American Life in Poetry
I must admit that I leave “In Patient” still wondering, “Is she alright?” I suspect that Erin Evans knows this, and what she wants to say is that this moment of humor, a distraction from the thing that is feared—a husband checking his wife’s heartbeat with a stethoscope—may, in the end, be far less important than the quirky observation. Perhaps he is listening for the sound of a child’s pulse, perhaps he’s testing a new stethoscope, perhaps they are just playing “doctor”, perhaps, perhaps.

In Patient

By Erin Evans

My husband holds the cold stethoscope to my chest—
his brown eyes averted, he listens carefully,
like someone taking directions on the phone
on how to save another life.

My heart is a room full of dispatchers
waiting for those strange-hour, desperate calls,
trained to keep you on the line while help arrives.

But what he says, smiling up at me,
after he’s listened awhile is,
“I think I can hear the ocean.”

And I know he must be right—

that what he hears is some small part
of the 95% of water on earth
yet to be explored,
that there is still no word for life
that doesn’t sound like the hush of the ocean.