

New Poetry by Lynn Houston

You Leave for Afghanistan

If I'm writing this, it means I can't sleep and that
the rain outside my window drops blindly in the dark.

The crops need it, the cashier told me earlier, ringing
me up for a pint of milk, making small talk, making change.

And now the tipped carton has marred the pages
on my too-small desk. I'm trying not to make too much of it—
this mess, the disasters my life and pages gather.
I'm trying to be kinder to myself, more forgiving.

Outside, a leopard moth lands on the screen, shudders
to dry its wings. One touch from my finger would strip
the powdered coating that allows it to fly in rain.
I wish it might have been so easy to keep you

from boarding the plane that took you to war.
In the predawn, my neighbors still asleep, I am the only one
to hear the garbage truck grind to a stop,
its brakes the sound of an animal braying.

The rain has stopped, too. I look over the smudged papers
on my desk. Nothing important has been lost.

When you come home safely to me in six months,
we will be able to say, *nothing important has been lost.*



You Send Very Little News

*You don't know all the time I'm killin'.
I watch it pass 'til nothing's left . . .
I let my memory carry on.*
–Buffalo Clover, “15 Reasons”

I try to imagine where you live now, try to read
beyond what operational security allows.

You say it's dirty there and hot. There's sand
everywhere. You have a French press for coffee.

Here, I keep things green for you—lie in the fresh grass
with the dog until we no longer smell like walls,

make entire meals out of honey and peaches. I choose
fields in Connecticut that remind me of the farm,

stare up at the now goatless clouds, imagine that the distant
bird I see is the shape of the plane that will bring you home.



They Lie Who Don't Admit Despair

*I'm trying not to think about you,
but when this combine rocks and rolls,
it shakes my mind and shakes my body,
the way your leaving shook my soul.*

—Chris Knight, "Here Comes the Rain"

I've had some dark moments
while you've been gone.
Mostly I've been okay, having
made up my bullheaded mind
to just get through it.
But last night you said
that in a few weeks you will
ask me to stop sending mail,
because you are that close
to coming home. And I felt
a lightness I haven't known
since meeting you.
From that first day,
this absence weighed on us.
When you return, we will
be together for the first time
without the threat
of imminent departure.

I imagine you this morning
with warm flatbread, steaming coffee.
I imagine you smiling.
I'm smiling, too, listening
to the house creak.
Imagining you here.

You Call from the Airport to Say You Are Home

When we began, our hummingbird bodies
did a thousand anxious pirouettes midair,
dazzled and unfazed by the sour nectar
we had to drink at end of season.

You are back now, and we will do it
all again, but with sweetness.
All the beauty of bodies in love.

How generous is war
to give us two beginnings.

At the Harbor Lights Motel After You Return

The fish aren't biting on Key Largo
the morning we spend together
after you return. You nap all day,
sheets spiraled like a carapace
around your torso and legs.

Next to you in bed, I touch your head,
stroke the hair you've grown long,
and ask what it was like over there.
But you pull the blankets higher
and turn away to face the wall.

Hours later, I call to you from the doorway
to show you a snapper on my line. You dress,
find me on the dock where we drink beer
as the sun slumps behind the palms.

You sleep through the night, and in the morning,
before you leave for a dive on a coral reef,
you tell me that turtles sleep like humans do—
you've seen them at night tucked into the nooks
of wrecks, heads withdrawn into shells;
you've seen their eyes blink open in the beam
of your dive light; you've even seen one wake
and swim away when a fish fin came too close.
They have nerve endings there, you tell me.
They can feel when something touches their shell.

When you return from the reef, I ask you
again how it was over there, and this time
you begin to tell me what you can.



The Persistence of Measurement

*There'll be a thousand miles between us
when I pass the border guard.*

*Is that thunder in the distance,
or just the breaking of my heart?*

—Chris Knight, “Here Comes the Rain”

The morning he leaves me, my lover buries
a lamb—a runt who'd only lived a few days—
on a hill of the Tennessee farm where we met.

Does he think, as he digs the grave,
as he presses his face to the cold wool
to say goodbye, of the last time he caressed
my hair or pressed his body against mine?

Or are his thoughts already in Memphis, with her?

I wouldn't know. I was not given the dignity of a burial, just an email sent after he'd been drinking, blaming me for asking too many questions, asking too much of him, for failing to give him space.

In Connecticut, winter refuses to relent.

It is still the season of waiting.

I look out the window of the room where I waited faithfully for half a year, where I wrote him daily.

The sky is cruel: clouds still take the shape of farm animals, and birds become the plane that never brought him home to me.

Part of me will always be waiting for the return of the man I met in summer, before the deployment changed him.

But that man is thousands of miles away. He will always be thousands of miles away.