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Featured Poet

Denise Duhamel

The Ex-detective

When I couldn't find you
I went looking for clues. The psychic said
he saw your last girlfriend
hurling a glass at you while you bent
with your hands over your face.
I bent over the secret box you'd left behind,
not wanting to open it. I finally picked
at the yellowed tape that slid off
in one strip. I hovered over the ticket stubs,
souvenir coasters and pressed flowers
before I could actually touch them.
I hovered over the letters and pictures.
She was a redhead as I was a redhead
when I first met you. She held a bottle
of vodka between her toes. There wasn't much
furniture in the apartment you two shared.

She looked bitchy. I studied her first
and last name on the return address label
of her love letters. She wanted to know:
Why did you leave her? Why wouldn't you
at least give her a call? I googled her—
she's a professor now, teaching math
in the Midwest. She gets crappy scores
on ratemyprofessor.com.

The students complain she is hard
and unforgiving, two emotions
I sometimes feel towards you.
While we were married, you never talked
about your past relationships
which I thought was classy. But now
I wish I knew if she really threw
that glass. And, if so, what kind of argument
had come before. The psychic said
even as a kid, you'd been abused, that a maid
had punched you, but you were too scared
to tell. All you ever said to me
was that you loved your nannies,
the way their scalps smelled
like lilacs when they held you.

I held the pictures of your ex
above the shredder and said,
“You have done enough damage,”
whether she did or not.

The psychic was trying
to construct a narrative
that made sense. I was trying
to do the same. You were missing,
but what was the crime?

The psychic's prediction
that you'd be back was wrong.
He said you'd never hurt me
but you did. You were missing,

but who was guilty?
Your ex was Miss Scarlet
wielding the lead pipe in the study.
Your maid was Mrs. White
polishing the candlestick in the kitchen.
The psychic was Professor Plum
fumbling with rope in the ballroom.
I was Mrs. Peacock in the Study
holding what? The phone?
A photograph of a young woman
frowning? A New Year's Eve
noisemaker smudged with her lipstick?
I destroyed the evidence. An x-ray
you'd saved of her wisdom teeth
shredded by the whirring blades.

* * *

The Scream

You are bald, in solidarity
with my mother who has just
lost her hair in a freak accident,
with all the cancer patients,
and alopecia sufferers, with the receding
who are healthy but wish
they still had their curls. Watch out
for the pickpocket behind you
and the hotdog vendor ahead.
Don't trip on the homeless man
wrapped in a blue wool blanket.
You are not alone with your dark
polka dot nostrils and oval mouth,
hollow even of teeth. I am waiting
for you, Scream, with my fluid hips,

my long skeleton hands. Screech
and puff your dread into me. I will be
your blowup doll, your twin.

* * *

Cold Stone

I thought I wanted to get laid. I even said it aloud a few times to friends, as a joke and as a not-joke, asking advice from women who had gone through bad breakups. Days before my divorce was finalized, I blew off the dust on some condoms I found in the drawer of the nightstand and slid them into my purse, into the side zipper under the tissues and lipstick.

I just want to get it over with, I said to my friend who invited me to read at the college where she taught in the Midwest. She was driving me to the hotel the last night of my stay. *You know, do it with a grad student from Alaska or a distinguished scholar from New Zealand, someone I'll never have to see again. I just want to have sex one more time in my life and then I'm done.*

My Midwestern friend, recently divorced, said she had the perfect person for me.

What?

He saw you at your reading last night and told me you were hot.

The expression “hot” made him sound young and Paris Hilton-ish. My friend would have never used that word.

She explained that she hadn't bothered to tell me this because the guy was no good, basically a cad, a ladies' man, a male slut. If I were vulnerable and looking for love it would be a disaster. But if I just wanted to get laid, this was my guy.

He's a potter, not a great artist, but he works with clay and his hands, if you know what I mean.

She reached in her book bag for her cell phone. *I can bring you to his studio to see his work. He's such an egotist he won't think anything of it.*

I looked at the dashboard to see the time: 9:05. I had to be get up at 6 the next morning to catch a plane.

Wait, wait, I said.

Come on, it'll be fun. I'm sure he'll take you back to the hotel or even to the airport in the morning.

I'm not packed, I stammered. And I haven't shaved my legs.

We'll stop by my house, my friend said. I've got a Lady Schick.

I need to brush my teeth.

I have a couple of new toothbrushes. Remember, I'm divorced too.

I started to cry but forced a laugh to cover it up. My friend asked if I was OK. When she saw that I wasn't, she took me for ice cream instead.

Maybe it's just too soon, she said. We sat at a small round table trying to push our plastic spoons into our too-hard treats. You have to be prepared.

But I am prepared, I said, pulling out my condoms that flapped obscenely in Cold Stone Creamery.

My friend took them out of my hand and folded them neatly. She discreetly inspected the Trojans and said, *Honey, I'm not judging your sex life or anything, but these expired seven years ago.*

* * *

My Strip Club

In my strip club
the girls crawl on stage
wearing overalls
and turtlenecks
then slowly pull on
gloves, ski masks
and hiking boots.
As the music slows,
they lick the pole
and for a tantalizing second
their tongues stick
because it's so cold.
They zip up parkas
and tie tight bows

under their hoods.
A big spender
can take one of my girls
into a back room
where he can clamp
her snowshoes.

Denise Duhamel
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Denise Duhamel's most recent poetry titles are *Ka-Ching!* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), *Two and Two* (Pittsburgh, 2005), *Mille et un Sentiments* (Firewheel, 2005) and *Queen for a Day: Selected and New Poems* (Pittsburgh, 2001). A recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, she is an associate professor at Florida International University in Miami.

from **Poet's Bookshelf: Contemporary Poets On Books That Shaped Their Art**

poet Denise Duhamel

Ai, *Cruelty*
Bill Knott, *Becos*
Sharon Olds, *Satan Says*
James Tate, *The Lost Pilot*
Stevie Smith, *Collected Poems*
Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems*

I picked the six books that were most important to me very early on, when I first “knew” I wanted to become not only a writer, but a poet.

I suspect that Olds' first book, *Satan Says*, is on many poets' short lists of essential books. For me, this book gave me permission, more than any other, when it came to subject matter. Olds' bravery at tackling the taboo continues to astound and humble me.

The Lost Pilot, also a first book, dealt with very difficult raw material and I'm still very moved

by the title poem. In addition, Tate's surreal bent in such poems as "Epithalamion for Tyler" which contains the lines "you go to the stockyards // buy a pig's ear and sew / it on the couch..." appealed to me as well. He could be rooted and "out there" at once, in the same book—sometimes in the same poem.

One of my favorite poems of all time (and one I find to be the most heartbreaking) is "The Closet," by Bill Knott, which is found in his book *Becos*. Like Olds and Tate, Knott also was dealing with extremely difficult subject matter—the death of his mother through the eyes of a young boy. The closet, empty of his mother's clothes, is full of hangers that the speaker jumps "Gropelessly to catch them to twist them clear, / Mis-shape them whole, sail them across the small air / Space of the closet..." Looking back, I was mesmerized by the way poets could transform the horrors of life and make something beautiful of them.

Nearly twenty years after first reading Ai's poem, "Child Beater," I still teach the poem almost every semester. The narrator in the poem is the child beater and the narrative is especially chilling. It's another way to get, again, to difficult subject matter—by speaking not from the victim's point of view, but instead the perpetrator's, thus, visiting the dark side. Ai manages more empathy for the battered child in this poem than if it were written in the child's voice.

Stevie Smith and Dylan Thomas were both very important to me in terms of word play, humor, and verve.

