

# DEPARTURES

**BRENNA  
LEMIEUX**

I sledded into a tree once, saw  
what would happen halfway down the hill  
but couldn't slow or steer, just felt  
my bones shrink with a helpless,  
thrilling terror, which is exactly  
what meeting John felt like.

- July -

I'd knead my neck at work and picture  
Montana, John stitching blisters  
on his feet, the needle sterilized with matches  
because alcohol weighs down a rucksack.  
He packed light but still he burst a disc,  
its gel lapped onto a nerve, which feels,  
he says, like someone holding a flame  
to the bones, like tingling and numbness,  
or like hell, depending on his mood.

When he left, he discarded a last box  
of belongings, the contents sagged  
with their own weight. He wanted nothing  
to *belong* to him; he wanted to belong

in the mountains, alone with his castoff Army bag, first issued to K. Benecke, who I guessed was Kevin and he said probably Ken. Its pristine condition had hinted grief more than fastidiousness, irrelevant and potent grief, which I had no strength for and ignored.

I'd offered to take his stuff to Goodwill, and so returned to my apartment box-laden while John marched south to the bus. At home I drank coffee till my eyelids purred and scrawled on the calendar: *July, a month for departures.*

- August -

John hefts crates of cabbages and tugs up beets. I level mountains of papers with a red pen. The harvest in, he drifts to California, finds work at a megachurch, and lies on his faith pledge.

I execute eighteen mice for shitting in the kitchen. He sighs in the way of snow-cumbered trees, so that he's lighter after and an avalanche begins (his own, eastward) and settles on the dotted line

of our lease. We root out an old laundry set, some second-hand pans, sit on the porch sticky nights and slap cards on the table. Sometimes, I roll pasta, hours of sifting and pinching, the noodles briny

from my sweat. Sometimes, I call him from the shower and draw back the curtain. Little thrills. We travel together and he never packs the Army bag; I haven't seen it since the move. I'd like to ask

where he put it, what he thinks happened  
to its first owner. I'm ready now; I could ponder that,  
as long as my hands were busy in the kitchen:

He enlisted right after high school,  
(flour talcs my arms) acned,  
the age of my students, who aren't  
so much younger than I am,  
patriotic, (my shoulders burn  
with kneading) at least at first—  
but then he comes home and marries  
his high school sweetheart  
and it's summer and there's no  
hint of breathable air—

(The mattress needs to be in the kitchen, he thinks, with the window unit—it's the only room that ever gets cool. He hasn't slept in weeks. Who puts a window unit in a fucking kitchen anyway? Ninety-four degrees inside and humid. No circulation. Bedroom feels like a goddamn sauna. He shakes his wife, says he's taking the mattress, but she doesn't wake up, just shifts her weight and he shouts that he's moving the goddamn mattress and she can either help or see where gravity dumps her, and that gets her, the shouting, and she sort of scissor-kicks her legs and her feet smack the floor and he's already lifting the head corner and she lurches to the foot and grabs it and starts talking real low, the way she has since he got home, saying okay now, easy does it. Her slim arms go ropey, straining against the load, and he remembers he likes that, the way her hair's all messy too, and pauses a second to watch her but she keeps going and sort of butts into the mattress. In the kitchen, he slides it across the tile and it flops flat, blowing a draft, and he sees right away this will work, he'll be able to sleep here, and strides to the bedroom for a pillow and when he returns she has a glass of ice water and she's saying why don't you drink this, saying I'm worried you're dehydrated and it looks delicious and he gulps it and feels better

even though it kind of sloshes in his stomach after. He lies down and she refills the glass and sets it by his head and switches off the light and he doesn't notice falling asleep but suddenly he's back in Iraq and everything's exploding around him and inside him and all he can think is I shouldn't have had that water because it's oozing out his stomach and everyone thinks that it's blood and he's dead and he tries to shout but can't and can't move and they zip him up and now he really might die because there's no air and he wakes tensed, sweat-greased, his wife kneeling beside him breathing *shh* and swabbing his forehead, where veins bulge like tree roots rupturing a sidewalk.)

—never mind. I don't want to do this.

But it's no good. The soldier's loose now,  
it's his poem too.

Fine then.

K. Benecke,

you were shipped to Iraq and it scorched you.

You leaked into my life and I ignored you.  
I hang a peace sign flag in the living room,  
as if it absolves me.

Mr. Benecke,

this was meant to be a love poem.