

# 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.