MUSIC BY WOMEN JOURNAL
ADVOCATE - EDUCATE - EMPOWER

Music by Women Journal

Vol. 1, No. 1
Winter, 2022

Getting to Know You; Curated and Edited by: Dr. Eva Floyd

ARTICLE

Sarah Kirkland Snider's *Penelope* and the Trauma of Coming Home from War

Marcie Ray

URL: http://www.musicbywomen.org/article/sarah-kirkland-sniders-penelope-and-the-trauma-of-coming-home-from-war/

Keywords:

Penelope; combat war veterans; caregivers; trauma; homecoming

Homer's *Odyssey* begins after the decade-long Trojan War and details Odysseus's ensuing ten-year journey home. In raids, encounters with monsters, angry deities, and love-struck goddesses, Odysseus loses all six hundred of his men on their way back to Ithaca. Meanwhile, believing Odysseus to be dead, over a hundred young nobles swarm his wife Penelope, asking for her hand, overstaying their welcome, and draining the couple's resources. Penelope has few means to defend herself, as her son remains young and she has only a small coterie of trustworthy servants. To delay remarriage, she claims that she must first finish her father-in-law's shroud. For three years, she weaves during the day and surreptitiously unravels it by night. The suitors discover her ruse and demand a decision. Odyssey finally arrives, slays the suitors, and re-establishes himself as head of household. The epic ends with Odysseus plotting his next great voyage.

With her steadfast fidelity during her husband's twenty-year absence, Penelope is an icon of the "good wife." In much of the story, we find her dissolved in a steady torrent of tears, aching for Odysseus and praying for his return. Given her husband's grand adventures and canny schemes, it can be easy to miss Penelope's own craftiness in delaying remarriage. Indeed, there are relatively few depictions of Penelope over time (compared to her cousin Helen of Troy, for instance), leading some critics to call her "a bit of a bore."[1] Translator Emily Wilson offers a different perspective, claiming that one of Penelope's most important traits is her opacity.[2] Thus, subsequent representations can shed light on the character's mysteries.

As early as Ovid, writers and artists have considered Penelope more complicated than simply the archetypal good wife, resolute and pure. In his collection of epistolary poems known as the *Heroides* (ca. 25-16 BCE), Ovid teases out the character in

The author wishes to thank Justin Phillips for introducing her to Snider's *Penelope* and Katie McEwen, Christine Roberts, and Michael Largey for being generous readers.

1. Ovid, *Ovid's Heroides: A New Translation and Critical Essays*, ed. Paul Murgatroyd, Bridget Reeves, and Sarah Parker (London: Routledge, 2017), 20.

2. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 89.

numerous ways. Rather than just standing by, weeping, Ovid's Penelope takes decisive action, writing Odysseus missives to urge him to return. She engages several tactics to persuade him: she emphasizes her virtue and how much she adores him; she also tries to make him feel bad for not returning, especially with the threat of the suitors. In the process, she chronicles her many external pressures and internal anxieties. She discloses how her father insists that she remarry and how distressed she feels every time someone reports another combat- or travel-related death. Penelope even imagines that Odysseus mocks her before his new mistress. The editors of the recent English translation argue that, "as part of her strategy she also employs speculation, exaggeration and downright fabrication."[3] As a result, we might see Penelope as a capable spouse for her cunning husband, who is known for his strategic prevarications. More recently, novelist Margaret Atwood (famous, in particular for her *Handmaid's Tale*) forges in *The Penelopiad* a portrait of Penelope's well-crafted stratagems.[4] Though Atwood is especially interested in fleshing out the twelve allegedly disloyal female slaves that are murdered upon Odysseus's return, she shows that Penelope deployed them to gather intelligence from the suitors as she attempts to keep them at bay. Thus, we can see the ways in which this character is not simply a passive agent in the hands of fate, but rather makes do with the resources available.[5]

Like Atwood's adaptation, Sarah Kirkland Snider's *Penelope* provides a distinctly female-identified re-telling of Homer's classic tale. Snider's song cycle centers on the reunion between a wife and her wounded combat veteran. The J. Paul Getty Center commissioned the work (originally a monodrama) in 2007, with lyrics by playwright Ellen McLaughlin. In 2009, Snider arranged it as a song cycle and then released it to critical acclaim in 2010 on New Amsterdam Records with vocalist Shara Nova (formerly Worden) of My Brightest Diamond and Ensemble Signal with Brad Lubman conducting. It is one of Snider's most well-known works, having been performed over fifty times across North America and Europe.[6]

Penelope is a sixty-minute song cycle, comprised of fourteen pieces. It has arrangements for voice and either chamber orchestra, large ensemble, septet, or sextet.[7] The program notes read: "A woman's husband appears at her door after an absence of 20 years, suffering from brain damage. A veteran of a modern war, he doesn't know who he is and she doesn't know who he's become. While they wait together for his return to himself, she reads him *The Odyssey*, and in the journey of that book, she finds a way into her former husband's memory."[8] Much like Penelope herself, *Penelope*'s narrator is a weaver. She braids together Homer, her husband's experiences in combat and homecoming, and her own shock and complicated sense of loss to illuminate the forgotten history of what it means to come home. As such, *Penelope* offers the opportunity to explore the impact of contemporary warfare, both on veterans and their caregivers, and the role music can play in collective healing as U.S. missions in Iraq and Afghanistan finally come to an end.

Invisible Female Labor: The Perspective of Caregiving Wives

Penelope picks up where *The Odyssey* ends, as a wife weaves together her husband's memories, their collective grief, and lives back together. It charts the unseen story that follows a combat veteran's return. Snider's song cycle portrays an emotionally complicated and conflicted process, deepening representations of what constitutes a "good wife." In a trailer for *Penelope*, Snider indicates that while this piece "explores themes of war, trauma, and homecoming," it is also about "relationships, compassion, and healing."[9] *Penelope* thereby furnishes a more holistic picture of the personal costs of war and caregivers' labors that have until only recently largely gone unremarked and uncompensated.[10]

Caregivers of veterans are not a niche market. As a result of the longest volunteer-fought conflict in American history, somewhere between 275,000 and

3. Ovid, *Heroides*, 11.

4. Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad* (New York: Grove Press, 2005).

5. Though this seems to be the take in Claudio Monteverdi's opera *Il ritorno d'Ulisses in patria* (1639-40).

6. She notes this in the biography on her website. See: https://www.sarahkirklandsnider.com/bio.

7. To listen to the album, see https://sarahkirklandsnider.bandcamp.com/album/penelope.

8. https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/56807/Penelope-for-voice-and-chamber-orchestra--Sarah-Kirkland-Snider/.

9. https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/56807/Penelope-for-voice-and-chamber-orchestra--Sarah-Kirkland-Snider/.

10. Caregivers of wounded veterans are now able to receive a monthly stipend. https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/docs/pubfiles/factsheets/FactSheet_11-02.pdf.

1 million people are caring or have cared for loved ones who have come back from Iraq or Afghanistan.[11] In one study, 96% of the caregivers for veterans were women and 70% were wives.[12] Caregivers reported suffering emotionally, physically, psychologically, and financially. Many have young children and after recent wars tend to provide care for longer periods of time. Caregivers serve a critical role in stabilizing veterans. "Prior research has suggested that being married can be a protective factor against suicide for veterans…thus it is of the utmost importance that services be designed to keep couples together."[13]

Caregivers of people with military-related traumatic brain injury are a particularly underserved population.[14] *Caregivers of Veterans—Serving on the Home Front*, a 2010 report funded by the United Health Foundation, indicates that caregivers of wounded servicemembers experienced "marital strain, decreased personal time, and feelings of isolation."[15] In their qualitative study, Noelle E. Carlozzi et al. found that caregivers most frequently raised how their role had negatively affected their social health, which included their relationship with the servicemember and other family members and friends. They also spoke about financial issues, such as those precipitated by giving up careers to become caregivers. Second most important, they discussed how the role had impacted their emotional health, resulting in compassion fatigue and grief over their own sacrifices, as well as how much their servicemember's life has changed. They also mentioned becoming hypervigilant so as not to upset the servicemember and keeping up appearances to avoid the stigma around mental illness in military culture.[16]

Unfortunately, caregivers are an underrepresented population in music. While several military spouses share playlists of songs online that help them through deployment and their servicemembers' return, the songs do not typically speak specifically of caring for injured combat veterans. Rather the songs cluster around themes of love, home, fidelity, long-distance relationships, and military life.[17] Geri Maples writes of her experience caring for her husband, who returned from Iraq with a brain injury and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She describes how the lyrics to the couple's favorite Matchbox Twenty song, "If You're Gone," had gained new meaning in light of their circumstances. She points specifically to the lyrics, "I think I've already lost you, I think you're already gone, I think I'm finally scared now, you think I'm weak, I think you're wrong."[18] In even this brief example, we can see that caregivers are taking creative approaches to their new roles and shared lives, while acknowledging fears, losses, hope, and resilience.

Snider's *Penelope* offers a unique and urgent contribution to the musical literature, especially as U.S. troops are withdrawing from Iraq and Afghanistan. It attends to the caregivers' perspectives and can attune to the complex process of reunion. Snider desired to write music that was "consoling and compassionate, but also resilient and courageous."[19] The song cycle neither trivializes caregivers, nor does it idolize them by erasing their complicated emotions. Rather, Snider describes the piece as a "musical diary," an account and catalogue of the caregiver's experiences following her veteran's return. [20]

In some ways, the emotions that the narrator faces in *Penelope* are not novel, but are at the heart of the expressive arts. Therapist and researcher Pauline Boss noted in the late 1990s that while clinical literature barely registered what she calls "ambiguous loss," opera, literature, and the theater grant us rich and varied portraits. She highlights Penelope's grief as one of the iconic examples of how we romanticize this feeling. Yet, she observes that "for the one who experiences it, however, the ambiguity of waiting and wondering is anything but romantic. Ambiguous loss

11. Terri Tanielian, Rajeev Ramchand, Michael P. Fisher, Carra S. Sims, Racine Harris, and Margaret C. Harrell, *Military Caregivers: Cornerstones of Support for Our Nation's Wounded, Ill, and Injured Veterans*, 2013. See page 2, here: http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR244.

12. Quoted in Bina R. Patel, "Caregivers of Veterans with 'Invisible' Injuries: What We Know and Implications for Social Work Practice," *Social Work* 60, no. 1 (2015): 9.

13. Patel, "Caregivers of Veterans with 'Invisible' Injuries," 12.

14. Carlozzi, et al., "Caring for Our Wounded Warriors," 670.

15. Carlozzi, et al., "Caring for Our Wounded Warriors," 670.

16. Carlozzi, et al., "Caring for Our Wounded Warriors," 673.

17. See, for example, the playlist put together for *Military Spouse*, https://www.militaryspouse.com/military-life/deployment/the-only-deployment-playlist-youll-ever-need/.

18. Geri Maples, "A Caregiver's Song," June 29, 2018, https://www.thanksusa.org/blog/a-caregivers-song.

19. https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/56807/Penelope-for-voice-and-chamber-orchestra--Sarah-Kirkland-Snider/.

20. https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/56807/Penelope-for-voice-and-chamber-orchestra--Sarah-Kirkland-Snider/.

is always stressful and tormenting."[21] While Homer's Penelope supplies one picture of ambiguous loss, Snider's *Penelope* gives us another. In *The Odyssey*, she waits, unsure of whether her husband is alive or dead. In Snider's song cycle, the veteran has returned, but he is no longer the same man he was before his deployment. In both cases uncertainty and confusion characterize the sense of loss, which can make it difficult to come up with anything other than temporary solutions. Boss characterizes these tensions: "Because of the ambiguity, loved ones can't make sense out of their situation and emotionally are pulled in opposing directions—love and hate for the same person; acceptance and rejection of their caregiving role; affirmation and denial of their loss."[22] As Boss observes, such losses deny people ritual closure (such as a funeral) and so a person suffering an ambiguous loss can feel that their experience goes unacknowledged. In time, the grief can take a toll on one's physical and emotional health, even leading to PTSD for the caregiver.

Boss explains that coping with ambiguous loss happens as a family. Each member can offer a different perspective on the other's behaviors and ideas. It also helps to clarify what has been lost so that the family may mourn. In her role as a therapist, Boss encouraged family members to tell stories about the past, how their lives have changed, and how they have survived difficult situations. "Collectively and through the use of narratives, family members begin to recognize and grieve what has been lost; and at the same time, they become clearer about which aspects of their loved one are still present."[23] Thus, *Penelope*'s narrator turning to Homer's *Odyssey* is an ingenious solution. It sets the stage for the music to embody how veterans and their caregivers move through conflicted and shifting emotional terrain.

Indeed, one of the main aspects that critics have been drawn to in the work as a whole is its in-betweenness, a musical style that is both here and there. The score indicates that "*Penelope* is influenced both by Western classical and vernacular (indie rock/pop/folk) traditions."[24] As such, Snider encourages the vocalist to drawn on aspects of both in her performance, "without leaning too far in either direction."[25] Furthermore, Snider registers the sense of ambiguous loss through several elements that wax and wane, such as abrupt affective changes between songs, as well as sections within pieces through aspects such as texture, dynamics, harmonic shifts, and instrumentation.

The cycle opens with "The Stranger with the Face of a Man I Loved." It establishes ambiguous loss as the heart of the work as a whole, beginning with the narrator expressing the pain of being left alone in their house for so long, and the shock and confusion of her husband's return. The title itself indicates implicitly not only the length of her husband's absence and how much he would have changed anyway during that time, but also likely how different he seems as a result of his brain injury. Marked "pensive," the song describes how this "stranger" returned to their house facing the sea, but it seems that the house is all that he remembers. He nevertheless claims it as his "though it's been mine and mine alone since he left me here," the narrator declares. She tries to remember all the good times, while also recalling "the times he lied and lied/ Before he just left me here."

Ambiguous loss offers context for the structural contrasts and returns in this piece. "The Stranger" specifically builds itself around the first section; its rolling rhythms draws the other sections back to its harbor. The short, opening instrumental prelude undulates tentatively on a c minor 11th chord, gaining confidence when the drums enter in measure 12. One can picture the returning veteran laboring up to the house, a bit unsure at first and then remembering, not unlike Odysseus, who did not recognize Ithaca upon his return. In the recording, Nova delivers this first stanza in a straightforward way, as if simply reporting that her husband, a stranger to her now, reappeared after a long absence.

While we might imagine that homecoming would be an uncomplicated, joyous reunion, the second stanza fleshes out a more nuanced picture that can include feelings of resentment and hostility. Following a diminuendo and a measure of rest, the next stanza offers musical and emotional contrast. Marked "slightly twisted," the harmonies change in a small, but significant way, adding a Db to the opening c minor 11th chord that forms the basis of the harmonic and melodic material. This section is more percussive, and indeed, rather than singing, Nova whispers her lines that her husband seems only to remember their house and claims it as his, although she has long cared for it alone. Combined with the harmonic shift, the electric guitar adds a rougher edge to the musical soundscape granting an angry or bitter tinge to the narrator's recollection of her husband's homecoming.

21. Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 5.

22. Boss, *Ambiguous Loss*, 62.

23. Boss, *Ambiguous Loss*, 113.

24. Sarah Kirkland Snider, *Penelope for Mezzo-soprano and Chamber Orchestra* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 2009), n.p.

25. Snider, *Penelope*, n.p.

In the next stanza the violin emphasizes the Db to offer a haunting dissonance to the returning undulating melody, which bears witness to the narrator's shifting emotions. Like the first section, the narrator objectively reports that her husband left her "half a life ago."[26] The next section, however, reaches the dramatic pinnacle as we gain insight into the emotional weight of the veteran's return. It features a full texture, "leaning forward slightly." As she ruminates on their past life together in the house, the narrator repeats "this house" in a descending leap of a tritone to register the conflict that the stanza as a whole portrays: she tries to remember the good times, while unable to forget the times that he lied.

As with ambiguous loss and traumatic memory, the narrator can relive the past such that long-ago grief feels fresh. The penultimate section—marked "foreboding"—catches a glimpse of the presence of the past. The texture becomes spare to indicate, perhaps, a memory of the house's emptiness in his absence. We hear layered voices repeating "he left me here," her cries echoing in a desolate house. The song ends with the same pensive wave-like motion but in the new harmonic territory of an F minor 11th chord, as if to acknowledge that what once constituted home is now something related, but situated differently.

While Snider notably centers the voice of the caregiver in this opening song, she goes on to draws attention to the ways in which *The Odyssey* can speak to the impact of contemporary warfare upon combat servicemembers and their families. In particular, *Penelope* explores the injuries most common to troops deployed in the War on Terror.

Contemporary Warfare and Injuries: The Perspective of Combat Veterans

Considering war veterans through the lens of ancient Greek theater and epics is a long-standing approach. Jonathan Shay reminds us that "*all* the practitioners of Athenian tragedy—as indeed was everyone in the audience—were themselves combat veterans."[27] Furthermore, scholars have noted that Homer offers particularly sensitive portraits of the plights of combat soldiers, well in advance of modern mental health specialists trying to treat them.[28] It has been a long road for injured servicemembers to receive accurate diagnoses and compassionate care. Over the twentieth century, the afflictions of combat veterans have been called "shell shock" and "war neurosis," among other labels. It was not until Vietnam veterans and their allies fought to have their numerous symptoms validated by the American Psychiatric Association that posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) found its way into the association's diagnostic manual in 1980.[29] With better diagnostic methods, treatments, and a growing de-stigmatization of physical and mental combat wounds, we can see more clearly the rich validation that Homer potentially holds for modern combat servicemembers. Wilson uses this modern lens to see how Odysseus himself seems to suffer from PTSD: "he is moody, prone to weeping, often withdrawn, and liable to sudden fits of aggression."[30]

Snider's Homeric adaptation homes in even more closely on the particularly common afflictions of modern troops. In recent wars, as a result of changing combat warfare, as well as advanced gear and military medicine, more veterans survive their deployments. Many return, however, with long-term physical and emotional issues.[31] Somewhere between 30,000 and 300,000 veterans of the Global War on Terrorism are estimated to live with so-called "invisible wounds" of war, such as PTSD and traumatic brain injuries (TBIs).[32]

Traumatic brain injuries are some of the most common injuries as a result of improvised explosive

26. See the *Penelope's* text here: https://penelope-music.com/#/lyrics/.

27. Jonathan Shay, *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 78.

28. Homer's works are integral to two classic works on veteran's homecomings: Edward Tick, *War and the Soul: Healing Our Nation's Veterans from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2005); and Shay, Odysseus in America.

29. For a brief version of this history, see Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 20-28.

30. Wilson, *The Odyssey,* 67.

31. Cynthia Boyd and Sarah Asmussen, "Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and the Military," in *Handbook of Military Social Work*, ed. Allen Rubin, Eugenia L. Weiss, and Jose E. Coll (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 163; and Karyn Dayle Jones, Tabitha Young, and Monica Leppma, "Mild Traumatic Brain Injury and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Returning Iraq and Afghanistan War Veterans: Implications for Assessment and Diagnosis," *Journal of Counseling & Development* 88 (2010): 372.

32. Jose E. Coll and Eugenia L. Weiss, "Transitioning Veterans into Civilian Life," *Handbook of Military Social Work*, 281.

devices (IEDs), rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and mortar rounds.[33] 20% of soldiers involved in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have sustained a mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI).[34] The severity of the injury is measured typically through three diagnostic criteria: the period of loss of consciousness, posttraumatic amnesia, and a rating on the Glasgow Coma Scale, the latter of which measures a patient's motor functions, eye opening, and ability to verbalize responses to commands. Mild to moderate brain injuries with no other complications can take weeks to months to return to pre-injury functioning.[35] In moderate to severe cases, most of the recovery occurs in the first two years after the injury, but individuals may be dealing with lifelong physical or mental disabilities. Even veterans who appear to have recovered fully may still experience challenges in their daily activities.[36]

Of these, the most common injury is the mild Traumatic Brain Injury (mTBI). While the term is synonymous with concussion, research indicates that an alteration of consciousness (AOC) should be a minimum diagnostic threshold.[37] "AOC encompasses acute changes in mental state such as confusion, disorientation, slowed thinking, feeling 'dazed' or a sense of having one's 'bell rung.'"[38] While most patients recover within a year, up to a third will continue to experience postconcussion syndrome, which may include physical, cognitive, and emotional symptoms.[39] Because these symptoms—including headaches, dizziness, memory issues, poor concentration, and mood lability—are common to a number of other medical and mental health conditions, health care professionals might not recognize the underlying cause.[40]

Posttraumatic stress disorder commonly co-occurs with mTBI. Together they are known as the "signature injuries" of the War on Terror.[41] Indeed, studies have shown rates as high as 84% of PTSD in cases of combat-related mTBI.[42] It makes sense that these conditions would co-occur since PTSD can develop after experiencing a threat to one's own well-being or that of another.[43]

The symptoms for mTBI and PTSD can be similar such that one goes undiagnosed. Amnesia, for example, is common to both.[44] Servicemembers, furthermore, might themselves attribute their symptoms of PTSD to mTBI since mental health issues remain stigmatized in the military.[45] However, treatment is different for the two conditions. While PTSD might be treated with counseling and antianxiety or antidepressant medications, mTBI patients benefit from a combination of occupational, physical, and cognitive therapy.[46]

Two of *Penelope*'s songs emphasize these physical and mental injuries. While Snider affords us both the the veteran's and the caregiver's perspectives, I use number four, "The Lotus Eaters," as an opportunity to think about how the combat veteran's experience is woven into this cycle. This song alludes to the episode in *The Odyssey* where some of Odysseus's men disembark and begin to eat the fruit of the Lotus Eaters. After eating the fruit, they lose all desire to return to Ithaca. For Shay, the Lotus Eaters scene invites us to consider a veteran's substance abuse and their need to forget or numb their pain.[47] Snider, however, gives us a view

33. Boyd and Asmussen, "Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)," 164.

34. Jones, Young, and Leppma, "Mild Traumatic Brain Injury," 372.

35. Boyd and Asmussen, "Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)," 166.

36. Boyd and Asmussen, "Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)," 168; and Jones, Young, and Leppma, "Mild Traumatic Brain Injury," 373.

37. Boyd and Asmussen, "Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)," 170.

38. Boyd and Asmussen, "Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)," 170.

39. Jones, Young, and Leppma, "Mild Traumatic Brain Injury," 373.

40. Jones, Young, and Leppma, "Mild Traumatic Brain Injury," 373.

41. The Department of Defense [DOD] Task Force on Mental Health in 2007 called them "signature injuries." See ES-1: https://justiceforvets.org/wp-content/uploads/Dept%20of%20Defense%2C%20mental%20health%20report.pdf.

42. Jones, Young, and Leppma, "Mild Traumatic Brain Injury," 373. Noelle E. Carlozzi, et al., "Caring for Our Wounded Warriors: A Qualitative Examination of Health-Related Quality of Life in Caregivers of Individuals with Military-Related Traumatic Brain Injury," *Journal of Rehabilitation Research & Development* 53, no. 6 (2016): 669-80.

43. Jeffrey S. Yarvis, "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Veterans," in *Handbook of Military Social Work*, 82.

44. Jones, Young, and Leppma, "Mild Traumatic Brain Injury," 374.

45. Jones, Young, and Leppma, "Mild Traumatic Brain Injury," 373.

46. Jones, Young, and Leppma, "Mild Traumatic Brain Injury," 374.

47. See Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 35-41.

of a veteran's insomnia, survivor's guilt, and the feeling of being caught between two worlds. For many, "The Lotus Eaters" is a particular highlight of the cycle. NPR listed the song in its list of "200 Greatest Songs Written by 21st-Century Women," and *The Huffington Post* named it one of the Top Ten Alternative Art Songs of the Decade.[48] It was also the only song from the cycle to be released as a music video.[49] It features images of combat, a military hospital, and the narrator wandering between past and present.

Like "The Stranger with the Face of a Man I Loved," this piece reflects on loss, here caused by combat injury. Perhaps both affective and literal, this piece is marked "sober." It opens with an arpeggiated solo viola line plucking out a pizzicato g minor sonority to embody, perhaps, the narrator's nighttime perambulations ("Now I'm smelling the night air,/ crunching gravel as I walk, walk, walk."). In a duet with the viola, the narrator then sings about seeing men "drooling in their cots. Pricks of blood in every elbow."[50] She (he) declares that, "I am no better. It's just that I'm awake," and that she (he) will "never sleep like that again." The spare texture gives way as the narrator opens into a *forte* declaration "I'm lost in this night" to fuller string accompaniment. She sings a more expansive vocal melodic line that drives upward, striving to outline the octave from Bb to Bb of a 3rd inversion Eb triad. It strains against A before it falls, not achieving the octave. The outburst dies away and the texture lightens as the narrator reflects again, introspectively, that she (he) is lost, notably, "but not as lost as them/ my sleeping, drooling, smiling men."

The song most clearly speaks to sleeplessness, a symptom of both PTSD and TBI.[51] The narrator fears that the insomnia will never subside: "Never, never, never, never, never,/ Never will I sleep like that, sleep like that…" The narrator registers that though the men in the ward are unconscious, "I am no better./ It's just that I'm awake," pointing to the fact, perhaps, that some veterans grapple with invisible wounds such as PTSD and TBI, but are likewise severely injured. Furthermore, two stanzas are devoted to the feeling of being lost, "but not as lost as them," which can express both a sense of grief and even survivor's guilt.

Number nine, "Dead Friend," also explores traumatic memory and survivors' guilt to show the emotional burdens veterans carry that they can often feel unwelcome to express. The piece opens "furious, violent" with agitated strings, but the vocalist sings unaccompanied, "very freely." She (he) begs her (his) friend, "Do not look at me/ With those eyes." The most plaintive moments are when the vocalist descends a minor sixth on both the command to "turn your back on me" and "I must leave you here," marking the grief of having to let go of fallen comrades. Like the opening song, it features abrupt musical and emotional changes that can remind us of the turbulence of homecoming. Indeed, each spouse carries their own losses and trauma, but an essential task is to figure out how to survive them together, reintegrating the veteran back into home and society.

Homecoming and Reintegration into Family and Society

While Homer's *Iliad* bears witness to the trauma of combat, his *Odyssey* offers an empathetic take on reintegration into civilian society. Given the length of the Global War on Terrorism, many troops, like Odysseus, have served in several deployments over a decade or more and can struggle to adjust to civilian life, experiencing some degree of physical or emotional distress in their transition.[52] When deployed, they feel a sense of urgent purpose, but when they return, they have time to process what they endured. They also feel that they have a difficult time relating to civilian friends and family.[53] Edward Tick and Jonathan Shay, both scholars and mental health professionals, have advocated for lengthier transitions back to civilian life. When servicemembers enter the military, they are given weeks of rigorous training. Yet, they have but a few days to transition back to civilian life. While homecoming rituals are typically organized upon a servicemember's return and several organizations have been established to ease this transition, they are not always adequate to the needs and number of returning troops.

Several scholars have noted the importance of the expressive arts as part of this transition. For Shay, "it is impossible to overstate the importance of the arts in creating the supportive social movements that permit trauma to have voice and the voice to be heard, believed, remembered, and re-spoken."[54] Tick writes

48. https://www.sarahkirklandsnider.com/bio.

49. To view the video, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hi9R0ig3TTE.

50. All references to *Penelope's* text can be found here: https://penelope-music.com/#/lyrics/.

51. See Mari Viola-Saltzman and Nathaniel F. Watson, "Traumatic Brain Injury and Sleep Disorders," *Neurologic Clinics* 30, no. 4 (2012): 1299-1312.

52. Allen Rubin, "Introduction: Understanding and Intervening with Military Personnel and Their Families: An Overview," in *Handbook of Military Social Work*, xxv.

53. Lisa Gilman, *My Music, My War: The Listening Habits of U.S. Troops in Iraq and Afghanistan* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2016), 137-38.

54. Jonathan Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 244.

that, "all such creative activities helped transform war stories from violence into art and from personal story into tribal myth."[55] Psychiatrist and researcher Bessel van der Kolk describes the effectiveness of writing, art, music, dance, and theater to alleviate symptoms of PTSD.[56] For instance, he describes the project of writer and director Bryan Doerries called "The Theater of War" in which groups stage Sophocles' play *Ajax* "to give voice to the plight of combat veterans and foster dialogue and understanding in their families and friends."[57] Tom Cipullo's opera *Glory Denied* (2007) about Col. Jim Thompson, the longest-held prisoner of war, has also become an opportunity to engage with the veteran community. Other theater groups invite trauma survivors to take acting roles to tap into their bodies and emotions in a safe and scaffolded way.

In her ethnography on the listening practices of U. S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, Lisa Gilman found that listening to music during the war could help soldiers manage emotions, and that music might also be sought out later to help process their experiences.[58] "Listening to music during leave could assuage fears and be used to express frustration, anger, and disillusionment, or alternately, could be used to reaffirm family members' and troops' belief in the important contribution they were making to the mission."[59] Furthermore, Gilman establishes that musical listening could contribute to memory making, and could help veterans develop a sense of coherence about their lives.[60] Music might also help connect veterans to their families and friends, as music communicates something they are not able to express themselves.

Penelope explores homecoming from both the wife's and the veteran's perspective, which I will treat in turn. The second song, "This is What You're Like," evokes the tensions of ambiguous loss as the narrator recognizes that her husband has returned, but that nevertheless something essential to him is missing. As if to a friend or family member, she begins by observing that he talks, but he does not tell her much of anything. She craves a real connection, claiming that she would even be willing to hear his lies if he would just talk to her again. She urges her husband to remember who he once was. Her recollections of his lies portray a sense of both betrayal and yet a longing for the way things used to be.

As Gilman argues, music can structure and hold even contradictory feelings simultaneously and help veterans and their families draw meaning from suffering. Likewise, "This is What You're Like" points in many directions: to the good and bad memories of the past, and to the present and hope for the future. The narrator opens with how they do not really talk the way they used to, recalling how he once talked "the way a bird sings,/ just to sing." "This is what you're like," she declares in what becomes a refrain. Then, as if summoning a bittersweet memory, the music changes course to a slow reverie. "Like a half-remembered waltz," the music lopes along as she recounts how he would dance, even after the music died away. She thinks of a poem he wrote about her: "You loved my eyebrows and my stomach and my knobby knees." The music builds as she reminisces over their past love. With this palpable sense of their connection long ago, she asks where he has gone and how she can find him, much like Homer's Penelope desperately seeking information from every passing stranger. The narrator acknowledges that he is grieving, too, as she hears him "weeping in the dawn." In her last, unaccompanied phrase, she urges him to "try to remember," as more of a wish than a command.

The eighth number, "Home," turns to the veteran's perspective, where he, too, observes that a part of him has not made it home: "Home is where I'm going, but never coming/ Home is someplace I can't recall, but head for still." Marked "wistful," it calls us the pull between home and being deployed, and the struggle to return to civilian life. As the text notes, "No, no, you can't go home, she says, the world." Number twelve, "Open Hands," is "quietly agitated, haunted." The narrator alludes to "What I did and what I thought." While it could be from either spouse's perspective, it makes sense to read it as all the things that a combat soldier has experienced that are difficult to share with their loved ones. Indeed, all these things he cannot say give rise to his wife's song, "This is What You're Like," where she longs for him to talk to her again. The melody of "Open Hands" repeats a ghostly serpentine gesture, as if the veteran is turning over an object in one's hands to revisit a memory of something lost.

Weaving and Unweaving: The Changing Dimensions of Loss over Time

As more veterans return with lifetime disabilities, a spouse's job is never done; it must be undone and redone, always in a process of becoming, much like

55. Tick, *War and the Soul*, 219.

56. Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 240-245 and 332-348. See also NPR's Rough Translation podcast "<Home/Front: Battle Borne," June 16, 2021, https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1002957885.

57. Van der Kolk, 334.

58. Gilman, *My Music, My War*, 138.

59. Gilman, *My Music, My War*, 140-41.

60. Gilman, *My Music, My War*, 150-51.

Penelope's daily weaving and unraveling of Laertes's shroud. For many, it involves a constant stream of doctor and various therapy appointments, filling prescriptions, filing for benefits, and so much more, on top of home management and childcare responsibilities. Caregiving requires enormous self-sacrifice and, in the end, the couple's individual and joint healing may always be measured only by progress, rather than reaching "recovery" as a destination.

Penelope gives voice to this teleology. Particularly in "The Stranger with the Face of a Man I Loved," "This is What You're Like," and "Home," the cycle addresses the sense that even though the veteran is physically present, some part of him has not come home yet. Roland Barthes speaks to the ways in which women might record and become a placeholder for a man's absence:

> Historically the discourse of absence is carried on by the Woman: Woman is sedentary, Man hunts, journeys; Woman is faithful (she waits), Man is fickle (he sails away, he cruises). It is Woman who gives shape to absence, elaborates its fiction, for she has time to do so; she weaves and she sings; the Spinning Songs express both immobility (by the hum of the Wheel) and absence (far away, rhythms of travel, sea surges, cavalcades).[61]

Barthes gendered telos is common to conceptions of Penelope's labor. Emily Wilson likewise notes the ways in which Penelope's ploys are "forever in a state of becoming, not completion."[62] What Odysseus builds comes to fruition (the Trojan Horse, his marriage bed), whereas what Penelope fashions (Laertes's shroud) must be undone.[63] Furthermore, while Odysseus schemes for specific ends (invasion, homecoming, destruction), Penelope's ploys stave off a conclusion (accepting her husband's death and marrying a new suitor). Feminist critic Barbara Clayton likewise observes that Penelope's doing and undoing Laertes's shroud creates a feminine discourse that stalls the forward motion of time. "The effectiveness of this web and the fulfillment of its purpose lie precisely in its absent *telos* in the sense of 'end,' a conscious choice of process over product."[64] However, when judged on its own terms, "Penelope's non-time becomes the equivalent of memory. The feminine space she carves out by means of this non-time is a space of remembering, and in this space Odysseus is kept alive."[65]

I think Snider's *Penelope* offers more than bearing witness to an absent presence. Judith Herman observes that caregivers hold memories and so much more. She writes that the trauma survivor's support people play a significant role in their recovery. In contrast to Barthes's configuration where woman simply keeps memories alive, Herman believes the caregiver shapes the future.[66] The caregiver's work is hardly passive and static. For instance, regulating the combat veteran's mood lability can be an important first challenge. Many veterans struggle with aggression and intimacy.[67] Difficulties may be compounded when veterans feel disconnected and even isolated from their friends and family because of what they witnessed or were asked to do in combat. Part of this results from cultural norms. Few civilians have a detailed understanding of what service entails, nor do we regularly enact public rituals for telling combat stories.[68] A crucial part of healing, however, is to have witnesses and support to mourn one's losses.[69] "Sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world."[70]

Without a public and collective means to process grief, the narrator of *Penelope* makes do. She turns to Homer to plot her and her husband's experiences in a centuries-long continuum with others who have gone before them. As such, she exemplifies Michel de Certeau's theory that individuals may enable their own agency through using and interpreting culture. Their consumption of culture is not passive, but in itself a kind of poesis that quietly and even invisibly remakes something so that it becomes useful for their own purposes. Geri Maples, in an example above, "made do" when she reinterpreted a Matchbox Twenty song to meet her and her husband's new circumstances. Rather than as entertainment or an activity to pass the time, *Penelope*'s narrator reads *The Odyssey* to say something of her own grief, to bring herself

61. Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 13-14.

62. Wilson, *The Odyssey*, 46.

63. Wilson, *The Odyssey*, 45.

64. Barbara Clayton, *A Penelopean Poetics: Reweaving the Feminine in Homer's Odyssey* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 45.

65. Clayton, *Penelopian Poetics*, 50.

66. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 61.

67. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 63.

68. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 67.

69. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 69. See also "The Healing Power of Storytelling" in Tick, *War of the Soul,* 217-34.

70. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 70.

closer to her husband's experiences, and to orient themselves towards remaking their lives together. Number thirteen, "Baby Teeth, Bones, and Bullets," in its "stately weariness" grants dignity to their struggles as they surrender to the conflicting feelings conveyed in layered voices that speak the fear of being seen and wanting it all to be swept away, cleansed by the rain. Overall, Snider's song cycle sheds light on the emotional ecosystem that the combat veteran and his spouse-caregiver inhabit to attend to their need for mutual care.

In the end, *Penelope* is both the *what* (the object of study here) and the *how* (a strategy for expressing and processing trauma). As it turns out, composing *Penelope* offered Snider a kind of "recovery." Snider writes that *Penelope* "was something of a turning point" for her as a composer "in the sense that I finally allowed myself access to the full range of my influences."[71] Her academic training kept her from using popular music influences, but this work gave her a chance to embrace them because the commission from the Getty Center was for playwright Ellen McLaughlin to sing. Since McLaughlin cannot read music, Snider felt that the "music had to be somewhat simple and memorable so she could learn it by ear."[72] Furthermore, McLaughlin's text was "plainspoken," such that Snider felt that it "frankly wouldn't have made sense to set it in any way that wasn't direct, honest, and heartfelt."[73]

With *Penelope*, furthermore, Snider gave herself permission to slough off the male bias of her education. She reveals,

> I was frustrated; I was the only female in my class at Yale for the first two years, so it was a constant issue for me. I realized that I was subconsciously associating all the things I didn't like about new music—pedagogy, ideology, over-intellectualization—with a male mindset, and so I would need to go and get in my car and listen to Sleater-Kinney so that I could just steep myself in a completely different vibe and mindset.[74]

She even felt that this piece was a "secret shame."[75] She went on to explain that she had a teacher who claimed, "You know, as a woman, you're going to encounter some discrimination about your writing if it's very melodic and lyrical. For a man to write melodic, lyrical music, that's courageous. If a woman writes it, it's sentimental." As a result, Snider felt compelled to write emotional music to change these kinds of associations. With a determination to liberate herself from simplistic notions of gender and music, she feels she can explore other aspects of herself in her music that she feels she is not allowed to show.[76] With respect to *Penelope*, Snider argues that, "It's not just about war, or the Greeks, or even homecoming. It gets you back in touch with parts of yourself that you've lost, and talks about how identity changes over time."[77] Thus, it speaks to her characters, but also to her own personal homecoming as a composer.

In the final song of *Penelope*, "As He Looks Out to Sea," the narrator understands her husband's story as something "bloody and sacred, truth and lie" that moves "backwards and forwards like the tide." The piece is warm, lyrical, hopeful, and accepting. As in *The Odyssey*, the cycle concludes as the newly returned warrior scans the horizon, restless to leave his safe harbor in search of his next adventure. For many veterans of the War on Terror leaves were but short respites in a series of multiple deployments. As the U.S. military missions in Iraq and Afghanistan officially wind down, combat veterans and their caregivers need space for remembrance, mourning, and reintegration into society.[78] *Penelope* inspires us to hold this grief and to look towards collective healing.[79]

71. Chris McGovern interview with Sarah Kirkland Snider on the Glass Blog, June 6, 2012: https://chrismcgovernmusic.wordpress.com/2012/06/06/sarah-kirkland-snider/.

72. McGovern.

73. McGovern.

74. Molly Sheridan, "Sarah Kirkland Snider: The Full 360," *NewMusicBox*: https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/sarah-kirkland-snider-the-full-360/.

75. Sheridan, "Sarah Kirkland Snider."

76. Sheridan, "Sarah Kirkland Snider."

77. Keith Powers, "The Story Behind 'Penelope,' Kirkland Snider's Song Cycle Coming to the Gardner," *WBUR News*, December 1, 2015: https://www.wbur.org/artery/2015/12/01/penelope-gardner.

78. See Robert Burns, Aamer Madhani, and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Biden says US combat Mission in Iraq to Conclude by Year End," July 26, 2021: https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-government-and-politics-middle-east-iraq-islamic-state-group-9397d9996703d7416f857165072a0a05, and Amanda Macias and Christina Wilkie, "U.S. Military Mission in Afghanistan Will End by August 31, Biden Says," July 8, 2021: https://www.cnbc.com/2021/07/08/us-military-mission-in-afghanistan-will-end-by-august-31-biden-says-.html.

79. For some suggestions on how to support our veterans and their caregivers, see https://www.publicservicedegrees.org/volunteering/with-veterans/.