

New Poetry from Abby E. Murray

Gwen Stefani Knows How to Get Everything I Want

It takes a misdelivered *Cosmo*
to finally understand what I want
and how to get it. Gwen Stefani
tells the truth on page 89.
We believe in Gwen because
her apron of chainlink stars
sparkles over a black bustier;
star-spangled bondage, says an editor.
She slouches, holds the heel
of her right white Louboutin
in one hand as if to say Congress
respects my body, as if to say
rifles aren't worth shooting.
This is what I want and Gwen
is here to deliver. When she slips
into a red sport coat and jeans
she comes in loud and clear:
grant proposals that write themselves,
cartons of baby formula
sold from unlocked shelves at CVS,
eight days of rain over California.
Because Gwen knows how to get
everything I want, she can afford
to be an optimist. Pharrell is rad,
her mom is rad, the whole world
is rad. I agree, Gwen, I do!
And I'd be giddy too in that baby blue
jacket, its faux-bullet spikes screaming
peace talks and pacifism,
bubblegum fingernails that tell me

soldiers who drop my writing class
are only on vacation. She pulls
her Union Jack sunglasses down
with one finger. This means Ruth Stone
never died but went into hiding,
it means the grocery store lobsters
have escaped, it means I can refinance.
Gwen steps into a pair of fishnets
as if to say the 2nd Infantry Division
won't return to Iraq, as if to say minke whales
are singing on the Japanese coast.

Notification

This is how I imagine it.

A black Durango follows me to work,
then home, tracks me to King Soopers
where I buy peppermint tea and milk.

It idles in the parking lot,
the driver obscured by clouds
of bitter exhaust. I know it is a man
by his shoulders, his grinding jaw.

I know he has drawn the short stick.

He tracks me home and waits
until the faint clicking of our luck
slows and stops. He steps outside
on a current of aftershave
and starched polyester,
pulls another man in uniform
from the backseat: he will stay
to help me make arrangements.

They use the handrail on the wooden porch.

They expect to be wounded.

Happy Birthday, Army

I'm wearing lace this time,
gold trim over a black slip because
Happy Birthday, Army.
I offer you these blisters
in my black leather stilettos
with mock-lace cut-outs.
Tom says it's a short ceremony,
we'll be done by nine
but he tells the sitter eleven
and I wedge a book into my purse.
In seeing nothing I've read too much:
the empty-bellied howitzer
kicked up in the corner of the ballroom
points me toward the cash bar,
casts a shadow over the cream
in my Kahlua and turns the milk grey.
I drink it. I order a second
before the emcee tells the men
to seat their ladies.

Uniforms droop by the exits
on velvet hangers, gas masks
sag on wooden dowels.
Quick, boys! Post the colors!
The lights drop and the general
mounts the stage in a shimmer
of green and yellow spotlights,
tells us to enjoy ourselves for once—
but first these messages:
thank you to our guest speaker,
the anchor from ESPN,
thank you to our sponsors,

thank you to the sergeant major
here to recite "Old Glory"
in the center of the room:

I am arrogant.

I am proud.

I bow to no one.

I am worshipped.

We are dumbstruck,
his recitation flung toward us
like an axe through paper.
Tom finds him later
and pays for his beer.



Johann Wilhelm Preyer, "Still Life with Champagne Flute," 1859, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD.

The chandeliers are champagne,
crystal brims sloshing with bubbles.
Someone's wife wins a kayak

and just when I think
a lieutenant nearby will surely jump
from his table to shake
a bag of limbs from his eye sockets,
a truckload of body parts
grey with longing for the soul,
a woman's voice whispers
from beneath the howitzer,
the rented microphone
on fire with song:
happy birrrrthday, dear arrrrmy
a la Marilyn Monroe,
and we are all a bunch of JFKs
in our lace and heels
and cummerbunds and cords,
watching a five-tiered cake
piped in black and gold buttercream
being pulled between our tables
by a silver robot
and shrug into the silk of knowing
we could end all this
with the flick of a finger
if we wanted.

Majors' Mafia

They want us to call ourselves
the *Majors' Mafia* and by They
I mean We because the Majors
are our husbands and they say
very little about what is discussed
during cocktail hour
at the Commander's house
as if our words sound friendly
but are muffled by a closed door
and the Wives giggle as if to say

we are not exactly *thugs*
as if to say they would *never!*
and a knot of words loosens
at the bottom of my throat
like a paper lantern released
as if to say *get out*, as if to say
I am on fire, and I have a problem
with the gang metaphor
but also the possessive *Majors'*—
that bitch of an apostrophe
at the end of my husband's rank
like I am, we are, owned
the way farmers own turkeys
and we are just as articulate,
just as grand, just as preoccupied,
because farmers are in the business
of keeping turkeys alive until they aren't,
farmers don't keep turkeys warm
because turkeys have rights
and these women can't possibly
be standing in a half circle
around a stack of spangled cupcakes
generating ideas like these,
like names, like possessives,
like we aren't making ourselves
more palatable by forming a flock
and nibbling sweet things,
and the sugar stars in the frosting
remind me how one can trick
a headstrong bird into eating
by leaving shiny marbles in its dish,
like the bird will think *marbles!*
I love marbles! then forget to fast,
and these women can't possibly
be women, they must be birds,
they sound like a lullaby
when they say we need a group name

because we need a Facebook page
in order to *express solidarity*
and they say solidarity is a survival skill
for all Army Wives,
and the paper lanterns are rising
again up my neck toward the brain stem
and my spine is burning
and I'm thinking about the tomahawks
and sabers and rifles and hunting knives
on the walls here in this lovely home
and I'm thinking survival
is a bread that I can't eat here,
and I ask them to excuse me
for a moment so I can check
my face in the bathroom mirror
where I find a sugar star wedged
in my teeth and I'm thinking
I could use an ax to fix that.

When Tom Asks Me to Call the Incoming Major's Wife and Welcome Her to the Battalion

Hi is this Becky this is Abby Murray my husband
(different last name) is the S-3
in the battalion where your husband is being sent I
don't know what S stands for or
why 3 anyway Tom's leaving this position and your
husband will replace him soon
you sound nice anyway welcome do you
know if there's something I'm
supposed to say or help you with Tom just said
welcome her and I guess I have
I don't know what does it mean to feel welcome
as a woman I really can't say
every week I feel more at home in a compact mirror I
think I was asked to call you

because we are both women my dog doesn't even speak
when I tell her to but
she does bark a lot she likes to speak on her terms
anyway the
battalion mascot is a buffalo so people are really into
buffalos here buffalo hats
sweaters earrings umbrellas leggings there's a big dead
buffalo in the entryway to
battalion headquarters it was donated by a museum in
Alaska the taxidermist
even glazed his nose to make it appear wet like he
was snuffling the prairie just
seconds before a glass case sprang up around him and BAM he
had a few minutes to breathe
his last bits of air while the herd backed away my
daughter loves the buffalo but is
concerned about his lack of oxygen he's not the only
symbol of death in that hallway
there are rifles and sabers as well I'm sorry
I hope you like it here the
winters are mild and there's cedar everywhere it smells
good on the coast Tom
says you're from Texas that's nice I was in
Texas once it was Texasy
I should warn you your husband might ask you to do strange
things for reasons he can't
articulate like calling women because you are a
woman and we should all be welcomed
to the jobs we don't have if there's anything you need
 try Google or maybe call
someone who knows your voice I'm sure you'll be great
 you sound happy



Philippe de Champaigne, "Still Life with a Skull," 1671, Musee de Tesse, Le Mans, France.

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"Majors' Mafia" and "When Tom Asks Me to Call the Incoming Major's Wife and Welcome Her to the Battalion" are previously unpublished.

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Hercules and Cerberus, 1608. Nicolo Van Aelst, Antonio Tempesta. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

13 WAYS TO APPROACH A THREE-HEADED DOG

I.

Those who tell you

to carry raw meat

have never met me.

Bones are better,

they last longer,

but if there's

no bones to be had
bring peanut butter.

II.

In this analogy
I am always Cerberus.
My beloved is inside,
changing.

When he wants me
to sleep in his bed
he comes to me
shaped as a body
like yours.

III.

I grew old here.
Compliment the quartz
mouth of my cave,
my heavy collars,
the bronze of my bark.
Tell me I sound
familiar.

IIIa.

I live to be recognized.

IIIb.

My hearing is spent.

Your language
is a red fruit
everyone loves
to chew.

If we lock eyes

I'll stand.

V.

I wouldn't call
human souls
delicious
or even tempting.
I swallow
what I must.

Dogs escape

all the time,

cats too, crows

and wolves.

I let wolves pass

because they sit

a while before

they go,

they don't trust

this river any more

than I do.

We watch it twist

around itself together.

VII.

What would I buy

with your money?

Lie down. Stay.

VIIa.

I do not know what a changed mind

feels like. Grass? Maybe sun?

VIII.

In this analogy
you are convinced
you are *sui generis*.

You will be the one
with quick feet.

In this analogy
the ferryman drops
your fare into a sack
with everyone else's.

Bring water.

I'm not saying
it will buy you
time
but I am thirsty.

In this analogy
you are the one
who thinks you saw
the city shimmer

before it split.

You're not wrong.

XI.

My beloved

has built a city

where all the bread

is free.

XIa.

His garden

is free of spiders,

nothing

that can be crushed

is sent there.

XII.

Show me what

a sleeping dog

looks like.

XIII.

Are you the moon?

If you are,

make me know it.

I keep a song

in my throat

for you.



Johann David Wyss, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, George Routledge and Sons.

HOW TO DIE IN PEACETIME

Welcome the cancer cell,
its sense of justice
more twisted than the DNA
inside its rebel membrane.
Welcome its obsession
with reproduction and division,
the way it makes a home
in the left breast and waits
so patiently, still a pearl
within a pearl within a pearl.
Welcome its false history
and family-friendly values,
its desire for more and more
children, the way it butchers
its own meat forgiven
by the prayers it sends abroad,
the way it campaigns for leader
of the immune system
and loses gracefully each time
until it doesn't, until the first
letter is tied to the first
brick and flies through the first

window of a neighbor's house.
Welcome its lavish parties,
electrons everywhere,
flags that flicker like emblems
of peace in the bloodstream,
welcome its marksmanship
when it shoots down the doves
who wake it each morning.
Your body is a sovereign
unable to wage war on itself,
your body is a black night
rippling with radiation.
This is peacetime, this is grace,
this is our merciful killer
rising like a star in our bones.
Let us raise our telescopes
and toast to its brilliance,
its speed, its true aim.

ARMY BALL

You've outgrown the army ball,
the men I mean, not us, the wives,
who spend hours buffing time
from our necks and faces.

We dazzle in our pearls
and tennis bracelets clipped like medals
to our limbs: my OIF amethyst,
OEF diamond studs, SFAT cashmere.

Some new wives miss the mark,
overshoot the dress code
and show up in wedding gowns.

They pick and pick at the tulle,
the crystals, the ruching.

At our table, your jaw is softened
by gin and a single year,
the one before Iraq
when Blackhawks dropped you
into the unarmed mountains of Alaska
and you floated down like bread.

We toast the dead and drink.

We howl like dogs for the grog.

Men come forward with liquor bottles

so large they contain entire wars,
dark rum for the jungles of Vietnam,
canned beer for Afghanistan.

A bowl the size of a bus tire
is filled with two hundred years
of booze and we serve ourselves
with a silver ladle made in America
but polished last night, too early,
its grooves blushing with tarnish.

RANGER SCHOOL GRADUATION

A cadence is written like so:
wives show up for the mock battle
at Ranger School graduation
in heels and spandex skirts,
some of us threaded into silk thongs
and some bare-assed,
some in black and gold
I heart my Ranger panties,
all of us too late

to hear this morning's march:

You can tell an army Ranger by his wife!

You can tell an army Ranger by his wife!

Because she works at Applebee's

and she's always on her knees,

you can tell an army Ranger by his wife!

This is how we sway like choirgirls:

America oils our hips.

Rope off the wood chips

and call it a combat zone.

When you're paraded into the lot

beside Victory Pond I pretend to know

which smudge of red is you.

Already I am washing your uniform, your back.

Your mother says *oh, oh!*

and claps: the sound of deer ticks

kissing your blistered necks

before we can.