Portrait of My Ex with Giant Burrito

EILEEN G'SELL
“The long-waylaid fairy godmother of sycophants and sad men, bossy girls and scrappy children has come at last around the mountain of disinherited All-American dreams. We didn’t know to hope she’d be hilarious. Or, that Sappho and Amy Schumer, James Tate and Whoopi Goldberg would be riding her white horses pouring yolky shots of sunrise G’Sell is daring us to take.”

—AMY WRIGHT
EILEEN G’SELL

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with Giant Burrito
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To Matthew, Jeremy, Zak, Josh, and Mikael
If I had it my way, I’d marry all my exes, and at the exact same time. This would be a wedding you wouldn’t forget. I’d have four different gowns, each a different white, each designed by a fashion house in keeping with each relationship (Galliano, Rodarte, Vivienne Westwood, early Jil Sander, surely no Wang). Instead of flowers, we would line the aisle with dominos carved of bone. No organ, no priest. Crème de Menthe Altoids thrown in the air. Family would be invited, and all their exes, too. We would dance in a dusty ballroom to four different versions of Etta’s “At Last.” In place of platinum, rings of fire. In place of cake, plutonium. If you’re one of the grooms and reasonably concerned that you’ve nothing to wear to this event, rest assured that a gratis suit and tie will be provided, each hand-tailored to fit your build, each a different foreign pastel. But you should also keep in mind, this is if I had it my way. I didn’t back then, and I still don’t now, so, really, you have nothing to worry about.
FOLLOW THE GIRL IN THE RED BOOTS

This place is weird, sexless, and white.
This is the place that I came from.
This is the place from which I came.
Plenty of people have.

I am tired of “Du bist wunderbar.”
I am smart as snow on Valentine’s night.
I am a place of silt and lonely anecdotes.
Plenty of people are.

Forget what the head waiter told you.
Forget every plate you forgot to lick.
Forget dessert and disconsolate girlfriends.
Plenty of people do.

I have tried to redress December.
I have softly unbuttoned my Cacharel.
I have circled the dawns with erasable ink.
Plenty of people will.

Follow the girl in the swollen shoes.
Follow the map that she made you.
Follow the soar of her certain song.
Plenty of people won’t.
to know that the grass sweats more than we do
that people wear perfume that smells like grass

the long dream of a true downtown
will wrestle us together

in the darkness in the music in the moon and in
the walls

in the music is the knowledge is the
legible persuasion

is the only way to Canada to follow
cryptic laws

where will you go and what will you do
and who will you be without me

your own imperious unicorn
and no one around to show

LOVE POEM FROM DETROIT
CATASTROPHE WAS QUITE POLITE

There used to be more to eat in here
than the house of your sugar-free sisters.
You were not wrong, and were not startled,
to find this corner of earth so sweet.

A crusty schoolbook explained the angles.
Handsome letters hid under the desk. Joy dense
as a welcome snow, you framed my name
in official pink.

Our bliss is prettier in writing
off the lucent face of God, you said.

But after absence, aspartame. Because after all,
you have left this chapel. You have left
the curtains always open.
Men have died for less, and I, for one, never asked for more. In the Pacific Northwest are a thousand restaurants, healthy girls, and slutty food. Trees that shade new money humbly greet you on the interstate; intricate tattoos peek from sturdy cotton sleeves. “I consume five thousand calories a day,” he said the day he met me. We spoke about weddings and Sly Stallone; we ranked our favorite dogs by breed. In the morning he kissed my forehead before leaving me for hashbrowns. But he didn’t. Or he couldn’t. And the trees never changed a thing. “Endings are my expertise,” I whisper to the ushers. They are bored with their professions. They are picketing our aisle. In the beginning, God said, “Let there be light.” It was the first—and best—joke ever told.
IMPERVIOUS TO AVALANCHE

Waiting for light to shake
only always

would we smile, you ask
whether I know the way

that Archimedes died,
time’s impatient blade

obeyed, not proof enough
for Leibniz. I wish to sleep

in perfect snow, die of sweet
collision, halfway to a heavy sky

and infinitely held. You say
you think I’d live through this,

you love as though it’s proven.
An excavated craving

for precision keeps me warm.
We curve as though

contrived of light, climb
as though it cures us.
Only and always hidden
blind, with sturdy shovel lifted.
This is the land I love.

When I love it is like I am dying
to make a very moving story.

When I move it is like I am dying
to make a story that you love.

Skyline, stranger, bullet hole of light,
they say there is nothing
but unjust clouds to break us

into morning. Not the past,
a promise, a polygraph tricked.
Not bad ibuprofen, not Namaste.

We escape to perfect, empty streets,
angry women. We never escape.

Clint, your very name
sounds like scowling at the sunset.

Do I feel lucky? Only if you do.
In Japanese, my name means love-bell, tender clang, soft alarm, a heart murmuring deep in the night its intimate metal insults.

That I am rapturous about Disneyland, anything old with a well-lit gate, I admit to anyone listening. I admit

a lot of things misunderstood as wise or colorfully tragic. I am trying to revarnish the clown. I don’t feel sorry for children or the ancient ways

a lover gets lonely. “Call me sugar, cause I’m bad for you baby. Call me tomorrow and I’ll ice your ears.”

Chocolate almonds, perfect snow, Electrical embezzlement.

As heaven’s deft ringing winds its way around the cables the coldest sweet talk we have ever heard.
BLANKET PRAISE

I will shut my eyes like a sad man.
I will sign my name in Cyrillic.

They were giving out roses
at the store today. I picked my flower
and went. And all
the children wanted
to know me, and every
Amanda thought me insane,
and sure as the sun
shot out from the East,

the sycophants got with it.
Invisible they were and reluctant
to swallow. Snow at the hemline
soft and bright, another spindled season.

In the time I took with him
in the greenhouse, three or four languages
left us for good.

You do not have to talk about it.
Okay. I mean, thank you.
The way Japan understands
that cute can be strong, cogent,
and misleading, I want to love as though
I slurp from your bowl of anodyne and goat milk.

May the best cloud save us. May the months
of no daylight map all things. To have taken advantage of
cinnamon beaches, rainy nights in a warm sedan, to have known
that there are better places to leave your heart, or shoes, or both,

“We sojourned here, and as heroes, wept for days
that did not warrant grieving.” The world was more real
than anyone could ever call reasonably possible.

But symmetry gets easy. The wind okays
our common friends and takes them out to dinner.
Skies clear the new dessert that no one gets to try.

So that they might soar from the throat of logic,
iceland cream headaches, and the color mauve, birds are allowed
to feather trees with luck and paper money. A girl
with a reddish pirouette is about to stain your sleeve.

And if you are just a warm surface
in the end, she will love you, just the same
as a star shoots itself in the glowing foot, as do we
at the threshold of box-store bliss, minds intent on ruin, lilacs,
and the way to make sure these are never affordable.
I want an RC cola and a quiet man.  
I don’t want to talk, not tonight.

And all the immiscible cash in the street  
couldn’t make me talk to you.

And all the immutable red from my sleeve  
couldn’t shake the neighbors.

I got mean veins, but a kind heart.  
The kind keeping trying to talk to me.

The kind of hair you could braid  
into a noose is spilling down your pillow.

What I spread is not paternalism,  
is not your father’s father’s pride.

I am not your father, but I am cinematic.  
I am not your father, but I’ll save the day.  
I am not your father, but maybe I should be.  
Not everything is easy.

The flowers I bought are ash in the sink  
and do not look like flowers.

You talkin to me? I didn’t think so.  
And the angels grind their last dulcet notes.
ODE TO MIKE TYSON

Sometimes I wanna say no
just so I can say it like you do.
As though nothing can be affirmed,
as though you can’t run into the ocean.

No. The appeased aren’t onto us.
No. A small, triumphant church.
No. A dog chasing a glove
on a street I can’t remember.

Freedom is only lonely
when you let it be.
The heat precedes the fire.
A boy precedes the heat.

Sometimes a lake is really a sea,
your prize pigeon beheaded.
Unmask my pet illusions.
Devastate the world.
It was nobody’s winter, the shoes, the shoes that brought us here were burned today.

My mouth mispronounced meat.
Spoonful of sea salt and a pillaged lime.
There were grape leaves we couldn’t get to, an attic without a home, and all the time I kept saying, “Whatever they tell you, don’t forget.”

You forgot. The ocean swallowed. And my tongue pretended to care. Or maybe it was the stupid ruse of my own impossible quiet. Hey, kiddo,

hey, God, did you think this was going to happen?
The ladies selling lotion found us really, really funny.
Everything obvious smelled of ore and fingerprints from Toronto. If you want to know the truth, know the numbers that I come from, know empiricism, speed, flowers buried in the dark. I was never afraid of the silent, see. I had sacrificed the handsomest months of my life. The shore cleared out so slowly
I couldn’t believe that you went with it.
Like a blind child who takes the arm of his brother,
his brother, who is also blind.
Actually—no. I know how to glow,
and my laundry has never been fresher.
The aftermath’s delicious
repetition spreads around us
in a place no duke or dove can free.

So easy to get lost here and lose your name,
snow on the eyebrows wet and dying,
so easy to arrive at your destination
with no one to greet your pretty green gloves.

And the dense, perfect city
you see in your dreams?
The cupcake burning
the top of your mouth?

Everyone’s daughter knows more than you do
as everyone’s wife crawls out from the woods.
Gilded tears dry out your plans
and gerbils haunt your childhood.

With smooth hair on a slow train,
I knew I’d never see you again.
What I knew meant very little,
“Was all I meant to know.”
MANIAC

Blue void. Dirty feet. A fast friend, a foundling.

There are a thousand ways to lose and a million ways to win.

Follow me, my heavy case of out-of-order knowledge.

the past its awful beauty no more awful than before,

run ahead and dream it is not possible to catch you.

There are 65 words for true and fewer words for always.

Because you are legitimate I cannot love you gently.

Because you are forever so far off, I flip the page.
MELODY, SPEED, AND A MAN WORTH MANNING

I have known them as flashing thunder stealers, echo-fed
and friendly. I have called to mind some thirty-plus purples and dare
to pin one close to your ear. My lanky statistician, so stern, so storm-ready,
a thousand lighted houses rush across the night to greet you. Little-known apothecaries lure you to the door.
I would stumble if so doing meant the sky would smell of oranges or that somewhere someone watching would see fit to paint a portrait.
But listen to how dulcetly I play the game of catch up. Time is on my side and finds direction in my frill. Roulade of lucent rationalization, ocean sad with conjugated rooms, the schooner is shifting; the race is not rigged. The season of fallen birds that I was too in love to notice comes as close to home as the wind allows.
Count yourself among
the counted. Say you know me,
and say it again.
It was criminal
in its cleverness. Women lost
their memories and grew sullen
before their times.

Beats me,
said the envoy. It’s your
telegram: deal with it.

I did and started wearing
fruity antiperspirant, wrestled while tipsy
with a St. Bernard. Silly early on
for Hawaiian-flowered logic, I anchored all
investments to the neighbor’s water heater.
That almond hour he calmed my tongue
with wintergreen ovation. We rolled
the windows lower and lower, cruised
like there was no tomorrow.

Ultra-smoothing aftermath of never
before, decadent prolonging of
tell me again . . .

We won’t get out of this, I warned.
Far off a martyr snickered.

I’m gonna wish that man
right outta’ my hair. Put some clothes on
girlie. Nice ones.
LIFE AFTER RUGBY

A brave dog will teach you to swim
and Jim will fix your furnace.

Song will wake the spiders
you have hidden in your sleep.

Your arms, lovers, long at the wrist
will wrestle with a hubcap.

Change dropped from another’s suit
will glisten if you keep it.
FOURTH OF JULY

Maybe you didn’t know this about me, but I have a canoe. I can’t operate it alone, but I do have paddles. If you have my number and want to go, just call me in the next couple days. We can share some sunscreen and I’ll tell you stories. How last week I went out on a dinner date with a man from Montreal. He was in town to check on planes—to “proof the planes,” he told me. He was an aeronautic engineer and he paid for our sangrias. His father had died, I learned that night, found Jesus toward the end. “God is like crutches,” the Quebecois said. “Does that mean you don’t believe?” I admired the scar above his eyebrow. Later we split a fancy shake. It was his idea. I didn’t sleep with him. The night was so hot that we never held hands.
From sun to snifter, heat is tricky.
Bossy girls walk best in boots.
Like the way, in childhood,

I had wanted to die
for something greater than a mind
ungrounded, it is not enough

to stare at someone I would never
sigh for, and silly to assume
that my sophistries suffice.
But this is my block and these

are my neighbors, numerous
but not unkind. To take me
at my word would mean rewording
what they take me for.

Today will still be
undrinkably warm.
the birth of an engine soft in your ears embellishing its provenance, a starless past that proves irredeemably forgone; orange moon, safe hands, a sudden pedal swooning; a shift into someplace dark, sincere, a solid daring duty. when else does the soul go slack, slick its bangs straight back to see? what right have we right now to say that time takes sides to taunt us? to hear the stir of a suburu and call it to the night, to steer the heart with a hardened palm and quantify its relevance, to stake one’s claim on an unpaved place and pray that it is worth it—isn’t this what the wonderful women who didn’t raise us were always raving about? this leather and heat and soft seat wishing, this rain and a midday singing so long, this more than 3,000 miles more than alaska more than my mother; this drivetrain talent for transaxle searching, this engine turning and turning again, this torque approach to front-wheel living I was never your slushbox beautiful nothing I was agency movement clutch clutch clutch I was 500 hp gold and you know it the place it was I came from on that deathless night I came
I could have set you free. If almonds hadn’t made me skinny, the world would look a lot wholesomer. Hold on to my bag of ruffled streetmaps. Here, a passage. Waterfall waffles. There, a pile of homeless bottles. A world less easy would finish me. I would deserve this, to know great weight, to kneel, to fall from the skirt of the city.
HA HA UNICORNS

To marry is to compromise; I hate compromise. I hate compromise and I love unicorns. Marriage is saying “I do” believe that this is it, forever. Unicorns do not exist yet people love them anyway. Marriage very much exists yet none contain unicorns. Unity is fallacy but faking it is fun. You never have to fake it with a unicorn, like you never have to fuck in a solid marriage. For some, to fuck is to compromise. For some, unicorns are far away. For some, marriage is a public decree: “I do not believe in unicorns.” And for those who divorce— with shaking manes, with glittery “never-again-will-I”? For them, too, unicorns are out. I would like to believe in unicorns; I would have to believe that you are one. If you are it means in fact that unicorns very much exist, which means that marriage is the flagrant disavowal of a fact. Given this, marriage sounds a lot more fun. Given this, compromise doesn’t sound so bad. Given this, I would love to have you forever and never hate what I’ve never had.
I’ll make it up for you: two wings
on the way to happiness or some other
distant color, the ghost that goes the same way
we do, ghost-blue and lofty-headed, a little bit
lost and dangerous. This is faith, like a pheromone,
floating through the attics, the top floor of a ruined
heart, filled with bits and pieces, a peaceful
project for engineers, a ghetto-fab apartment.
These are the final minutes before we land
the deal of a lifetime. What else would you like
me to tell you, world? I’ll make up a plan you can’t
refuse, a trashy jaunt through the wilderness.
In this happy time for headphones, plane of tame
entendres, I plan to make you mine within
the limits of a logo. This cabin-frozen love
for cockpit, for always, for pilot-lit deliverance
basement deep, these wings
will not collapse overnight, not now, right
in the spring of things. This skin, chilled
to the musk of touch, will ribbon,
will cloud the alkaline sky.
LIKE GOOD NEWS FROM A PRETTY GIRL

It was, my friend, a good story. Very, very, very romantic. Several people died. It was black and white, and then it was color. A man got sad, and then he got angry. We all got laid, agreed it was fun. What you thought the story was really about, it wasn’t. It was insuperable. A dangerous kid in a rainbow coat kept skating past the market. It freaked us out, always did. Matthew was making a card for his Mom. At this point in time we played “Runaway Bunny” on repeat everyday. Blue sky, brave ears, little thing of whiteness. Where will you lead the patient reader when all of your words are gone? To Holland? Hollywood? Over the plains? When Laura Ingalls was still quite young, her family crossed the prairie. Pa shot a bear and they all ate it. In fact, it was her favorite meal. When I was small I avoided teddies. Animals can’t talk so why play with them. People do, so dolls make sense. Evelyn says there’s a sweet seam to sadness, that I should try and let it be my guide. What I want to say is, I would love to do that! I would love another story that good people loved. So I find that seam and I choose to pull it. My favorite dress starts to fall apart. I can never go anywhere ever again, spend weekends sewing on buttons. And all the while I keep telling my friend, I am sorry, but I refuse. I refuse to make this beautiful.
I am, as always,

eventually your ribbon house,
your soggy sugar cone, the wrist you break
with a swollen heart on a walk with another
person. I am all the time consumable. Clarified
butter in a bowl of milk. Free

like the haircut, sunset, blowjob, that makes you feel
a bit better about yourself. Girls
making out with hitmen slowly gentrify
the city. Women making out with handbags
start to billboard glassy homes. Maybe

you don’t notice this. Nowhere
dear do you make demands. Downtown,
at nighttime, a boy spinning fire
fills the trees with ghosts

you believe in. A broker hangs
her hat on her head; the crumbling lion
loses an ear. The rain wet coupon
you thought had expired swirls its way
down the playground steps.

There are places where the precipice
of reason is the reason. Hold on
to my wreckage or, please, let me go.
Right now I am on a plane and there is nothing mundane about it. Cumulus looms, surrounding sky. Surround Sound in a dimming place. Laughter, Twizzlers, moving light. What was then was then, is very important, but not so much that we can't have now. Gertrude Stein loved tiny words, she caressed the nouns till they came in waves. Outside my plane is a Care Bear house, and nobody cares but me. Rainbows have never bloomed from my abs, but at times I have felt that way. One night I heard your manly voice and imagined your boyish sleeping. That night I slept so happy I felt as though I could vomit stars. Have you ever felt that way? Do you love the life you waken? My best friend Jake knows a lot about culture, at least the kind that counts. Sometimes we talk about Hollywood Squares and ardently swap our childhoods, how you stare at the blacktop flat on your stomach stunned at how it smells. You wonder, how badly have I been hurt? Will somebody come to check? What I’m trying to say is, being this high doesn’t hurt my ears anymore. I have heard the call of ambivalent birds and still fall fast asleep. I have stared at a word like laughter until I know it’s spelled correctly. I have left the curtains open, always, and I have faced the face of the kindest man.
ANNIVERSARY

I have not been charged for the closet that was filled with birds, silt, gloves, and the dullness of petals.

Yet my heart was clean from the very first. My hands were ready and opened like gifts. In sleep, the sound of hours rushed across the street to ravish me.

I have made light of many things and that’s why we can see in here.
Sometimes I like to have feelings just because they are so impractical. They are electric-green Mary Janes on a hike and they are my favorite color. Sometimes they make my calves sad, but my heart is tauter for it. I know a room of Russian balloons with only room for you. These balloons are tough—they’re Russian—but they’re still balloons in the end. You pick the best and feel its pull; your hand will not be orphaned. Everything extravagant is pulsing down your veins. Why scale the night with satin cord? Why sprint the sequin cliff? In the end, your horse will fall, your quest will fail to carry. The stars once found so helpful will start to feel so cold. And yet that yawning sea of sheen envelopes all ambition. Shiver not, ye scrappy child. Nothing solid saves.
I LOVE YOU LIKE A GOOD GAME OF SKEE-BALL

First of all, I never said that.
Second, if I drove a stick
I sure didn’t do it for Jesus.

The manuscripts are warm and the salary
depressing. Behind the stars are blue
and bold, hearts we steer toward bluer skies.

No one knows the speed of joy, and no one
speaks of sinking. I lived the way
a sailor lives, and I’ve seen swallows

starve. For I smell of love
and Suavitel, for I love the way
the sailor loves. For every second

past, a silver captain listens. If this
is the gift, and this, the giver,
then this is the sea you were meant
to receive. This is the rain
you were meant to forget,
this, the star that will not forsake you.

My handmade hypotheses are legions
on, yet no one speaks of drowning.
If I have drowned, then let it be
with you, for you, and fallen birds.
First of all, I never said
that it wasn't something worth saying.

You were the game
I was meant to lose. But the game
was sweet, and soft, my friend,

and my hand still warm from the weight of it.
Eileen G’Sell’s poetry can be found in *DIAGRAM*, *Conduit*, *Ninth Letter*, the *Denver Quarterly*, and the *Boston Review*, among other journals. She teaches rhetoric, poetry, and film at Washington University in St. Louis, where she received her MFA in creative writing. Her first chapbook, *Euphoria Takes One for the Team*, is available through Dancing Girl Press.