

Classic Poetry Series

Denise Duhamel
- poems -

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Denise Duhamel(1961)

Duhamel received her B.F.A. from Emerson College and her M.F.A. from Sarah Lawrence College. She is a New York Foundation for the Arts recipient and has been resident poet at Bucknell University. She has had residencies at Yaddo and the MacDowell Colony.

Duhamel's earliest books take a feminist slant, beginning with *Smile* (1993) and *Girl Soldier* (1996); *The Woman with Two Vaginas* (1995) explores Eskimo folklore from the same perspective. Her best selling and most popular book to date, *Kinky* (1997), marries her bent for satire, humor, and feminism in portraying an icon of popular culture, the Barbie doll, through an extended series of satirical postures ("Beatnik Barbie," "Buddhist Barbie," etc.). Two collections that followed, *The Star Spangled Banner* (1998) and *Queen for a Day* (2001), move more broadly into American culture to display the same satire through the lens of absurdity. Later work is formally various with pantoums, long surreal explorations of American life, and list poems (*Mille et un sentiments* [2005]). *Two and Two* (2005) and *Ka Ching* (2009) also have the same tone. Her poetry has been widely anthologized and has appeared in *The Best American Poetry* annuals.

Duhamel has also collaborated with Maureen Seaton on *Little Novels*, *Oyl*, and *Exquisite Politics*. Of this collaboration, Duhamel says, "Something magical happens when we write - we find this third voice, someone who is neither Maureen nor I, and our ego sort of fades into the background. The poem matters, not either one of us."

Duhamel names as some of her influences Lucille Ball, Roseanne Barr, Andrea Dworkin, Alyson Palmer, Amy Ziff and Elizabeth Ziff (who make up the singing group Betty), and the 70s television heroine Mary Hartman.

Denise Duhamel was married to the Filipino poet Nick Carbò. Duhamel now lives in Hollywood, Florida, and teaches creative writing and literature at Florida International University, and in the Low-Residency MFA at Converse College in Spartanburg, SC.

Ai

There is a chimp named Ai who can count to five.
There's a poet named Ai whose selected poems Vice
just won the National Book Award.
The name 'Ai' is pronounced 'I'
so that whenever I talk about the poet Ai
such as I'm teaching Ai's poems again this semester
it sounds like I'm teaching my own poems
or when I say I love Ai's work
it sounds as if I'm saying I love my own poems
but have poor grammar. I haven't had a chance
to talk much yet about this Japanese chimp
who can arrange pictures in order of the number of objects
contained in those pictures. I just read about her
for the first time yesterday, the fifth of January in the year 00
which I imagine would be a hard concept
for Ai the chimp. It feels weird writing 00 -
I had to do it when I wrote my first check
of the year 2000. I think we should proclaim
this year as the year of Olive Oyl, who
is also an 00, but with letters instead of numbers.
I was in the Koko fan club for a while since I love gorillas,
but then I moved around so much, the newsletters
and requests for money stopped coming.
I wonder if Ai the poet is happy she shares a name
with a gifted chimp. To me, the most amazing thing
about Ai the poet is she hardly ever
writes an 'I' poem about herself.
She crawls into the hearts
of the cruelest men and writes about what
it is like to be them, while I mostly
curl in the bellies of the shattered women.
There's no evidence that one approach
is better than the other. There's no evidence
that chimpanzees use numbers in the wild.
One expert said that perhaps chimpanzees
count the number of predators they see.
I read on the web that John Wayne actually said,
'I don't feel we did wrong in taking
this great country away from them. There were great numbers

of people who needed new land,
and the Indians were selfishly trying to keep it for themselves.'
So maybe chimps do count their enemies, to see if they
have the advantage, but I'm a romantic -
I like to think that Ai the poet and I mostly count our stanzas.
I like to think Ai the chimp mostly counts her bananas.

Denise Duhamel

Buddhist Barbie

In the 5th century B.C.
an Indian philosopher
Gautama teaches 'All is emptiness'
and 'There is no self.'
In the 20th century A.D.
Barbie agrees, but wonders how a man
with such a belly could pose,
smiling, and without a shirt.

Denise Duhamel

Buying Stock

'...The use of condoms offers substantial protection, but does not guarantee total protection and that while there is no evidence that deep kissing has resulted in transfer of the virus, no one can say that such transmission would be absolutely impossible.'

--The Surgeon General, 1987

I know you won't mind if I ask you to put this on.
It's for your protection as well as mine--Wait.
Wait. Here, before we rush into anything
I've bought a condom for each one of your fingers. And here--
just a minute--Open up.
I'll help you put this one on, over your tongue.
I was thinking:
If we leave these two rolled, you can wear them
as patches over your eyes. Partners have been known to cry,
shed tears, bodily fluids, at all this trust, at even the thought
of this closeness.

Denise Duhamel

Crater Face

is what we called her. The story was
that her father had thrown Drano at her
which was probably true, given the way she slouched
through fifth grade, afraid of the world, recess
especially. She had acne scars
before she had acne—poxs and dips
and bright red patches.

I don't remember
any report in the papers. I don't remember
my father telling me her father had gone to jail.
I never looked close to see the particulars
of Crater Face's scars. She was a blur, a cartoon
melting. Then, when she healed—her face,
a million pebbles set in cement.

Even Comet Boy,
who got his name by being so abrasive,
who made fun of everyone, didn't make fun
of her. She walked over the bridge
with the one other white girl who lived
in her neighborhood. Smoke curled
like Slinkies from the factory stacks
above them.

I liked to imagine that Crater Face
went straight home, like I did, to watch Shirley Temple
on channel 56. I liked to imagine that she slipped
into the screen, bumping Shirley with her hip
so that child actress slid out of frame, into the tubes
and wires that made the TV sputter when I turned it on.
Sometimes when I watched, I'd see Crater Face
tap-dancing with tall black men whose eyes
looked shiny, like the whites of hard-boiled eggs.
I'd try to imagine that her block was full
of friendly folk, with a lighthouse or goats
running in the street.

It was my way of praying,
my way of un-imagining the Drano pellets
that must have smacked against her
like a round of mini-bullets,
her whole face as vulnerable as a tongue

wrapped in sizzling pizza cheese.
How she'd come home with homework,
the weight of her books bending her into a wilting plant.
How her father called her slut, bitch, big baby, slob.
The hospital where she was forced to say it was an accident.
Her face palpable as something glowing in a Petri dish.
The bandages over her eyes.

In black and white,
with all that make-up, Crater Face almost looked pretty
sure her MGM father was coming back soon from the war,
seeing whole zoos in her thin orphanage soup.
She looked happiest when she was filmed
from the back, sprinting into the future,
fading into tiny gray dots on UHF.

Denise Duhamel

Delta Flight 659□

—to Sean Penn

I'm writing this on a plane, Sean Penn,
with my black Pilot Razor ballpoint pen.
Ever since 9/11, I'm a nervous flyer. I leave my Pentium
Processor in Florida so TSA can't x-ray my stanzas, penetrate
my persona. Maybe this should be in iambic pentameter,
rather than this mock sestina, each line ending in a Penn

variant. I convinced myself the ticket to Baghdad was too expensive.
I contemplated going as a human shield. I read, in open-
mouthed shock, that your trip there was a \$56,000 expenditure.
Is that true? I watched you on Larry King Live—his suspenders
and tie, your open collar. You saw the war's impending
mess. My husband gambled on my penumbra

of doubt. So you station yourself at a food silo in Iraq. What happens
to me if you get blown up? He begged me to stay home, be his Penelope.
I sit alone in coach, but last night I sat with four poets, depending
on one another as readers, in a Pittsburgh café. I tried to be your pen
pal in 1987, not because of your pensive
bad boy looks, but because of a poem you'd penned

that appeared in an issue of Frank. I still see the poet in you, Sean Penn.
You probably think fans like me are your penance
for your popularity, your star bulging into a pentagon
filled with witchy wanna-bes and penniless
poets who waddle toward your icy peninsula
of glamour like so many menacing penguins.

But honest, I come in peace, Sean Penn,
writing on my plane ride home. I want no part of your penthouse
or the snowy slopes of your Aspen.
I won't stalk you like the swirling grime cloud over Pig Pen.
I have no script or stupendous
novel I want you to option. I even like your wife, Robin Wright Penn.

I only want to keep myself busy on this flight, to tell you of four penny-
loafered poets in Pennsylvania

who, last night, chomping on primavera penne
pasta, pondered poetry, celebrity, Iraq, the penitentiary
of free speech. And how I reminded everyone that Sean Penn
once wrote a poem. I peer out the window, caress my lucky pendant:

Look, Sean Penn, the clouds are drawn with charcoal pencils.
The sky is opening like a child's first stab at penmanship.
The sun begins to ripen orange, then deepen.

Denise Duhamel

Ego

I just didn't get it—
even with the teacher holding an orange (the earth) in one hand
and a lemon (the moon) in the other,
her favorite student (the sun) standing behind her with a flashlight.
I just couldn't grasp it—
this whole citrus universe, these bumpy planets revolving so slowly
no one could even see themselves moving.
I used to think if I could only concentrate hard enough
I could be the one person to feel what no one else could,
sense a small tug from the ground, a sky shift, the earth changing gears.
Even though I was only one mini-speck on a speck,
even though I was merely a pinprick in one goosebump on the orange,
I was sure then I was the most specially perceptive, perceptively sensitive.
I was sure then my mother was the only mother to snap,
"The world doesn't revolve around you!"
The earth was fragile and mostly water,
just the way the orange was mostly water if you peeled it,
just the way I was mostly water if you peeled me.
Looking back on that third grade science demonstration,
I can understand why some people gave up on fame or religion or cures—
especially people who have an understanding
of the excruciating crawl of the world,
who have a well-developed sense of spatial reasoning
and the tininess that it is to be one of us.
But not me—even now I wouldn't mind being god, the force
who spins the planets the way I spin a globe, a basketball, a yoyo.
I wouldn't mind being that teacher who chooses the fruit,
or that favorite kid who gives the moon its glow.

Denise Duhamel

Exquisite Candidate□

I can promise you this: food in the White House
will change! No more granola, only fried eggs
flipped the way we like them. And ham ham ham!
Americans need ham! Nothing airy like debate for me!
Pigs will become the new symbol of glee,
displacing smiley faces and 'Have A Nice Day.'
Car bumpers are my billboards, billboards my movie screens.
Nothing I can say can be used against me.
My life flashes in front of my face daily.
Here's a snapshot of me as a baby. Then
marrying. My kids drink all their milk which helps the dairy industry.
A vote for me is not only a pat on the back for America!
A vote for me, my fellow Americans, is a vote for everyone like me!
If I were the type who made promises
I'd probably begin by saying: America,
relax! Buy big cars and tease your hair
as high as the Empire State Building.
Inch by inch, we're buying the world's sorrow.
Yeah, the world's sorrow, that's it!
The other side will have a lot to say about pork
but don't believe it! Their graphs are sloppy coloring books.
We're just fine—look at the way
everyone wants to speak English and live here!
Whatever you think of borders,
I am the only candidate to canoe over Niagara Falls
and live to photograph the Canadian side.
I'm the only Julliard graduate—
I will exhale beauty all across this great land
of pork rinds and gas stations and scientists working for cures,
of satellite dishes over Sparky's Bar & Grill, the ease
of breakfast in the mornings, quiet peace of sleep at night.

by Denise Duhamel and Maureen Seaton

Denise Duhamel

Exquisite Politics□

The perfect voter has a smile but no eyes,
maybe not even a nose or hair on his or her toes,
maybe not even a single sperm cell, ovum, little paramecium.
Politics is a slug copulating in a Poughkeepsie garden.
Politics is a grain of rice stuck in the mouth
of a king. I voted for a clump of cells,
anything to believe in, true as rain, sure as red wheat.
I carried my ballots around like smokes, pondered big questions,
resources and need, stars and planets, prehistoric
languages. I sat on Alice's mushroom in Central Park,
smoked longingly in the direction of the mayor's mansion.
Someday I won't politic anymore, my big heart will stop
loving America and I'll leave her as easy as a marriage,
splitting our assets, hoping to get the advantage
before the other side yells: Wow! America,
Vespucci's first name and home of free and brave, Te amo.

by Denise Duhamel and Maureen Seaton

Denise Duhamel

June

The blue forest, chilled and blue, like the lips of the dead
if the lips were gone. The year has been cut in half
with dull scissors, the solstice still looking for its square
on the calendar. Perhaps the scissors were really
lawn mowers or hoes. Perhaps God's calendar is Chinese.
As first I didn't understand those burlap dolls
slouched in Central Pennsylvania craft stores.
Where were the button eyes, the tiny pearl nostrils?
the smudgy pink watercolor cheeks?

I enter the woods--part Gretel, part Little Red.
Such a small patch of sun makes it to the ground
through the leaves. The tree trunks are all elbows and knees,
all arthritis and gripes. The Amish think it's wrong
to render nature, quilts abstracting each pattern's name
of tree, buggy, corn, horse, farm.
My uncle, not Amish but superstitious, holds his palm
to the camera in a Christmas photo. Before she died
my grandmother ripped up all the pictures of herself.
She liked a novel with mystery, magazines without nudity.

The boy was killed by a drunk driver. My Amish neighbors
forgive. I prefer seeing it all, the snot, the optical nerve, the liver
behind the belly's skin. I prefer a good fight,
a wailing of grief. The Farmers' Market sells apples
as red as tricycles. The dolls without faces
want it silent. The forest, all anger and yesterday,
newspapers blank as white cotton sheets.
the branches, the teeth, the awful vees.

Denise Duhamel

Kinky

They decide to exchange heads.
Barbie squeezes the small opening under her chin
over Ken's bulging neck socket. His wide jaw line jostles
atop his girlfriend's body, loosely,
like one of those novelty dogs
destined to gaze from the back windows of cars.
The two dolls chase each other around the orange Country Camper
unsure what they'll do when they're within touching distance.
Ken wants to feel Barbie's toes between his lips,
take off one of her legs and force his whole arm inside her.
With only the vaguest suggestion of genitals,
all the alluring qualities they possess as fashion dolls,
up until now, have done neither of them much good.
But suddenly Barbie is excited looking at her own body
under the weight of Ken's face. He is part circus freak,
part thwarted hermaphrodite. And she is imagining
she is somebody else-- maybe somebody middle class and ordinary,
maybe another teenage model being caught in a scandal.

The night had begun with Barbie getting angry
at finding Ken's blow up doll, folded and stuffed
under the couch. He was defensive and ashamed, especially about
not having the breath to inflate her. But after a round
of pretend-tears, Barbie and Ken vowed to try
to make their relationship work. With their good memories
as sustaining as good food, they listened to late-night radio
talk shows, one featuring Doctor Ruth. When all else fails,
just hold each other, the small sex therapist crooned.
Barbie and Ken, on cue, groped in the dark,
their interchangeable skin glowing, the color of Band-Aids.
Then, they let themselves go-- Soon Barbie was begging Ken
to try on her spandex miniskirt. She showed him how
to pivot as though he was on a runway. Ken begged
to tie Barbie onto his yellow surfboard and spin her
on the kitchen table until she grew dizzy. Anything,
anything, they both said to the other's requests,
their mirrored desires bubbling from the most unlikely places.

Lawless Pantoum□

Men are legally allowed to have sex with animals,
as long as the animals are female.
Having sexual relations with a male animal
is taboo and punishable by death.

As long as the fish are female
saleswomen in tropical fish stores are allowed to go topless.
Adultery is punishable by death
as long as the betrayed woman uses her bare hands to kill her husband.

Saleswomen in tropical fish stores are allowed to go topless,
but the gynecologist must only look at a woman's genitals in a mirror.
The woman uses her bare hands to kill her husband,
then his dead genitals must be covered with a brick.

The gynecologist must only look at a woman's genitals in a mirror
and never look at the genitals of a corpse—
these genitals must be covered with a brick.
The penalty for masturbation is decapitation.

A look at the genitals of a corpse
will confirm that not much happens in that region after death.
The penalty for masturbation is decapitation.
It is illegal to have sex with a mother and her daughter at the same time.

To confirm what happens during sex,
a woman's mother must be in the room to witness her daughter's deflowering,
though it is illegal to have sex with a mother and her daughter at the same time.
It is legal to sell condoms from vending machines as long as

a woman's mother is in the room to witness her daughter's deflowering.
Men are legally allowed to have sex with animals—
why it's even legal to sell condoms from vending machines, as long as
everyone's having sexual relations with a male animal.

Denise Duhamel

On Being Born The Same Exact Day Of The Same Exact Year As Boy George

We must have clamored for the same mother, hurried for
the same womb.

I know it now as I read that my birthday is his.
Since the first time I saw his picture, I sensed something—
and with a fierce bonding and animosity
began following his career.

Look where I am and look where he is!
There is a book documenting his every haircut
while all my image-building attempts go unnoticed, even
by my friends.

I'm too wimpy to just dye my curls red
or get them straightened. I, sickeningly moral,

talked about chemicals when I should have been
hanging out with George's pal, Marilyn.

He would have set me right:

Stop your whining and put on this feather tuxedo. Look,
do you want to be famous or not?

In the latest articles, Boy George is claiming he's not
really happy. Hmm, I think, just like me.

When he comes to New York and stays in hotels in
Gramercy Park
maybe he feels a pull to the Lower East Side,
wanders towards places where I am, but not knowing me,
doesn't know why.

One interviewer asks if he wishes he were a woman.

Aha! I read on with passion: and a poet?—I bet you'd like
that—

You wouldn't have to sing anymore, do those tiring tours.
George, we could switch. You could come live at my place,
have some privacy, regain your sense of self.

So I begin my letter. Dear Boy George,
Do you ever sit and wonder what's gone wrong?

If there's been some initial mistake?
Well, don't be alarmed, but there
has been.

Denise Duhamel

Sex With A Famous Poet□

I had sex with a famous poet last night
and when I rolled over and found myself beside him I shuddered
because I was married to someone else,
because I wasn't supposed to have been drinking,
because I was in fancy hotel room
I didn't recognize. I would have told you
right off this was a dream, but recently
a friend told me, write about a dream,
lose a reader and I didn't want to lose you
right away. I wanted you to hear
that I didn't even like the poet in the dream, that he has
four kids, the youngest one my age, and I find him
rather unattractive, that I only met him once,
that is, in real life, and that was in a large group
in which I barely spoke up. He disgusted me
with his disparaging remarks about women.
He even used the word 'Jap'
which I took as a direct insult to my husband who's Asian.
When we were first dating, I told him
'You were talking in your sleep last night
and I listened, just to make sure you didn't
call out anyone else's name.' My future-husband said
that he couldn't be held responsible for his subconscious,
which worried me, which made me think his dreams
were full of blond vixens in rabbit-fur bikinis.
but he said no, he dreamt mostly about boulders
and the ocean and volcanoes, dangerous weather
he witnessed but could do nothing to stop.
And I said, 'I dream only of you,'
which was romantic and silly and untrue.
But I never thought I'd dream of another man--
my husband and I hadn't even had a fight,
my head tucked sweetly in his armpit, my arm
around his belly, which lifted up and down
all night, gently like water in a lake.
If I passed that famous poet on the street,
he would walk by, famous in his sunglasses
and blazer with the suede patches at the elbows,
without so much as a glance in my direction.

I know you're probably curious about who the poet is,
so I should tell you the clues I've left aren't
accurate, that I've disguised his identity,
that you shouldn't guess I bet it's him...
because you'll never guess correctly
and even if you do, I won't tell you that you have.
I wouldn't want to embarrass a stranger
who is, after all, probably a nice person,
who was probably just having a bad day when I met him,
who is probably growing a little tired of his fame--
which my husband and I perceive as enormous,
but how much fame can an American poet
really have, let's say, compared to a rock star
or film director of equal talent? Not that much,
and the famous poet knows it, knows that he's not
truly given his due. Knows that many
of these young poets tugging on his sleeve
are only pretending to have read all his books.
But he smiles anyway, tries to be helpful.
I mean, this poet has to have some redeeming qualities, right?
For instance, he writes a mean iambic.
Otherwise, what was I doing in his arms.

Denise Duhamel

Snow White's Acne

At first she was sure it was just a bit of dried strawberry juice, or a fleck of her mother's red nail polish that had flaked off when she'd patted her daughter to sleep the night before. But as she scrubbed, Snow felt a bump, something festering under the surface, like a tapeworm curled up and living in her left cheek.

Doc the Dwarf was no dermatologist and besides Snow doesn't get to meet him in this version because the mint leaves the tall doctor puts over her face only make matters worse. Snow and the Queen hope against hope for chicken pox, measles, something that would be gone quickly and not plague Snow's whole adolescence.

If only freckles were red, she cried, if only concealer really worked. Soon came the pus, the yellow dots, multiplying like pins in a pin cushion. Soon came the greasy hair. The Queen gave her daughter a razor for her legs and a stick of underarm deodorant.

Snow doodled through her teenage years—'Snow +? ' in Magic Markered hearts all over her notebooks. She was an average student, a daydreamer who might have been a scholar if she'd only applied herself. She liked sappy music and romance novels. She liked pies and cake instead of fruit.

The Queen remained the fairest in the land. It was hard on Snow, having such a glamorous mom. She rebelled by wearing torn shawls and baggy gowns. Her mother would sometimes say, 'Snow darling, why don't you pull back your hair? Show those pretty eyes? ' or 'Come on, I'll take you shopping.'

Snow preferred staying in her safe room, looking out of her window at the deer leaping across the lawn. Or she'd practice her dance moves with invisible princes. And the Queen, busy being Queen, didn't like to push it.

Denise Duhamel

The Bottom□

I stopped drinking on my way down the hill
to the liquor store when two guys pulled up
and tried to drag me into their pickup. I crossed the street
then ran in the opposite direction, puffing
against the incline. The stranger thrust into reverse
and, when I wouldn't talk to him,
threw a bag of McDonald's trash at me,
Stuck up bitch. I stopped drinking
when I realized I was fighting
for the vodka at the bottom of the hill
more than I was fighting against the terrible
things that could have happened to me
inside the cab of that rusty Chevy. I stopped drinking
before cell phones. I stopped drinking
after Days of Wine and Roses. I stopped drinking
even as I kept walking to El Prado Spirits
and the guy behind the counter who recognized me
asked if I was alright. I didn't tell him
what had happened because he might have called
the police and then I would have had to wait
for them to arrive to fill out a report, delaying my Smirnoff.
I stopped drinking even before I had that last sip,
as I ran back up the hill squeezing a bottle by its neck.

Denise Duhamel

The Threat

my mother pushed my sister out of the apartment door with an empty suitcase because she kept threatening to run away my sister was sick of me getting the best of everything the bathrobe with the pink stripes instead of the red the soft middle piece of bread while she got the crust I was sick with asthma and she thought this made me a favorite

I wanted to be like the girl in the made-for-tv movie *Maybe I'll Come Home in the Spring* which was supposed to make you not want to run away but it looked pretty fun especially all of the agony it put your parents through and the girl was in California or someplace warm with a boyfriend and they always found good food in the dumpsters at least they could eat pizza and candy and not meat loaf the runaway actress was Sally Field or at least someone who looked like Sally Field as a teenager the Flying Nun propelled by the huge wings on the sides of her wimple Arnold the Pig getting drafted in Green Acres my understanding then of Vietnam I read *Go Ask Alice* and *The Peter Pan Bag* books that were designed to keep a young girl home but there were the sex scenes and if anything this made me want to cut my hair with scissors in front of the mirror while I was high on marijuana but I couldn't inhale because of my lungs my sister was the one to pass out behind the church for both of us rum and angel dust

and that's how it was my sister standing at the top of all those stairs that lead up to the apartment and she pushed down the empty suitcase that banged the banister and wall as it tumbled and I was crying on the other side of the door because I was sure it was my sister who fell all ketchup blood and stuck out bones my mother wouldn't let me open the door to let my sister back in I don't know if she knew it was just the suitcase or not she was cold rubbing her sleeves a mug of coffee in her hand and I had to decide she said I had to decide right then

Denise Duhamel

Yes

According to Culture Shock:

A Guide to Customs and Etiquette
of Filipinos, when my husband says yes,
he could also mean one of the following:

- a.) I don't know.
- b.) If you say so.
- c.) If it will please you.
- d.) I hope I have said yes unenthusiastically enough
for you to realize I mean no.

You can imagine the confusion
surrounding our movie dates, the laundry,
who will take out the garbage
and when. I remind him
I'm an American, that all has yeses sound alike to me.
I tell him here in America we have shrinks
who can help him to be less of a people-pleaser.
We have two-year-olds who love to scream 'No!'
when they don't get their way. I tell him,
in America we have a popular book,
When I Say No I Feel Guilty.
'Should I get you a copy?' I ask.
He says yes, but I think he means
'If it will please you,' i.e. 'I won't read it.'
'I'm trying,' I tell him, 'but you have to try too.'
'Yes,' he says, then makes tampo,
a sulking that the book Culture Shock describes as
'subliminal hostility . . . withdrawal of customary cheerfulness
in the presence of the one who has displeased' him.
The book says it's up to me to make things all right,
'to restore goodwill, not by talking the problem out,
but by showing concern about the wounded person's
well-being.' Forget it, I think, even though I know
if I'm not nice, tampo can quickly escalate into nagdadabog--
foot stomping, grumbling, the slamming
of doors. Instead of talking to my husband, I storm off
to talk to my porcelain Kwan Yin,
the Chinese goddess of mercy
that I bought on Canal Street years before
my husband and I started dating.

'The real Kwan Yin is in Manila,'
he tells me. 'She's called Nuestra Señora de Guia.
Her Asian features prove Christianity
was in the Philippines before the Spanish arrived.'
My husband's telling me this
tells me he's sorry. Kwan Yin seems to wink,
congratulating me--my short prayer worked.
'Will you love me forever?' I ask,
then study his lips, wondering if I'll be able to decipher
what he means by his yes.

Denise Duhamel