

The Present Deeply: The 21st-Century Love Poem

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All the poems in new films set in the future are still the old poems. It means our visionaries of film are still looking to the past and not the present for lasting texts. And perhaps that says more about canonical texts needing time to rise above or drown in sand like Shelley's "Ozymandias" (the poem turned 200 this past January). But it also says something about the need for forums like this feature—space to speculate on those 21st-century poems bound to last. Here are two that I prophesy will make the list—Katherine Larson's "Love at Thirty-Two Degrees" and Solmaz Sharif's "Look." Prophecy, I once heard a theologian say, is not about glimpsing the future. True prophecy is about seeing the present deeply.

First, the past (briefly): Shelley died four years after "Ozymandias" was published: 1822. That same year, Matthew Arnold was born—and so goes the cosmic balance. But today, Arnold's most anthologized poem, "Dover Beach" (it turned 150 last year), more closely resembles Ozymandias the statue reduced to "trunkless legs of stone" than it resembles "Ozymandias" the poem. One reason why: Arnold follows his famous thesis that "The Sea of Faith / Was once, too, at the full" but is now "withdrawing" and "retreating" with a sentimental turn he'd telegraphed earlier: "Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!" In this poem of existential desperation, where two stand "as on a darkling plain" over which "ignorant armies clash by night," the poet turns dramatically back to his love. But although the line and its move to stay destruction by the declaration of love are memorable, it can also read as a prop, a staged expression of passion to make a poetic point. But is there something else that troubles us?

"The Dover Bitch," Anthony Hecht's ugly satire of "Dover Beach," contains a revelatory phrase on this moment in Arnold's poem, a phrase that might also serve as a key to interpreting the way contemporary poets shy away from such extravagant gestures. In his poem, Hecht suggests that what offends the lover—and thus the reader—is not *that* she appears in the poem, but *how* she appears: as "a mournful cosmic last resort."

The poetic move to juxtapose the human with the cosmos, to “throw our arms wide with a gesture of religion to the universe” and yet “close them around a person,” as Frost once described it, is tempting but no longer enough.

So one-hundred-and-fifty years later, after Arnold’s death and a long period of faith’s retreat, here we are. Love can no longer be a prop in the great poems of the present, nor only a last resort. And although some cosmic juxtaposition appears in the work I want to highlight, love in our time of constant war and rising tribalism is presented with a new kind of resolution.

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Who better than Larson, a molecular biologist and field ecologist by training, to call us to the window overlooking our contemporary darkling plain? In “Love at Thirty-Two Degrees,” Larson catalogs her notes on the subject of love in four sections, each its own contained poem and together arranged as a meditative series. “Today I dissected a squid,” begins the first section, “the late acacia tossing its pollen / across the black of the lab bench.” We get a gesture, a description of landscape, then this:

That was the thing:
there *was* no blood
only textures of gills creased like satin,
suction cups as planets in rows. *Be careful*
not to cut your finger, he says. But I’m thinking
of fingertips on my lover’s neck
last June.

Almost immediately, buried in simile, the juxtaposition here of finite and infinite, the squid’s “suction cups” turned “planets” in a single phrase. The move is an old one, of course, inescapable even, like the “pebbles” on Arnold’s shore linked to the “moon” above them, and in Larson’s poem, each of the sections will return to this juxtaposition as she links her sections with images: the “lab” in section one turns to a “lab coat” tossed away in the desert, then desert sky, then “stars,” then “astronomer,” then finally back to where the poem began. But what changes in each section is the audience to whom the poem is directed, and unlike Arnold’s declaration, Larson’s poem seems more ambivalent and more inclusive. When she throws her arms around the universe, she grabs more than her own story.

In the first section, the speaker addresses the reader. She thinks of her “lover’s neck,” not *yours*. In the second section, however, she drops the pretense and

speaks to the lover directly, remembering when she “drove all night through the Arizona desert” in “*your* mother’s / beat-up Honda” (emphasis mine). Shifting from a defined audience, the third section begins with the first line, “Then, there is the astronomer’s wife.” And although we slip in linking the first word “then” to any specific action that came before, we know, at least, that we are being told a story now, reader and lover alike, about an astronomer and his spouse, how when “his migraine builds and / lodges its dark anchor behind // his eyes” he goes walking in the night. In the poem’s greatest simile, though, he returns to his wife in the end:

The snow outside
is white & quiet
as a woman’s slip
against cracked floorboards.
So he walks to the house
inflamed by moonlight, & slips
into the bed with his wife
her hair & arms all
in disarray
like fish confused by waves.

It is an image of beauty *and* distress, like the moonlight sharpened by the migraine. Lovely. And that would be all, lovely, if not for the last turn and section of Larson’s poem. Here is a poet making the same moves Arnold made more than a century before: grandeur next to the commonplace, astronomy next to astronomer. But there are differences, and they are essential. First, the lover is embodied here, given—if not narrative—at least a presence. And second, we get more than “love, let us be true.” While both Arnold and Larson feel the necessity of seeing love as solace, Arnold turns away from his darkling plain and Larson’s speaker turns toward hers, presenting her relationship in the terms of her sometimes brutal vocation:

Science—
beyond pheromones, hormones, aesthetics of bone,
every time I make love for love’s sake alone,
I betray you.

When the contemporary poet-scientist writes about love, she first speaks to us, then her lover, and then presents a story for both. Finally, she turns to the ghost behind all of these—science itself. In only four lines, she tells us that what science sometimes represents—our rational life, our mortality—can be overcome. In the end, the poet turns to confront the darkness on her own. To “make love for love’s sake alone” is an act of defiance, a response emerging from a faith that something exists beyond “aesthetics of bone.” And that something is not just the pleasure of mortal flesh, but the power to defy any god who reminds us of our mortality. “Science,” she says, calling the god softly by its name: “I betray you.”

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Since the opening line of “Look,” the title poem of Solmaz Sharif’s debut, begins “It matters what you call a thing,” let’s give the poem a label it deserves: “Look” is a love poem, one of the best of the past twenty years, and it succeeds on that level because of its resistance to love and how it responds to the pressures of its time. Like “Dover Beach,” Sharif’s poem is concerned with the clash of ignorant armies (now replaced by disembodied drones), but it is her turn away from her lover in the end that elevates her work.

Following up on “It matters what you call a thing,” Sharif introduces a word that will be repeated throughout the poem: “*Exquisite* a lover called me. / *Exquisite.*” No matter where the poem goes from here—the 2004 Republican National Convention, the Iran/Iraq border, Las Vegas, Afghanistan, a courtroom—it is rooted in this stanza: two lovers and their language. Of course Sharif knows the root definition of *exquisite*—“to search, to seek”—and the rest of the poem is a record of what she finds.

After this brief opening, “Look” adopts the language of the court and the formal term “Whereas” to generate the remaining stanzas, a listing of everything else that must, in this world of faceless warfare and racial profiling, be accepted as true:

Whereas it could take as long as 16 seconds between
the trigger pulled in Las Vegas and the Hellfire missile
landing in Mazar-e-Sharif, after which they will ask
Did we hit a child? No. A dog. they will answer themselves;

Whereas the federal judge at the sentencing hearing said
*I want to make sure I pronounce the defendant’s name
Correctly;*

Whereas this lover would pronounce my name and call me
 Exquisite and LAY the floor lamp across the floor so that
we would not see each other by DIRECT ILLUMINATION,
softening even the light . . .

In “Look” Sharif blends the realities of love and intimacy—terms of endearment, the dimming of lights, the “heat” of the body responding to another—with the realities of war and unchecked surveillance. What’s more, the interruptions by words in small caps that appear throughout, taken from the Department of Defense *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, are used to emphasize the disruption violence makes, or should make, during our most intimate expressions. The juxtaposition is startling, and the poem is rich with such moments. But it is Sharif’s conclusion, like Larson’s, I want to emphasize.

Her repetition of “Whereas” functions as an extended introduction before that conclusion, which begins with “Now, therefore”:

Let it matter what we call a thing.

Let it be the exquisite face for at least 16 seconds.

Let me LOOK at you.

Let me LOOK at you in a light that takes years to get here.

“It matters what you call a thing,” she began, and now the “you” has moved to the first-person plural: “Let it matter what *we* call a thing” (emphasis mine). For a moment, before the speaker turns to her beloved like Arnold’s speaker turns in “Dover Beach,” Sharif lets the reader join that “we.” By the time we feel that invitation, we are ready for the yearning of “LOOK.” But Sharif won’t let this romance go unchecked. As we’ve learned earlier in the book, “LOOK” in the Defense dictionary is “a period during which a mine circuit is receptive of an influence.” So in addition to the act of looking, the command “LOOK” also reminds us of the small space between silence and deafening sound, the “16 seconds” between the pulled trigger and the bomb exploding.

In that space, we read the poem’s closing lines in two possible ways (or two ways simultaneously). In one, Sharif’s speaker turns back to her lover—*Let me look at you*. She turns away from the presence of the destroyer to the presence of love. *Let us be true*, we hear them say—almost. But when Sharif writes “LOOK,” she also insists upon the mine, the bomb, the truths we have to face.

Sharif and Larson both conclude their love poems with full awareness of mortality. They are not turning away. And while their poems testify to our present need for poetry that comforts, they also stare directly at the destruction that makes that reach for comfort necessary.

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Marshall McLuhan, the pioneer of media studies, offered this definition of the artist's role during a debate with Norman Mailer on Canadian public television in 1968: "Every age creates as a utopian image a nostalgic rearview mirror image of itself which puts it thoroughly out of touch with the present. The present is the enemy. The present is [. . .] only faced in any generation by the artist."

Speaking just moments before about the Victorian era and the telegraph, he'd pointed out that the intellectuals of that time were terrified that "a new environment had formed around the old mechanical one." McLuhan's point about our resistance to the present—its technology and scientific advances—reveals why the cosmic juxtaposition, repeated in each of the poems presented here, is central to poetry across time. Every generation of artists must confront the confounding enemy of the present, and every artist must attempt to see it deeply.

Matthew Arnold was this kind of artist to his generation, and he concludes "Dover Beach" with an ancient lament: that the world "Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain." Sound familiar? The world, its revolution, never changes. We are all still "thoroughly out of touch with the present" because the present terrifies us. So most go looking for comfort in the poems of the past.

Meanwhile, many of the artists of this generation have the same desire as artists before: to stand on the threshold between the cosmos and the self, the sea and the shore it ravages. To confront the speed and change of their day. The difference in our age is the manner and direction of our attention. Faithfully, desperately, Arnold turns back to his love. Katherine Larson turns to hers in "Love at Thirty-Two Degrees," but not for comfort. Solmaz Sharif turns, too, and yet her choice to *LOOK* at her lover is tempered by violence. Our poets, it seems, are still standing at the window, still inviting us to come and see. But the best of them turn to face the dark, finding beauty *and* distress—one is only seen by the light of the other.