1,372 For Love

by

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For my family, who first introduced me to love

For Nate and Rose who made me want to perfect it

Special thanks to Elizabeth Willis and Martine Bellen
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Statement of Purpose
For Kurt Brown

“It’s dead,”
the man
in the audience
said, “That style
of writing
where women
treat their lives
like they had all
climbed Machu Picchu,
gone through AA
and found poetry
on the other side.”

It’s so peculiar
to me
how often
old men
proclaim God or truth
is dead—
like they have killed it
with logic,
superior aesthetics,
or their grey pea coats.

I confess,
I don’t know
the next wave,
but I do
enjoy sitting
on my pink silk sheets,
writing angry poems
like I’m doing now.
I like my body,
its curves,
how my hair
sticks to the sweat
on my shoulders.
I’m always
turning myself on,
like I’m a radio
tuned to God,
and putting an ear
to my speaker.
That’s what it is, what I can’t leave alone—not the unfolding plot of my particular life, but how my heart keeps pumping blood, the way food passes through my esophagus.

I am unhinged by the legitimacy of my life (and yours!)—the right of each body to exist, the simple poetry of just that.
Summer

After a while I understood that,
talking this way, everything dissolves: justice,
piñe, hair, woman, you and I.

—Robert Haas

Out Beyond wrong-doing and right-doing
there is a field. I’ll meet you there.
When the soul lays down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase “each other”
doesn’t make any sense.

—Rumi
Juice

Baby, if I had the money
I’d let you charge me
one hundred dollars an hour—
this makes you
sound like a prostitute
though I mean it more like
you could be my therapist
but sort of in an erotic way.

By “erotic” I mean
making things pleasurable
and exciting, juice,
me on your leather couch,
you defining me,
me licking your envelope,
you pushing mine.

I’ll leave the diagnosis
to you. At the very least I love
learning new words, like how in Hindi,
“to drink” and “to smoke”
are synonyms so in India I could tell you:
I want to smoke you in.
I want to drink you out.
Love

You constitute me:
call me a hippy
when I express
preference for compassion
over anger,
or a “sadomasochistic
femme bottom”
when I’m lazy.
These are etic terms
yet suddenly I find myself
chained to the bed.

The good news
with all this
is I get to treat you
as I would
my own eyeball,
or that space I like
between Nate’s shoulder
and breastbone.

All beings have been
my mother
so I really mean it
when I say
we make ourselves one body
to be held
with a vehement
and holy tenderness.
The Lovers

For Rose

After reading
a love poem about her
my audience asks
if we’re lovers
and I don’t
know what to say.

Do they mean
do I lick her pussy?
Do they mean
is her love like medicine
like a bed in winter,
an antidote,
an exception to the rule?

Only the third definition
of “lover” in the OED
mentions sex.
Number one:
“A friend, a well-wisher”
Number two:
“A person who loves god.”
And my personal favorite,
“A person who praises.”

Maybe we are lovers
then, after all
because my whole life
is one sigh of gratitude
for her life, and sometimes
when I remember her voice,
I fall to the floor
in praise.
The Bread Poem

I’ve found
the road less raveled

where I’m comfortable being
a smell you breathe in/or your ass-
hole when my finger’s inside it
or whatever we’re doing when

philosophical insight strikes: there is no
permanent self, e.g. bread is bread

until it is French toast and then
it’s French toast until it’s shit

White Tara’s second testicle!
My two consciousnesses, reverence

and brevity collide like tectonic
plates

Strolling at night
I am a well for every sun

Fireflies say take me to Canada
Take me now, oh

God, you’re quiet again
It’s raining

I want to be
the rain
One cannot read Derrida
while waiting

for pregnancy test results
I am gummy
translucent
stuck

between sign
and signifier

which is a strange place to be

Quan Yin, Goddess of Compassion says,
“French toast is French toast
and also bread,
you are worried you are pregnant
and you are also fine”

The and/or dash
is finally graduating!

Form is emptiness
except in
size zero jeans

Emptiness is form
yet I remember
my name
at tea
I ice myself
like gingerbread
oven so hot
gotta look good
enough to eat
pop these gum-
drop buttons off
with your
teeth
the nature of bread
is to be eaten
or discarded
and similarly
we are both
born
to die

life’s a waste
if mortality’s
not treated
as an opportunity
to piss your pants
at blooming flowers
but of course
I forget this
frequently
use me

not like bread

but fire
in leaving
bread
eats bread
Eucharist ghost
haunting
my dreams
savory
weightless
love stay close
conquering
no all
“we are too much one
too much each other”
earlobe soft
squishy plum
love, please lead me
wherever
you are
sleeping
with open eyes
Before you go, google,
“Parting is such sweet sorrow.”
No wait, google,
“A thousand times goodnight.”
You read your part!
No, my line is
“by any other name
this is confusing, sexy
when I wiggle on you.”
My sweet, tis almost morning
I have a 9am class
please discard your condoms
on the way out.
I wonder
what light from yonder window
breaks my ankle
as I fall?
It is the East, and Juliet
is my son, my daughter—
we’re all one family
with unclean hands.
Give me new language
please, so I can knit
my love a castle of pleasure
where we speak to each other
in our own words.
Until that time I need to sleep.
When I awake
I hope you’ve become a Montague,
a rose, or any other name
alive and fresh
as this love feels.
Gangster

*And if you don’t want me
There is still no shame, only
White legs of lightning, thunder.*

— Maggie Nelson

Wild dreams:
I am a housewife
vacuuming love lines
into your carpet.
I want warm soymilk with honey,
annihilation grey as this morning.

“It’s a relief,” Maggie writes,
“To know what you want.
To want.” Well, to be honest,
I want you. This desire
clogs lungs.

I’ve learned something today:
greed’s a gangster. He sends henchmen
to rough me up, make me think I owe him.
But I don’t owe him.
I can ignore the rings on his fingers.
I can live without fear.
The Wailing Wall
For Nathan Ratner

Touching after one month’s absence
your skin’s a foreign delicacy
brought form Israel.

Naked, you kiss my heart
like the Wailing Wall,
pious lips pressed to my chest.

Separation seeks union
so today we are holy,
my body’s your Temple
Mount, fragile velocity
unclosing you.

As the Hasid
prays by lament,
so too you honor
how I hold my heart
open like a duvet cover
for emotion’s
vast comforter.

Between my cleavage and neck
is solace, the loon cry over water.
Every far-off sound is bringing him to me.  
The walls’ shivering is his hand on the doorknob.  
Wind is his bright body coming to fill my bed.  
I’m tired of leaning away from myself  
to memories of skin, or to the future  
where I will finally be happy.  

Like a lighthouse I am both here and there.  
I cast my sad beam from stone, seeking sinking  
ships (look! The sea captain  
is clutching a rusted locket! The sails  
are torn like failed love letters).  

I want to be still, to gather  
my skirts about me and stay  
in one place: my heart’s own warm country  
whose native language has 37 words for taste,  
1,372 for love, and growing.
The last time I saw Dave
I said, “There are as many kinds of love
as there are moments”

He laughed at me for that,
then two weeks later
walked into the forest, got hit
by a falling tree branch, and died

I still hold to what I said, Dave:
“I love you” has more meanings
than there are lips

* 

When Nate says “I love you”
kissing my shoulder, “I love you”
    kissing my clavicle, “I love you,”
    kissing my knee, “I love you,”
“I love you, I love you,”
falling over and over like rain

First “I love you’s,” electric

“I love you” goodbye
    to Rose
    before hanging up the phone

or an echo: “I love you too”

“I love you” to cover up mistakes

gratitude “I love you” with relieved sigh

yearning “I love you,” wanting to be close

“I love you” to my father feels strange,
body tense from the words

with my mother, “I love you”
wraps around like a sticky tea leaf

“I love you” to ex boyfriends means “let’s be civil”
overcome with adoration, “I fucking love you” can’t be held back

“I love this car!” means something quite different

than “I love you” to Grampa in his last days

*

Dave, when did I first tell you?
And did you?

“I love you” then was cement
for drifting bodies

Now in this empty house
I whisper “I love you”

(oh your unique being, oh your proud, clear face)
Monsoon

Urge and urge and urge,
always the procreant urge of the world.

—Walt Whitman
More

I’m lost
in your mouth
help me find
my way out.
Also, did you know
long poems
really piss me off?
I have no attention span
past the tenth line,
would rather
get in
get out,
get on
with my life
of lattes, loud music
and go.
Quick fixes are best
except with you—
you can spend
all the time
you want on me
and more.
Alarm Clock

What do you want
when you kiss me?
I ask.

He says:
to keep
kissing you.

Desire is deceptive
and perpetual
like this.

I wish
he were a door
I could walk through
instead of
a mirror
knocking me back
into my own
loneliness.

Bodies
might lead
to the soul
but a soul’s thirst
can’t be slaked
with pleasure.

Eros divides us
from ourselves
but don’t forget kindness.
Don’t forget
to look them
in the eye
on the street
and smile:
the necessity
of compassion.

Choosing
this kind of love
can feel
like burrowing
through concrete
but it’s also
what wakes me up
in the morning
to brew my coffee
and tie my shoes.

What, you might ask
could she really
know of love
being so young
and a human
just like everyone else?
Only
that it
has brought me here
a river
carrying me
to this
my ocean.
Playtime!

For Nate

What’s that game that grownups play
called “Love me until you die? I’ll be the Velveteen Rabbit:
you can snuggle me till my skin comes off.
Or hide and seek! I’ll hide from the world in you
and when the IRS finally finds me
it’ll be your turn. You can run off forever, leaving me
to scour the empty house, jerk off sadly in the hallway,
ready or not here I come!
The thing is, I can’t get enough of your wonder.
Or maybe it’s how you bite my neck and call me names.
Either way, I’m totally in love with you
but can you please stop taking my toys without asking?!?.
If not, I can play by myself, you’ll see,
make up my own game involving my fingers, chocolate,
a temple courtyard filled with lanterns,
and more stars than I can count.
Republic of Bed

our country
population 2
official language
baby talk

here you call me Pear

I call you regulated names
denoting infancy

Our bureaucracy is
I open emotionally,
self-sacrifice,
you squeeze
my butt, emit
preverbal noises

someone’s selling
exit visas
to the “real world”

can’t leave now though
today’s the festival
of stay in bed till four,
sliced kiwis, coffee

and local specialties:
orgasms with eye contact
I don’t like
the wind. You
like green peas and I
don’t, even though we are together like
peas in a pod. Your boy face
like a smooth chapatti, the kind I like
to nibble with paneer and beer. I like
when we share, but not when I take
your name, which really means you take
my name away. I take this to mean
we are like Beniffer, a liger, an apple pear. Take
what you want from this, I like
when I am home alone, wind can’t scatter me. I take
sugar with tea, am large, contain
multitudes of dreams.
Is the art of wondering where the birds are now?
Honey bees have flown to Neverland.
I turn hot soil, soaked leaves.
Blackberry roots invade neighbors’ yard, and
honeybees have flown to Neverland.
What’s mine and what’s yours?
Blackberry roots invade neighbors’ yard, and
this is what I know while gardening:

What’s mine and what’s yours
is rust under a trowel.
This is what I know while gardening:
waste can become flowerbeds. Hope

is rust under a trowel.
I turn hot soil, soaked leaves.
Waste can become flowerbeds, hope
is the art of wondering where the birds are now.

First line by Robert Kelley
Wake up with a sequin
from last night’s salwar
stuck to my breast.
In the studio
I’ll bare it all
while they
draw my butt
with a personality
unto itself— wide hips
shocking
in pastel green.

I want a world
of universal truth—
what you see
is what you get.

In Lee Miller’s photographs
a breast served
bloody on a plate—
a response to modeling.
I understand
her desire
for ugliness
the vanity, desperation
in wishing
the world would look away,
then pulling down your robe
and stepping
into the spotlight.

In the poetry
of Reetika Vasirani,
anger’s hidden
beneath bangles,
ironic epigraphs
about women.
“I eased
into the nights arms,”
she wrote,
“forgot my language,”
before she stabbed herself
and two year old son.
What if she had said
“I am livid”
what if she had said
despite me
are making me
go crazy! Because
she was so beautiful,
because
she could not say it,

I will: fuck you greatly,
patriarchy, fuck you
to all the men
who’ve groped me
on the street
or in the bedroom
and fuck you
to size zero beauty.

Here is my mastectomy
my angry breast
on a plate
my rightful claim
to happiness.
Winter

We had what the others
All crave and seek for;
We left it behind at nineteen

I feel ancient, as though I had
Lived many lives
And may never now know
If I am a fool
Or have done what my
karma demands.

—Gary Snyder
Anicca¹

Then one day I stopped craving him. It was the trees instead, pine needles silver as Christmas tinsel, sun over snowy meadow, clusters of frosted cranberries on their branch, and icicles shining so bright

I thought the moon was caught in a doorway.

__________________________
¹ In the Pali language, “impermanence.”
Breakfast

This morning,
wind takes snow by the hand
and twirls her in a white dance.

Everything I’m eating is white:
plain bagel, banana, egg sliced
into six neat slivers.

Slowly, dawn licks pink onto night.
To Make Peace, Move Closer

Insect swarm
thick around a street light;
I enter you
like a needle,

arms
raised in surrender,

a valentine.

My valentine, surrender!

I will move close
to your cruel mountain,
your ornate shrine.
she says sometimes evil
wells up

I want to love all parts of her,

how she omits facts,
turns on those she loves
like a missile reversing track
to strike home

instead, hiding from malice
under my desk, hands to neck

still, I remember
cooking pea soup, her bed draped
with gauze canopy,
and feeding catfish at the Maha Bodhi,
watching them writhe, their teeth, whiskers
slimy black bodies fighting
for soaked bread

the Indian heat
Michael and I walk Delhi’s black river. Dark and flimsy as baby bats, kites circle in an orange sky. I want to hold his hand but he is twenty years older than me, and he doesn’t touch young girls, something about ethics. We cross a tire bridge. On the other side dogs chase bulls. I bemoan my life. He does not reassure me. Trash in riverbed shimmers like Christmas wrapping paper. Skeletons of pujas (marigold petals) half-buried.

Loose sand fills
a depression
of earth
he says jump in

We drink chai by the highway, wicker chairs. Michael recognizes a famous Rinpoche who pays for our tea and calls me “ani” even though I am no longer a nun. His entourage swallows him. My shaved head, renounced vows, boredom luminous and calming, children missing limbs.

I have lost
even resistance
to being lost
I.
You say hello with your hands.

II.
Attraction: when objects
are undeniably drawn
to each other—the physical
law of nature guiding
heat to the sky. Like the moon
I am circling you, silver,
distant, moving
around an inaccessible body
in space.

III.
“How shall I withhold my soul so that
it does not touch on yours?”
-Rilke

IV.
There is nothing I need.
Fallacy and a Wild Garden

Eros is thinking
your lover is more worthy
of embrace

than a stranger.
In this way
eros is fallacy, and a wild
garden where I see God
in your face.
Religious tropes
are useful, they imply
an original, transcendental
like earth, sky, stars,
or they are not
ploys at all,
but marrow.

I know the inside of bone
without a scalpel—
through experience.
That’s how I calculate
degrees, and how
I learned the violin
is a metaphor
of all this
from God.
There’s a story of a peasant who asks a Zen priest about the nature of reality. The priest says, “How are your children? How is your wife? Your cattle? Your neighbors?” If you’re not in touch with the simple truth of people, you’re missing the point.

Time was, I couldn’t get you to meditate. Like a six year old who’s played too many video games you couldn’t understand why I wanted to pray.

Now you are leading the masses, serious in a Zen robe, unyielding as a temple of black marble. You tell me that once I was your teacher; I wonder, though what was I teaching you, years ago lost naked in bed sheets sticky with longing, thinking I knew so much about how life should be.
Open Field

buds bright sweat

As singing bowl
is sound
sun shows form:
green spring
and somewhere, blue

jays. Then the bull

presses grass,
overturns soil.
He snorts soap
onto daisies.

She can feed

even him.
Guru Worship

“... that period of bright faith, which is at first an intoxicating rush of falling in love”
—Sharon Salzberg

I’ve only known
him an hour
and he’s renamed me.

At his feet
a child’s smile
stretches me
into surrender.

Black hair, “favorite” films,
these pieces of self
are gone. Only

faith: my body
offered up
like a tea light,
unthinking and bright.
Against the Stream

You can’t be too careful
about defining terms,
I’ve learned that much
in school.
When I tell him
“I love you”
it means
I want
to own him.
It means
I love him
like a desert,
or like I love sorrow—
holding it close
and cursing
its palpable heat.
This is the closest
I’ve ever come
to slapping him
with the cool
backside
of my hand.

It’s so easy
to swallow the stories
of love
told by others:
that eros is bittersweet,
and yet
it will save you.

Still, something quiet and precious
moves within me,
calling me home,
and when I arrive there
even for one moment
I know
what it is
to move against the current
like the gold dish
the Buddha tossed into water
the day he stood
by the river
and prayed,
“If this floats upstream
may I attain
complete liberation,”
then
hurled the dish
into the foam
and
watched
with shock
and relief,
Nature
defy herself.
I began seriously thinking about love my sophomore year, when I fell in love in a confusing and challenging way around the same time as I began a Buddhist meditation practice. What I learned both by falling in love and through meditation was that my ego is not stable and solid. Loving and spiritual practice were (and are) simultaneously terrifying and joyful, and because of them I began to question my basic assumptions about the nature of reality. Around the same time as I fell in love, my professor Mathew Sharpe gave an assignment to write a non-fiction personal essay. Because I was interested in what it means to say “I” love “you,” I wrote an essay called “Saving Chloe: Problems of ‘I’ in Romantic Love,” a feminist critique of Boris Vian’s Foam of the Daze. In this essay I used Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage, Buddhist philosophy, and feminist thinking to problematize romantic love as described by Vian. Writing this essay was a fulfilling and rewarding exercise. It was also the first time I engaged with love intellectually, and I realized there is a vast and profound history of intellectual (and not just spiritual or emotional) investigation of love. That summer, with the help of the Olin Fund, I researched loving-kindness meditation and wrote a non-fiction piece about the role of self-love in sexual assault recovery.

While living in a Buddhist monastery in India my junior year, I was continually confronted by the belief that romantic love is detrimental to spiritual development because it is based on desire, attachment, and greed. One of my teachers had been a monk for ten years before disrobing to marry a woman. He is now married with two children. During my stay at the monastery I asked him if he saw any spiritual benefit to married life, and he said “No.” Despite his rejection of romantic love, this man was incredibly kind, friendly, and warm. In Theravada Buddhism, this friendliness is called “metta” or loving-kindness. It is “unconditional love” or “unconditional friendliness,” the simple will for others to be happy. This is different than the Western notion of brotherly love or even agape because one can direct metta toward oneself, animals, and plants, in addition to people. Much of my poetry is concerned with the grey area between romantic love (“eros”) and metta. Although my Buddhist teachers say attached love is the “enemy” of metta, I have to believe romantic love contains unconditional friendliness within itself. Ultimately, I am interested in how these two qualities (the selfish and selfless) can coexist.

My poetry is blunt and direct, obsessively interested in Buddhism, the body, the self, love, and surrender. Billy Collins, often maligned as a “non-poet,” describes his poems as “hospitable.” “I want them [the audience] to waterski/ across the surface of the poem/,” he writes, “Waving to the author on the shore.” Like Collins, I want my poems to be hospitable to those who aren’t schooled in literature.

My first serious engagement with poetry in college was with “political” poets such as Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Amiri Baraka, and Adrienne Rich. Reading Giovanni, in particular, showed me that poetry could be frank, funny and could speak openly about sex. Before reading her, I did not know poetry could use colloquial language and still touch upon issues of power, personal intimacy, psychology, and selfhood. Lorde and Rich influenced how I choose to approach gender and express intense emotion, especially Lorde’s essay “Poetry is not a Luxury,” which argues that poetry is a powerful tool for change. Although I admire Baraka’s style and
uncompromising passion, I differ from him ideologically in a crucial way. In “Black Art,” Amiri Baraka writes, “Let there be no love poems written/ until love can exist freely and/ cleanly.” I say, invite and perfect love so that love can exist freely and cleanly. Write a lot of love poems, but make your love strong. Think about how to love. Make your love and your politics identical. A friend once told me “Love is a social justice movement.” I agree with this.

This year my work has been influenced primarily by the poets Maggie Nelson, Bernadette Mayer, and Eileen Myles. These poets are self-consciously female, irreverent, witty, surprising, and pensive, all qualities I identify with myself. Nelson, Mayer, and Myles were particularly helpful in showing me how to infuse energy and movement into my poetry. The poem “More” is a direct result of reading these women. For inspiration on traditional “love poems,” I read a lot of Kenneth Rexroth, Robert Kelley, Rumi, and Pablo Neruda. Neruda was probably the first poet I truly adored, and in my opinion, Rumi writes the best love poems of all time; his fusion of the spiritual and erotic, and the intelligent and tender is what I aspire to attain in my poetry. I also read Zen poets like Ryokan and Ikkyu, whose heavy influence can be seen on the final section, “Winter,” which is the most dispassionate section in the collection. From Zen poetry I also borrowed the tradition of naming the collection’s sections after the seasons, although I use Indian seasons (Summer, Monsoon, Winter) because of my personal connection to India.

Even though I started out writing what I called “free verse poetry” (direct, conversational poems like “Against the Stream” and “Alarm Clock”), in the spring I experimented with discipline and form. I began a daily writing practice for the first time in my life, working in the morning after meditation, and branched away from free verse, writing pantoums, haiku, and haibun (“Gardening” and “Tibetan Colony”).

In this thesis, I am not trying to write the perfect “love poem,” nor am I putting forward a love ethos. Rather, I hope to show the problems, ruminations, delights and contradictions of love. For this reason I write mostly from, and about, personal experience. When discussing romantic love, I always write “eros,” and I use “love” only to designate pure love, or metta. At no point in this collection do I use the word “love” to mean eros, except in the phrase “I love you,” in which case the definition of the phrase is given. I hope my readers will think about their habits and preconceptions of love as they read my poems.

The Hollywood (and literary, for that matter) model of romantic love is terrible. There are so many other ways to love than boy meets girl, followed by sex, betrayal, reconciliation, and marriage. I’m tired of hearing that love is “a scorpion bite” or that, in the words of Charles Bukowski, "Love is a fog that burns with the first daylight of reality."

As I write in “A Hitch in the Plan”: “Give me new language/ please.”