

Spring 2021

PLEASE STAND BACK

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PLEASE STAND BACK

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature of Bard College

by
Amelia Sage Van Donsel

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2021

PLEASE STAND BACK

Amelia Sage Van Donsel

Dedicated to the women who have lost.

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Notes

Thief! Thief!

A hard, indifferent bird,
he'd snatch your life.

- Robert Hass, "Songs to Survive the Summer"

For love is the same

And you

What is your substance and whereof are you made
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?

- Bernadette Mayer, "Midwinter Day"

I.

Self-Portrait With Dog

Self-Portrait With Dog

The moment the trunk hears its splinters,
it begins to waste. That's what
I watched—
dead wood, my dealers
congratulating termites.

Everything rested in the dining hall.

Fondly,
what is that
ripple in the field
but dusty holidays inventing
their wheat.
No—I have been told
it is the truncated
anatomy of a small, snailish boy
whose boss had glittered
spryly at him,
fracking his way
to the keen position
he has to this day
and yelling, *shave the television,*
you leggy idiot, while
I eat tofu and pat the dog. I say *pat*
as in
I will pat the dog, a real bulldog
of an evening.
But what would
Keats say—*The woof*
of darkness thick, for hid delight?
Who is the dog crying
for? one
of you asks.

April in Cambridge

She shows me something on her phone
and lets me handle it.

We stand beneath lilac bushes plump
as bladders, sending their lilacs down, blossoms falling through us.

The oligarch on her phone
is crying, imprisoned; he
has been overthrown by a military dictator.
Meanwhile, her top is flattering.

I press the little
volume UP button on the side, and the man
begins to cry
louder in a different language.

He must be saying, *Stupid!! You are not peace
descending everywhere! You
are sliced from my chin,
my very darkest hairs.*

Maybe he is speaking his country. But why
say anything when you can suffer
famously,
gleaming away, drilling away.

A garden steps down
between us. My hands—
one does nothing while the other weeps.

My Sadness as an Unlucky Man

Never in law school, I once dislocated my shoulder playing on the green and wound up on ice cream duty, twirling soft serve onto cones.

Birds constantly smeared themselves against the windows above

the deep-friers; I was alone with them

except when Jimmy came

out of the toilet to brag about his early-onset Crohn's disease.

On breaks, I'd loiter in the lobster lobby across the street and eat a double milk

chocolate bunny in front of the lobsters

with a sullen brain gaze. Our dead eyes

would meet, the lobsters' and mine, like something

sliding into an envelope. Then begins what? I tapped the glass.

Diphthong

A tutor named Mr. Connor instructs me in grammar in his cold apartment. My head gets wet on the snowy street, so I feel blurry and winded as I climb to his door. “I know your thoughts,” he tells me, “like a waiter with his silver hair bringing you soup.” I don’t know the meaning of his statement, so I say nothing. He just turns back to the books, though his beauty is arresting—in this light, his forehead gleams like a small square of butter in a pan. I can see into his bedroom, where his sheets look icy from the window’s draft. As I sit, he selects a slender pencil and some paper, and his writing makes the sound of skates on ice. Instead of the eager flight and spacing of Mr. Connor’s cursive, my own letters are clumped and curly, like pubic hair. I copy over sentences and semicolons and diphthongs some one hundred times, dropping pages across the floor in an ignominious ribbon before he stamps on my alphabet. I demand the meaning of this action. He sets a typewriter on the desk between us the way you set a whole chicken on the dinner table. “It’s too sloppy,” Mr. Connor observes. “I can’t read it; you’ve got to use the machine.” As he rolls a piece of paper into the carriage, I admit that I’ve never used one before. Then, behind me, Mr. Connor bends until I can feel the warmth from his neck, discern the smell of the almonds he eats. His tie is nearly in my face. Fingers reach around each of my wrists and place my hands onto the keys, but tenderly. “It’s just like swimming,” he says. He does not let go.

Dog Show

When I look up from my breakfast, I see Andy
draining his ear. *Like hunting?* he asks,

putting blood into his napkin. *Something like that?*
Now there's just fluid. *Forget it*, I tell him.

He must hear the TV going *wa wa wa wa* through
that damaged eardrum. On the National Dog Show,

a judge scratches the hot, dry skin of the Standard
Poodle whose hair has been shaved into

hedges for better inspection. The judge pulls back her lips
so we can see her teeth, which are vivid and shocking.

But how true she is, unlike that Deerhound
trotting around with ghostliness.

Andy's kid makes a pistol from his hand
and shoots me, fork upright in his waffle.

His face is dirty with the leviathan
of lust, or maybe youth. *It's Thanksgiving*, I say.

*It's a holiday. I have to tell you all about
the holiday, otherwise you'll keep shooting me.*

No, I won't, says Andy's kid. He sits there sucking
along the ridges of his teeth for a moment

(his gums have been mutated since birth),
but never once turns to watch the dogs behind him.

Two Holes

Once more, Jerome removes the bandage from my foot,
since he has already drilled a foot deep into the sediment.
Silence in the arctic is the sound of a tiny ant
beating itself to death, which I like.

The scientific expedition

for the greater good of mankind ran cold—
same as the liquid running from my crotch.
Money was the main thing before we totalled
the snow dome and snatched the last of the brie.
Toes have been amputated.

Jerome looks at me juicily

with the boys who stand above, their teeth having grown
long in the misery, and caresses my cold heel.
My blood moves with his heat of his touch.

The American Standard of Perfection

For the chicken, the point at which
heart girth is measured
falls near the shaft of plumage.

If quill and feather
are discernible to the eye,
one must understand
that impurities, when
they occur, do not
indicate impure blood.

Rather, their form finds the judge
until such birds are called
to execute the mark,
waves beginning collective shape.

A pendant of good
length protrudes from the throat
or at the center of
the skull where, near
its unrelated cheek
white luster is applied
against that hollow, a reddish
bay beak. Prime eyes still
flood an oblique garden.

Freshness of fowl about the thighs
should be considered in eras
of molting, having the productive
brassiness in golden cast or
silver pencil; bare skin
is secured when the barbs
of its hook are prismatic.

Soft diagonals are stirrers of eggs.
The irregular bird forages
original impotence,
which flows glazed from the hen.

The Substitute Blonde

She no longer looks
toward me are blurry
winters passing blimps
drift famously so her
neck is an absolute fruit
belongs to ascending air
will let me read its palm
trees appear more real
departs from sleep loss
does not shimmer.

My Imagined Close Friendship With Humphrey Bogart if He Hadn't Been an Alcoholic

It's my birthday, my first in Los Angeles, and Bogie buys me a shot glass.

Did you catch my flick? he asks as I unwrap it. He means *The Big Sleep*. When I tell him no, he sets his imagined fedora down on the couch and says, *Just a minute*.

I consider offering him a drink but don't.

It's dumb blinding out, but he goes and stands on my patio anyway, smoking, his hair reflective as donut glaze.

Sometimes I think he only smokes for the look of it, since working with him requires a certain style—

a crisp, white Napa Valley complemented by a meaty provolone.

Once, on set, Bogie pulled his gun on me for a laugh, and I socked him in the mouth.

A man's gotta know when he's being kidded. Back when he had the money, he'd pick up the check or take me out on his yacht, roll my cigs.

One time his hair fluttered off in the wind, but we never talked about it or the other women. Then later, Bogie pointed to some

weepy young dame in the paper, fox over her shoulder, a sultry red dress, and cried, *Christ, I smashed my face with hers! I still can't get the lipstick off!*

I'll admit that I was jealous of his brashness, even though the press was all over him for it.

Bogie comes back in and just stands there like a dark dinner chair;

he's tracked some dust onto the carpet. I offer my birthday cake, but he waves his hand.

Meeting my gaze, his eyebrows pucker, the way they do for the camera, and he laments,

My flick's a bunch of hooy, Harry. They've killed the talkies.

What My Editor Paul Deleted From My Autobiography

Kerouac held up a cracker to the beige-ish sun.

*

“I hate it when you stroke my hair like that, when you lie that way.”

“I’m not lying.”

“No, that way.”

*

Earlier that day they removed an abandoned tractor by the CVS. A middle-aged man the size of a dunk-tank stepped down out of his tow truck. I thought fondly of his beard against the wind.

*

“Christ, what do they even teach you there?”

“Don’t touch me.”

*

I told Pierre about my lecture at the Bengali Institute for the Word, during flood season.

“It’s repellent.”

“What, the culture?”

“No, the coat. The coat and water.”

“Don’t laugh—I’ve had a full day. Sometimes I read before bed.”

*

After my third book tour, I climbed Montagne Blanc. That was when I lived nearby, where there were cathedrals for the tourists. My guide up the slopes was as young as I was, though perhaps still old enough to have known Pierre. While the ropes I had bought were expensive and ethically-sourced, my guide insisted that I purchase new ones. Thus, I lost what little money I had left, for I could not communicate to the clerk that I wanted the cheapest equipment. You can imagine the commotion, considering, at this point, my lack of fluency in the language.

*

“Why all this violence?”

“What did you call it? What did you say?”

“The violence. What’s it for?”

“You mean violence, yes?”

*

Something happened—the check did not come. Upon foreclosure, Yousef left his carpets on the street.

*

He reached for more garlic bread. “Do you mind?”

“No, not at all.”

*

He slipped a gun under the table and shot me.

*

The same day, she came home from the Village with a new kitten. I pinched its ear.

“Cats are no good,” I told her. “They only shriek.”

*

“Leave it.”

“Here?”

“That’s what I said. Get your coat.”

“But you can’t leave it here.”

“Why not?”

“It’s pricey.”

“What?”

“I said pricey. Like a new trombone.” She was already standing in the doorway. “You can’t just leave those things around.”

“I don’t know about trombones.”

*

Even with *Celebrity Apprentice* on, Pierre looked that way again.

“I don’t believe in your work,” he said, shaking his head.

“What do you care?” I said over the television. “I’m leaving for New Mexico.”

Pierre sighed, then took out a fine-toothed comb and began raking Lucy with it. I turned away.

*

Removed from my pocket, the other half of my Danish had bled into its napkin.

*

After a minute, she stood up and got dressed. I took of photo of her spine. With the water at my back, the parking lot stretched on infinitely, black and burning.

“Do you still run?” I asked her.

“Don’t do that.”

*

Nevertheless, a parrot had washed up onto the beach, golden and still.

*

The work was already siphoning all the good out of me; I felt ashamed for everyone I met. And Henri, I imagined, had had enough of the coast. So many strangers dead in my books.

*

Henri kept talking and talking. It was dark now, most things outside covered in ice. I was tired of money, tired of reading, painfully, the ads and receipts in another language. *Essuyez avec plaisir!* said the tiny words printed on my toilet paper.

*

But it was a Saturday, and Carl Sandburg had left. I'd written very little.

Endnotes to My Autobiography

- 1 Carl Sandburg visited me and set his keys on the table.
- 12 From my 1996 interview.
- 13 I posted an advance copy.
- 28 Qatar.
- 30 When I had won the Booker.
- 32 He slipped a gun under the table and shot me.
- 33 E.g., my nurse's name.
- 77 My editor gave me *Near Miss* without a dust jacket.
- 88 At this point, Kerouac had passed out on the linoleum.
- 90 I was again on the brink of creative starvation. "Feed your lion," he said, his eyes almost shut.
- 103 *Come Call Your Mother*.
- 114 By now I have forgotten where she had lived.
- 122 This was a year before I wrote *Blister Hound*.
- 128 Yousef owned a carpet store on the Upper West Side.
- 167 Or thick wooden plugs for the earlobes native to eastern Botswana.
- 190 The Jiffy Lube in Albuquerque.
- 245 Meager inspiration for *The Hydro Lathe*.
- 246 A misprint in the December issue.
- 299 Over *Naked Lunch*.
- 366 Perhaps newspapers influenced me more than I'd like to admit.
- 373 François was one of the world's best apiarists, saving over two million bees with only a wooden spoon. There is a famous statue of him by Rodin in Central Park.
- 381 This was after I had spent some time in Bangladesh.
- 389 Henri was the inspiration for Luther.
- 390 Pierre got out of bed with it, a hand to his head.
- 399 Paul told me I was done for.

II.

The Shape of a Downpour

Past Tense Over Zoom

I've taught a man the wrong grammar: *I went at the store to buy my bread.*

He speaks as though he has just seen himself shirtless

for the first time. In fact, he is just like me

when I saw myself in a naked spoon,

so love-faced with language.

I walked through the bridge.

Glancing up, a day has slammed

down a board of sunlight; a narrow spider

calls me intruder up in the corner. Blanks of his face

through the screen take so little to disappear me. *I did ate at the table.*

Election Results

When I open my laptop, data seizes me like a stroke.
I meant to close the tabs earlier, before it went bad,
but now I glimpse the one state tessellating itself.
Each point, our points, of saturation come, one
by one, though maybe without any want of being seen.
On the tvs, they're talking about taking Nebraska, Iowa, the Dakotas—
they're taking it all away. And soon, finally,
a man's forehead spreads like a sheet of ice
against the sides of the screen.
Skin pressed to glass, I see him melting in his fog.

Error Codes

A local object with this name already exists

The tree deletion is not finished

Required color was not called

This operation is out of scope

Node is managing this resurgence

Specify a different name for property

A superior antecedent was lost

There has been a naming violation

No attribute can be assigned to creator

A derogatory chain has occurred

There is no process to wait for

Inappropriate loop

Cluster base is possibly corrupt

An attempt was made to eliminate

Schema is not good

Number contains foul material

Constant probing

Cannot relieve tag inspector

Identical language

It is not permitted to call

Insufficient luxury

Parent without assigned child is not permitted

There is a problem with the pipe

Requested operation can only be completed with heavy object

Fatal error while passing the stub

Identity cannot be supplanted

Incompatible spool

Child already exists

Unknown has been exhausted

Cartridge hazing unavailable

Bad load

There is nothing to trust

Voice infection has stopped

Memory flap is insecure
Inaccessible dish
Alias must be tazed
Replication too short to endure
Illegal surgery
Invalid hook type
Clean child failure
Offering is denied
Breach without flag
Catastrophic leg failure
Recovery police are too complex
Too many joints
Pool is full
Hot key is already listening
Arithmetic is dead
Unable to impersonate pipe
Tree is locked

The Cow

Neighbors watch a movie on the cow,
beaming Lindsay Lohan onto her sweet fur.
You want to shoot them both.
You want an appletini,
but none of your children will leave. A boy
blows on the cow's forehead, pets her
with his short orange Cheeto fingers.

Sexually-precise cinema is discursive, you decide.
The cow, she is not you, not your story—she is
watching the film that is being on her.
Though she cannot know the plot,
her utters gently sway whenever
Lindsay Lohan kisses someone,
her downy, pinkish skin rippling in the haze.

If you were to aim at her dumb utters
with a gun in the night,
no one would see her blood
and milk leaking across the lawn.

August Complex Fire

Until he coaxes
the breath, the
not beloved, away, I am
wanting, holding his blood in my arms.
And I read on

the venomous periphery of California, where
my father dies and dies, flattening
out his forehead until it is a
penny.

What does he weigh, East Bay
Hills, Globe Rock? His weight is smoke.
Copper coils around his house,
and the sleeve and beard are similar and frightened
by their own edges.

The blaze progresses
against him as though his living
were scratched into the heat
of his sweaters, casting only
poor muslin shadows.

The Shape of a Downpour

People don't know what they want.
There are stairs on the side of the house
that no one uses, so I don't use them.
There's trash that someone will take out
as you might carry a mouse out by its tail.

I saw an old friend while returning
a dress at Ross's with its receipt
in the bag, though he did not
recognize me, and I thought of this
until I got home to the living room,
where most of my possessions still are.

I want to pick up the keys I've just
set down and drive back to put on
the dress, to sense *I* long enough so
the letter makes an umbrella over my head.

Skeet Shooting

Now that you've broken the clay, what's the point? The clay pigeon thrower spits its disks up into range, and Tiny Gomez stands there, poking them out one by one until they have all exploded. Red dust touches our eyes. Afterwards, his silence is so terrific, it beams itself into me. I say, "when I saw myself completed, there was one cloud over the city like a blimp over the pyramids. I don't know what violence is, anymore." His shotgun raises to nothing, then he says, "it's on the inside of your head, McCandless." And the bookie shakes his head, chews his cud and sucks his tongue; sun is in his semen. Rolling down his sleeve, the cuff's button floats above his wrist like a lemon in a surrealist painting. He is looking straight up, up at the trembling saucer which skates across our vision.

Crispy Duck

Anyone—

a collection of pilgrims
extending their fish towards

Europe's subtle knife
from which the ducks flee.

I look a long time at
him, shake my white jaw at

him, the young bird who fell

sick in his grave living
on pastoral ingredients.

His allergy was dark blue, like a murky chlamydia.

Here, our best waiter stands softly

pouring the golden sauce
as he thinks of loneliness.

The South Pole

Creamy drifts had jostled us off course.

He squatted in the snow and fit
together our delicate drawings. At this angle of the year,
his damp moustache cast a shadow on the squares
of geography we had figured,
using a compass and sundial.

Mawson was from a small Massachusetts fishing family.

He spoke only German.

Wo sind wir? Through the wind,

his words were so messy it were as though

he had no mouth. I asked him, *What?*

Mawson just squinted at me through the midnight
sun and noisy condensation on his moustache.

He had never duped me before.

The men were restless—Earth's gravitational force

was particularly felt, and some had been known to collapse
from magnetism. Once, we had come upon a small
reconnoitring party whose hands had turned inside out.

A sleddog was left in the mud with a tumor enlarged on her throat.

Our dogs were alive and wolfing down gizzards,

and one could imagine new landscapes

moving among their innards. My favorite, Yelena, was snapping at
wind sounds, her hindquarters quivering.

Aeneas, an oil-keeper, metered conditions while on skis.

As we'd been warned, unilateral cold softly dried

each man's organic menagerie:

the company knew only of the expedition

to plant our flag and not how

to part the soft tissue of the snow.

One hand on the glacier, Mawson stood in all his fur,

and I caught myself making stone from his eyes

and the creases of the expanse, blinding and dumb.

III.

Midwinter Examination

The Leg

By now, against the wind, the black hairs on the man's left leg were stiff with dried blood. He'd fallen from the cliffs above, and his horse had long gone. The laceration, stretching the length of his shin, had caused the entire leg to swell with torment. The instant he had sliced his skin, he'd felt almost nothing, though now its ferocity blinded him and shot up the left side of his body. The man fanned it with his hat; he could feel the leg cooking in the heat. Not only did the sun drill into his cavity with a spiraling blaze, but there was a compounded throbbing pressure from the depth of the wound.

Pain further enveloped his vision. The man looked down at the leg and chuckled.

"Hell, I don't want you." He spat at it. "Get off and eat steak and drink whiskey and find yourself a lover."

"But I love you," said the leg.

The man looked closer. "What?"

The leg was gone.

Rendezvous With Chloe

I spot wind at the Texas inn where
my brother plays charcuterie, his head glowing with sweat.

As he peers into the cheese, my oblong sister
offers her face to violent vegetarians

and prognosticates the part about the bison;
indeed, this bison will have denied paradise to us

before we have even eaten. At this moment,
I am washing my car with source material

and holding my phone to the squeegee,
which allows the foam franchise to perform at slower speeds.

To come to her aid seems counterproductive.

As I say, when making a picture, one must account for such things,

like light making noise on the tangerine,
or where traffic wreaths the salt zone.

Lead life as a vacuous snowball!!! I tell them at the table.

Their applause is silent. *Absorb the impassable!!!*

My Imagined Close Friendship With Jack Kerouac if He Had Lived Past Forty-Seven

After so many years, I see him walking across the restaurant in a long coat. When he sits down, he orders the string beans and stretches out some. *How's the old tank?* he asks, referring to my imagined spouse who I am planning to divorce. *How's Marty?* Marty is practically in the backseat holding his guts in with his hands, floor sloshing with organ slurry, but *he's fine*, I say. Jack turns for a moment so I am reminded of the way he looked when he was much younger—now his face drips like liquid conch. I smear butter from the imagined Oysters Rockefeller we share into the fabric of my dinner napkin, which is laundered by a weekly service. Jack makes a weak joke about finger foods.

When I knew him in his twenties, before he got deep into all that hippie shit, he would talk feverishly about driving across the country, sweat running from his temples. He invited me to go, but I got busy with the kids. Once he told me over the phone, *I write the same way a worm inside of a seagull's brain exists. Gloria, it's like if you kept playing chess in the park without ever looking up.* He would say stuff like that all through the night, and sometimes he'd come over with Butterfingers—he was wild then and handsome. As he drops bean after steaming bean into his open mouth, I stare at him and ask about his writing. *Oh that?* He scratches his light stubble with a buttered finger. *Nothing since the check*, he says and glances at the waitress.

Sonnet With Dog

In front of the Shanghai Tidal Wave,
my dog pisses at a height
just below the front window.
He is not a lapdog crazy
for the ankles, but a Dalmatian,
so his stream is as harsh as his bark.
When he looks away, I watch his pee
strike to kill the brick stained
darker every morning. His consequence
runs down the sidewalk
in a line between my legs.
Little Dalmatian droplets hit my shoes,
and I think of returning to the same
wall each day to massacre it.

Cher Ami

Her ashy plumage and small head
tossed from a palm
up to the middle of slaughter. The note on her onion
paper read:

*We are along the road paralell to 276.4. Our own artillery is dropping a barrage directly on us. For
heavens sake stop it.*

Men are lurching on the front,
their runners all gunned
down among ruin, planks, and flesh.

What if there had been
no third bird, no unblank air
with the difference of her color? No, not the right
question—what is the shadow in her beak
as she kites the death beneath her?

Midwinter Examination

When I meet the optometrist,
it is not the freckle
in my eye that concerns
her but what stands
in the middle of my house.

It's that, she says
while looking
through my head.

*It's taking your good china
but cannot manage*

stairs with all those saucers.

She prescribes pills so maybe
it will leave for some other,
nicer cornea.
As I drive home through snow,

each slash of wiper tearing
across my face parts
a violet wedge, which arrives
translucent as a baby's eyelids.

Understand

When they squirt on the jelly and press the wand around,
they communicate something through me.

On the screen, everything inside is a shadowy black and white:
my uterus is a flat and triangular void.
There is no sharpness or dimension

here, but still depth, and depth
without light, matter tearing into image.

My womb is black and yawning and waiting;
it is like sleep with no doors.

Understand: When I was twenty, a receptionist gave me a list of doctors nearby for when I wanted a baby.

What they project is coming from the inside, even though I thought

inside was the only privacy I had.

Entirely mine.

Understand: I don't want a child.

Three doctors are looking and find nothing inside of me,
which is
how I like it. I don't want to share.

On the inclined table, I don't let all of my weight down, as if there were already something in there,
as if, when I collapsed,
it would collapse with me,

the vacancy might fill.

What if there had been someone there
to be seen in the dark.

I think of what it must be to watch myself in an eternal room—

perhaps the same as watching someone undress,

then redress over
and over again.

I would see myself coming towards

myself; maybe

that's what a child is.

I almost say to the technician:

Everything my womb is I do not want.

Can I say that here?

Understand: My mother's yearning for children drove her to sperm banks and surrogates and
experimental drugs and radioactive injections and artificial inseminations.

Understand: I cannot imagine such a hunger.

Once I dreamt that I had a baby by accident.

He kept growing and growing until I couldn't hold him anymore.

Instead, I set him on the windowsill or stovetop while I changed his diaper
and wondered why I did not love him.

And what if he too dreams,
is dreaming about what a terrible mother I have been
already.

What if one day he comes,
and I have to apologize
for making the mistake
of him.

Understand: I have a twin, but she will never give birth.

And what could he speak through except through my body.

What a stranger he would be
and not just the glint of a baby.

Understand: On Thanksgiving, my mother gave birth to a blue brother I'll never know.

The thought of dividing myself for another, the discomfort
of walking, moving
our house (my body)
again when there are two
for one body
and not enough room.

I like it here—I like it empty,

I want to say.

I don't plan birthdays.
I don't cut sandwiches in half.

I like the looseness inside my cotton shirt, how the garment gapes,
not pushed out.

I want someone to explain
why I am seeing this darkness on the screen, why they find
nothing.

Unintelligible

1.

A friend tells me this
and that while she pinches a bluish
stream from her nipple (she is breastfeeding,
which I find unintelligible) for the baby.
Others have told me that a baby is a good
thing, but I think a baby is a circle,
aware of its intactness. *Are you
warm enough?* she asks without looking up.

Yes, I say, but realize that she means,
of course, the baby as she
watches him nurse,
almost like a calf
drinking from a big, docile camel.
The gaze draws between them
as they flood themselves
with each other, and
she, my friend, is a mirror.

2.

From the window, I watch a man leave
with no umbrella, so his shirt goes filmy
in the rain. But then his time is not mine.
His apartment overlooks hurried things
before the body can take them in.

You ask me blankly, while washing the greens,
*what did you do when you lived
in the country?* When I told you that
I wrote poems, you said
you strike me as a doctor-type.
No, never a doctor

giving orders and injections or lifting
up a child to set her
upon the crinkly paper.
You were like me, yodeling
in the ash of thought and getting nowhere.
I'd like to know what kind of woman
I must be so as to be a poet.

3.

Once, when you ran back for diapers,
I held him budlike above the stroller,
trying to understand his smallness.
My terrified fish lover, you called him
(this was May of '98), and I remember
his eyes following your distance,
his soft forehead turning until
I lost who he was. He is the stem of us
reaching out weepily in the street—
he wants you, only you,
his cries through a ruined tunnel
wander back to me.

4.

I love the phlebotomist—
she speaks dark, like a robe.
As she finds a vein,
I look away and think
of fields in a long gaze
moving like one face.
My son shares her lyric hunger

in the mornings when
his teething studs
my fingers with dents. Traitor,

his eyes almost say. But then
she's taken all the blood
she needs for her thin flute.

While Driving Past My Lover's House in August

A shiny Black
man on the road
turns to look at me.
How does the heart
know me the way
the heat knows
this man? Forwards
and nothing in flash like
a pen raised out of ice.

Note on Loving

I'm thinking about how I see love happening but I can't have it. I have love, too, it's just that I can't use it. It's like: here's a moment, here's a moment, here's a moment. He'd promise to talk but wouldn't for days. Eventually he'd put his head on my shoulder and say something like sorry I was being an asshole and then I'd say it's ok, because what could I say really? That was it. Or he'd cancel plans suddenly and I'd call him and call him and he'd finally pick up, and there'd be the rush of the car over the phone and he'd drive quietly for awhile in that shame and say finally I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. And it wasn't that he didn't mean it. Really, he did. Sorry was just all he could do.

Once on a video call he told me that he missed being a boy, which I've never understood, because he was always a boy to me, a boy with his rashness and his heart, it was obvious. I'll buy you anything, he told me, I'll write back to you. And I really believed him because he loved me, because he would just keep telling me that he loved me. I once saw an envelope in his bedside drawer with my name on it, but I didn't ask because it looked like something I wasn't meant to see. He never bought me anything. He never wrote me back.

But then there were those moments when he'd open the car door for me, when he'd set his hand on my knee, when he would raise one eyebrow the way he did, when his hair would be cold and fragrant from a shower and somehow even blacker. Lying next to him in the dark was peaceful but never comfortable enough to sleep. Peace like I mean he'd ask me what I was thinking about and at first I was terrified because I wasn't thinking at all, but then I realized that it was all just blank bliss, like he had taken off my head. He would snore horribly in a kind of startling way, and a little light would come through the burlap blinds and I couldn't see much of the bed, but his silhouette would surface in the haze and I would squint at his profile and eventually make out his stubble and dark eyelashes and I wanted more than anything to kiss him, but I didn't want to wake him up. I don't know how many times I did that. I mean, I knew I loved him then, even when he wouldn't let me sleep, because the love would just spill over out of me, there was so much and it was right there, he was so immensely there. Nearness wasn't enough, and I felt like I knew the entirety of him. I never missed a single thing when I was next to him, and even when I wasn't I still felt like I was there, it was still going on, it was still in me, and if he'd wake up in the night he'd find a new way to set his body against mine so exactly and that brilliant glow from him would start and I would try to hold onto it, hold onto him. And when I wasn't looking at him, when, say, he'd roll over in the depth of his sleep so his back was to me, I would look up at the stucco ceiling that was all grainy with night and imagine smoothing it out.

Then there was that last night, when I had to walk over a snowbank to get to his car door, and I wondered whether this would be the last time I'd see him. I had planned to come out and tell him everything before even letting him touch me, everything about how much I wanted him to call or at least apologize, but instead I opened the car door and he kissed me, and it was all fine. That was it. And the night was perfect, I mean, he was there, smiling and his eyes were so dark and wide and he was happy. I was seeing everything, I was seeing love, it was all right in front of me. I wanted to keep living in that, live just like that forever, to have him keep talking breathlessly as we walked past bright restaurants, his life pouring into me. I mean, I saw it coming and he did too, only he was afraid to say it, and then in the car I started saying things and so did he, or maybe he did first and then neither of us could stop, and the more agitated he got the faster he drove, switching through the gears with his palm, plunging through the dark. I was trembling and just kind of warm, almost fiery because there was so much spilling out and I didn't want to say it all even though it felt easy and even though it was true, and I never wanted to get loud even though I did, then finally he was quiet.

Love had begun so quietly, then it became obvious, enveloping, so when he finally parked in front of my house and I looked at him through the dimness and said I love you, it felt like I hadn't even needed to say it. When I said it, he squeezed my hand and said immediately I love you, too. And of course I believed him, but I don't know, maybe I shouldn't have. We'd left Nina Simone singing and his big hands were warm and coarse in mine, and I watched headlights creep up and slash across his face and I could see that he was crying, damp dark hair hanging in his face. I'd never seen him cry before. Maybe the embrace lasted longer than it should have, but we were hanging onto each other knowing that moving would mean change, and suddenly things were smaller and smaller, cold hair and the smell of a person, the smell of nothing but him. And then that was it. Closing the door and stepping through the snow and going up the stairs and into the house.

And the next day all I could do was look out the window at where his car had been or leave the house and step in the same footprints in the snowbank as I had the night before. It was this perfect, empty box suspended there, hanging in front of my house. I mean I could just stand there and look at love through that window, it's still sitting right there. I just kept staring at that glass box letting its shards cut into me, on and on all inside of me, because I didn't want to lose any of it, even the pain, because when you lose pieces of it, which you will, you're afraid, you're terrified that you've lost everything. But you know you have to stop. And I see that love over and over again, everywhere, just as clear and sharp, because it still goes on, and think of how I can't really stop it, how I can't have it or touch it, even after it's over.

Notes

- 8 “The American Standard of Perfection” takes its title from a guide first published by the American Poultry Association in 1874 and uses language entirely from the book. “The American Standard of Perfection” classifies and describes the standard physical appearance, coloring, and temperament for all recognized breeds of poultry, including chickens, ducks, turkeys, and geese. It is primarily used by judges at poultry shows and independent farmers.
- 10 “My Imagined Close Friendship With Humphrey Bogart if He Hadn’t Been an Alcoholic” is in reference to the film actor of the 1940s and 50s. Starring in *The Big Sleep* in 1946, Bogart’s heavy consumption of cigarettes and alcohol ruined his health, later causing lethal esophageal cancer.
- 18 “Error Codes” uses a lexicon specialized for Windows OS.
- 25 “The South Pole” takes its title from Roald Amundsen’s diaries during his exploration of the South Pole. In 1911, Amundsen and his party were the first to successfully reach the South Pole.
- 29 “My Imagined Close Friendship With Jack Kerouac if He Had Lived Past Forty-Seven” is in reference to the novelist who died in 1969 from an esophageal hemorrhage, which was caused by a lifetime of drinking.
- 31 “Cher Ami” takes its name from a female homing pigeon who was used by the U.S. Army Signal Corps 77th Infantry Division in France during World War I. In October of 1918, Cher Ami became famous for delivering a message from an encircled battalion during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. She replaced two other homing pigeons who had been killed while dispatched with the vital message. Although she was shot through the breast, blinded in one eye, and lost a leg, Cher Ami returned to headquarters 25 miles away, helping save the lives of 194 men.
- 40 “Note on Loving” was inspired was Lydia Davis’ short story “Break it Down.”