

Love Songs of My Twenties



by Dale Marie Murphy

first

i tried to not start with a poem for you but you're the sight of the actor's feet as the curtain is slowly rising and the hard fought for breath after a fit of laughter that you just, did not, see coming. yes, there have been tears and doubts and fears and even *dear god what have I got myself into's* but when i feel what i feel looking at your face miles away and pixelated by technology; well that, i think, is poetry.

love letter to love

dear love,

i'm sorry that people are all the time blaming you for their pain;
i'm guilty of it too.
but i've learned it's not you,
it's just us making messes and misusing you,
and maybe one day we'll all learn how treat you right.

when you showed up as a boy with big dreams
and tangled thoughts,
i created you into something you were not,
i plastered your face onto posters that screamed "found!"
and i told the non-believers of your vibrant colors
and your immense size.

but you are gentle and quiet,
and you walked away.

after that you were the echo of soft voices in an empty room.
you were paper, guitar strings, and tire tracks.

i knew you were giving me a second chance when i became scared.
this time you were in the body of confidence,
glowing, magnetic, and warm.
oh, to keep you just that way.
i promised i would fight my corner with feathers
and with anything else that i had to give,
until i learned sometimes i have to let go,
even you have to grow,
even you make mistakes,
get muddled or pulled in different directions.

still i kept my promise and love, you always keep yours.
you came back to me in the way a fire roars to life.
you keep coming back.

church

i wish i could wear that '97 accord around my neck like a locket.
open the door and clumps of dirt from sunday morning's
small feet in soccer cleats will fall to the floor
with the redolence of fresh cut grass.
dad's reaching over the center console to hold moms reluctant hand
and she squeezes back despite herself.
an exclamation of "jesus!"
as the car in front treats the fast lane as if it were a railroad track.
music pours out of the open windows;
the clang of the banjo strings weaves around
four separate bodies and ties a knot.
we all know the words and
we sing along like an unpracticed choir.
we put our faith in tires
worn out from road-trips and explorations.
they would press against my chest as they did
on parkways, dirt roads, and state welcome center parking lots
while two pairs of eyes rested
and ever growing legs crossed over each other in the backseat.
the tired eyes up front are both glazed and glistening with midnight
laughter so that we can make it home,
to feel the dip in the driveway that awakens everyone.

ramblings in humanities

the sky is the same color it was yesterday, the day that we slept in a fort made of blankets and towels that we constructed under your bed. how silly we must have looked, two adults peering out from behind a blue sheet draped over one side of your bed. in that moment, i felt like a kid. you make me feel like a kid. maybe i shouldn't have written that, because now this is beginning to sound like just another love poem, for you. it could be, i suppose, just not the kind that you've come to know. as i sit here, i catch a reflection of myself: tangled matted hair from a night spent swimming in blankets mimicking the waves and the shore, the ebb and the flow, the less and the more. black eyeliner is smudged under my eyes which grow darker with each night that i choose to spend restlessly so i can feel your warmth beside me. my mind is a kaleidoscope of thoughts some are at war with themselves, often i get lost in them but when i find my way back all the noises become clear (like when you bring your head above water) i don't remember where i had been. now i wonder what i would be thinking if i had never met you, how this moment would feel if you didn't exist. but that's where i run into a wall; i can't go to that place. i've been making up stories since i can remember, constructing characters that do not live, feelings that have never existed and words that have never been said but it's impossible to imagine my life now, if you had never been in it. there i go again, writing another love poem. i see now have no other choice. everything i write from this moment on will be a love poem for you. because everything i write is woven from the threads of my life, and now you are that thread, that holds the others together; the thread i cannot imagine life without.

board games

i really hate that word: cheated.
like someone snuck an extra \$500 in a monopoly game
or, ate a whole pizza in secret
when they were supposed to be on a diet.
you can't cheat unless you're playing against someone
and we were supposed to be playing together.
a more accurate term for it would be murder because
even that word made you uncomfortable and
i don't know how else to better describe
the loss of breath and movement that comes
when he says, "i'm sorry."
it was a knife, not a googled answer during trivial pursuit
it was a life, not a peek you stole
when everyone was hiding.
to make me chose strength or strength
when i used to be so soft,

i'm not soft anymore.
even my breath is scarred.
nobody wins.

headstone

my granddad is the rain.
when i crave one of his anecdotes, one of his facts
that he kept stored in his mind for just the right moment,
one he would eagerly tell me, inches from my face,
a raindrop falls on my cheek.
my granddad is the Nile river.
as a boy, he hopped on a train
just to see something different.
his small hand clutched a new fountain pen
but his shoes were too loud
on the engine room floor
and he was sent home for dinner.
my granddad is the ocean.
i visit sometimes to see him
the waves waltz gracefully
and i wonder if nana knows, here,
she can dance with him again.
we said our last goodbyes,
as a bell from a lighthouse chimed
and the water that surrounded us
swayed us to sleep.
my granddad is the snow
that turns the whole world quiet.

circles

...and around. i'm trying to remember the date that brancusi sculpted mademoiselle pogany; he never felt like he captured her eyes (neither do i). yet all i can remember is the time we were lying on the bed in the third floor bedroom, the one with the slanted wall. we put our feet up against it and you looked at me (with your blueberry, or are they robin egg, eyes) and you said that i gave you direction. i laughed because i never know where i'm going, so you told me you'd show me the way. that's when i knew: i want nothing more than to spend all my days going in circles with you, around...

asheville

the rise and fall of her streets are like a treble-clef line
she is laughter, she is music, and everyone is dancing.
my lady in the mountains holds a parade every day
of purple pick-up trucks, accordion players,
and paintbrushes. they groove past the wig shop
and the monopoly pieces, up winding roads,
around stone chimneys, and through the fairy lights
encircling my bedroom window.
her pulse, the rhythm of the drums
in pritchard park after sunset, starting soft
but growing louder.
her body envelopes me and
her breath, teal and thistle, brings my still hands to life,
still hands that thought they couldn't create.
these sidewalks stick to my boots like elastic bands
so she knows if i must go, she can pull me back home.

the five year plan

1. i'll say, 'come with me. don't be afraid,' and you'll say, 'okay' and then with one pack each, we'll get on a plane.
2. we'll head south, to chile, brazil, or maybe peru. explore the rainforest, dance, see machu picchu. we'll learn local phrases and write them on the backs of postcards. some we will keep, others we will send in the mail to greet familiar faces.
3. we'll stop by nepal in order to feel small and make love in the shadow of something unmovable.
4. we'll see the hills in new zealand, walk the great wall.
5. i'll show you my old stomping grounds by the colosseum, where i learned things start to crumble when you try and be what you once were.
6. you'll make sure that i see the eiffle tower, all lit up and sparkling, just like i've always wanted. i'll turn to you and say, "have you ever seen anything to beautiful?" and you'll turn to me and say, "i'm looking at her" and i'll laugh at you.
7. when our feet are tired we'll head to the mountains and get a brick house with very small rooms and very big windows. it'll have a back yard and solar panels on the roof.
8. we'll hold hands as we stand in front of it, and you'll turn to me and say "what do you think?" and i'll turn to you and say, "of all the things we've seen, your face in the morning is my favorite" and you'll laugh at me.
9. sometimes the shower will be cold but your company will make it warm; the front door that squeaks will become a comforting 'welcome home'; and you'll build a big garden out back .i'll help if you want but i'm no good with plants.
10. i'll unpack our photographs and mount them on the walls, making sure to leave space for new ones.
11. i'll place sunflowers in vases all around the house to remind us to always follow the sun because sometimes, we'll forget. we are, after all, incomplete stories that need editing and you might say something mean and i could be inconsiderate, so i'll hide away in the room that i made for writing or go next door and have a glass of wine and bucket of words with the neighbor and you'll get on a bike that takes you miles and miles from our home
12. but you'll always come back, and so will i because
13. every sunday evening, we'll drink a beer and sit in the garden and admire the way that each plant needs the others in order to grow.

love letter to myself

when i was born it was raining like the clouds
were trying to create a new ocean.

i guess somebody already knew that i would leave a mess
everywhere that i go and so they had to clean up a bit
before i arrived and made my way outside.

i do try to clean up after myself but when my thoughts are messy,
my room is messy and my thoughts are messy most of the time.

some people say i'm quiet but i think that's because
i have to listen really hard to all my different thoughts
shouting over one another, wanting to be the first
to come out of my mouth.

i've never seen a face that i didn't think was beautiful
and i'm learning to think about myself in that way too.
they say your body is the house you grew up in
but i didn't grow up in a house, i grew up in a heart,
a heart that took me around the world, planted flowers in my mind,
and wore the soles off my boots.

my parents taught me to feel the tug of my heart so
i have always run in the direction it has pulled me,
but i've learned sometimes i need to tip-toe instead,
and leave a trail of breadcrumbs to find my way back if i need to.
i've felt the kind of love that made the earth disappear,
the kind of love that made me believe he was a part of me,
an extension my hands, my heart, my legs, my breath,
and my mind and i was an extension of his
and we would move as one.

but i've also known what it feels like to lose that,
to have fallen so far and not be able to find the breadcrumb trail,
to pick myself up and brush the dirt off my knees.

sunflowers are the compass to my next destination
and wherever it may be, i will face it
wielding a pen and paper, wildflower seeds,
and a new pair of boots to wear down.

if it rains i will catch the drops with open palms and say,
"I know you. you were there when i was born."

minus signs

i didn't understand them when they flashed across my screen, with a jumble of letters and numbers or when i saw them in the notebook on my father's desk. i didn't like them when they showed up on the sixth grade math tests that i would finish last. i wanted to cry when they first appeared on my kitchen thermometer or worse, on my bank statements, bold and red. a writer once said, a positive something is better than a negative nothing, and i believed that, until the day i found myself alone in a supermarket bathroom, waiting.

storybook

you thought the story was over but
i bookmarked my heart
so you could come back to it and you did.
the chapter was messy and so were your hands
but they were strong enough
to hold the pen and keep writing.
now you fold down the corner of my paper heart
each night before we sleep
so that it looks worn-out but well-loved
like a favorite childhood novel.
we tiptoe quietly through this tale,
cradled by the soft curve of each letter,
gliding across long silky sentences,
happy to know this storybook doesn't end.

lessons in rome

1. patience is getting used to
twenty minutes late being early
and 30 minutes late, on time.
it is deep breaths when
a man cuts in front of you
for the last bit of space on the tram
for the third time that day
and its embracing your hunger
a dinner because when it rains,
it pours.

2. even on your worst day
someone on your walk to school
will think you are a *bella*.
so buy a pair jeans one size up
and call them your pizza jeans
because its time we enjoy
what we have, while we have it.

3. love doesn't become thin
even when it has to be stretched
hundreds and hundreds of miles.

4. when choosing between
piazza trilussa and the
shortcut down via bendetta,
i will always walk through the piazza
to see the people sitting on the steps.
the ruins have crumbled,
even the marble has faded
but there is still beauty.

5. most nights i chose to be alone
and that's okay.
a man in the limestone tunnels told me
wine ages best in silence.

i'm not

i am not the brown stain on your son's white shirt or the reason he didn't call. i am the spaces between his words and the soles on his shoes. i am not the panties you found in his laundry (though i'm sorry about that). what i am, is learning to use an iron after i found out i would meet you, i am burning my fingers. i am not a five year plan or a practical degree; i'm not an anchor. i am four moving wheels, i zigzag, spiral, i flounder, then start all over. i wish i could wear your confidence instead of this old goodwill sweater but i'm not a color-by-number or church on sunday. i love, i forgive, and i love harder, praising no one.

things to remember when you're sad

1. the sun will come up
tomorrow morning
and the morning after that
and you get to choose
what to do with those hours.
2. somewhere right now,
someone is writing a love song
and i, a love poem,
despite our world's history of
broken hearts.
3. no matter what has happened,
flour, cocoa, baking soda,
eggs, water, and sugar
will always make
chocolate cake.
4. i'd craft a phone out of
old coffee cans and string
to stretch across the ocean
if you needed to hear my voice.
5. scientifically, the bumblebees'
wing to body ratio, should
prevent them from flying,
but nobody told them.
so they dance through the air,
never wondering how.

this is the room where she loves me too much
and that is the hole in the carpet that she burned
with a hot coal from her hookah.

black leather boots, nail polish, and tupperware
strewn across the floor during her daily costume change
for job number two.

this is the room where she held me
when i wanted to become the floor

this is the room where we stayed up til four in the morning,
trying to decipher misery while the record player crooned.

this is the room we imagined

when we said we would sacrifice

fullness for ramen and comfort for mountains,

not just one, but the whole range.

this is the room where she asks me if this is all worth it

and this is the room where i tell her that it is.

when you get good news, who do you tell first?

put their name on the tip of your tongue,
then gently roll it around in your mouth until it dissolves
so when you call their name
across a room or an airport terminal
they know that you've been thinking of them.
pick them up and put them in
your pocket when they are sad.
feed them jelly beans and chocolate milk
let them listen to your favorite song and read them poetry
until their eyes are dry and they are ready to be big again.
when they are angry, hand them breakable things like
teacups, plates, glasses, even mirrors,
tell them you'll be their nine years of *good* luck.
let them smash things over and over again
until their arms get tired, then take over for them
until they fall asleep.
tape everything back together before they wake up.
when they are happy, take a picture of their face
and show it to them when they don't think
they will ever feel that way again.
remind them that you would change
the way the world works
just to make sure that they smile like that once more.

puzzles

i like when people's eyes light up when they show me around their hometown. every place that they point out is another puzzle piece that they are handing to me: a field where they ran around naked on a dare, a restaurant they dined and dashed, a high school they couldn't wait to leave behind. fitting each piece together in the backseat, i begin to make out a face that looks more like me and looks less like me. and i know there are pieces missing, memories that they talked themselves into forgetting so i will show you my picture. open my puzzle box, and put together the pieces of muddy feet in a potato field, a trampoline where i had my first kiss, a roof top that helped me escape. as you watch my pieces start to fit together, our puzzles start to connect as pieces that belong to you belong to me too.

reflection

those are my mother's eyes in the mirror,
the one who already loves this poem,
the one who is wildfire.
her words come like a brook feeding a river,
i wonder if i borrow them sometime; we already share a mouth.
our hands are the same,
but we do different things with them.
mine hold a pen, a heart, and expectations
hers two young children, a hospital pass, scars, and kitchen knives.
these hips of mine are from my father's side
but i've still made her closet my own:
snug shirts and size nine shoes,
they smell like summer skin and lavender
i heard that cliché about the mom who
lifted a car to save her children and laughed
but i didn't know how many cars my own
has raised above her head and thrown aside to save me.
i don't know if my heart is hers or not,
but i hope that it is.

writers block

my mind used to whirl while my thoughts traveled
like children on a ferris wheel, and the line was endless.
i couldn't ever sleep because there are infinite ways to say
i love you, i miss you, i wish, and i dream
and i wanted to learn them all so that he would know
and they could see what they might not understand.
every word he said, every sunny day, every rainy day,
every person who passed me with
search lights in their eyes, was poetic.
every word would hit the page like a flower petal.
(he loves me, he loves me not, he loves me)
but now i have to dig holes and search under rocks
until my clothes are torn,
there is dirt underneath my finger nails
now every phrase sounds a little more
like sweat, creaking bones
and a little less like prayer.

holidays at honeybaked

i can't help but love the man
who is indecisive about his mustards.
he holds up the line as he paces back and forth,
his clumsy body bumping into the woman
in a denim uniform behind him,
trying to choose between tangy and sweet.
i am distracted by the young woman
who asks for our smallest ham because
it will only be her and baby this year.
the woman beside her complains
that a ham that would cost me ten hours of work
isn't large enough, and the man in the nascar shirt
comes back for another free sample.
i give him two.
the man with the mustard has now picked up a third bottle.
the line sidles past him as he reads the back.
i think of his wife at home,
wondering what is taking so long,
the family is starting to arrive.
i shout across the store to him,
that there is a discount if you buy three,
everyone takes a grain from their hourglass to look at me
before going back to their last preoccupation,
but the man with the mustard tacitly nods his head,
while our smallest ham is carried out the door.

for her to read one day

the women in this family are waiters, we wait.
we wait for husbands to come home from work
or to return from overseas.
we wait for water to boil,
for tomatoes to ripen,
we wait for people to make up their minds.
but i don't want you to be always waiting.
i want you to catch raindrops in
cupped hands before they hit the ground,
and to not worry whether or not he will call
because you already did, and of course
he wants to see you again.
run head first into walls,
i'll be there if you fall but if you want to try again,
i'll let you.

i like to wear other people's clothes
because they weren't shaped by my body,
i'm waiting to be comfortable,
but you, you will eat the whole apple
and never be ashamed of your nakedness.

keep your mama's patience like a bookmark in your journal
but don't wait in line if there isn't one.
if there is, question it the way your father taught you
when you went to him wide-eyed and curly haired
crying that you were afraid to grow up but you had to,
and he asked you, why?

touch the world as if you had feathers for fingertips
and fire in your knuckles.
stand next to the ocean and feel big.
swim in it and feel small,
but only small enough to do no harm.
just once, fall asleep to the sound
of a city's morning stretch and that evening
when you awake with an ardent desire
to be somewhere new, don't wait.

what are you going to do with that?

the look on people's faces when i tell them i am a creative writing major is something like bewilderment and pity. then they'll ask me the question, always the same: what are you going to do with that? and so i tell them: i'm going to crush flowers in my hands and paint pictures with the blues, purples, and pinks left in my palms and i'm going to taste the ocean on the tip of my tongue until it turns from salty to sweet. i will be transported to a kitchen eight-hundred miles away when the smell of sizzling bacon wafts through the room and i will see a broken heart when you see a coffee ring on a wooden table. i am going to listen to the sound of a single car on a long dirt road and come away with the truth. i will break glass silently. i will turn diamonds into dimes i will write.

home

every night as i'm drifting off to sleep, i hear the sound of footsteps on the stairs and i imagine that tonight will be the night that you tiptoe into my room and crawl into bed with me. you'll put your arm around me not saying a word. i won't need to speak either because we both know that we are finally home.

last

i love you, and that's the beginning and end of everything. i think fitzgerald said that, or something like it. i think i said it in my sleep last night. i think shooting stars are just something we made up; only real because we want them to be, like god. i think flowers don't really die, they go where they are needed. i think flowers die. since i first saw you on the cement stairs, i think two is the highest number. i think sometimes when the sun sets behind the mountains it sleeps there, too tired to light the other side of the earth. i think i am cinderella and waves are hands on a clock. i think all i need is swiss cheese and strawberries. i think that this is the kind of thing that lasts.