SVWG November 2013, Writing Prompts

1. Debriefing Veterans' Day (same prompt we gave following Veterans' Day last year, modified slightly)

Write a position piece about Veterans' Day: From your perspective, what function/purpose should Veterans' Day serve, and how well does it fulfill that purpose? What should people do/say on Veterans' Day? What should they not do/say? How did your friends and family regard you on Veterans' Day? How do you feel about the day itself, and do you have a particular ritual or way of spending the day?

2. Burning Questions

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote: "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms or like books written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them... Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

What are the burning questions that you feel are "unsolved in your heart"? Write a list of questions, and use one or more of these questions to generate a new piece of nonfiction writing. This prompt is similar to the poetry prompt that we did during the retreat, but this one invites you to unravel the questions further in essay form, explore the sources of these questions, and use the questions to produce detailed scenes and narrative.

3. In an NPR interview with Terry Gross from Fresh Air, veteran Jake Siegel, co-editor of the collection Fire and Forget speaks to the challenge of coming home and trying to tell civilians, including friends and family, about what he saw and experienced at war. He describe the tensions as follows:

And then when you get home, you have these kind of conflicting urges, where on the one hand, you're desperate to tell somebody and feel connected to somebody and tell them about what you saw. And on the other hand, it's, like, what's the point? They're never going to understand, anyway. And so that can be really difficult. It's difficult to deal with, and then, you know, you do tell somebody something, and then they don't understand it in precisely the way you want them to understand it.

They don't get something about it. You're trying to reveal something essential about your experience, and they don't quite get it, because they don't have the context to get it. And then you figure: Well, why even try, if it's going to end like this? That was the dynamic I was trying to get at with that exchange.

And the other thing with that is, like, you get back, and you have all this stuff you want to say, but you don't know quite how to say it, and you can feel like a burden. You understand
that you’re difficult to be around. Understanding that you’re difficult to be around doesn’t make you any easier to be around. But you understand it, and you just - sometimes, you know, you just think: This can’t be what they thought it would be like when I got back, either. You know?


Write a scene or scenes that represent a time or times you’ve tried to share your military and/or war-time experiences with friends, family, or acquaintances. What kind of exchange or interaction transpired?