

Old Soldiers

Brady Peterson

When he knew he was dying,
his thoughts turned to Jesus,
and if Chuck and Eldridge could find
a certain comfort there,
making an odd pair,
why not an old booze peddler.

During those last temperate months
he returned to church
and sat on the front row
and wrote large checks to the building fund,
bargaining as best he could.
But in the evening
when he sat on his back porch
watching the sky move
from blue to shades of pink and beige,
he worried.

And when the old veteran
was lying in the white hospital bed
attended by strangers in green gowns,
he saw demons coming for him,
oozing out of the walls.
My mother said it was the morphine.

Years later, I got a post card
from an old war buddy
who had searched him out too late.
He described a man I didn't know,
a hell of a man, the old war buddy said.

And when my father asked me
to kill the demons oozing out of the walls,
when he asked me to take a big knife
and stab them,
don't let me down, son, he pleaded,
don't let me down, he said,
his eyes wide with fear,
I told him I didn't see them.

But just the same,
I knew they were there.