

New Nonfiction from Sarah Haak: "Assimilation"

My

husband has downloaded a sleep cycle app for his phone. Every evening he tucks

the phone into bed with him, under the sheets so it can measure how many times

he moves during the night, and when he enters deep sleep. In the morning, the

app displays a dark graph full of his various sleep-cycle transformations.

Except, since we've started sleeping together again after more than a year

spent apart—he in boot camp and then a Special Operations nine-month training

program; me in different places but always waiting—he isn't sure the app is

calibrating to his cycle alone anymore, and he begins to worry it is including

my movements with his.



Photo by Arthur Debat – Getty Images

Every night the sleep cycle app dictates when we get into bed, and every morning it shows whether we did the right things the day before. Every curve on the graph tells a tale. The little ones in the beginning, tiny dips through an otherwise straight line, tell my husband he waited too long to get into bed. If only we had eaten dinner earlier, or maybe if we had not had chocolate for dessert, he might have made a shorter line, might have descended into sleep, and then deep sleep, faster or better. If only the bed we're sleeping in were bigger so we didn't touch, but the extended-stay hotel where we live awaiting our orders doesn't have any other rooms.

The larger curves are more troubling to him, though—I can tell by the way he studies his phone in the mornings with a frown—the peaks that rise and carry him awake. Those occur between the hours of 1:00 and 3:00 am. During those times, the graph usually shows a vast mountain of consciousness, my husband sometimes cresting ever so slowly upward, and other times shooting straight up into awake. Before he left for

training, when I could feel him restlessly fidget in his sleep, I would reach out and touch his face, or maybe even pull him to me and comb my fingers through his hair. But now his hair is buzzed regulation-short. Now he dreams of gunshots and being chased, and he thrashes and shouts in his sleep and moves away from me when I touch him, curling into himself on the other side of the bed. Now he is full of heat at 2:00 am, so warm I have to peel the blankets back from my skin, which always wakes him. In the mornings, he looks at me earnestly and asks what he can do to help me sleep better.

When the graph shows 95% sleep quality, things are good for the day. When the graph shows 45%, things are not. He decides we need to drink less wine and shut off all screens an hour before bed. No more funny shows to take some of the tension away. We need to exercise before 10:00 am and eat three meals a day. We need routine and consistency. We need to resolve difficulties earlier in the evening or maybe not at all.

New Nonfiction from Erin Carpenter: “Fully Involved: A Trauma-Informed Approach to Date Night”

Part 1: The Healing Shed

In 2016, my husband burned our guesthouse to the ground. He left a t-shirt over a lightbulb while painting the eaves, and the fire inspector said the motion detector probably kept turning the light on in the wind, eventually causing a spark. Kent works meticulously and always cleans up; I think there

was some moonshine involved in this oversight. But it was the year of the Gatlinburg wildfires, and by fall we would be seeing the worst inferno the East Coast had experienced in the better part of a century. Even in April, fires burned in the Big Cove, Yellowhill and Birdtown communities of Cherokee, enough to delay school due to smoke. So like so many things in our life together, he probably doesn't deserve all the blame.



photo: Brian Lary

I woke up bathed in orange light feeling so cozy that it was hard to get out of bed. If it weren't for his service dog's persistent whimpering, I don't think I would have budged. I stepped out onto the back porch and opened the screen door. The fire marshal would write a report using the words "fully involved" to describe the blaze—there was no stopping it, the best we could do was contain it. I got Kent out of bed and he

stood still for long enough to yell fuck, fuck, fuck until something in his truck exploded and we started moving again. I gathered our dogs and our daughter Katie and drove to the bottom of the mountain to flag down the firefighters. The first volunteer arrived within seven minutes of the 911 call – he told me later he found Kent up on the roof with a garden hose, wetting down the siding and the deck.

For over a month, we let the pile burn, and salvaged what we could. A page from my thesis director's first novel survived. Our neighbor Jim, a Vietnam vet with a steel plate in his head, asked for the metal hand tools, planning to hammer them back into shape somehow, or sell them for scrap metal. But everything Kent had saved from his infantry years with the 10th Mountain Division went up in flames. His BCUs and his dress blues were still back in Idaho at his parents', but he lost the kinds of things that Tim O'Brien might have mentioned.

It took about two years to re-build. We upgraded to a 500 square foot barn-style shed with a deluxe porch package. Half of the space would be used for his workshop and the other half would be shared by me and Katie to host guests, hang out, and have more privacy than the two-bedroom main house could provide. I chose colors from Sherwin Williams' American Heritage collection to appeal to Kent's patriotism—I was still all about pleasing him then. Fireweed red for the exterior, Salty Dog blue in the bathroom. I had him install cedar fence pickets in a shiplap pattern on the walls and he reclaimed wood from the fire to use as a countertop in the breakfast nook. It had rustic charm. I loved it. What I didn't know was that he would soon be living in it.

In February, he was sent home on administrative leave from his position on the road crew of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park because a co-worker blew the whistle on him for carrying a personal firearm in his lunchbox. I had questioned him about this choice over the years, but he had his reasons.

The most obvious is he's been shot at, a lot. And although he was not in an urban environment like Mogadishu, he worked in remote locations where people often went to disappear. It can take an hour for law enforcement rangers to respond to a call, and they work alone. In Kent's view, he was protecting himself and his crew. The gun never came out of the lunchbox until it was confiscated, which happened just a few days after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglass High School in Parkland, Florida.

I don't like to make excuses for Kent, and as a schoolteacher, I am as concerned about gun violence as anyone else, but just a month or so earlier, he had finally approached his supervisor and asked to bring his service dog to work. The request had been denied. His claim for a service-connected disability rating with the VA had been denied numerous times over the years as well. His relationship with his boss was strained, and his irritability was high. This would be true for me as well if I had finally come to terms with the severity of my condition and found the courage to speak out and ask for help, only to be denied accommodations or even acknowledgment that my experience was valid. So although I always disliked the fact that he carried a weapon in his lunchbox, I believe he was resorting to the only coping mechanism he was capable of at the time. But unfortunately, his indiscretion cost him his career in federal service.

When the National Park Service finally asked for his resignation, he turned to a twelve pack of high-octane beer for solace. I found him lying in the loft of the shed surrounded by storage bins and staring at the ceiling, conscious but unwilling to talk. An hour later, I heard yelling and crashing noises. I had just started watching *The Greatest Showman* with Katie. (The soundtrack would make me cry for a year afterwards.) I went out to find him ripping open and overturning anything that was not nailed down: motorcycles, tool chests that were more like wardrobes, a rack

of winter clothes that he had moved out of our bedroom so I could have a closet.

"I'm taking your guns," I said.

"Take them!" he yelled, and I grabbed his Glock off the only upright surface left in the room and left.

I called my therapist who told me to call the police. "He can't act like that. You have a child." I was afraid for his safety, not mine. I was afraid for my daughter's emotional well-being, though she only complained that I was on the phone too long and wouldn't sit to watch the movie. Having him removed from the property seemed tragic, but so did finding him dead in the shop, so I called the VA-suicide hotline and tried to make him talk to them. He just mumbled about how he was "done." They patched me through to the police.

"Does he have any firearms?" they asked.

"Yes. He has a Glock pistol and a semi-automatic rifle. But I locked them in my trunk and hid the keys and cartridges."

"That's all?"

"Yes." His other Glock, the one in the lunchbox, was supposed to have been destroyed by the authorities after he was found guilty of the misdemeanor of carrying without a permit, but it would be returned a couple weeks later at the federal courthouse in Asheville after the judge decided he had no legal basis for keeping his weapon from him. "Good luck to you, sir," the man had said to Kent. I thought he should be talking to me.

"How does he feel about law enforcement?" asked the police officer.

"He doesn't like them, to be honest."

"And why is that?"

"I guess it's because they're always around when he gets in trouble."

"What about dogs?"

"A rottweiler, a doberman mix, and a mountain cur."

"Are you sure he doesn't have any other weapons? Like a secret stash?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"My wife doesn't know about half of my guns," he said.

The officer's confession felt much too casual, too conversational for the crisis I was facing in my mind. More than anything, I was afraid for what this incident meant for my life and Katie's, and I knew at that moment that the men on the phone wouldn't be fixing my dilemma. I had never wanted to leave Kent, but had often wondered whether I should, and I was already negotiating with myself on how I could justify staying with a violent man. He would have to stop drinking. He would have to go back to therapy. Maybe he could move into the guesthouse until he was stable.

The officers arrived and strolled over to the outbuilding, but by that time, Kent had apparently climbed out the window (since all of the doors were blocked by the demolition) and wandered off into the woods. I directed them to our neighbor Jim's house, where they found Kent and brought him to the hospital. Knowing he was under someone else's care that night brought a profound sense of relief. I heard myself saying, "I need help. I can't do this alone anymore."

He passed their test. He was not a threat to himself or others, so he was free to leave the next morning. I asked Jim to take him down to the VA in Asheville and let them do a full psychiatric evaluation. I set up the appointment. But Kent was hungry and didn't have his wallet, and so Jim brought him

home. I presented my demands. I told him I'd be giving his guns to a friend in law enforcement for safekeeping.

"Fine, but you have to stop drinking too," he said.

I knew I couldn't continue drinking. For thirteen years of marriage, and for many years before, the wine had guaranteed that I could find happiness and some form of companionship at the end of the day. Kent has never been much of a talker, but a beer or two, or sometimes three or four, would always help open him up. Now the stakes had gotten too high for even my moderate dependency. My husband was going downhill fast. I had watched him destroy things he needed, even loved, out of anger, and thought he might take the rage out on himself. Was I okay being married to someone who could do that? How would this affect my daughter? I didn't know the answer, but I knew drinking made me complacent. I have been sober since that day.

He moved into the shed. Two weeks later, he said he was stable and wanted his guns back. "If you don't give them back, next time I might not be so trusting," he said. He had been sober and attending his mental health appointments. He was either comatose, or irritable, but the bulk of his anger seemed to have turned inward, so mustering all the trust I could find, I met my friend on the side of the freeway, and she loaded his guns into my trunk. I turned them over and invited him to move back to the house.

"I'm good," he said.

Over the next several months, Kent took Katie to school and picked her up from dance. Beyond that, he was a ghost. I'd go out to ask him to eat with us, to come watch a movie, to give me a hug. On a good day, he would turn his face from the TV to say no. Most of the time, he wouldn't even look at me.

"What can I do to help?" I asked.

"Leave me alone," he replied.

“Really? That’s really all you want?”

“I’m just trying to stay alive,” he said.

So I went back to my living room, where I binge watched Parks and Recreation with Katie, and let her sleep in our King sized bed for the first time in her life. From time to time, I’d try to talk to him, and fail, or try to seduce him, and succeed. Either way, such a lack of affection was evident that before long the effort became more painful than the loneliness. I thought there was another woman. I knew he wasn’t the type, but I couldn’t understand it any other way. If it were me, and I was treating him this way, it could only be that someone else was providing some of that lost connection.

“This has nothing to do with you,” was how he saw it, and in a way he was right. But I was being told “no” all the time. I would give him his space for as long as I could stand it, and then I would go out again to check on him, to let him know I was still there. I knew he was suicidal, and there was not a damn thing I could do about it except stand by. One day, he went out with his rifle into the woods. I hoped he was with Jim, but of course he hadn’t told me anything. I prayed he would come home alive.

He was drinking again—I found bottles in a wheelbarrow under the shed and soon saw him drinking when I popped in to visit. But by then I was going to 12 step meetings. I had a sponsor and a group where I could come undone and re-focus my attention onto myself. I didn’t get to decide whether or not he drank. I got to decide whether or not I stayed. That decision alone required all my strength. I had spent six months trying to help heal him with words, but words mean little to those who have lost trust in people, and for a man whose only need or want is to be left alone, my choices dwindled down to one. I finally had the strength to accept that our marriage was over.

I thanked God that I had taken a full-time teaching job to help us pay for the fire, and I would have my permanent license by the end of the upcoming school year. I began to prepare for a different future. I separated our bank accounts. I took him off the credit cards. I told him I wanted to be married to him, but I wouldn't look back on 25 years with someone who didn't want to be with me.

I remember telling Katie on the way home from school that his recliner had shown back up in the living room. She seemed interested if not particularly impressed. I remember him standing in the doorway of my bedroom saying, "Don't give up on me," and coming over to kiss me while I was reading in bed. I remember resisting the urge to get close to him in bed those first few nights, trying to let him settle in, just happy to listen to him breathe.

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Part 2: The Date Dilemma

About a year and a half later, I rolled over one Sunday morning and asked Kent what he wanted to do that day. To my delight, he wanted to take us on a full moon paddle that evening. But while we were eating the croissants I had bought for my French class, a text arrived inviting Katie to the haunted corn maze in Asheville.

"What does everyone want to do?" I asked. No one spoke.

"I want us *all* to go. That was the plan," Kent said, as if this had been on the calendar for days and not just an hour. Katie stared down at her plate, and I fought the urge to cover up the silence. Maybe I should make her come. But some time alone with him would be wonderful.

"I win either way," I said. "I'll get a date with my husband or a family kayak trip."

Kent waited through another long pause and left the table. I let the fear of losing him to the TV subside and then turned to Katie.

"It seems like you don't want to disappoint your dad," I said.

"Yeah, because he'll yell at me."

I'm sure mother guilt is one of the strongest emotions at work in America. If believing we can't be enough for our children weren't insidious enough, infecting ourselves with baby daddy guilt—the sense that you should have done better in choosing a mate—that she deserves better, that you deserve better—is one of the biggest threats to my serenity. It does nothing to clarify my vision and only makes me feel like an idiot.

"Talk to him. It's okay. Nobody's going to get hurt."

Her scowl turned the volume up on the voices in my head. *Are you sure?* I am aware of how his anger can be frightening, and I want to protect her from it, but after years of walking on eggshells, which only ever fuels anger and resentment on both sides, I have learned to trust them to their own devices. I explained how my fear likes to tell me stories; stories I've learned to ignore. "What stories are you telling yourself?" I asked her.

I was expecting all of them but one.

"I don't want to make dad go kayaking without me. He doesn't seem that into going with just you. I'm not trying to be mean, but he seems really awkward."

Her words confirmed my fear that my husband didn't want to date me, but I ignored myself. I had heard it time and time again; this was not about me.

"It's okay. Go tell your dad what *you* want to do today." And she went off to the corn maze with her friends.

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Part Three: Power to Win

Kent pulled our kayaks off the truck while there was still some muted color behind the mountains. Our three-legged Rottweiler climbed into my boat, while the mountain cur tucked in with Kent and his pole, whimpering that she didn't get to go with me. The Doberman had died in August.

"Don't cut in too close," he said as we left the shore. "I've got a line out." He moved into the dark shadows created by stacked ledges of slate rock, trying to hook a fish without the effort of casting. They call it trolling. I had to smile, thinking what a great metaphor for my marriage. But then I paddled out into the moonlight and watched it improvise on the water, happy to sit alone with my thoughts.

"Erin, where ya at?" he called out from the edge. "Come to the left."

He knew where I was, and he wanted me closer. He was keeping an eye on me and it felt like love.

"It's too dark to fish," he called.

"How come? You can't see what you caught?"

"I think I hit something."

"Like a log?" I asked.

"Like Jaws." He laughed. It sounded like those seagulls that pass through here on migration. Perfectly natural and totally out of place.

We moved out into the center of the lake. The occasional campfire flared, and drunken shouts and laughter could be heard. We rounded a piece of shoreline with a pine tree clinging to a ragged slope like it was the last bit of land

the Earth had to offer. I felt something undermining my rhythm, forcing my body to struggle a bit more with each stroke. I looked back to the trusting eyes of my tired old dog for encouragement.

“Is it me or has it gotten very hard to paddle?” I asked Kent.

“Upstream,” he said.

We had come to that part of Fontana Lake that is also a river. By travelling for over a hundred miles to be impounded by a 480-foot wall, the Little Tennessee river held enough energy to produce the atomic bomb. What power there is in purpose. I wish I knew with such certainty where I was headed.

When Kent was at his worst, his father came from Idaho to visit and we took him to the dam’s release. It would be the only day we spent together during that whole difficult time. The spillway was open, and the spray was so massive that it appeared to form two cumulus clouds. I have a picture of Katie and I leaning against a railing looking like off-duty angels posing before the gates.

I’m not an angel—not that I haven’t tried. But commitment to my veteran has taught me this: love is a powerful force, but it does not flow unimpeded, it does not exist to carry me along to my next destination, and its fluctuations are often outside my control. At times we are forced to sit in its backwater, looking closely at how we contain ourselves and where else we can find sources of hope, until enough energy has built up to push us forward.

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.

"Notification" was originally published in Ragazine.

"Happy Birthday Army," "Gwen Stefani Knows How to Get Everything I Want," and "Notification" appear in [Hail and Farewell](#). Hail and Farewell was [winner of the 2019 Perugia Press prize](#).

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

New Poetry from JD Duff

Night Flash

You've been having nightmares again.
The cruel shaking of a body
resisting slumber.
Hands twitching,
chest jerking to beats
of unknown song,
playing over and over
like memories you sold at a tag sale,
buried on the Tuscarora trail,
dumped in a white room
at Bethesda Naval Hospital.



Jules Tavernier, Heart of a Volcano Under the Full Moon, 1888.

I awake to the moon beaming
unto a lonely bed,
find you out back where dreams

smear on a blurry canvas of recollection,
and ghosts rise from wooded corners of truth.

I climb under the poncho liner
that covered you through
countless peaks of ice
and frost, Persian sandstorms,
fighting holes where you used
the cloth to shield you from walls
of claylike dirt.

The June breeze dries the sweat
around your lips. I lift a rifle
from your chest, place it beyond
the reach of ready palms.

A single leaf rests
on your cheek.

Cicadas cry for their lost
as I hush your silence with a kiss.

The Homecoming

It rained for a week
after our mailman's son
died in a roadside bomb
attack near Al Karmah.
The sky wept
as half-mast flags
blew gently
on the prairie's haze.
Signs of well wishes
bowed in store windows,
bellowed from alters of diverse
domes of prayer,
rested in alms of flowers
and fried dough.
A Corps led procession,

thick with mourners,
crowded the lot
of the pearly
mountain church.
Bagpipes sang
for a Lance Corporal
draped in dress blues,
mother betrayed
by dark dismissals
of nightly pleas,
father wilting
to soft hymns
for his broken boy.
The lone sibling
stared at the casket,
wondered why he survived
the trashings of war
while his brother
lay in a box,
waiting for rifles
to speak his praise,
a dark tomb to welcome
another lost Marine.

Seal of God

Foxholes and submarines led you to farm life
where you graze the vast splendor of still land.
Crickets speak to the quiet hush of night
as an elusive sky captures secrets,
spits sins in large chunks of hail,
disrupting the tranquil flight of time.

Faith's armor shoves you in church
where peace is offered between pews
and sounds of crossfire muffle

the graceful hum of atonement.



William Holman Hunt, Cornfield at Ewell, 1849.

You sneak home through cornfields;
stalks reek with bruised dents
of blistering flesh.
Wounded frogs leap past
thick tridents of reticent thought,
darkness dismantled by the crippled promise
of a swelling cherry dawn.

The euphonies of children
replace cancors of slivered screams
as the wind blows you
toward our kitchen, where we break bread
with an Amish farmer
and wait for God to heal us.

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.

New Poetry By Abby Murray



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.