

J E H A N N E D U B R O W

Five Poetry Readings

i. United States Naval Academy

I'm reading
to a thousand
uniforms in a stadium
that's meant
for contact sports or four-star
silver speeches.

My words return
in blurred, metallic waves,
so that it's hard to hear
myself
above the sound of me, this tinny,
tiny version,

as if I'm listening
to a distant me
reverberate, *fathoms*
I say of marriage,
the darkness wide, percussive
as a mine.

How young
the plebes all seem,
laughing when I say
fuck,
and afterward, in line
for autographs,

they ask
about my wedding ring,
how much it cuts
the skin,
the kind of bruise commitment
leaves.

Their collars gleam
with golden anchors.
Already they're weighed
down. I tell them *light*,
I say, *you'll barely feel the burden*
of this thing.

ii. Dodge Poetry Festival

Circled by our strange company
of veterans and poets
preparing to read is the great,
golden silence of a dog, Sadie Mae,
 who all day has leaned
at her owner's side, guided
through crowds on a thick line of rope,
and now, has placed herself
at the heart of everything,
 a furred focal point
toward which all our voices aim.

 Later, in the strafed light
of the stage's wings, she lies
near a curtain, unstirred
 by shots of applause.
Her coat seems to muffle
our perplexing, human sounds.

 We stroke her muzzle,
so unlike the violence of that word—
it lifts at the clatter of poems,
before resting again on the ground.

iii. Andrews Air Force Base

I hate this guy. He hasn't said a thing yet,
but I know what's coming,

the sentences
that soar on wings of certainty—I've met
his type before.

Later, when I watch
the video, I can see it on my face,
a smile meant disarm

hostilities,
my best defense in moments such as these.

It's terrible and lonely and difficult,
I say, meaning

I think to be married
to a man like him or any of the men
in this room, or for that matter,

my husband,
who've sworn to protect against threats foreign
and domestic,

against poems perhaps,
those tiny detonations made of words.

iv. Walter Reed National Military Medical Center

The poem is not
a body, although

enjambment comes
from the French

to put a leg across,
each sentence twisted

at the break.
The sterile rooms

through which we wheel
are called stanzas.

And what are words?
—prosthetics made

to bear the weight
of what is lost,

the improvised blast
at the volta

which is another way
of saying turn.

v. Naval War College

I can't stop watching the other
dependent in the room—
she's coral
in a sea of khaki,

my gaze dragging back
to the bright reef
of her dress
each time I look up from the page.

I've just read a poem about loneliness,
how two people
are a distance measurable
like the nautical miles between ships,

and now I'm reading a sonnet,
also it seems on the theme
of so much water,
though rhyming this time,

because it's best when one is lost
to look for echoes,
navigate by stars
resembling other stars.

This isn't the first time
I've found myself
speaking to the only spouse in a crowd
of officers, as if we're always pulled

to what's familiar,
both of us trying
to determine our places relative to land.
She's nodding now. And I believe

we've reached the same conclusion,
that reference points
keep moving out of reach,
that when I say vessels

I mean boats and bodies,
that there's no more imperfect union
than marriage
or the marrying of words.

Ramrod

Perhaps I wanted an officer, only I thought I said a man,
but sometimes transmissions have a way of breaking

at the place one needs precision most of all,
so that whoever read my message at the other end,

put in a form for officer when all I asked for was a man—
the gap between what's right and what is written

like a squad's request for more white pills
and the metal pails delivered weeks from now.

Instead of a man, I received a regulation figure,
stern and straight from the box, gilded at the insignia,

not to be touched for its brightness, so shined
it was best to leave to the actual thing

standing at attention on a shelf, the little spine
gone ramrod—a device, I learned, once used to shove

the bullet down a barrel, to tamp the powder,
to guarantee the spark at the peak of battle,

when the infantryman could barely hold the musket
steady. Ready aim fire. Cruel to consider

the body an instrument, the tool it could be,
how easily it entered common speech—sometimes

the ramrod sat unpurposed, heavy enough to serve
as paperweight or to prop a lazy door.

Perhaps I should have specified a gentleman,
but what was the point? Everything belligerent

looked the same—the gun, the cannon.
When I watched the officer sleep,

I could see, divested of his uniform,
how he remained rifle and cartridge.

And I learned that some collect these things—
the ramrod restored, the one a soldier

carried with him to the Civil War.
Imagine the fumbling hand. The officer lay so quietly

I could mistake him for a beautiful antique
which, if I didn't value, I understood that others did.

And so I kept him out of sentiment. Displayed him.
Impressed my guests with this curiosity from a field

we'd only read about—the dust, the sweating horses,
the quick, iambic marching of the boots.

A Row of Ribbons

They're laid in lines,
on plastic backings,
so many stripes of service,

thick horizontals,
fine verticals that signify
campaigns, as if duty

could be turned to strips
of variegated braid.

Some are studded

with metallic stars—
pierced, we might say,
with longing for the celestial,

perpetually remote.
Gold and silver, bronze,
and all of it unreadable

to civilians—except
as a kind of cordoned off
achievement.

To us they're only rules
and bars of color,
each one a regulated streak

of a body belonging
to a greater one.
But ask my husband,

and he'll point to awards
on his chest, which are
to him an ocean,

or a certain sea
where his ship
once swept for mines.

What if these were enough
for the widow, the mother
of the suicide—who,

presented with medals,
would frame them
beside a folded flag,

touch these things
until they became more
than grosgrain

and base metal? Today,
I pin them on
my husband who seems

immobilized
by my hands fumbling
not to hurt him,

the ribbons hard
despite their apparent silk—
they don't bend

to fit the wearer,
who is after all, part
of a vessel which is part

of a fleet in its gray deployments.
Suppose for some there's peace
in these rows,

citations fit each to each,
how every sacrifice already
knows its place.

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