

## **A BRIEF COMPANION TO SELECTED POEMS FROM JEHANNE DUBROW'S *STATESIDE***

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### Overview

Jehanne Dubrow's third book of poems, *Stateside*, is concerned with the difficulties that military families, particularly spouses, encounter throughout deployment. Dubrow, herself the wife of a Naval officer, balances images drawn quotidian experience in America with intricately formal verse that uses dramatic personae and alludes extensively to Western war literature, particularly Homer's *Odyssey*. The book addresses experiences far more likely to touch far more of our midshipmen's lives than combat: the difficult psychological adjustments and challenges to marital and family harmony that military deployment poses. Yet these experiences may prove difficult to discuss in the classroom. They challenge midshipmen to imagine a future they themselves have not yet lived, and they challenge instructors to address the messy, unglamorous aspects of military life, some of which may touch uncomfortably close to home; as Dubrow notes, "it's hard to know: / the farther out a vessel drifts, / will contents stay in place, or shift?" ("Secure for Sea").

But if midshipmen and faculty can learn to focus on and consider the poetic elements of these poems, they may find an effective and amenable way of engaging with such difficult subjects. Certainly Dubrow has faith in poetry as a mode of expression; after all, she has chosen to write poems about a war primarily represented, so far, in memoir and film. Dubrow's *Stateside* offers midshipmen and faculty a chance to engage with unpleasant but professionally relevant subjects, and perhaps to discover how poetry can articulate and even clarify the complexities of human experience.

### A Note on (Auto)Biography in Poetry

Although the book draws on events and material from Dubrow's personal experience, readers should take care not to identify the *speaker* of the poems too closely with the author herself. One risks limiting the range of meanings in a literary work when assuming it is simply the author's private confession, for although an author may include details from his or her life, the process of creation and revision undermines such an assumption, since the biographical facts must inevitably be subordinated to the work's aesthetic demands. Dubrow makes the distinction between author and speaker quite clear in the second section of the book, where she largely drops her first person narration for the third person and channels the spouse's experiences through the persona (literally "mask") of Penelope. To clarify this distinction, I will use the expression "the speaker" or "the poet" when referring to the character voicing a poem and "the author" or "Dubrow" when referring to the author herself (i.e. the one who makes particular aesthetic decisions consequential to the meaning of the poem).

### Suggested Readings

Depending on the number of days an instructor is willing to devote to *Stateside*, the following poems might prove to be the most representative and the most useful for discussion.

- One day: "Nonessential Equipment," "Ithaca," "Situational Awareness"
- Two days: "Nonessential Equipment," "Against War Movies," "Reading Stephen Crane's 'War Is Kind' to My Husband," "Ithaca," "At the Mall with Telemachus," "Situational Awareness"

- Three days: “O’Dark Hundred,” “Nonessential Equipment,” “Against War Movies,” “Ithaca,” “At the Mall with Telemachus,” “Instructions for Other Penelopes,” “The Erotics of Deployment,” “Situational Awareness”
- Four or more: *Stateside* in its entirety

The discussions that follow address the nine poems suggested for three days’ worth of readings. A longer companion covering the entirety of *Stateside* is being prepared and will be made available on the website for the Brady event.

### **Part One**

This section of the book features poems that take place before the deployment of the poet’s husband. The poems in this section are mainly set in the Norfolk / Virginia Beach area, and they are concerned the days leading up to the deployment. One might consider the sequence’s organization as less chronological than emotional—the poems chart the stages of the poet’s psychological responses to the possibility, and later the certainty, of her husband’s deployment.

One might pay particular attention to the themes of temporariness, especially with respect to living spaces, and of sleeplessness (ironically, the sleeplessness the couple experiences is a foreshadowing of the sleeplessness resulting from sustained deployment that Jonathan Shay describes in *Odysseus in America* (39) and that will trouble the couple in Part Three of *Stateside*). Throughout this section, Dubrow examines the value of marriage for those preparing to deploy, wondering if it is a source of protection for the serviceman or else if it is in need of

protection, in which case it might be a source of anxiety, whose own situation is a cause of anxiety for the spouse. She considers the different ways she and her husband try coping with the anticipation of deployment: he through his military duties and personal bearing, she through her reliance on the formal patterns of art. And she asks how one might best comport oneself during such stressful times, whether by resorting to stoic resignation or by expressing rage at one's circumstances, as in "Whiskey Tango Foxtrot," in order to feel some psychological relief.

### **"O'Dark Hundred"**

This poem begins as a meditation on the tedium of midnight watch duty, evolving into a consideration of the nature and the value of the poet's duty. Each stanza of the poem is a loose version of the triolet, a French verse form of eight lines in which the fourth and seventh lines repeat the first, while the final line repeats the second. Here, Dubrow permits herself some variation in the exact wording of the repeated lines (e.g. dropping minor particles or breaking a long phrase into two) in order to conceal the elaborate artifice of the form and to create a more natural tone. The extensive repetitions are integral to the theme of the poem, since they correspond with the repetitiousness of watch duty, "the hour that writers eulogize" (1), when "*all conditions [are] normal*" (6), and the watchman must "stand and watch and wait alone, the rest / of the crew asleep in the machinery" (13-14).

In the first stanza, the speaker evokes the monotony of the midnight hour with an allusion to Emily Dickinson's "After great pain, a formal feeling comes," in which Dickinson writes of the time that follows great trauma or tragedy, "This is the hour of lead" (9). She imagines her husband "[guarding] his post" (2), and though "*all conditions [are] normal*" (6), his time aboard the ship is dull and torpid, as perhaps her own might be, at home and alone. In the second

stanza, the speaker pictures her husband as “he faces west, / the sky like a purple sail above the sea” (9-10), insisting that “I [can] imagine him” (9, 12, 15). This insistence suggests the speaker’s deep-seated need to keep her husband fresh in her thoughts, or perhaps it indicates the difficulty she has in doing so, or perhaps both. Either way, the stanza points to the capacity of poetic form (in this case, the repeating lines of the triolet) to articulate, emphasize, or otherwise influence meaning.

In the final stanza, the speaker’s thoughts shift from her husband’s experience of the empty hours of the night to her own, and she begins to weigh the value of her own poetry. At first, her view seems derisive: “My words are just reflections from the shore” (17). Yet the pun on “just” and “reflections” ironically undercuts such a judgment, suggesting that while a superficial reader may find poetry derivative and removed from the real world (‘my words are mere illustrations’), an attentive and analytic mind (the sort one relies on during the most difficult hours of the watch) will find in poetry a ‘worthy and accurate consideration’ of experience. Whose experience, though? As the poem concludes, one realizes that as much as the poet has been communicating to us her husband’s experience on watch, she has also been communicating (to him, to us) the lonely, watchman-like duty of the spouse at home, whose “page [is the] imperfect mirror of his ship” (18) and whose love and imagination remain vigilant, even amidst “the sound of nothing” (22).

### **"Nonessential Equipment"**

This poem, a Shakespearean sonnet, makes a subtle reference to Elizabeth Bishop's villanelle "One Art," which begins “The art of losing isn’t hard to master.” Dubrow’s poem is about psychological coping, particularly with regard to separation, though here coping is no art,

but a sort of willed amnesia. For the speaker's husband, psychological security during deployment means letting go of his stateside life; thus, "(h)e shouldn't bring / too many photographs, which might get wet, / the faces blurred" (3-5), the seawater (or perhaps the husband's own tears) a literal threat to the photographs just as nostalgia (literally "homecoming grief") might idealize home beyond its true nature. For the husband to bring home with him (whether literally in a photograph or figuratively in a memory) is to endanger the very thing which he would defend, the very thing on which he will depend when he returns. "The dog and I are first among things / that will not be deployed with him" (1-2), writes Dubrow, simultaneously indicating that she is of the utmost importance to her husband ("first among [all other] things") and that she is the first thing that he will leave behind (or forget, omit, or neglect), largely because the memory of her is too valuable for him to carry on deployment. Thus, as this poem reveals, the means of a (psychologically) safe deployment is also its cost: the abandonment of the loves of one's life. "The trick is packing less. No wife, no pet, / no perfumed letters dabbed with *I-love-yous*, / or anything he can't afford to lose" (12-14). But when one relinquishes love so as not to ruin it through regretful brooding—"each canvas pocket emptied of regret" (11)—one risks diminishing that love. Thus, Dubrow explores the implications of the military term "nonessential equipment," asking whether this designation, when applied to home and family, might prove a self-fulfilling prophecy; that she does so in a sonnet, a form emerging out of the tradition of love poetry, only intensifies the ironic sensibility of the poem.

### **"Against War Movies"**

In the previous poem, "A Short Study of Catastrophe," Dubrow asks how one might art of tragedy, and she finds herself unable to answer. In "Against War Movies," one of the most

memorable poems from the collection, she considers the purposes that might be served by tragic art, especially art about war. The choice of form, a Shakespearean sonnet (with a variant rhyme scheme in the third stanza) proves poignantly ironic, since any love the speaker might once have felt for tragic art seems to have run afoul of the realization that her own husband might suffer such a fall.

The speaker imagines her husband appearing in a number of different war films, and in the first eight lines, he is “the star / of every ship blockade and battle scene” (5-6), and though tested and wounded, “his body smeared / with mud, his face bloodied” (4-5), he is clearly a survivor. Yet after the eighth line, the tone of the poem changes (this turn, or ‘volta,’ corresponds to a similar shift in the Petrarchan sonnet, which hinges on an eight-line octave that articulates a problem or asks a question and a six-line sestet that resolves the conflict or answers the question). At this point, the speaker begins imagining her husband killed in the line of duty, with images from films like *Stalingrad*, *Midway*, and *A Few Good Men* providing her the backdrop for her visions. This concern has been plaguing her throughout the book, but now it is manifest concretely, along with a new anxiety about the effects of PTSD should he survive: “He’s burned or gassed, he’s shot between the eyes, / or shoots himself when he comes home again” (11-12). In the closing couplet, the speaker reflects upon the idea that art enables individuals to face future difficulties by living them out in their imaginations, yet her ironic tone undercuts such a hopeful vision, suggesting that tragic art may simply be offering an incipient horror: “Each movie is a training exercise, / a scenario for how my husband dies” (13-14).

### **“Reading Stephen Crane’s ‘War is Kind’ to My Husband”**

The title of the final poem in the opening section of *Stateside* refers to a darkly ironic poem by Stephen Crane, which Dubrow quotes midway through. Crane condemns the savagery of war in the very terms that are often used to praise it, and by now one can understand Dubrow's affinity for such subversion. Haunted by the image of a burned soldier on *60 Minutes*, "small metal slivers still / embedded in / the skin" (17-19), she notes that the man's face "was beautiful before, / smooth, unblemished as / my own" (22-24), recognizing that just as war can harm other servicemen, so it can harm her husband and, ultimately, herself. She expresses disgust at "the sickly green of night / vision that cuts / the darkness open" (29-31) and at the way that the violence of war can pervert beauty, so that "the shells... sing through air, / as though alive" (39-40), and even transform the man she loves into an instrument of war, with even his clothes depicted as weapons: "your socks balled up / like tan grenades" (5-6).

Yet there may perhaps an additional, less easily identifiable irony in Dubrow's reading of Crane. While she understand his savage critique of war, one can't help but hear, in the halting meter of the poem, her unspoken wish that his mock praise of war might indeed be true: she wants war to be kind to her husband, though she knows that will not be possible. Having seen the wounded soldier and envisioned herself in his place, she reads "*For war // is kind*" (24-25), and though one hears the outrage, one might also hear a strange hope, that perhaps war will be kind to her and her husband. At the very least, she hopes her own love will provide him some protection: "between / the Kevlar vest and heap / of clothes" (9-11) she has placed her photo, a metonym for herself and for their marriage, which might serve as the last layer of protection for her husband, though she knows it is a very vulnerable sort of armor.

## **Part Two**

The second section may be of special interest to instructors. Here, Dubrow relates the experiences of a present-day military spouse to those of Penelope, the wife of Odysseus and a central figure in Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*. The Penelope figure who appears in the poems in this section is more highly fictionalized than the poet's persona elsewhere in the book; for instance, Dubrow herself has no children, while Penelope is mother to Telemachus. This fictionalization is, in one sense, simple poetic license, yet one might also consider why Dubrow chooses to displace herself thus (given the strong autobiographical emphasis of the book to this point). In "Instructions for Other Penelopes," the poet advises women whose husbands have deployed for military operations to "call yourself mythology" (19), suggesting that one perhaps needs to adopt a new persona in order to cope with the stresses of deployment.

This section of the book also reveals the particular influence of Alfred, Lord Tennyson on Dubrow's poetry, particularly his dramatic monologue "Ulysses," with its famous praise of the aged Ulysses' decision to leave Ithaca on one final adventure, "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." Dubrow turns a skeptical eye on this restlessness and on the casual attitude Ulysses displays toward Penelope ("an aged wife"), inviting the reader to consider the motives and experiences of the spouse who faithfully awaits her husband's return for twenty years. What the poet asks of Odysseus' faithful dog Argos, who greets his long-absent master shortly before dying, she might also be asking of Penelope: "What kind of instinct is such loyalty?" ("Argos" 9).

### **"The Rooted Bed"**

The opening poem of the second section of *Stateside* focuses on a key image from the *Odyssey*, one which Dubrow uses to explore issues of marital fidelity. According to Homer,

Odysseus carved the marriage bed that and Penelope share from the roots of a live olive tree; here, the speaker imagines that “they built their bedpost from an olive tree” (3), the shared labor an indication of the mutuality required of marriage and the bed itself a fitting symbol of the fixity (‘rootedness’) of their marriage. One gets a sense of the peaceful order of their lives before the Trojan War from both the pastoral imagery of “floorboards grassy as a lawn” (5) and from the controlled rhythm of the poem, especially in the seventh line, with its perfectly regular iambic pentameter measure: “They slept beneath its living canopy” (“They **SLEPT** be**NEATH** its **LIV**ing **CANoPY**”). Indeed, in the *Odyssey*, the bed serves as a touchstone for how the husband and wife know each other: since only Penelope and Odysseus (and a single maidservant) know about the bed, Penelope uses the secret of its rootedness to test the identity of Odysseus after he has revealed himself and revenged himself upon the suitors. Thus, as the first part of *Stateside* demonstrates, Dubrow finds the surety and sanctity of marriage in the erotic.

The poem is a sonnet, a fitting form given the choice of subject, yet its variant rhyme scheme suggests conflict and disorder moving beneath the surface of happy love. The speaker in this poem is the poet from the opening section, yet by claiming that “I’m stateside now, my husband six months gone” (1), she is beginning to associate herself with Penelope. The adoption of this fictional persona allows the speaker, in one sense, to comfort and strengthen herself with an appropriately motivating story, one which might “[stroke] darkened hands across her brow” (8) as the leaves of the tree did Penelope. Yet Penelope’s story is, to some extent, left untold by Homer, and the poet finds that that lack of recognition parallels her own experience as the spouse of a deployed serviceman, her struggles unacknowledged by others. And in that silence, the poet imagines Penelope (as well as herself) finding in her frustration and despair a strength and a

desire for independence that she hadn't known she possessed: "I like to imagine that she often thought / of chopping down the trunk" (10-11).

The poet's final admission that "I can't help asking if, when he came home, / did they lie together or sleep alone?" (13-14) points ahead to the marital troubles that Odysseus and Penelope (as well as the poet and her husband) face upon his return, as well as to the troubles that have brought them to such an impasse. Yet the poet's claim also serves to remind us of what literature can do: it provokes us with important questions, refuses to answer, and forces us to explore our own answers. The closing couplet does just that. It raises a perilous question—what will their marriage become once he returns—but leaves it unresolved, since any 'answer' would risk oversimplification and the likely evasion of ticklish subjects. (Indeed, the sense of closure is thwarted at the sonic level as well, since the closing couplet features a slant rhyme—"home / alone"—rather than the expected full rhyme.)

### **"Ithaca"**

If instructors teach no other poem from this section of *Stateside*, they should teach "Ithaca." The poem uses the *In Memoriam* stanza from Tennyson's famous elegy for Arthur Henry Hallam (iambic tetrameter quatrains featuring an envelope rhyme scheme of ABBA; Dubrow distinguishes her stanza construction by staggering the lines and by taking some freedoms with half-rhymes). Unlike the earlier poems in the section, this one shifts fully into third person point of view, so that the poet is not simply associating herself with Penelope, but is treating Penelope as a woman dealing with issues of deployment in the present-day world.

In the opening lines, the speaker tells us how there is little or no sense at home of the wars abroad: "There's war beyond the shores. But here / there's Dairy Queen and Taco Bell, /

the Westfield Shopping mall.” Dubrow juxtaposes brand names against Homeric allusions in order to suggest how easily the Homeric myths can help us understand present-day matters and also to suggest how the stories behind Homeric myths had their own mundane elements, though most of these were ignored by the epic poet.

The second stanza examines a recurrent trope in war literature: the desirability of home. Dubrow writes that “home remains a metaphor / for something else: a wife who tries to guard her chastity” (5-7), indicating that the burden of preserving the sanctity of the marriage falls to the spouse who stays home from the war. One might expect, given the continued valorization of that trope in war literature, that the sanctity of marriage would be acknowledged and protected, and indeed, Penelope makes her chastity, her status as a faithful wife as public as possible. She ties her chastity “like a yellow ribbon to her door, // sticks it to the bumper / of her car” (8-10), but just as the facts of the war seem to go unacknowledged in the opening of the poem, so her efforts to let “the neighbors know / she sleeps alone” (10-11) and to make clear that “her love // [is] preserved in plastic wrap like some / dessert too beautiful to taste” (12-14) are ignored by other men.

The revelation that the modern-day Penelope is besieged by her “divorcés and other glum // suitors” (16-17) should surprise and discomfort midshipmen, let alone a general audience, given the emphasis placed on (and anxiety about) marital fidelity, particularly during an overseas deployment. Yet it’s as if Penelope’s very circumstances exacerbate the problem, an unforeseen consequence of the war and a personal conflict that the reader should sympathize with, not condemn. “Nobody seems to care / that she still wears a wedding ring” (17-18), writes Dubrow, suggesting that the vision of home the soldier might preserve while abroad is often a sentimental illusion, whereas the reality of the stateside experience is that is as fraught with conflict and

danger, at least of the moral and psychological sorts, as life in the war zone. “Odysseus is gone,” writes Dubrow, “same thing / as being dead” (19-20). The veteran will only receive the respect he’s due when he returns home; until then, he can do nothing to protect his loved ones.

By the end of the poem, Penelope is depicted as Ithaca itself, “trapped in her own body, / an island circled by the seas” (23-24). She is the home toward which Odysseus is ever journeying; she is an island, cut off from land and from aid by the seas (just as Penelope is cut off from support and besieged by the suitors); and yet she is also the site of an epic conflict, suggesting that her own experiences are as serious and calamitous as Odysseus’ own. In a sense, Penelope (as Ithaca) represents the culmination of the Trojan War.

### **“At the Mall with Telemachus”**

Dubrow’s only poem about the experience of parenting while one’s spouse is deployed abroad brings the characters of Penelope and her son Telemachus fully into the present day. The poem is written in an unbroken sequence of ABCB rhymes, with roughly iambic trimeter lines; the rhyme scheme evokes the ballad stanza (quatrains rhymed ABCB with alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter lines), a form which traditionally promises a violent plot and a gruesome ending.

Here, Dubrow imagines Telemachus, son of the great Odysseus and future king of Ithaca, as a child throwing a terrible temper tantrum at the local mall. Denied a happy meal at the local Burger King, the boy becomes “a fit of temper in / the food court... / ten out of ten / on the tantrum scale” (6-9), his screams matching “an ambulance / at siren pitch” (10-11), their oscillating pitch making him “melismatic / as a mystic in a trance” (14-15). Just like the other mothers in the mall, readers sympathize with Penelope and are embarrassed by the boy’s

behavior, yet they also experience a touch of *schadenfreude* that this is not happening to them: “appalled / but so relieved he’s not / their son” (24-26).

But this guilty pleasure is made all the more uncomfortable by the explosive metaphors associated with the child. Telemachus is “a toddler bomb about / to blow that cannot be / defused” (18-20), and as Penelope “shouts / at him to stop, just stop / this nonsense now” (20-22), one senses not only an escalation in the tension of the scene, but also in the potential for a violent response. Indeed, the anger that Dubrow evokes through heavy alliteration (‘b’ and ‘br’ sounds) and consonance (final ‘n’ and ‘s’ sounds, as well as the harsh rhyme of spank / yank) at the end of the poem seems to come as much from the other mothers at the mall:

[they are] so relieved he’s not  
          their son, not theirs to spank  
or bargain with or bribe,  
          their little brat to yank  
past Toys R Us and drag  
          away  
          (25-30).

To be a parent made single by war is to face a kind of conflict and violence at home that threatens to disrupt lives and tear the parent-child bond. Yet by the end of the poem, the tone shifts from reactionary anger at the child’s misbehavior to sympathy for the unarticulated depths of frustration and grief he himself must feel because of their circumstances: “he grabs hold / of fistfuls of the greasy air / and cannot be consoled” (30-32).

### **“Instructions for Other Penelopes”**

This poem is an *ars poetica* of sorts, a meditation on the art of poetry, though in truth, it becomes an *ars vita*, or an art of life, for women who, like Penelope, will be alone once their husbands leave to serve abroad. The poet urges such women to assume personae that will enable

them to survive their ordeals, and she does not seem content to esteem the traditional role of Penelope, as the faithful and patient spouse, as her ideal. The poem is written in heroic couplets (two-line stanzas of iambic pentameter with an AA rhyme scheme), and the form indicates, if only by association with that name, the heroic commitment required of the stateside spouse. The lines are unpunctuated, and they feature a spatial gap in the middle of the lines where the caesura (mid-line pause) will fall, a format that calls to the mind the look of lines in old English verse, some famous examples of which (e.g., *Beowulf*, “The Seafarer”) depict the travails of wandering heroes. The lives of the women who remain stateside, Dubrow suggests, are no less dangerous or heroic than the lives of the heroes abroad.

At first, the speaker seems to encourage women who find themselves in circumstances like her own to conduct themselves as Penelope did, resisting the petitions of the suitors and guarding the sanctity of her marriage. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope fools the suitors by telling them she will choose her next husband once she has finished weaving a funeral shroud for her father-in-law, Laertes, only to unravel her work at night, thereby postponing the moment of decision. Here, however, the poet seems to view the spinning of the shroud as more than just a figure for the efforts a woman should make to protect her marriage; instead, she seems to be calling for such women to reinvent or revise themselves: “spin what you can from his absence” (1), she writes, and “if mirrors crack cut jewels from the glass / comfort the muscular suitor with a kiss // comfort yourself” (3-5). As the poem progresses, the speaker’s advice begins to appropriate details from Odysseus’s voyages suggesting that such women assume the powers of the (often female) beings who oppose Odysseus on his way home. The speaker of the poem urges future Penelopes to “call yourself mythology” (19), suggesting that they should “learn siren songs” (9) and behave increasingly sensual ways (perhaps like the powerful figures of Circe and Calypso,

who seduce Odysseus), their bodies transformed into objects of beauty at once as ephemeral as orchids and spices (17, 21) and as impenetrable as marble (18).

Perhaps most surprisingly for some readers, the poet seems to advise women in circumstances similar to her own to forego the role of Penelope entirely: “forget the funeral hymn / pretend you are widow done with mourning” (9-10), she urges, since “the ashes of these twenty years announce / your appetite” (13-14), overtly contradicting the familiar image of Penelope as the epitome of marital fidelity. Near the poem’s conclusion, the speaker tells the future Penelopes to make “a reckless garden of your skin” (17), an image of sensuous beauty that ironically (and anachronistically) calls to mind the Garden of Eden that would seem to praise Eden in its postlapsarian state, with its recklessness (Eve’s decision to eat the fruit) and its sexuality. Admittedly, the speaker does not urge infidelity, but she does suggest the need for the free play of the imagination in order to cope with the loneliness of a long separation: “remove // your dress the zipper opening like a V / or else imagine it” (23-24). As the concluding poem of the second part of *Stateside*, “Instructions for Other Penelopes” brings into focus the issues of sexual intimacy that have been lurking through many of the Penelope poems and that will be addressed even more directly in the poems of Part Three.

### **Part Three**

The poems in this section of *Stateside* take place after the poet’s husband has returned home, and they explore the difficulties of making the transition back into marriage after a long separation. Students may be surprised that the images of joyous and tearful reunions of veterans and their spouses do not always continue so smoothly once the couples return home. Though it “(t)urns out that living alone results in pain” (“Tendinitis,” 5), the poet chafes at the

dependencies of a partnership after having finally learned to cope with living alone: “I think how hard / all tethers can be” (17-18), she admits in “Winter Walk.”

### **“On the Erotics of Deployment”**

A poem that matches “Instructions for Other Penelopes,” “On the Erotics of Deployment” explores even more overtly the importance of sensual experience as a way of coping with the loneliness that comes from the long separation of partners during deployment. Here, Dubrow organizes her poem in rhyming couplets, but unlike the couplets in the earlier poem, these are of irregular length and meter, and so are not heroic couplets. While readers would be advised not to make too much of the meaning of that prosodic term, Dubrow’s decision not to follow the earlier form indicates that the poet has followed her own instructions and broken free of the restrictive role of Penelope.

While “(s)ome wives prefer / to wait along the pier” (15-16) for their absent partners, the poet announces that “I’ll build an altar / to the tiny flecks fallen from his razor” (1-2), joining in that image the sacred and the mundane (if not the profane) as if establishing a religion of Eros itself. Her body, hungry for physical intimacy (“often I’m an empty plate” (13), she admits), will become a sacred icon:

I will exhibit art  
    composed of my vestigial parts,  
  
my breasts the centerpiece  
    to this display. I will be all of Greece  
  
and Italy.

(7-11)

Yet if it is sexual intimacy the poet craves and reveres, then she will need to find a fitting priestess to conduct her rites:

I'll try to be the harlot  
that I want to be,  
    Bathsheba gleaming on the balcony  
Susannah combing tangles from her hair.  
(18-21)

Ironically, the greatest sacrament of such a religion would have to be the act of consummation itself, and so poet prepares herself as “a holy sacrifice” (23) for the god her husband, waiting to be consumed: “I’ll be the fruit kept edible on ice” (24). One might object that the speaker has been, metaphorically at least, objectified by the conclusion of the poem; yet she is not only a willing object, but as a poet and maker of metaphors, she is the agent of her own transformation. Given the controlled formalism and psychological acuity of the earlier poems in the volume, the tone of this poem seems not only over-the-top, but quite intentionally so. Thus the deeply ironic tone enables Dubrow to suggest just how comically frustrated she is in her desire for intimacy (so much so that she could found a new religion of desire based upon it), while also allowing her to acknowledge quite seriously the salvation that physical and emotional communion with one’s spouse could bring to a person left so long alone.

### **“Situational Awareness”**

Dubrow’s subversion of Navy jargon and of traditional poetic forms achieves a special perfection in “Situational Awareness.” A Shakespearean sonnet (three quatrains of alternating rhymes that concludes with a rhyming couplet: ABABCDCDEFEGG), the poem summons up

the tradition of love poetry associated with that form only to emphasize the terrible difficulties that the poet and her husband face now that they have been reunited. The “situational awareness” that midshipmen are so often told to cultivate is manifest in the poet’s acute sense of her husband’s presence overseas and of his absence from their home: “These past few weeks I’m more than just aware / of where he is—I’m hypersensitive, / stretched thin as a length of wire” (1-3). Such awareness, rather than helping her make her way through “the Green Zone / of this house” (7-8), in fact intensifies her anxiety about his safety as the end of his deployment presumably nears: “Nothing can live / near me. I twitch each time the telephone / rings through the dark, so like a warning bell” (4-7). The enjambment of the fourth line captures the speaker’s deep fear that the war cannot be survived, since it seems, in the moment it takes the eye to glide from the fourth to the fifth line, that “Nothing can live.”

Throughout *Stateside*, Dubrow has been revealing the challenges faced by stateside spouses throughout a military deployment. Now, she employs the form of the sonnet itself to claim that those who are deployed have an easier time of it. In Petrarchan sonnets, one typically finds a volta or ‘turn’ between the eighth and nine lines of the poem. In the eight lines prior to the volta, the poet typically asks a question, raises a concern, or describes a problem; in the six lines that follow, the poet answers the question, addresses the concern, or resolves the problem. Although “Situational Awareness” is a Shakespearean sonnet, it retains (like many other Shakespearean sonnets) a trace of the earlier form. Dubrow quite explicitly taps into the Petrarchan convention by ending the eighth line with a pertinent and somewhat impertinent question: “Who that said war is hell?” Her answer in the ninth line might come as a slap in the face for many servicemen: “Well, waiting can be worse.”

In the first part of *Stateside*, the poet frequently senses threats to her husband's safety all about him, transforming through metaphor even the most innocuous objects into weapons: "your socks balled up / like tan grenades" ("Reading Stephen Crane's 'War Is Kind' to My Husband," 5-6). In the third section, the poet senses threats to her own safety, and the terrible irony is that the most dangerous of these is her own concern for her husband. "Show me a guy / shipped overseas," she tells us, "and I'll show you a wife / who sees disaster dropping from the sky" (9-11). Not only might harm come to the serviceman as suddenly and inexorably as a falling bomb, but the very fact of his being deployed transforms him into "a road of booby traps and blind spots made / to hide the rock, the shell, the thrown grenade" (13-14). The utter metrical regularity of the final three lines mimics the appearance of peace, calm, and order that an ambush relies on to lure its victims in, and as the poet remarks, full of dread, "The ambush always comes" (12). Thus, her concern for her husband makes her "a hair-trigger mechanism" (3-4), jumpy and anxious as one traumatized by combat, though for the poet (and perhaps for any family member waiting back stateside), love itself has become the enemy.

Dubrow, Jehanne. *Stateside: Poems*. Evanston, IL: Triquarterly / Northwestern UP, 2010.