

**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.

Eserleri:

Books

*Girl Soldier* (Garden Street Press, 1996)

*How the Sky Fell* (1996)

*Ka-Ching* (University of Pittsburgh, 2009)

Kinky (Orchises Press, 1997)

Mille et un sentiments (Firewheel Editions, 2005)

Queen for a Day: Selected and New Poems (University of Pittsburgh, 2001)

Smile, (Warm Spring Press, 1993)

The Star-Spangled Banner, winner of the Crab Orchard Poetry Prize (1999)

The Woman with Two Vaginas, (Salmon Run Press, 1995)

Two and Two (University of Pittsburgh, 2005).

Chapbooks

It's My Body (Egg In Hand Press, 1992)

Skirted Issues (Stop Light Press, 1990)

Heaven And Heck (Foundation Press, 1988, 1989, 1990)

## 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-  
loafed 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

## 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.

Denise Duhamel

## 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