
Your pain was simply awful, yet
Your pain was simply lovely too
So I took all I could get
And gave some back to you, it's true
I broke you trying to get you out
Broken there beneath my skin
The worst of you is what I got
The best of you did not go in
But I was thinking, just today
Experience being what it's been
It must sound crazy...me to say
"Oh lover...bite me once again!"



WHERE'S GRANDPA?

By Robert Benedetto

Sure, I had toys to keep me busy. It was Saturday afternoon at Grandpa and Grandma's house, playing with my imagination running wild.

Sometimes I like to explore the different areas of the house. I knew Grandpa was home, but where? I looked in the back—not there. I checked the garage—not there either. Oh no—not the dreaded basement. Did I want to go down in the basement to see Grandpa? What if he yells at me or chases me? He might be busy. There are so many things down there. The grinder. No need to worry—I've been down in the basement before.

I could see a thin beam of light shooting out of the slightly cracked basement door. One thing I knew for sure—Grandpa's down in the basement.

The door creaks as I slowly open it. The odor of dampness along with an array of basement smells rush up to my nose. Now I was standing at the top of the basement stairs. For some unknown reason my hand was reaching for the light switch, but the light was on. CLICK. Now I knew Grandpa was in the basement because of the awful sound coming up

from the dark. “*Fongul! Turn on the light or I breaka your head.*” I scrambled to turn the light back on. “Who’s there?” he said.

I said, “Robbie.”

Then he said, “You want me to put you down here and shut out the lights?”

I said *No* very slowly.

“Come on down,” he said.

Thump, thump, thump, down the stairs I went. “*Watch yourself,*” Grandma yelled from the kitchen. There were boxes of fuses screws, nuts and bolts on the ledge that ran along the wall of the stairs—a candy store for handymen. The further I went downstairs I could smell oil and paint mixed with mildew; sub-basement aromas. I made it to the bottom. At that moment my eyes shot right to the big rat-traps. Maybe there’s one that got caught. Nope, not this time. Then Grandpa teased me by saying that trap was for me. My distance from the trap definitely increased after he said that.

As soon as I turned from the rat-traps, the boiler erupted. With the same fascination, I got close to it, hoping for a glance of the flame. Of course, Grandpa teased me again, saying he was going to cook me in the boiler. Do I have to say what I did—mad dash for the stairs. But before I got there he called to me, “Robbie, come here, help me.” Well, Grandpa needed my help; I couldn’t let him down.

Now all the while I was down there, my eyes, ears, and nose sensed the array of nuts and bolts, the clanking of ancient tools, and the scent of oil from the pipes that ran all over—almost overwhelming.

Grandpa gave me a piece of metal and pointed toward the other side of the basement. The door to the little workroom was right by the boiler.

But this had to be done. Cobwebs galore. Made it to the door, went into the room and it was pitch black. Desperately reaching for the light, hopefully before a rat or spider or bogeyman got me. CLICK. Lights on, and there it was. The grinder. Went right to it, with a click of the switch, it was whirling at full speed in an instant. Grandpa leaned back in his chair and had a clear view of the grinder. He yelled, “Put the metal on the stone. Easy. Don’t touch the stone.” Slowly I touched the metal to the whirling stone. It was like the fourth of July—sparks unlimited. For the time being, I did not think of rats, boilers, spiders, or stairs—just that I was helping Grandpa and having fun.

But there’s one thing that got me and Grandpa running up those stairs—Grandma shouting down, “*Nicky, Robbie—lunchtime!*”



NEGLECT

by Frank Muer

In the fall of 1986, I had orders to the Naval Air Station in Alameda, California, to work in the Military Police field, twelve weeks of training in Military weapons and tactics.

Once we started training, I found that I was good at the obstacle course and the physical training. Weapons training involved that we go to the firing range which was a little intimidating for me.

The range was surrounded by a six-foot red fence that was in the shape of a horseshoe, with ten firing lanes and a small overhang that stretched the width of the range. When I walked onto the range I could smell the gun powder, oil and smoke all mixed in the air.

I looked over and saw this old codger of a man; the range master, a skinny, tan-faced man who had wrinkles on his face and each one of them held a story.

At the beginning we got to know our weapon which was a four inch 38 Smith & Wesson. We learned how to clean and load it. After taking a short written test about the weapon, we each got to go to an individual lane. The range master would place a silhouette target on each line and

run it back approximately forty yards. At his command, we would begin to fire at our targets.

I tried to be a good shot, but I wasn't good at all. I often felt like I could throw the gun and get closer to the target than firing; I was a terrible shot. I tried breathing techniques and concentration to assist in achieving tighter shot groups. Needless to say, it was quite frustrating for me.

Many times I would check my target using a pen to verify the bullet holes. I would count in my head "six in my gun, twelve in my speed loader ... that's eighteen!" I would say to myself.

There were more holes in my targets than I had rounds.

I would glance to each side of me and hear some snickering and then I would feel my face getting red and my ears burning from embarrassment.

I knew that my friends were trying to help me, but I truly did not feel comfortable carrying or shooting a gun.

After satisfactorily completing the course, I was assigned to ride along with an experienced patrolman named Robert, an Italian guy from the Bay area. He reminded me of a James Dean type; cigarette pack rolled up at the shoulder of his sleeve, hair slicked back, who drove Code 3, without lights and sirens, everywhere we went.

After a couple of weeks, I was glad to be in my own vehicle.

I was feeling a little more comfortable now. During the next couple of months, I was doing a good job on routine situations where I was the responding officer—domestic disputes, fights at the E.M. club, and lock outs.

Every day, right before the shift ended, it would suddenly get quiet, with no radio chatting or anyone at the dispatch office. I knew that they would all be leaving to meet somewhere of which I had no knowledge.

As a newbie, I was not yet invited to their gathering. I was not sure where they would be meeting because it was a huge base and they could be anywhere. I supposed that after I was in my own truck they would ask me to join them, and that's just what they did.

We all would meet at Airport Road which was on the outskirts of the base near the flight line. The area was desolate with small bushes popping up here and there, and jackrabbits hopping around in droves.

This is where we would have our "liquid debriefs." Here we would talk about our shift calls and see what we could have done better, although the majority of the time, we would just get fired up!

They would pull a patrol car up in front and point the high beams and spotlights at the dusty and sparse vegetation. Then these guys would shoot at the jackrabbits that were hopping around; creating puffs of dust as the rabbits scattered to get away.

I would hang in the back because this was not fun to me. After that, we would return to the office and call it quits for the night.

One afternoon, I was on the swing-shift which ran from three to eleven. It was an unusually humid day for November in California. After doing my vehicle check out, I was on patrol in my sector, the main gate in Navy Housing.

At five PM, I received a call from the dispatcher, telling me that there was a missing child in Navy Housing, and for me to meet with the mother of the child. So I rolled up the house, and the mother was waiting outside.

Her eyes were bloodshot from crying and her hair was all disheveled. As she was behaving frantically, I tried to calm her down so that I could get a description of her son. I asked what he had been wearing and when she had last seen him. She described him as a Pilipino American boy, five years old with blue shorts, a blue shirt, and sandals. The last time she had seen her son was around noontime for lunch.

Now, it was after five PM.

After putting the description on the radio, and trying to maintain calmness for the mother and myself, I could feel the anxiety growing.

After a few long minutes two other patrolmen arrived at the scene. I had them set up a perimeter, and start a systematic search of the area.

I maintained contact with the mother, asking her what had transpired that afternoon. She said that they had had lunch at noon and then the boy had gone out to play ball in the front yard. I thought to myself that too many hours had elapsed since she'd last checked on her son.

By this time we even had neighbors joining in on the search. I told the mother to go inside the house in case someone called with information about the child.

After ten minutes that felt like ten hours, I decided to go into the house myself. As I walked up the steps, something at the left of the entrance caught my eye. It was a medium sized Coleman cooler with the lid closed. I walked up to the cooler and opened it up on a hunch.

To my shock and dismay, the little boy was in there, his ball lying right next to his hand.

The odor was overwhelming and his skin was clammy and grey. Instinctively, I reached into the cooler and pulled him out.

Immediately, I began to perform CPR, but subconsciously I noticed that rigor mortise had already set in. I began to call for assistance on my radio in between breaths.

As soon as one of the other patrolmen arrived, I had them go inside to house to make sure the mother did not come out and see what I had discovered. Another patrolman arrived to assist me.

Even though only minutes had passed, it felt hours and I was left totally emotionally and physically drained.

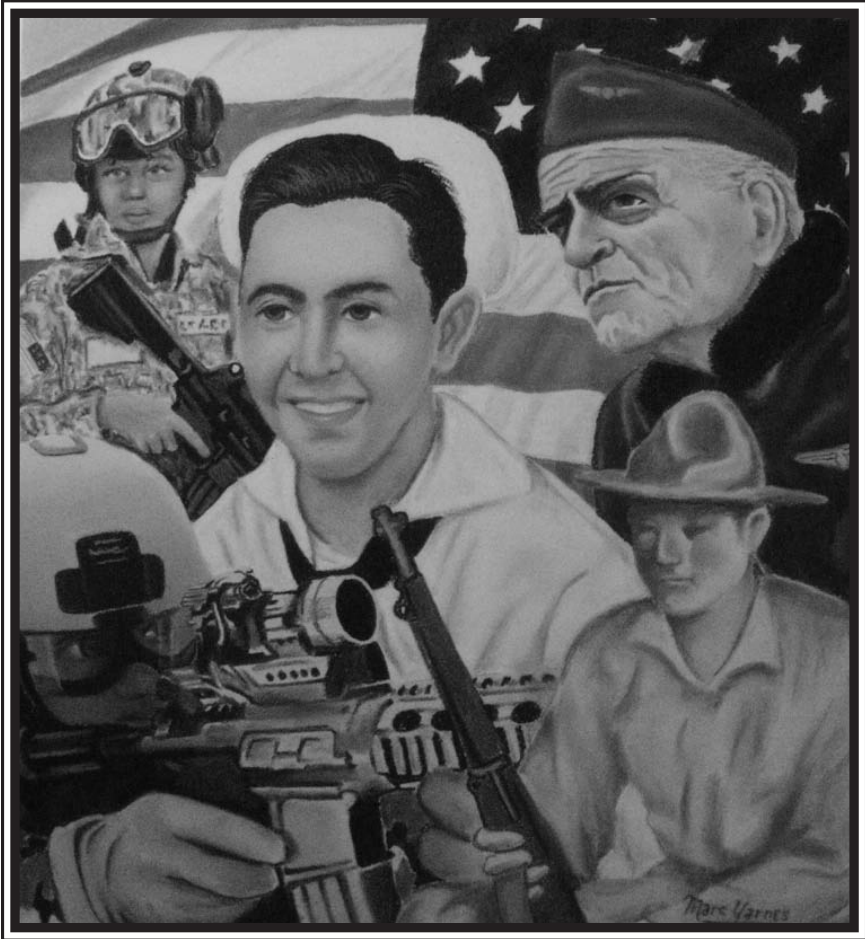
The rest of the evening was a blur.

I remember that I was in no condition to drive and another officer had to drive me back to the station. I turned in my weapon and went home.

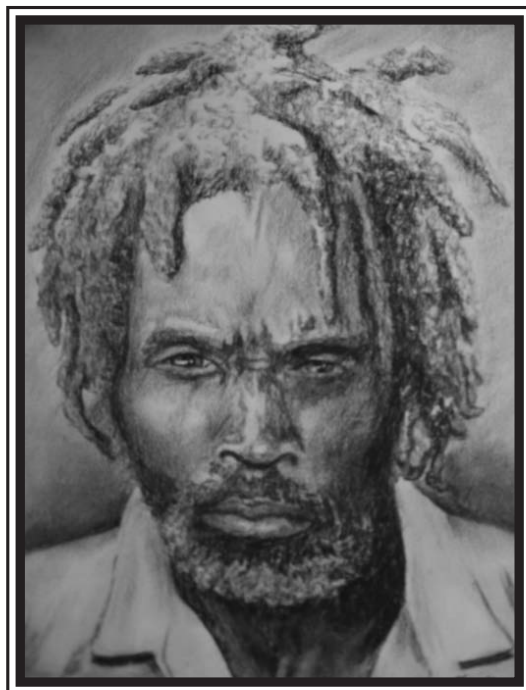
Within a few days I knew that I could no longer be a policeman. I asked to transfer out of patrol, because I knew that I could not go through another tragic incident like that one.

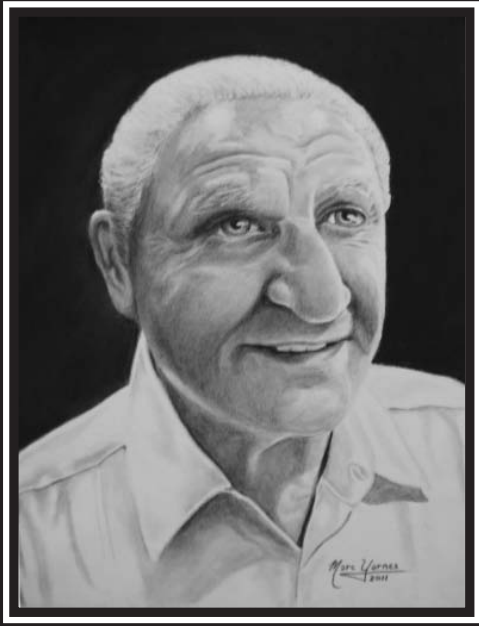
It would be years before I accepted the fact that there was not anything I could have done to prevent that child from dying like that.

As I look back now, I realize that there are things that happen in life that you cannot control.

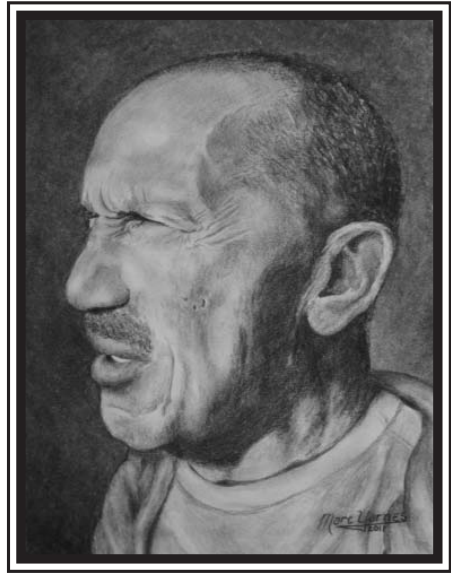


PORTRAITS
A portfolio by Marc Yarnes













BRIGADE TRANSFER

by Angel Ramos-Lopez

The air siren startled me from my near coma sleep. I leaped from my bunk and started getting dressed in my battle dress uniform. When I was done tying my boots and began to put on my combat gear, I looked out from the three large windows that faced the middle of the kasern where I was transferred to. The streetlights were still lit to show the buildings: the Headquarters Battery barracks, the communications company's barracks and HQ, the gymnasium that was housed in what resembled a white canvas balloon, the PX and, my favorite place, the EM Club.

It was only a couple of hours ago, five I believe, that I'd drank myself into a stupor—albeit a mild one—to make myself more comfortable in my new surroundings. The way that I had gotten here was a bit weird, considering that I had made an inter-service transfer from the U.S. Marines Reserves unit where I was doing the weekend warrior bit in New Rochelle, NY to this U.S. Army post in West Germany. A fellow soldier at the EM Club mentioned in between gulps of his heavy weissen beer and Jagermeister shots that this post was once the local Nazi SS HQ during World War Two. Later that night, as I guzzled my third stein of dunkel-

bach beer, I morbidly wondered whether the former goose-stepping tenants of this place had either ended up hanging from a tree somewhere in Bavaria or had heeded their confessor's advice to catch the next flight to Buenos Aires with their homemade lampshades and forged passports.

But now my head felt like it was wrapped around a big cotton ball as I was finally able to adjust my helmet strap to where it fitted my chin without the helmet covering my eyes in the process. It wouldn't look too cool if I found myself bumping into walls or, worse, into someone in authority because I couldn't see where I was going. By the time I got out of the room where I had spent the night, which was on the second floor of the Brigade HQ, and made my way to the first floor, my head had cleared up enough to recognize my surroundings. I stepped out of the building and into the cool pre-dawn breeze that blew across the parade ground, and looked to see if there was anyone around who knew where my unit was supposed to muster. I figured that, if I stood in front of Brigade HQ, someone, most likely an officer of some type, would direct me to where I should be.

"Soldier!" I heard a woman's voice speak out with authority. "Where is your unit?" I turned around and saw a woman in a battle dress uniform and combat gear like mine except that she wasn't carrying an ALICE pack on her back. I also noticed that both her helmet and the collars of her tunic were adorned with silver captain's bars that glittered in the spotlights that waved back and forth, lighting the pre-dawn sky. I quickly stood at attention and, since I had my weapon, an M-16 with me, made the proper salute with my right arm crossing my mid-section and my hand flush with the barrel.

“Well, ma’am,” I responded. “I’ve just gotten here from another unit yesterday and this happens to be my first alert drill here.” The captain then asked me more questions and, when she was satisfied with my answers, she said, “Fine, Specialist. For the moment, you can stay right where you are now. The Sergeant Major and the rest of the Brigade HQ staff will be here soon and this is where they will have formation.” I stood at attention again, saluted and said, “Thank you, ma’am.” The captain returned my salute and responded, “Carry on Specialist.” She then made an about face and entered the Brigade HQ building. Once the door had closed behind her very admirable backside, I relaxed. My brain was still a little foggy from last night’s drinking, but not as bad as it was earlier. I thought, *Maybe when this is over they will let us get some breakfast at the mess hall. Now if the coffee is as strong as it was on my last unit, I’ll be good to go.*

I dug into my trouser pockets to get my lighter and my pack of cigarettes. I placed the Kool Milds cigarette to my lips thinking, *Since Newport’s aren’t sold here, I’ll have to settle.* I could hear the gunpowder crackling at the lit end as I took a deep drag. I pulled on the cigarette enough to get the much needed nicotine smoke into my lungs. When I exhaled, I couldn’t help but let out a satisfied, “Ah!” as the fogginess from last night’s beer-fest quickly dissipated. I flicked the ashes onto the ground next to my feet and when I was about to take another drag, I noticed some movement from the corner of my eye. I turned to my left to see what it was and, for a minute, I wasn’t sure of exactly what I was seeing. To my left were the Headquarters Battery barracks and what I saw was all of these people, both men and women, either running out of the doors or climbing out of the windows while, at the same time, there were people

going into the same building and climbing into the same windows to get in. Some of them were colliding into each other in what seemed like a desperate attempt to be somewhere they were supposed to be. The same thing was happening in all of the other barracks on the post. The communications company and the artillery barracks seemed to be hemorrhaging people from all of its doors and windows as well.

So there I was, standing in the middle of this chaos as these people, some half-dressed, were running in opposite directions as the air siren continued to wail and the spotlights swayed in their steady pace. Since my last unit was an infantry unit, there were no female personnel. So, to see women in all shapes and sizes climbing in and out of windows, obviously because they were spending the night with someone who either looked good or who they thought looked good after I had called it a night at 2:00 AM, made me wish that I had a camera. I thought, *No one would believe me if I told them about this.*

The scrambling back and forth was frantic but brief. Only about five minutes had passed and the parade ground was as empty as it was before. I then put out my cigarette, making sure that I field stripped it and placed the filter back into my trouser pocket. As soon as I was done, the Sergeant Major and the rest of my unit had shown up. We quickly lined up and as the Sergeant Major called us to attention, I thought to myself once more, *I think I'm going to like this place.*





A FLOCK OF GEESE

by Edwardo Padilla

The other morning, it was cold but sunny outside. It had snowed about two inches the previous night, and the village where I live seemed to be asleep while covered in a soft white blanket. I stepped out onto the front porch with my morning coffee. The big field in front of my house was white, but peppered with something that, at first, I couldn't make out. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and finally realized what it was. There must have been a hundred geese in the field. Some were preening, others were eating, and others were just sitting there resting.

I heard a familiar sound above me and saw flocks of geese flying overhead. There were flocks of ten and flocks of twenty. They all circled above Perry Point. The sky was black with their silhouettes. As I watched them, I noticed that some geese circled once and then continued flying south, the lead bird giving some silent command that the flock would not be stopping here to rest. However, some flocks circle once or twice and then the lead bird would start to descend and the others would follow. I knew that some of the flocks that came here to rest would continue their journey after a few days. Others would stay here for the entire winter and this would be as far south as they would venture this year. The winters

are cold but far milder than in the north. And the river that was no more than a hundred yards from my house was tempting to these water birds.

As I stood there in my robe and fuzzy slippers, coffee cup still in hand, I began to marvel at the beauty and majesty of these creatures. While on the ground they were slow and clumsy looking. Their wings seemed too big for their bodies. But once they took off, they soared above the earth so flawlessly. Once in the sky they would form a V and follow the lead bird without question. I knew that at certain points in their journey the birds would take turns as leader. They would cooperate in this fashion all the way to their destination.

Gazing out at the river, the trees, and at the vastness of the sky, I felt small. At that moment, in that place, I saw the hand of God. I asked myself “How could all of this beauty and wonder have just happened? Could all of the animals, birds and fish be an accident?” I stood there that cold morning, and I realized that some things were just too big for me to wrap my mind around.

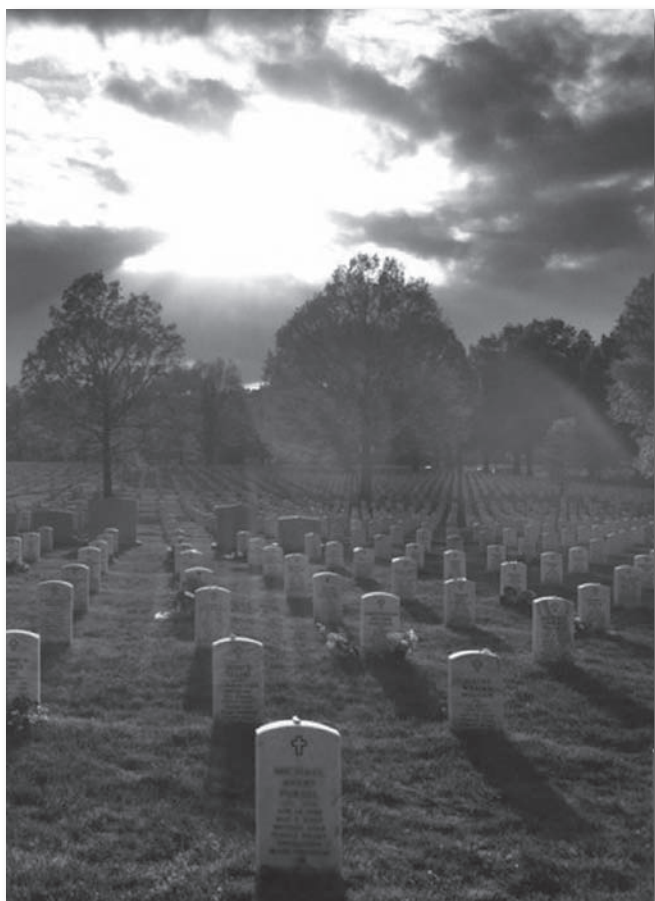
I looked down at my ice coffee and looked back up at the sky. The warmth of the sun caressed my face. I felt a measure of awe and wonder.

A warm glow filled my heart and I felt like an infant in the arms of a devoted father. I had a sense that God was trying to tell me something, but being a baby, I couldn't understand what He was saying.

A flock of geese took off into the sky.

Ah, He must be smiling, so it had to be something good!





AN UNEXPECTED SALUTE FROM ABOVE
by Robert Benedetto

The land to the left had many crosses and stones
The land to the right, empty,
waiting for the fallen to come home.
At parade rest, two brothers gave gifts to the honored.
We all stood there in silence as we remembered.
When all was said and done,
an unexpected salute came from above;
Two helicopters did a fly-by
Then disappeared into God's sky.

AUTHOR BIOS



Robert Benedetto served in the United States Air Force as a Fire Protection Specialist. His travels include Saudi Arabia (Gulf War), Somalia, and Alaska. He would like to help less fortunate veterans and civilians with their addiction problems.

Frank Muer served eight years in the Navy as a Boiler Technician. Frank was stationed in Hawaii for three years and Japan for three years. His shore duty was in Alameda, California. He is presently pursuing a new career and taking on new challenges.



Sgt. Edwardo Padilla served 15 years as an Army Paratrooper specializing in Warehouse Operations. He had the honor of serving with such prestigious divisions as The 82nd Airborne, 1st Infantry, and 2nd Armor (Forward). His overseas assignments included Fairbanks Alaska, Northern Germany, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Iraq. Edwardo is an aspiring moviemaker and writer, enjoying retirement in upstate New York. “Airborne!”

Angel Ramos-Lopez enlisted in the United States Marine Corps Reserves in 1978 then made an inter-service transfer to the U.S. Army in 1981 and served three years in West Germany and Fort Benning, Georgia.



Marc Yarnes is a United States Army veteran who grew up in Savage, Minnesota and is currently residing in Westchester County, New York. A self-taught artist specializing in portrait realism he works primarily with charcoal and pastel and has created over a hundred portraits of many nationalities and ages. He can be contacted at marc.yarnes@yahoo.com.

INFORMATION

The Veterans Writing Workshop works to establish writing programs for the veterans' community in Westchester County and the New York Metropolitan area. It was created as an outgrowth of a successful veterans' writing program hosted by Fordham-Westchester University in Spring of 2010 as part of the National Endowment for the Arts' The Big Read program.

The Veterans Writing Workshop consists of two major components: veterans' community-based writing workshops held in a public space free of charge to all U.S. veterans, and veterans' behavioral health writing programs offered in residential and behavioral health settings.

For more information, email info@veteranswritingworkshop.org or go to www.veteranswritingworkshop.org.



David Surface, founder and instructor of the Veterans Writing Workshop, has designed and led writing programs in public schools, mental health centers, homeless programs, and other community settings for twenty years.



The Common Ground Montrose Veterans Residence is a transitional residence for 96 homeless veterans on the Hudson Valley VA campus in Montrose, NY. Geared to helping veterans get their lives back on track, we provide case management services and assistance with recovering from physical and emotional injuries, reconnecting with family members, and securing employment and permanent housing.

Common Ground is a nationally respected leader in efforts to end homelessness and one of the largest developers and managers of supportive housing in the nation. It also operates, under contract with the NYC Department of Homeless Services, outreach programs that target people living on the streets in parts of Manhattan and all of Brooklyn and Queens. For additional information, visit www.commonground.org.

Afterwords: On Common Ground, is the second anthology of writing from the Veterans Writing Workshop.

The writers in this book are U.S. veterans from the Common Ground Veterans Residence in Montrose, NY. The stories and poems they've written are a lesson in what it means to stay human under the most challenging of circumstances---remembering family and home, dealing with grief felt for fallen comrades, witnessing horrific human tragedy, and finding moments of peace in the solitude of nature.

These veterans see their writing as helpful not only to themselves, but to others as well. "That's what it's all about," one workshop member said, "You tell your story, and maybe it'll help somebody else."



The Veterans Writing Workshop works to establish writing programs for all U.S. veterans in the New York metropolitan area. For more information, email info@veteranswritingworkshop.org, or visit our website: www.veteranswritingworkshop.org.