

Everyone Writes Love to Their Beloved

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Everyone writes love to their beloved. I can't think of an example of a present-tense love written in third person, though maybe that's because I haven't read enough. Or because I so easily forget what I read. Or because I avoid reading about love. But it hurts to detach from him, like I'm bending myself back to where I was before the dry reed of my heart and hope was soaked and curled around ~~you~~ his frame to harden capable of most anything. I think of writing about my dad as he died, or being raped, or the ambivalent months before deciding to divorce. Then I wrote in scene; reluctantly first person, terse and willfully past tense--moments brought into the present edit by painful, drawn-out edit. State the facts and get out. Now, I want to be as close to him as I can. Immediate, direct: to write into his mind and heart; imagine him reading and feeling a twist, a pull, a swell maybe as I tangle my thoughts into his. This is a step back, a chance to think without the distraction of proximity. Like the flush of pleasure when my skin touches his and the desire arching my back when we're close. Like looking in his eyes and feeling my heart beat in response. I'd like to describe it better, the physical changes that happen when I'm close, but I can't without cliché. If this was less new maybe. If I was better with words. I should start reading more about love.

I'm wearing his sweatshirt. He's on a trip and I miss him and I'm wearing his yellow hoodie on my bare skin. I've never done something like this, not since I was a teenager, and then I never had a lover or a boyfriend long enough or good enough to want to smell them when they were gone, to stay intoxicated by the thought of his body moving inside this fabric. I feel a little insane, like someone's going to see me wearing his sweatshirt and scream as though I'm wearing

a jacket of human skin. *That is not yours! Take it off!* I've never been in love before, not like this, not really. I was married for seventeen years. Before then, when I was so young, I had more lovers than I could count. But this is new. His name is Adam.

The way my brain rewired in the days after my children were born terrified me. Although they were seven years apart, the experience was the same. The chemical bath of oxytocin and endorphins woke me to them a thousand times, let me put them again and again on cracked bleeding nipples, bent me in a stupor over the smell from tops of their tender heads. I was no longer moved by the pull of my own tide. I was irrevocably bound to the stir of their cries and the rhythm of their breaths; I listened to the in-and-out of air through their noses and mouths praying that the impulse to draw another and another would fire correctly.

I tried to cultivate this kind of love with my ex husband. What is the pheromone cocktail that pulls you into someone else? Can we fit with someone our body doesn't love? When I was young, in bed with him before morning sickness pulled me up, I stared at his sleeping face and tried to learn him: every turn of skin, crooked eyelash, freckle, how his beard grew and did not grow. Tried to make him a part of me and etch him into my brain. But he felt my eyes on him and startled. *You're so intense.* He laughed as he turned away. *You look like a frowning manatee.* *Don't look at me.* So I didn't.

I used to lie in bed when I was a kid imagining lines of energy and love going from me to the other people in my house. My mom stood in the doorway of my room, a silhouette in the hall light, and I felt like I could burst or weep because I loved her so much. Her hand was on the doorknob and she must have been trying to get me to sleep for a long time, or maybe I wouldn't stop talking. I've felt exhaustion that makes me harden to anything but the silence of my kids'

sleeping bodies. Maybe she was feeling this exhaustion, the kind that pulls you down so low, when I asked her if she felt the love going from me to her and if it came back to me and she shook her head and shut the door. I listened to her footsteps wondering if my love was wrong and why it felt like it was spooling out of me as she walked away.

I don't like to feel stupid. It feels like we should know better when we care about someone more than they care about us. Babies are safe. They need our complete love and devotion to survive. Maybe this is why there are so many documentaries about how parenting kids with attachment disorders wrecks the parents. We watch the derailing family; what it feels like to love a kid who can't love you back. We're fascinated because kids are supposed to be a given. You give love, they take it, they give it back. Safe. A sure thing.

I fought the transformation as I fell in love with Adam. I am so fresh in this, just three months of laughter and orgasm and relief/release/revelation, and am flush with every biological response meant to bind me to him. He texts me throughout the day every day since our first date asking how I am, what I'm up to, telling me he loves me. I stopped by his place after work to give him a blowjob because I love the way he is and we talked about ownership and belonging and Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract* as I laid on his chest and traced his skin with my fingers and breathed his smell. We play and laugh talk and fuck and make love and go on dates and our lives are starting to integrate and my kids ask for him to be around. When I feel so grateful that I want to burst--and sometimes I do weep--I often feel foolish. I was able to sustain this gratitude for almost a week recently without folding back into doubt and fear.

I haven't heard from him this morning, he's visiting friends in Seattle. I imagine he is surrounded by women there, beautiful women, women who like what he likes. I think of his body moving

through crowds. I think of his body being watched by women, I think of him smiling and laughing with them and the way he didn't resist touching me on our first date when I wanted him but didn't know how to reach past my seventeen years of being asked to look away. Yesterday I imagined him having sex on the floor of the apartment he stayed at, imagined him telling me and me not caring, trying to convince myself it would be ok which is a lie. But today I am waiting to see my ex-husband's parents who are visiting from the south, his dad who will not look at me, his mom who still cries and shakes her head at the awful mistake we made in splitting. They embody every reason I divorced in some shadowed way or another but I'm grieving that they put me in the "bad" category. I tried to learn generosity from them. I did learn what a mother can be, how she can care about and for and strangle her children out of love. For his parents, there are two kinds of people and I am just one more disappointment to add to the rest of the world. So today when I think about Adam waking up hungover on the floor of that apartment with a head that is not mine on his naked shoulder I feel sick and weak. I feel faithless for thinking he might do that now, go back on what we're building. Part of me wants him to so I stop imagining what it would mean if he turned away from me and didn't turn back. He says we are human and we will make mistakes and it terrifies me.

We talk about being together for a long time. Maybe the rest of our lives. I know this could be true because I have learned things in the years and years and years love rattled the insides of my ribs with nowhere to go. And because my brain and heart is grooved with his name and I will claw with everything I have to make it work. The hard thing is letting myself be in love on days I have to see Michael's parents and I think maybe the weight of divorce will crush me.

Adam loved the woman he broke up with a month before he met me. Before her and a few others, he was married for ten years and had a son with his ex-wife; I can still hear the hurt from

the way that love skewed over time. I stopped looking at his Facebook photos when I saw pictures of him and his ex-wife and young son on trips and at family parties and imagined what he thought life would be and the grief of disillusionment. His most recent ex were together about a year, shared an apartment, and he was still deeply in love with her when she told him she just wasn't anymore.

I slept with another guy a month ago. When Adam and I started dating we were both just looking for sex with someone we could talk to; we were hurt, limping from love that broke down and fell apart, feeling stupid for loving in a way that couldn't be returned. I was set on being single, mostly, for a few years to get back on my feet. Maybe I could recapture the promiscuity of my youth without self-destructing. Feel desired, a safe version of being loved. By the time Adam's ex was spending the night at his house between her old place with hi and a new one, he and I were getting serious. But he wasn't done being in love with her; he wasn't going to have sex with her or get back together, but he wasn't healed. I couldn't handle it, I asked him to tell her no, he refused.

I went out with Sean the night Adam's ex stayed over. I told myself I was hanging with Sean as a friend but I knew he wanted me; he bought me dinner, we went back to his place, had a couple beers, he played techno off vinyl on a digital turntable. I explained I was with Adam but he was letting his ex stay with him even though I didn't like it and I felt disrespected. That technically we weren't in an open relationship but we had been at first, when we just wanted someone to fuck. That I didn't think he'd be that upset since he didn't get jealous like I understood jealousy. And we had sex. It felt good, like sex does with an earnest lover. I didn't love Adam less; I didn't love Sean at all. The chemistry wasn't there. I didn't want complication.

The next day, when Adam asked if I did it to hurt him I realized I did and that the complication I couldn't handle was the vulnerability of being in love. I was capable of stunning self-deception, ready to let him be done with me and grieve my stupidity. Ready to not have to deal with a human being who could hurt me. His ex wasn't even staying with him until the next night. He had been alone.

We went back to his apartment to talk things out. As he paced he told me he was upset that I had broken my word that we wouldn't sleep with other people, that this was the week his son went back to his mom for most of the year and he didn't have my support. My heart beat fast as I watched the tension along his neck and arms, watched his tired green eyes become bloodshot and teary, listened to the strain in his voice. He was surprised I thought he would break up with me; I didn't understand unconditional. I had just made things complicated. So soon, still hurting, so reluctant to be vulnerable to another he had taken on whatever I would bring. This is not the way I was treated in the past. This is not the way I will treat people I love from this point forward. I cherish him, who he is, what we have. I can't effectively communicate this commitment to him in words; how many times have both of us been lied to and made promises we couldn't keep?

Adam is a funeral director. He was called at three am one night I slept curled next to him, moving his body away from mine and into the home of a family grieving the death of their loved one, offering condolences, letting their grief wash over him and absorbing it with his bowed head and clasped hands, carrying the body away. I don't know if he embalmed it that night. I laid awake for awhile after he left, thinking about his seamless movement from life to death and back again. When he returned, I woke to his skin against mine, a hand along my hip, my neck, a long kiss. My hand on his neck, moving against him, breath fast, moaning, a gasp as my legs spread and he is inside me, we are moving together and I come easily as I do with him, shivering

underneath with my head tucked on his shoulder. I am half dreaming and wonder if he needs my warm skin and small moans in his ear to bring him back to the living.

He says he is human and we are still hurting and we will make mistakes. Some days I wait for that, for bad news and aftermath. But I can't hold my breath around him--my heart beats too fast, my eyes dilate, my blood vessels and pores open to him. I have to breathe: my body comes to life when we are close. Adam and I give each other a place to practice love the way we always wished we could. When I am afraid, when I feel my love for him enough to weep with gratitude, I will let my body speak for me. For as long as I can, I will wake to him a thousand times, fall into a stupor over the smell of his skin. I will be irrevocably bound to the rhythm of his breath. Let his name carve itself into my heart.