

PACIFIC UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES



SILK ROAD

A LITERARY CROSSROADS

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Editor's Note

A PORTRAIT OF BAGHDAD AS BEAUTIFUL

Heather M. Surls

**

Most Americans and Europeans who have gone to Iraq didn't like it at first. Might as well be frank about it. They thought it a harsh, hot, parched, dusty, and inhospitable land. But nearly all of these same people changed their minds after a few days or weeks, and largely on account of the Iraqi people they began to meet. So will you.

—from *A Short Guide to Iraq*,
published by the U.S. War & Navy Departments, 1943

One fall day in Jordan, I ate a meal I'll never forget. I could smell everything that day, the air was so clear: bleach from the laundry hanging on someone's porch, coffee with cardamom, flowering jasmine crawling over garden walls. That was the day my Iraqi neighbor made tashreeb.

After we crossed from our apartment to hers, my husband, son, and I watched Um Maryam tear loaves of flatbread into two large bowls. I brought a pot from the stovetop filled with chickpeas, chicken legs, and onions, tomato broth flavored with bay leaves and dried lemons. She ladled it all over the bread, then showed us how to press the whole lemons against the sides of our bowls to release their bitter flavor.

Um Maryam was an elderly woman, childless and housebound, and my husband and I American adults with the Arabic vocabulary of children. We had, therefore, learned to let silence be. We quietly

dug in to our meal, happy for warm soup, happy for an excuse to eat white bread like this—soggy on the outside from the broth, still chewy in the unpenetrated center.

When we finished, I put our bowls in the sink and Um Maryam stood to make tea. She inched around the kitchen, clinging to the counter and whispering prayers. At that time it seemed like the nerves in her legs and feet were dying, the way she moved, hunched with continual pain. Walking was so difficult for her that whenever I visited, she asked me to hang laundry, fill water bottles, or move something from one room to another. A doctor had told her he could operate on her spine, but there was a fifty percent chance she wouldn't be able to walk after the surgery.

She filled the kettle with water. "But now I can walk," she declared.

A few minutes later, light filtered through the frosted glass door, striking our glasses of sugared tea. Um Maryam began to talk about her scattered family—her brothers in Detroit and Baghdad, her niece in France whom she'd practically raised. She talked about her parents, who had both died of cancer.

"Baghdad is a very, very, very beautiful place," she said, "but now..."

She had talked about Baghdad many times, of course, but with her Iraqi Arabic, so different from the Levantine Arabic we were studying, I basically understood one thing: Iraq was hot. I wanted to understand more, to know how a place fraught with violence could for her be very, very, very beautiful.

But what can one do without the gift of tongues? I washed the tea glasses and squeezed lather from the sponge. We hugged and kissed each other as I left. "Good-bye, habeebti, my love," she said. "Good-bye, good-bye."

I've got a picture from Baghdad in front of me now—not a stereotypical one, of palm trees and minarets along the Tigris, or the

aftermath of a car bombing. With this picture, I'm searching for the everyday beautiful. And this is what I see:

I see an overcast sky and boys wearing short sleeves. It must be fall; no Arab mama would let her kid out in a t-shirt if it was chilly. I see leafless branches tangled with wires over the alley, and damp-looking asphalt—recent rain or maybe they just cleaned it. There are no women in the picture; maybe it is Friday morning—the women are at home preparing lunch for after prayers, and that man is taking a bag of groceries to his wife. That's a dukaane in the background, a hole-in-the-wall filled with yogurt and tomato paste and chips and juice boxes and candy. On Sunday morning it'll be packed with kids in school uniforms, and the patient man behind the counter will be doling out change to his little customers, maybe breaking up a squabble or two.

I see a boy on a bike in the center of the photo. He's wearing gray sweatpants, and the slight definition in his arm muscles tells me he's about eleven. Maybe he's one of the regulars at the dukaane. He is staring at me, and I can't tell if he's about to make a rude remark, or if he's about to invite me to his house for lunch.

Knowing Iraqis, probably the latter.

In the fall we ate tashreeb, Dinah, another Iraqi neighbor, sent me a text: "Can you help me read a letter from the UN?" I walked to her building around the corner and climbed the stairs to the second floor, where she lived with her toddler. When I rang the bell, a young woman in sweatpants answered, with curly brown hair and frizzy curls around her forehead. It took me a minute to realize this was Dinah without her hijab. I laughed and told her so.

I sat down, and after a bit of chat, expected her to bring the letter. Instead she carried out a full-sized chocolate sheet cake, with a layer of sliced bananas in the middle and "Happy Birthday" frosted on top. "I can't come to your party this weekend," she explained, "so I wanted to make you something instead."

We enjoyed big slices of cake while wrangling two-year-old Maryam away from the gas heater. I knew the cake was a generous gift, but later I would learn that her best childhood memories involved bananas and chocolate, as well as chicken and meat—expensive foods her parents rarely managed to buy in Baghdad in the 90s.

"I still remember one day," she'd tell me. "My brother saw his friend eat a banana, and since we didn't have money for it, my mom sold old clothes to buy two bananas only." I'd learn how Iraqis had suffered under UN sanctions from 1990 until 2003, how the only people who had money during that period were those close to Saddam.

Dinah and I spent many afternoons together in her apartment. Once, while sitting at the kitchen counter, I asked if she'd brought anything from Baghdad when she came to Amman in 2007. She gestured to a tea glass in the cabinet. At that time I didn't have the words to ask why—why did you come? What was the event that caused you to flee? Later she'd tell me.

"They wrote on all the walls, if anyone lives with someone from a different sect, they will kill them unless they separate." Her father was Sunni and her mother Shia, so they ran, fleeing the threat of sectarian violence. Dinah's father and mother were Swedish residents now, having immigrated after several years in Amman. Because she'd been over 18 at that time—legally independent, which demanded a separate UN case—Dinah had been left behind.

I met Dinah's husband, Osamah, in pictures. He had returned to Baghdad from Jordan shortly after Maryam's birth. My Arabic wasn't good enough to understand the reason he had left—that honor had forced him back to Iraq, where he could legally work to pay for the roof over his wife's head and for his daughter's formula, instead of depending on his in-laws. I couldn't even understand how they'd met (online) and that Maryam wasn't their first child (she'd lost their

first because they couldn't afford prenatal care, and because their landlord had evicted them, forcing them to walk all day in search of an affordable flat).

Dinah and Osamah talked through the internet now, and Maryam would get excited seeing "Baba." Even though she didn't know what Baba felt like or smelled like, what it was like to hold his hand, she knew he was her daddy.

I'm trying to remember myself more than half my life ago, when Baghdad was a capital to be memorized, when Iraqis were not my next-door neighbors. I want to remember accurately, to honestly resurrect a former self.

On September 10, 2001, when I was 14, I did a geometry lesson that included a picture of the Twin Towers. The next day they fell, and I started watching Fox News with my parents. In years to come, I sketched news network banners in the margins of my journals: "America Attacked," "America Mourns," "America at War."

President George W. Bush gave a speech to Congress shortly after 9-11, using unfamiliar words like Al-Qaeda and terrorism, caricaturing America as "freedom itself under attack." Which is just what we all believed, our grieving selves who were avoiding airports but braving work and the grocery store with flags clipped to our cars.

"As long as the United States of America is determined and strong, this will not be an age of terror," he said. "This will be an age of liberty here and across the world."

The idea of war was heavy, something from history textbooks. I watched boys from our blue-collar community go to boot camp and come back tall and straight as bayonets, in wooly uniforms with buzz-cut hair. They'd stand in church to our grateful applause, and afterwards, shake hands with the older people in the lobby.

In March 2003 I sat on my bed, listening to music and coloring the latest news banner: "Operation Iraqi Freedom." They told us Saddam Hussein, the dictator of Iraq, was hiding these things called

weapons of mass destruction, that he was a threat to our freedom like the terrorists in Afghanistan. They said Iraqis needed democracy like us—and after all, who wouldn't want a government like ours?

"This will not be a campaign of half measures," President Bush said in a televised speech at the beginning of the US invasion of Iraq. "We will accept no outcome but victory.... We will defend our freedom. We will bring freedom to others. And we will prevail."

Dinah was 15 when US troops entered her country. Before the invasion, she didn't understand why so many people wanted Saddam to leave. She didn't understand, because no one talked about him. When kids left for school in the morning, their parents told them, "Don't say anything about Saddam," because they knew that he could hurt them. But after the invasion, she remembers how sad stories began to leak out, along with information about mobile phones and satellite television, things they'd never seen under Saddam's rule.

In 2003 Dinah saw American soldiers walk into the stores in her neighborhood with friendly smiles and gifts or candy for kids. "We thought Iraq would become like America," she confessed. "We lived around one year without water or power, but we were looking to something in the future."

In 2004, I sat in a room full of high school seniors answering this question: "What is your definition of a hero?" My answers: firefighters, US troops ("they are fighting to create freedom for the Iraqi people"), and George W. Bush (who pursued "the liberation of Iraq"). Around this time, Dinah started to see insurgents in her city, and the dead bodies of people who dealt with Americans.

My high school essay and George W's speeches are perfect examples of hindsight. I bet that after his presidency, as he watched Iraq crumble and ISIS rise, when he saw the consequences of his decisions, he felt regret. Today I feel a little embarrassed, but more accurately, regretful, that I won \$4,000 in scholarship money for an essay that praised his decisions.

When I sit at Um Maryam's kitchen table, drinking coffee, and hear her say as plain as day, "Bush ruined the Middle East," I feel humbled. Or when I am chewing on whether this is true—is the mess we see in Iraq today my country's fault?—and my Arabic teacher tells me, "Well, that is well known," I feel a bit ashamed.

But could either of us have anticipated the disastrous results of the US invasion—me, a 17-year-old, and him a big-hearted Texan doing his best with the information he had? Very few people had the sense to know that the blueprint of America wouldn't fit over Iraq. No one knew that Saddam's rule, though cruel, when overthrown would lead to worse things. And no one knew that one day America, the nation that vowed to bring freedom to Iraqis, would try to ban them from finding it on her shores.

Dinah texted me a string of worried questions in late fall 2015, trying to figure out why some in Congress wanted to block Iraqi and Syrian refugees from entering the US. She was deep in the application process to emigrate to America.

"What do these decisions mean?" she asked. "Why is the government doing this?"

When I was 17, I had lots of words—words that won me money. But when questions like these came from my friend, while I was bathing my son next-door to Iraq, all I had were two words: "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

We were on vacation in the US in May 2016, when I had my first flashback. I was being assaulted again; the terror of that experience in our neighborhood in Amman engulfed me again. I pulled my scarf over my head, sat on the side of the road, and wept. A half-hour later I told my parents, "I feel like I just came back from Iraq."

I was eventually diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, a mental illness I'd first heard of as a teenager, applied to soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Maybe that's why I said what I did, even though I'd never been to Iraq or immersed in combat. My

husband, son, and I spent an unexpected year in America, holed in a mostly empty building in the Midwest, trying to sort out what had happened to me and how to recover.

While stateside, I dreamed in Arabic two or three times a week. These weren't the nightmares characteristic of PTSD, but they did highlight my sometimes obsessive love for Arabic, and my concern for Um Maryam, who appeared in almost all of them. The best dreams were the ones in which she walked. In one, I met her on the sidewalk, wearing a fancy, knee-length silver dress and high heels, walking straight and proud. She greeted me but moved on to meet the crowd of neighbors and friends waiting for her.

As I recovered, I found myself trying to figure out what had happened in Iraq. I prowled libraries for something that could help me. I knew the basics of what had happened. Now I wanted to hear these people who'd survived so much. I remembered the many Christian Iraqi families I'd visited, people who'd endured years of sectarian violence and finally fled the death threats of ISIS. What had they thought of their country? Did they, like Um Maryam, have memories of its beauty?

And so I read. I read a book by a journalist who'd been to Iraq before the Gulf War, and a book about a writer's experiences with Iraqi Christians. I skimmed the diary of an Iraqi teenager at the time of the US invasion. I read poems about Baghdad from ancient times to present. And while the ancients praised Baghdad for its beauty, all recent memories were of war. "Once upon a war/ I took a quill/ Immersed in death," Sinan Antoon wrote in 2010:

I drew a window
On the war's wall
And opened it,
Searching for tomorrow,
Or for a dove,
Or for nothing.

But I saw another war
 And a mother weaving a shroud
 For a dead man
 Still in her womb.

My last book was a collection of interviews about Iraqis' lives after the US invasion. I started this one, then shelved it for a while. The stories were so heart-wrenching and gruesome that I couldn't read on until I was strong enough.

"There is a verse in the Koran that is sometimes said when you wish God to keep you safe," a woman named Maysoun Mahdi said, describing a deadly attack on her bus route. "It...goes, 'We have put a barrier before them and a barrier behind them and covered them over, so that they cannot see.' The other woman and I both began saying this softly as we walked farther down the road, chanting it together. We did not know whether they would come after us or maybe just shoot us in the back as we went. Anything could have happened in those moments."

I wondered if Dinah ever whispered these verses under her breath when, as a teenager, she walked past dead bodies on the way to school, though in Baghdad, dead bodies had become a common sight. I thought of Um Maryam's words again: "Baghdad is beautiful." She had seen death and lived through wars before Dinah was even born. What did her words mean?

I'm sitting with another picture now, taken in a school for Iraqi refugees in Amman. I see a framed drawing on a wall papered with yellow, red, and white stripes. This frame holds the trauma of a child, neatly labelled by a teacher. There are planes that look like finned hot dogs, but they are shooting things; there's a black, red, and white flag ("Iraq Flag burnt from isis," it says); there is a black cloud with red underneath ("explosion"), a couple of s, the letter ISIS spray-painted on Christian homes. At the bottom is a stick man with a round open mouth and a red pool near his neck ("the man died"), and standing

over him is a man with frowny eyebrows and a smiley face ("isis happy"). Four little figures behind him are "people afraid."

Miraculously, the page has a second half. There is a sun in the upper corner, a perfect ROY G BIV rainbow arcing over a fruit tree bearing apples, oranges, and lemons. There is a small building ("my home") and a big one opposite it ("my church") and a row of stick figures carrying presents ("the people in the church come to help us"). The child concludes, "my life in Jordan full of save happy."

I look at this picture and think how resilient humans are. Our bodies are so fragile; a tiny piece of metal to the neck can take us from this world. But our spirits—they can go through hell, not just once, but day after day after day, and still they live.

Of course, not all scarred souls heal. Some are debilitated by trauma. They turn inward, grow callous, and permanently shut down. But so many are like the seedlings that sprout after a forest fire, or like the phoenix of myth. They go up in a roar of flames, only to be born again.

One day in February 2017, a year after her immigration to Chattanooga, Tennessee, Dinah called me. Donald Trump had been president not even a month and had already halved the number of US refugee arrivals and issued executive orders barring Iraqis and Syrians from entering the country.

For the first time in our friendship, Dinah and I spoke in English. I felt like I was talking too fast, speaking my own language, my words tumbling out in an excited torrent. She and Maryam were well. Dinah was working for a phone company and had recently been promoted to office manager. Maryam was in a day care and speaking English more than Arabic.

"I liked Chattanooga from the first minute," she told me, "because it was my last station—no more waiting, no more thinking about Maryam's future. It was the place to start my life in the right way." Many people had helped them, she said, and she'd found most

Americans to be friendly. She understood if people didn't like her, because they only knew what they'd heard about Iraqis, not who she really was.

"The only thing I need now is Osamah," she said. We didn't discuss how this might be impossible now, though we both knew it. Osamah's face was the one I saw in that season, whenever travel bans came up, as anti-refugee sentiment broiled. I wished people could see who he really was: a husband and a father, a human like the rest of us.

In the midst of that gray Midwest winter, I started to understand how Baghdad was beautiful. I thought of how, in spite of dead bodies and wars and poverty, so many Iraqis were still open-hearted, generous people. I thought of how Dinah, though she'd lost her family and country and language, was managing to flourish in her new home. I thought of how I, an American, had been received in dozens of Iraqi homes in Jordan, how they'd welcomed me with smiles and kisses. Never an accusation, never a snide remark—just coffee and cookies, which spoke: "Your nation destroyed ours, but you—you are our guest. You are a person like us, and you are welcome."

A wounded spirit that still loves. If that is not beautiful, I don't know what is.

When we finally returned to Jordan, Um Maryam was walking. I remember one visit, about a month after our return, when the enormity of this change hit me. While I stood at the stove, stirring coffee over the blue flame, Um Maryam walked to the other room to order a kilo of tomatoes and more phone credit from the dukaane down the street.

She walked. Perhaps she'd improved gradually in the 14 months we'd been gone and hadn't surprised anyone. But to me, her mobility seemed miraculous. She had already hand-delivered me plates of saffron-colored pilaf with chicken and beef, rice with fava beans and dill. She had draped the living room with drying sheets and

pillowcases she had washed. She had mopped her back porch and set out a jar of cucumbers to pickle.

The days before we returned to the US, a physical therapist had been visiting Um Maryam every day. I came the first few times to sit and watch as he led her in strengthening exercises. Balance on one foot. Lift your left leg. Stand straight without holding onto me.

"She is very motivated," he had said. Perhaps she was old and should use a walker the rest of her days, but in her mind, she was still a vivacious young secretary in Baghdad. So she kept up the rhythm of her days—calling friends to check on them, cooking from scratch, dyeing her hair and drawing on her eyebrows—until one day she left the walker in the bathroom and didn't even think about it.

At the kitchen table, Um Maryam and I sipped our coffee and talked. I was amazed at how much Arabic I was understanding—how unexpected exile and mental illness had made foreign words clear. I told a story: yesterday I found a little girl on the sidewalk, two streams of snot coming from her nose. I asked her, "Where's your mama?" but she couldn't speak. When I picked her up, she laid her head on my shoulder, and I walked up a path and found her family in the building there.

We sat a few moments in silence. It was an awkward silence, one that reminded me how much I still had to learn. But Um Maryam reached over and squeezed my arm with her veiny, wrinkled hand. "Habeebti," she said, like she loved me all the more for my lack of words.

WHIRLPOOL GALAXY

Liz Marlow

Sometimes she imagined herself a brown creeper, smaller, blending in with the cedars' bark, feeling wind up her shirt while riding her bicycle. When her uncle made her taste whiskey on his breath, she envisioned her sobs loud like a whooping crane's, confidence like a goose's, ready to defend her body, nest full of eggs during the spring. Did he know that when her friends took her fishing, she heard the river's edge call her name? Its surges drowned out all other noise. They sometimes stood on a sandbar, awaiting the collapse from their weight, whirlpools strong

as tornados, taking them somewhere else. When her body floated up on that same sandbar, teeth marks, indentations like an epigraph covered her arms and neck. When the uncle found out, his cousin, a dentist, extracted every tooth, like a writer censoring details to make it fiction. A hunter found her, his beagle barked and howled not leaving her side, reading the story her body told. The bridge above said "memory" through its M shape, and the river sighed when her body rolled away on a gurney. Her imprint left behind on the sand revealed a constellation.

THE GAME OF MAKE-BELIEVE

Lauren Berry

Never in my childhood did I pretend I was a bride
sweating through lace in a church dressing room,

given away. When you slid that diamond on, I thought
it was a game. I heard my mother calling me home

for supper. I saw myself falling asleep in a lopsided pile
of enchanted toys. Would I need my handsome father

to carry me to bed over his shoulder, whisper a prayer
and tuck me under white sheets, my tiaras sparking

with fear that I'd outgrow them? Dear lover,
my mother taught me marriage would be the end

of every adventure. But you said, "Make me
the happiest man alive." You bowed as dragons do,

closing your eyes to the narrator. You didn't know
that as a girl, I lined plastic horses into strict parades

under mother as she ironed father's shirts to a crisp.
I crafted chains to bind my stallions as they pranced in tandem

through a kingdom where I was Queen. I practiced
the perfect wave. I strung a sash across my royal heart.

But never was there a King in the carriage. Never an heir
revealed to the paparazzi. When I held mother's heels, I ran

a finger over their spikes. As that girl, I bathed for hours.
I pretended I was the most tragic of all mermaids, kidnapped

by an evil circus ringleader. He sold tickets to men who begged me
to flap my emerald tail, splash them with icy water. When I slid back

the shower curtain, I held a fold of the big top, heavy red and gold

in my fist. I could hold my breath forever, which I needed
as a runaway in the swamps. There I rode alligator minions

my bare feet resting between their scales, fireflies in our wake.
I trained blue herons to braid my hair into mazes with their beaks.

My armies of shadow children built tents out of coyote bones, devised
plans to capture more territory. Before war, they rolled out a carpet

of moss. Was it the aisle that led me to you? You, whom I love
above any other creation in my life. You, whom I did not will into being.

THE EVER AFTER BRIDAL STORE

Lauren Berry

The saleswoman's skin
is dark as my distant mother's
when she holds
the hangered white lace
above her head

but she isn't.
The way I hide my breasts
in the chipped-paint,
too cold dressing room
is like standing in front
of my childhood

pediatrician but it isn't.
The saleswoman runs
that zipper up my back
and it's like the doctor's
dry scoliosis finger,

the Greek word for "broken"
rushing to my head like blood
as I bend over wondering
if I can spell it.

But I can't. But it isn't.
And now I think
the pink tape measure,
glossy around my hips,
might be a kind of diagnosis

but is it? The girlfriends with
their drugstore champagne
in the plastic red cups from
the bridal store's back room—

they are pretty as my sisters
and they are the same in number
and they are patient as when

we waited our turn
to learn about our own
tiny spines. Were we broken
or weren't we? But we aren't.

In the end, I pick the dress
that makes everyone cry.

THE RENTED ALTAR

Lauren Berry

The day after our wedding,
the entire town comes down

with fever. I check the path
where I stood alone for portraits,

my mother rushing to adjust
the hem of my dress into a circle

as perfect as a wedding band. But now
that grass is a ring of yellow blades.

Even when I love as well as I can,
I leave a wake of ruin.

I ask her how the flutes we raised
during my father's champagne toast

fell to pieces. The next morning,
I find my husband on the floor,

my dress collapsed beneath him.
The backyard garden gate

where I promised to die
before I'd leave my husband

ensnares in kudzu vines.
The painted sign that directed guests

to our ceremony chokes in thorns,
our names hidden under barbs.

With white cake still glowing
in their bowels, my sisters whisper

about where the rented altar went,
but I'm afraid to answer. I knew

this would happen. I can still see
my mother lunging at my feet

with her clicking manicure.
How she backed away

with her palms covering her face
as though I were on fire.

MY HUSBAND'S SLEEP

Lauren Berry

**

My husband's sleep is heavy as the rusted trucks that moan
when the city pulls them off the beach after a storm.

It comes fast as the flash floods that wash glamor from our streets, turn
the public library to a swamp of spines and stories, a wrecked terrarium

where the books suffer an alphanumeric blur in their covers. I study
my husband as he breathes one deep sigh and drifts off. He is

lavender water receding from the shore of my day; my thirst
burns for this man alone. My husband's sleep is as still as

the black market bourbon he keeps in glinting glass bottles
at the bottom of my burnt-orange pie safe, the devil's cut

with a flat surface, dark and meditative. Every spirit holds back
a hallelujah, its breath all night as my husband sleeps.

In the light of my lamp, the angles of my husband's face are sharp
as bloodless knives, a collection kept for some future purpose

like protecting a woman in a hurricane named after her, guarding
a country inside her. In this darkness, his street-light silhouette

echoes the Sarasota father who loved him best with a closed fist
against his head when he refused to bathe as a child.

In my husband's sleep is the fear of drowning. In my husband's sleep
is the leather of a lawyer's wallet. The font on his first marriage license.

The rules in this house's deed restriction. The scent of nutmeg
at Christmas, musk on New Year's Eve. After midnight in his sleep,

his annotated bible opens to the proverbs he wishes he could memorize
as easily as our rose bush memorizes its thorns. In his sleep, he aches

with impatience like a tied-down horse. Twitching behind his eyelids
are the nurses he might have loved but didn't, squalls broken

on another coast. I've never seen a man as beautiful as he is. I am
a seawall drowned by this husband; from a fixed point, I watch his storm.

HONEYMOON ISLAND

Lauren Berry

**

Perhaps it was for the best that we never planned a honeymoon.

After the last dance, we just went home and folded
my gown into a cardboard box. Like a child, I peered in

to the freezer's silver mist, slid our slices of coconut cake inside.
My new husband unhooked my hundred satin buttons

while humming a tune I'd never heard before.
He washed my face and then his own with the same bar of soap.

He kissed me. I was home. That night I dreamt of Honeymoon Island, a key
of land sheared off by a hurricane. In 1939, a millionaire

built fifty thatched huts along the shore for newlyweds.
When I woke, I asked my husband if the lucky brides' moans

traveled to meet waves as they crested. Did the grooms shave
their faces with ocean water, the salt sting waking them up

from their haze? That first month, my husband and I went
nowhere.

I grew restless in our brick house, changed all its switches and
knobs,

counted the swinging hangers in all five of our closets, rearranged
pregnancy tests by color. By price. By name. I fed my husband

and his son honey at every meal. I drizzled lazy flowers
onto their vanilla yogurt, their burnt barbeque chicken, their

peanut butter banana sandwiches sliced by his ex-wife's knife which
I was still getting used to. I filled their teacups with gold.

Their blood sugar soared. They grew lethargic in the
evenings.

While they dozed on our couches, I sat in a ring of encyclopedias,
obsessed

with researching honeymoon history, tracking details with a sharpened
pencil,

crisp index cards that during the day I hid in a box of tampons.

Did you know that in their free time, the monks who copied the blood
and love of the bible crushed honeycombs for beeswax? They craved

candles to light their bedrooms as they prayed to saints
who died before honeymoons were invented. The monks

rinsed the combs, rested the sweet water on mantles above their fires
for a biblical forty days. They sold new husbands that dew of
Heaven,

a month's supply of mead to feed hesitant brides.
And the Vikings—they believed they'd clink steins of mead
into the air, toasting victories in the paradise of Valhalla
if the god Odin deemed them worthy enough to live
in the same house. My favorite detail was this:
in Norse, the word for honeymoon means "in hiding." Legend has it
that a man would kidnap a woman, keep her unseen
until her clan gave up the search. Or she became pregnant
with a new god and no one could dispute the union.
Honeymoon.
The night of our wedding, I bled carnations onto our sheets.