

Poetry Review: Graham Barnhart's THE WAR MAKES EVERYONE LONELY



1.

The book arrives. By mail and on the cover. There are clouds.

Gray clumped in altostratus heaps. A military helicopter headed.

Into thick sky that stretches off. The bottom right hand corner of cardstock.

Or how the title. *The War Makes Everyone Lonely* makes me think of 2007.

How my husband deployed to Afghanistan. And how lonely we both were.

When he came home.

2.

Graham Barnhart's poems are about war.

What war is.

What war is not.

Like clouds his poems
gather.

3.

There is a musicality to them. Barnhart's poems.

The transformer outside his sister's house –

still humming somehow

(Everything In Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)

How the hum makes memory.

Reminds Barnhart of war –

electricity quieting in the wire when the sun

scrapes its knee bloody up the mosque steps
(Everything In Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)

Or how. When he was at war. For Barnhart –

every insect droning is a cicada
(Unpracticed)

4.

Or bullets. How –

Bitterness sounds like this: steel-tongued
cascades pouring out by the handful.
(Range Detail)

5.

At home there is. A child playing an oboe.

Through a window and after.

After Barnhart comes home from war dull.

Growing dull or the music of it.

Human breath pushing down an oboe's neck.

Blast of sound. How the boy –

he sounds like a robot learning to speak,

*but now and then an almost "Ode to Joy"
or "Lean on Me" outlines itself, and I forget
I am going to die.*

(Belated Letter To My Grandmother)

6.

Barnhart's poems are electric.
Like voltage in a box. Or moving down a wire.
How it is this constant current.
The persistent hum of still being alive.
And then the jolts. When you remember.

7.

Remember yes.
Writing to his grandmother a letter about the letters
he never wrote.
While he was away. How Barnhart writes –
*to say yes
yes, the guns were loud –
loud like gods applauding*
(Belated Letter To My Grandmother)

8.

But most of all there is tension.

Tension in Barnhart's poems.

9.

Tension between war and home. Between
remembering war and leaving it behind or
how –

Flashbacks

don't announce themselves.

It takes so little.

(Everything In Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)

In one poem, Barnhart is flooded with it.

Memory of barracks and army green wool.

White sheets. Film reel dark rooms.

Passing moon.

The fire watch and screams. Of a drill sergeant.

How Barnhart writes –

I told her all of this when she found me

standing in the bedroom doorway.

(Somnambulant)

10.

The tension is a distance. Between
what happened and how he cannot
describe it. Or regret. When he does –

*Behind headlights growing darker
night against the snow, I regret saying*

*kind of like Afghanistan aloud
with my mother and grandmother*

in the otherwise silent heat of the car

(Sewing)

11.

In Barnhart's poems, there is a sense that
coming home from war is displacement or
this placement outside of time. How –

tree branches, black

in the dawn sky, resume their grays and browns

*by lunch. The black wrought fences continue
leaning into their rust, rigid and failing
(Everything In Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)*

Everything remains. Goes on.

And Barnhart writes –

there

is no war in this but me.

(Everything in Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)

12.

Or the tension between what is real
and what is not. How there is training
for war. Watching grainy videos of men
over there. Placing bombs. Or defecating
under almond trees. Set to pop music.

Only to emerge in America –

sunbright Texas

tobacco juice hissing on the tarmac.

(Capabilities Brief)

13.

How soldiers play *Call of Duty*. To pass time.

This game of war. Where –

*Rifles were weightless. Bombs fell with nothing
close to oversight. Injuries meant
heavy breathing –*

a red-tinged screen.

(Medics Don't Earn Killstreaks)

But in a video game, war is fiction. And unreal.

How –

there's no difference between urgent and expectant.

No need to estimate under fire

the percentage of a body burned.

How much fluid to administer. How much per hour

they should piss out. No need to pull the bodies to cover.

They disappear without you

checking their pulse.

(Medics Don't Earn Killstreaks)

14.

And the unreality of war is not limited to what is virtual.

Barnhart describes an army recruiting advertisement.

A child hugging a soldier. Her brother or her father.

How the word *army* is used five times. *Strong* six.

But there is little war. How there are no –

piles of feet

on airport roads

and no one assigned to shovel them.

(Notice and Focus Exercise)

And –

No blistered trigger fingers.

No depressions in quiet skulls

(Notice and Focus Exercise)

15.

In Barnhart's poems, war is –

Another year refusing water to children.

When they made the universal gesture for thirst

along roadsides you wouldn't stop.

(Days of Spring, 2016)

It is bombs –

*A bombing at the gate before you arrived
was just a story you knew about rubble.*

(Days of Spring, 2016)

It is guards at a gate –

hired to die so you wouldn't when another bomb came.

(Days of Spring, 2016)

16.

Barnhart's poetry acknowledges militarism.

Acknowledges aggression.

The physicality of deployment.

Occupying space in a country

that is not your own.

Barnhart remembers arriving in a village
raided by American soldiers. Arriving and –

Dressed

like the men who killed

their

husbands, we passed out sewing machines

to

widows so they could make clothes

for their children and embroider cemetery flags.

(Sewing)

17.

Or in Iraq. Dinner with a man who called himself. King of Kawliya.

Who fed them meat peeled from goat bones.

How they fed each other from their hands.

Barnhart writes –

I remember my fingernail

against a man's lip .

(Shura)

Or how later –

the women who had prepared our food

and waited with their children for us to finish

were given to eat what we had left.

(Shura)

18.

There is leaving in Barnhart's poems.

War and

what it leaves behind.

Remembering transitioning a village, Barnhart writes –

all the small corners in that small base

were pulled open. Picked blessedly clean.

Before our dust-wake settled, no stone,

if we had stacked it, was left standing on another

(How to Transition a Province)

This is the tension.

Between going to war but not staying.

Between leaving a mark and wanting

to leave nothing at all.

And the complicity when it is not possible.

19.

Barnhart remembers H.E. rounds. Their smoke and

dust. How –

illuminate
shells – packed light and smoke

and
shot too low – drop phosphorous

through
civilian fields we aren't

supposed
to burn, so we wait down

the cease-fire in the bus that brought us.

(Indiana-Stan)

There is privilege in leaving. Because –

Over there, if the wheat
or poppy crops catch, we can leave
those fires as soon as they start.

(Indiana-Stan)

20.

This is the complexity of going to war.

21.

When imagining himself on a dating site.
And choosing a profile picture.

Barnhart writes –

*Hope it all says: confident
and responsible.*

*As an aggressor
aware of his complicity.*

(Tinder Pic)

He acknowledges –

*there will be left swipes
for that arrogance.*

*For trying to play imperialist
and dissenter without seeming too*

*patriotic or worse –
apathetic. Naïve or too reckless.*

*Unwary and soon to explode
(Tinder Pic)*

22.

This is the complicity of it.

23.

Or how
because. Because Barnhart is a medic. D18.

U.S.
Army Special Forces Medic. There is a tension.
Between going to war and going to war as a medic.

24.

How the word medic in Latin.

Mederi

Means to heal.

25.

During
deployment, Barnhart works with a physical therapist –

*learning
to scrape sore tissue*

*with
a slice of machined steel*

*curves
to match the shape of the musculature.*

*Like
a cradle or scythe, you said to no one*

(Days of Spring, 2016)

In

Barnhart's poems. This is the tension.

How
he is both. A cradle. And a scythe.

He writes

—

And that was how morning found you,

*sometimes
a cradle, sometimes a scythe*

(Days of Spring, 2016)

26.

But out
of it. Out of this complexity of war.

The
complicity of it. Comes Barnhart's poems.

Like
the purple loosestrife he describes. That

grows
at the prison near Mazar-i-Sharif —

gathered

*trembling
against the walls*

(Tourists)

27.

Barnhart
imagines himself –

a glowing green eye in a gargoyle mass.

(0300)

28.

He
describes going to see an informant.

How
he is remembering the man and his cell phone video –

Hacksaw tugging neck skin.

*The careful
way you spoke in English*

*my
uncle, my brother, my uncle's son. Your
finger*

*touching
each shemagh-wrapped face.*

*The
one you couldn't name I knew was you*

(Informant)

Or how
Barnhart's poetry is like this.

How in
his telling it. He straddles worlds.

Reveals
secrets. Identifies himself. And
invites
the reader. To find themselves.

29.

The
war. The war stretches on like sky.

Across
countries and deployments.

How this
war does not ever end.

30.

Because how many years ago. When I stood on that corner
watching.

As a plane
hit the first tower. And a plane hit the second tower. Fire.

Or
people clinging to the metal. Slipping and jumping and falling
and

how
the two towers crashed down.

31.

There is a poem about post 9/11 tear gas training.

Words *PRO PATRIA MORI* in red.

Above a cement hut door. *To die for your country.*

Or how. After. Barnhart writes –

*Somehow
outside, somehow after*

*on my
knees with everyone else, purging*

*years
of sediment phlegm from scraped alveoli,*

*I saw
the line waiting to go in, heard*

*the
men behind me learning to drown.*

*Learning
to breathe that evil pure as air.*

*Motes
of gas, like dust in sunlight,*

*wafted
from the exit labeled DULCE ET*

(Post 9/11 Gas Training (II))

32.

How

many. Soldiers have gone to war. Gone to
war
post 9/11 and how many have come home.

And how
many.

How
many dreamed of its *sweetness*.

33.

There
is a futility.

Poems
about training and more
training
or the feeling that it may
not
matter.

34.

Barnhart writes –

Today
I can deadlift four-oh-five.

When
I can move four-ten it will
not

stop a bullet or

*the
overpressure of a bomb*

(Cultivating Mass)

There is a sense of inevitability.

Because

–

A
tourniquet will work

*unless
it doesn't*

(How To Stop the Bleeding)

35.

Language
is questioned.

Its
privilege. How Barnhart inscribes diplomas in Pashtu.

Only
to be told. By the Major. To write them in English –

*The
Pashtu,*

*he said,
is lovely*

but unofficial.

(Certificates of Training)

36.

Or the
task of announcing he will deploy again.

How Barnhart
imagines his words as bats. How –

*I'll
probably just open my mouth,
wait for something to fly out
(Telling You I Will Deploy Again)*

Or when the words don't come.

Barnhart describes hitting them
with a racket.

Scoops and sloughs them outside.

And –

Regretting,

*only
a little, the need, the abrupt
cessation
of a fragile thing,*

*that terrible
satisfaction, even*

*with
these apologies hanging limp,
crumpled in the rhododendrons.*

(Telling You I Will Deploy Again)

37.

In
trying to describe to his father –

*the
dull machine chunk*

*of a
rifle's sear reset between rounds*

(What Being In The Army Did)

Graham
offers –

*maybe
there is no word*

(What Being In The Army Did)

Just
space.

Air

between bars. Distance between keys.

To
which his father replies –

*No,
he said,*

*there
is definitely a word*

(What Being In The Army Did)

38.

And
Graham questions poetry.

Remembering
a photograph of two dead bodies.

Men wrapped and left on a dirt field. Barnhart writes –

bodies

*sloughed
in a field then photographed.*

*In
their repose*

*deserving
more than this poem*

*and
its portions*

of

sky framed by power lines.

*(Deserving
(II))*

39.

Of
course. Loneliness is this.

This
futility. The question.

Of
whether anything makes a difference.

Or if
words are enough.

40.

But
in Barnhart's poems. His words
are
the answer. The raveled call to
prayer.
Or his surprise to see a boy –

kneeling beside his bucket to kiss the dirt.

*(Call
to Prayer)*

The shared
humanity of experience.

Even
in war. Even in our loneliness.

41.

In
his poems, Barnhart sews together.

The pieces
of war. Memory. Leaving

and coming
home. What it means to

fight
a war and care for its wounded.

42.

He
describes history as a skeleton –

each city suturing

new skin to the skeleton.

(Pissing in Irbil)

Or
how his poems are flesh.

Attaching

themselves to the
skeleton
of what happened.

Wrapping
bone in meaning.

43.

At a poetry
reading, Barnhart sees a bee
dragged
by a spider. As the poet who is
reading
says –

*Those
with the time*

*for
poetry don't deserve it*

*(Deserving
(I))*

Barnhart wonders –

*The
poetry or the time*

*(Deserving
(I))*

44.

I am
not certain we deserve either.

But,
as I read Barnhart's *The War Makes Everyone Lonely*,

I am
grateful.

Grateful
for both.