

# Poetry Review: Graham Barnhart's THE WAR MAKES EVERYONE LONELY



1.

The book arrives. By mail and on the cover. There are clouds.  
Gray clumped in altostratus heaps. A military helicopter  
headed.

Into thick sky that stretches off. The bottom right hand  
corner of cardstock.

Or how the title. *The War Makes Everyone Lonely* makes me think of 2007.

How my husband deployed to Afghanistan. And how lonely we both were.

When he came home.

2.

Graham Barnhart's poems are about war.

What war is.

What war is not.

Like clouds his poems  
gather.

3.

There is a musicality to them. Barnhart's poems.

The transformer outside his sister's house –

*still humming somehow*

*(Everything In Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)*

How the hum makes memory.

Reminds Barnhart of war –

*electricity quieting in the wire when the sun*

*scrapes its knee bloody up the mosque steps*  
*(Everything In Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)*

Or how. When he was at war. For Barnhart –

*every insect droning is a cicada*  
*(Unpracticed)*

4.

Or bullets. How –

*Bitterness sounds like this: steel-tongued*  
*cascades pouring out by the handful.*  
*(Range Detail)*

5.

At home there is. A child playing an oboe.

Through a window and after.

After Barnhart comes home from war dull.

Growing dull or the music of it.

Human breath pushing down an oboe's neck.

Blast of sound. How the boy –

*he sounds like a robot learning to speak,*

*but now and then an almost "Ode to Joy"  
or "Lean on Me" outlines itself, and I forget  
I am going to die.*

*(Belated Letter To My Grandmother)*

6.

Barnhart's poems are electric.  
Like voltage in a box. Or moving down a wire.  
How it is this constant current.  
The persistent hum of still being alive.  
And then the jolts. When you remember.

7.

Remember yes.  
Writing to his grandmother a letter about the letters  
he never wrote.  
While he was away. How Barnhart writes –  
*to say yes  
yes, the guns were loud –  
loud like gods applauding*  
*(Belated Letter To My Grandmother)*

8.

But most of all there is tension.

Tension in Barnhart's poems.

9.

Tension between war and home. Between  
remembering war and leaving it behind or  
how –

*Flashbacks*

*don't announce themselves.*

*It takes so little.*

*(Everything In Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)*

In one poem, Barnhart is flooded with it.

Memory of barracks and army green wool.

White sheets. Film reel dark rooms.

Passing moon.

The fire watch and screams. Of a drill sergeant.

How Barnhart writes –

*I told her all of this when she found me*

*standing in the bedroom doorway.*

*(Somnambulant)*

10.

The tension is a distance. Between  
what happened and how he cannot  
describe it. Or regret. When he does –

*Behind headlights growing darker  
night against the snow, I regret saying*

*kind of like Afghanistan aloud  
with my mother and grandmother*

*in the otherwise silent heat of the car*

*(Sewing)*

11.

In Barnhart's poems, there is a sense that  
coming home from war is displacement or  
this placement outside of time. How –

*tree branches, black*

*in the dawn sky, resume their grays and browns*

*by lunch. The black wrought fences continue  
leaning into their rust, rigid and failing  
(Everything In Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)*

Everything remains. Goes on.

And Barnhart writes –

*there*

*is no war in this but me.*

*(Everything in Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)*

12.

Or the tension between what is real  
and what is not. How there is training  
for war. Watching grainy videos of men  
over there. Placing bombs. Or defecating  
under almond trees. Set to pop music.

Only to emerge in America –

*sunbright Texas*

*tobacco juice hissing on the tarmac.*

*(Capabilities Brief)*

13.

How soldiers play *Call of Duty*. To pass time.

This game of war. Where –

*Rifles were weightless. Bombs fell with nothing  
close to oversight. Injuries meant  
heavy breathing –*

*a red-tinged screen.*

*(Medics Don't Earn Killstreaks)*

But in a video game, war is fiction. And unreal.

How –

*there's no difference between urgent and expectant.*

*No need to estimate under fire*

*the percentage of a body burned.*

*How much fluid to administer. How much per hour*

*they should piss out. No need to pull the bodies to cover.*

*They disappear without you*

*checking their pulse.*

*(Medics Don't Earn Killstreaks)*

14.



And the unreality of war is not limited to what is virtual.

Barnhart describes an army recruiting advertisement.

A child hugging a soldier. Her brother or her father.

How the word *army* is used five times. *Strong* six.

But there is little war. How there are no –

*piles of feet*

*on airport roads*

*and no one assigned to shovel them.*

*(Notice and Focus Exercise)*

And –

*No blistered trigger fingers.*

*No depressions in quiet skulls*

*(Notice and Focus Exercise)*

15.

In Barnhart's poems, war is –

*Another year refusing water to children.*

*When they made the universal gesture for thirst*

*along roadsides you wouldn't stop.*

*(Days of Spring, 2016)*

It is bombs –

*A bombing at the gate before you arrived  
was just a story you knew about rubble.*

*(Days of Spring, 2016)*

It is guards at a gate –

*hired to die so you wouldn't when another bomb came.*

*(Days of Spring, 2016)*

16.

Barnhart's poetry acknowledges militarism.

Acknowledges aggression.

The physicality of deployment.

Occupying space in a country

that is not your own.

Barnhart remembers arriving in a village  
raided by American soldiers. Arriving and –

*Dressed*

*like the men who killed*

*their*

*husbands, we passed out sewing machines*

*to*

*widows so they could make clothes*

*for their children and embroider cemetery flags.*

*(Sewing)*

17.

Or in Iraq. Dinner with a man who called himself. King of Kawliya.

Who fed them meat peeled from goat bones.

How they fed each other from their hands.

Barnhart writes –

*I remember my fingernail*

*against a man's lip .*

*(Shura)*

Or how later –

*the women who had prepared our food*

*and waited with their children for us to finish*

*were given to eat what we had left.*

*(Shura)*

18.

There is leaving in Barnhart's poems.

War and

what it leaves behind.

Remembering transitioning a village, Barnhart writes –

*all the small corners in that small base*

*were pulled open. Picked blessedly clean.*

*Before our dust-wake settled, no stone,*

*if we had stacked it, was left standing on another*

*(How to Transition a Province)*

This is the tension.

Between going to war but not staying.

Between leaving a mark and wanting

to leave nothing at all.

And the complicity when it is not possible.

19.

Barnhart remembers H.E. rounds. Their smoke and

dust. How –

*illuminate*  
*shells – packed light and smoke*

*and*  
*shot too low – drop phosphorous*

*through*  
*civilian fields we aren't*

*supposed*  
*to burn, so we wait down*

*the cease-fire in the bus that brought us.*

*(Indiana-Stan)*

There is privilege in leaving. Because –

*Over there, if the wheat*  
*or poppy crops catch, we can leave*  
*those fires as soon as they start.*

*(Indiana-Stan)*

20.

This is the complexity of going to war.

21.

When imagining himself on a dating site.  
And choosing a profile picture.

Barnhart writes –

*Hope it all says: confident  
and responsible.*

*As an aggressor  
aware of his complicity.*

*(Tinder Pic)*

He acknowledges –

*there will be left swipes  
for that arrogance.*

*For trying to play imperialist  
and dissenter without seeming too*

*patriotic or worse –  
apathetic. Naïve or too reckless.*

*Unwary and soon to explode  
(Tinder Pic)*

22.

This is the complicity of it.

23.

Or how  
because. Because Barnhart is a medic. D18.

U.S.  
Army Special Forces Medic. There is a tension.  
Between going to war and going to war as a medic.

24.

How the word medic in Latin.

*Mederi*

Means to heal.

25.

During  
deployment, Barnhart works with a physical therapist –

*learning  
to scrape sore tissue*

*with  
a slice of machined steel*

*curves  
to match the shape of the musculature.*

*Like  
a cradle or scythe, you said to no one*

*(Days of Spring, 2016)*

In

Barnhart's poems. This is the tension.

How  
he is both. A cradle. And a scythe.

He writes

—

*And that was how morning found you,*

*sometimes  
a cradle, sometimes a scythe*

*(Days of Spring, 2016)*

26.

But out  
of it. Out of this complexity of war.

The  
complicity of it. Comes Barnhart's poems.

Like  
the purple loosestrife he describes. That

grows  
at the prison near Mazar-i-Sharif —

*gathered*

*trembling  
against the walls*

*(Tourists)*



27.

Barnhart  
imagines himself –

*a glowing green eye in a gargoyle mass.*

*(0300)*

28.

He  
describes going to see an informant.

How  
he is remembering the man and his cell phone video –

*Hacksaw tugging neck skin.*

*The careful  
way you spoke in English*

*my  
uncle, my brother, my uncle's son. Your  
finger*

*touching  
each shemagh-wrapped face.*

*The  
one you couldn't name I knew was you*

*(Informant)*

Or how  
Barnhart's poetry is like this.

How in  
his telling it. He straddles worlds.

Reveals  
secrets. Identifies himself. And  
invites  
the reader. To find themselves.

29.

The  
war. The war stretches on like sky.

Across  
countries and deployments.

How this  
war does not ever end.

30.

Because how many years ago. When I stood on that corner  
watching.

As a plane  
hit the first tower. And a plane hit the second tower. Fire.

Or  
people clinging to the metal. Slipping and jumping and falling  
and

how  
the two towers crashed down.

31.

There is a poem about post 9/11 tear gas training.

Words *PRO PATRIA MORI* in red.

Above a cement hut door. *To die for your country.*

Or how. After. Barnhart writes –

*Somehow  
outside, somehow after*

*on my  
knees with everyone else, purging*

*years  
of sediment phlegm from scraped alveoli,*

*I saw  
the line waiting to go in, heard*

*the  
men behind me learning to drown.*

*Learning  
to breathe that evil pure as air.*

*Motes  
of gas, like dust in sunlight,*

*wafted  
from the exit labeled DULCE ET*

*(Post 9/11 Gas Training (II))*

32.

How

many. Soldiers have gone to war. Gone to  
war  
post 9/11 and how many have come home.

And how  
many.

How  
many dreamed of its *sweetness*.

33.

There  
is a futility.

Poems  
about training and more  
training  
or the feeling that it may  
not  
matter.

34.

Barnhart writes –

*Today*  
*I can deadlift four-oh-five.*

*When*  
*I can move four-ten it will*  
*not*

*stop a bullet or*

*the  
overpressure of a bomb*

*(Cultivating Mass)*

There is a sense of inevitability.

Because

–

A  
*tourniquet will work*

*unless  
it doesn't*

*(How To Stop the Bleeding)*

35.

Language  
is questioned.

Its  
privilege. How Barnhart inscribes diplomas in Pashtu.

Only  
to be told. By the Major. To write them in English –

*The  
Pashtu,*

*he said,  
is lovely*

*but unofficial.*

*(Certificates of Training)*

36.

Or the  
task of announcing he will deploy again.

How Barnhart  
imagines his words as bats. How –

*I'll  
probably just open my mouth,  
wait for something to fly out  
(Telling You I Will Deploy Again)*

Or when the words don't come.

Barnhart describes hitting them  
with a racket.

Scoops and sloughs them outside.

And –

*Regretting,*

*only  
a little, the need, the abrupt  
cessation  
of a fragile thing,*

*that terrible  
satisfaction, even*

*with  
these apologies hanging limp,  
crumpled in the rhododendrons.*

*(Telling You I Will Deploy Again)*

37.

In  
trying to describe to his father –

*the  
dull machine chunk*

*of a  
rifle's sear reset between rounds*

*(What Being In The Army Did)*

Graham  
offers –

*maybe  
there is no word*

*(What Being In The Army Did)*

Just  
space.

Air

between bars. Distance between keys.

To  
which his father replies –

*No,  
he said,*

*there  
is definitely a word*

*(What Being In The Army Did)*

38.

And  
Graham questions poetry.

Remembering  
a photograph of two dead bodies.

Men wrapped and left on a dirt field. Barnhart writes –

*bodies*

*sloughed  
in a field then photographed.*

*In  
their repose*

*deserving  
more than this poem*

*and  
its portions*

*of*



*sky framed by power lines.*

*(Deserving  
(II))*

39.

Of  
course. Loneliness is this.

This  
futility. The question.

Of  
whether anything makes a difference.

Or if  
words are enough.

40.

But  
in Barnhart's poems. His words  
are  
the answer. The raveled call to  
prayer.  
Or his surprise to see a boy –

*kneeling beside his bucket to kiss the dirt.*

*(Call  
to Prayer)*

The shared  
humanity of experience.

Even  
in war. Even in our loneliness.

41.

In  
his poems, Barnhart sews together.

The pieces  
of war. Memory. Leaving

and coming  
home. What it means to

fight  
a war and care for its wounded.

42.

He  
describes history as a skeleton –

*each city suturing*

*new skin to the skeleton.*

*(Pissing in Irbil)*

Or  
how his poems are flesh.

Attaching

themselves to the  
skeleton  
of what happened.

Wrapping  
bone in meaning.

43.

At a poetry  
reading, Barnhart sees a bee  
dragged  
by a spider. As the poet who is  
reading  
says –

*Those  
with the time*

*for  
poetry don't deserve it*

*(Deserving  
(I))*

Barnhart wonders –

*The  
poetry or the time*

*(Deserving  
(I))*

44.

I am  
not certain we deserve either.

But,  
as I read Barnhart's *The War Makes Everyone Lonely*,

I am  
grateful.

Grateful  
for both.