

POETRY AND DIALOGUE
with DENISE DUHAMEL

YOU'RE LOOKING AT THE LOVE INTEREST

It's a long story, but basically
I'm stuck in Lincoln, NE and need to get to Omaha
to catch my flight back to Fort Lauderdale
and the person who is supposed to pick me up
has overslept. When he doesn't answer his cell phone,
I call the local cab company who can't let their cars
leave Lincoln because of some law that takes
the person answering too long to explain. The next hotel shuttle
leaves an hour from now and surely I will miss my flight
if I wait for it. The woman behind the desk says,
There's one more option—a car service—but it'll cost you.
I negotiate a price--\$200 for an hour's ride—and run
to the nearest ATM to get the cash. I'm expecting a town car,
but a driver pulls up in a pick up truck. I climb in
and the usual chitchat begins except I keep pressing him—
will I make my plane? *You sure will*, he says,
I used to drive this route all the time. Why was I in Omaha?
To give a lecture, I say. For the most part,
I've stopped telling cab drivers I'm a poet for fear that they'll launch
into how they hated their English teachers
and/or they'll tell me they are poets too and begin
to recite rhyming couplets about life behind the wheel.
A lecture about what? This driver asks. *Poetry*, I say,
clearing my throat. *Oh, so you read last night. You're Denise, right?*
and I'm stuck. *My ex-wife was there. She's a poet, too.*
He describes her to me: long gray hair, red sweater.
She had the first question at the Q&A. And I'm relieved—

he gets it. He has a smart ex. For the first time all morning I relax. I won't have to talk about Rod McKuen, Tupac Shakur, or Jewel. *What about Ted Kooser?* he says. *Do you like his work?* The driver's favorite book of his: *Weather Central*. We talk Nebraska poets: Hilda Raz, Weldon Kees. The benefits of living here: cheap rent, good air. *It's a long shot, I say, but do you know my friend Meghan Daum?* Before I tell him she writes prose—fiction and nonfiction—his grin fills the rearview mirror. *Know her?* he beams. *You are looking at the love interest!* I ask, *You mean from The Quality of Life Report? But aren't you supposed to be a carpenter? That's what you are in her book.* He says Meghan has since talked him into taking work on the side as a driver since he used to bring her back and forth to the airport so many times. *Besides, that's a novel,* he explains. He assures me he's only 70% as bad as she made him out to be and tells me, scene by scene, his version of the story. I panic when I see we are in Iowa. *Aren't you taking me to Omaha? I said Omaha, didn't I?* He explains what I should already know—that Omaha's on Iowa's border. *No hard feelings*—he says he understands why Meghan had to make him out to be a little bit of a jerk. *No conflict, no story, right?* As long as he came across as a sexy guy, what the heck. He slides into the passenger drop off zone and hoists my bags to the curb. *Run,* he says. *You're going to make it.* He checks the crumpled bills I put in his hand—I tip big. And his tip to me: *Just remember—don't believe everything you read.*

INTERVIEW WITH ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY WORKSHOP - SPRING 2007

ST. JOHN'S: Is this a true story?

DENISE DUHAMEL: Yes! The poem is true in that it happened to me.

SJ: Should we not believe what we are reading when reading this story?

DD: Well, the cab driver's last piece of advice, "Don't believe everything you read," complicates, I hope, the narrative. It brings up the question--can we really believe anything we read? A good poet or a writer will fudge the facts to make a good story.

SJ: Were you "reading" the cab driver? Is that why you say, "don't believe everything you read?"

DD: That's an interesting observation--at first I didn't really want to believe the cab driver. In reading Meghan's book, I pictured her boyfriend in an entirely different way and I was disappointed, I guess, that he didn't match what I'd imagined.

SJ: What do you consider a 'big tip'?

DD: Fifty percent.

SJ: Did you tell your friend, Meghan, the story?

DD: Yes!

SJ: If yes, what did she say or think?

DD: I think she was freaked out because this guy was a part of her past--and he came to life again through my telling her this story. And now in the poem.

SJ: Why are you friends with Stephen Paul Miller?

DD: In the 80's (before I met Stephen Paul Miller) I had one of his poems taped to my fridge. I love his work!

SJ: What is the trick in combining poem and narrative?

DD: I guess the trick is to make the language interesting enough to keep the reader reading, while dispensing information that moves the story along.

SJ: Would you consider this creative non-fiction?

DD: I suppose the poem does have elements of creative non-fiction in it. I'm really interested in hybrids--poems in the format of plays, short stories made up of recipes, and so on.

SJ: Does the last line of this poem confuse the line between fiction and creative non-fiction?

DD: Yes! I think I was trying to say that how can we ever believe anyone's side of the story. I mean, even as we retell a story we are forcing a narrative and our own sensibility on it.

SJ: Is the "no stanza break" a significant part of the poem, if so how?

DD: No...the poem ran more than one page, but I guess there are no "pages" in cyberspace.

SJ: Is love interest an economic term in any way?

DD: I didn't intend it as such, but I suppose it could be read that way.

SJ: Were you nervous or scared at any point, considering you forgot that Omaha was on the border of Iowa? DID THE cabbie scare you?

DD: Yes! The whole incident was bizarre.

SJ: What were the negative things that Megan said about the cab driver? What were the sexy things? And how did his story differ from hers?

DD: I never really talked to Meghan about the cab driver since they'd already split up by the time we met. I just had read about him in the book and thought he'd be very handsome and charming. But he was just sort of a regular guy. Meghan's love for him--or perhaps her desire to make her story more interesting--made him quite hunky in her novel.

SJ: Do you believe there was a reason that events went wrong that day that led you to this cab driver?

DD: Yes! Perhaps so I could write this poem.

SJ: How did you feel about blowing 200 bucks?

DD: Pretty angry--but I got the guy who was supposed to pick me up to reimburse me.

SJ: What was your tip—30 dollars?

DD: I wound up giving him \$50. And I've since asked myself this question: did I give him a big tip because I was grateful or because I thought he'd tell Megan I was a cheapskate if I gave him a smaller tip?

SJ: Did you catch the plane?

DD: Yes!

SJ: What does it mean for you to call your own work into question at the end?

DD: I'm referring to the slippery nature of memory and storytelling and how two people witnessing the same event can interpret it differently.

SJ: You say Meghan writes fiction and non-fiction. Is it important to in some way call the separation of them into question?

DD: Yes. If Meghan had written about the cab driver in a piece of non-fiction, for example, I believe she would have described him more accurately. In her novels, she was able to take greater liberty. And in a poem, writers are also able to take greater liberties.

SJ: Which Stephen Paul Miller poem did you have on your fridge?
Stephen, maybe you remember it? It was a short poem--three or four lines--

about people being cartoons? I used to know it by heart, but I'm old now and my memory is gone!

STEPHEN PAUL MILLER: It goes, "PEOPLE THINK JUST BECAUSE YOU ARE A CARTOON CHARACTER YOU CAN'T FEEL PAIN, BUT ISN'T THAT EXACTLY WHAT HURTS."

SJ: Kelly wants to know what made this guy unappealing and non-hunky to you.

DD: I didn't mean to imply he was unappealing. The book had made him seem movie-star like, so I had his "character" built up in my mind...

SJ: Why did you get reimbursed? Was it a friend just feeling guilty?

DD: I was actually in Nebraska because I was doing a poetry reading at a university there. The faculty member who was supposed to bring me to the airport overslept. So he didn't really have to pay out of his pocket--he got the money for me through the school.

SJ: Was the cab driver a writer?

DD: No, he was a carpenter before driving a cab.

SJ: Kelly is concerned that you might look down on cab drivers. Dane knew a doctor who drove a cab. Kelly says that Judge Larry in the Anna Nicole hearing drove a cab. What do you think of Judge Larry? If Judge Larry is the father will he get in trouble? Will he get a Reality show?

DD: I love cab drivers! I wish I could be a cab driver--I am too lousy a driver to be able to do it. Judge Larry was indeed once a cab driver...however is probably crazy, don't you think? I believe he broke down on the stand so that he could get his own reality show. Judge Larry is NOT the father of Anna's baby--I am the father!

SJ: When you got reimbursed did you get reimbursed for the tip?

DD: Sadly, I didn't.

SJ: Any tips to us on how to write "story-poems"?

DD: Yes. If there is a story you always tell at a party--or a family lore story that has been passed down to you--why waste it? It could be a great poem waiting to be written.