

Denise Duhamel

### Prodigal Prayer

I kneel before my mother, trying to get her slipper socks over her swollen feet. Then she presses the remote control on her recliner to push her to an almost standing position. Once upright she is not steady enough to get to her walker alone. Our goal—to get her to the bathroom on time. Shame. Then tears. My mother soaks her Depends because of a water pill that's supposed to help her puffy legs. But nothing, it seems, is helping.

This is a week before her second fall, the bad one. Before the pneumonia and the sippy cups. Before her right arm no longer works. Before the fingers on her right hand go numb. Even when I put a pen between them, she will not be able to sign her name. This is before the hospital and more sippy cups, one with the Nemo logo on loan from her great grandson. This is before her stint in rehab where Doug will try to teach her to put on socks with a blue plastic device she slips over her calf, a rope she holds in her good left hand. She will keep cheese popcorn in the seat of her walker and offer some to Doug who looks like Matt Damon. She will be like a girl with a crush. She misses my dad—dead eleven years—but some days is angry he left her.

I will drive her twenty-year-old Toyota to see her in the Catholic nursing home where the priest reminds us “this too shall pass.” I will think about my mother passing water, about her ultimate passing, her eventual death. I question if her pain will indeed pass, if what is passing through her body will keep on passing, looping into her, the morphine drip not enough to dilute the pangs in her spine, her neck, sciatic nerves running down both of her legs. A chorus of nuns will sing while playing maracas and tambourines. One sister will drop her percussion as she falls asleep mid-song. It will be funny, then touching, then ultimately so profound I become my mother taking care of a two-year-old me.

I become my mother who puts a pillow under my stomach when I can't breathe. With cupped hands she pats my back just the way the doctor shows her, the doctor who says to pretend my back is a bongo drum. When the fever comes, she rubs my arms with alcohol and flips the pillows

under my head to the cool side, puts a bucket near my bed  
as I am sure to vomit. When we go to La Salette  
to see the Christmas lights, I mistake the basin for donations  
near baby Jesus's cradle as a puke pail. All the kneeling people  
around us laugh, guessing perhaps what a sick child I am  
and how many nights my mother sits up with me with Vicks  
and antibiotics, inhalers and picture books to help calm the cats  
who live in my chest making strange wheezing sounds.  
I'm allergic to cats and dogs and even stuffed animals, grass  
in the summer and leaves in the fall, lilacs which blossom  
in spring, and my lungs can't take the winter cold. No wonder  
my mother wraps the statue of the Virgin Mary she kept  
by her marital bed and puts it in the bottom drawer.  
The Virgin helped her get pregnant,  
but after me, she's had enough.

Soon my mother is again with child anyway. She tells me  
how I still wanted all the attention and as soon as my mother  
started nursing my little sister, I'd put my hand in the diaper pail  
and stare at her, daring her to make me stop. When JFK was shot  
and my mother wept in front of the television, I blocked her view  
with my two-year-old body and peed on the carpet.

Now it is my mother peeing, mortified, drenching  
her nightgown. She once changed my diapers and now  
I change hers. Oh little mother, my helpless daughter,  
please forgive me for I have sinned. It has been years  
since my last confession, my last therapy session.  
Hail Maryjane brownies, please help mother's appetite,  
please help her to sleep. Hail Mary, full of grace,  
please heal my mother's bruised face.

## Wheels

My first putty-colored computer had a Daisywheel printer that only took paper with holes along its sides that I had to line up, the pages perforated like toilet paper. Often the printer would jam, paper skewing, ink clogging. Often my floppy disc read "error" before I could print out my poems, those days before you could save stuff on a desktop. I started over again so many times, the anxiety of remembering a phrase or line break. So I began writing everything by hand first, just in case, and occasionally went back to my typewriter in protest. Then when my IBM Selectric broke down I called the 800 number and complained until the customer service employee said, "I am going to hang up now. I don't like your tone." I remember the dial tone and how I was too ashamed to call back. I needed toner for a bulky xerox machine I bought for my home office (a corner of my studio apartment) and became discouraged when I had to replace the cartridge which cost \$100 in 1988. I stained my hands and T-shirt in the process. That's when I started sneaking copies at Baruch where I was an adjunct. I would xerox a few more pages each week, seeing if I'd get caught, until I worked up my nerve to xerox the 300-page novel I wrote. An agent said, "Great!" but then couldn't sell it. She xeroxed all the rejections for me and I tried to fixate on each editor's small polite comments before the "but." More than one mentioned I had the heart of a poet. I did have such a heart, a sensitive one that tended to shatter easily though the poet in me would look for better image, a better verb and stretch out the sensory details. The editors wanted me to get to the plot. I xeroxed my poems for grad school as I had mimeographed them as an undergrad. Back then we typed poems on carbon paper and brought them to the very cool English Department secretary (before such workers were called administrative assistants). She would affix the poems to a metal circular drum, then crank a handle so damp copies of our verse would slough off. The blue ink made us all a little high as poetry made us a little high. We students were giddy with possibilities. Mario Cantone (from Sex and the City) was at Emerson those same days, his obnoxious voice trailing down Beacon Street. He was not the least bit interested in poetry. He was hellbent on becoming famous before Instagram or Facebook, when a newspaper or TV station or record label had to acknowledge your existence. There was no Twitter to post jokes or witty observations. He probably had a typewriter like me or index cards on which he'd develop his standup act. I remember a teacher saying women can't be funny

unless they are ugly or fat because no audience would laugh along  
with an attractive woman. There was no way I was going  
to get up on stage and talk about being fat since there was still  
a chance I could lose weight, right? So I stuck to poetry—  
with my notebooks and typewriter and eventually the computer  
with the daisywheel printer. I listened to Catherine Wheel,  
David Byrne's score for a Twyla Tharp dance project  
I never saw as it premiered in NYC years before I moved there.  
I was living my life, my lives plural, as I sang along  
I put the wheels in motion/A time for big decisions...

## Lady Moustache

In 1938 the world's longest moustache extended 64 inches, only an inch or so shorter than I am now. I used to be five feet seven inches tall, but I am shrinking, my spine trimming me like a barber. In menopause, I am growing my own lady-moustache. You may have noticed it in my self-portrait though my moustache is not yet as beautifully pronounced as Frida Kahlo's. In 2017 the world's longest moustache was 18 feet. The man who sported it used both olive and coconut oils to treat it. I am fond of these oils too for their antioxidants, how they prevent split ends. We still try to spilt gender into neat compartments, but our end is a split no one can prevent.

## Damnation Nation

Where a prez boasts a “coming-soon” vaccination,  
where so many have died because of his machinations.  
Where Don refuses to cover his face—insubordination?—  
but you don your cloth mask,

your destination  
the supermarket, your determination  
to find illusive Clorox Wipes, your indignation  
at the empty shelves.

Where, to prevent cross-contamination,  
you pull on latex gloves,  
but honestly you’ve felt this alienation  
all along, in a country where corporate donations  
ensure domination, wage stagnation,  
and the elimination of any examination  
of your nation’s discrimination.

Where a prez’s fascination  
with sex workers’ urination  
in combination with inclinations  
for his own coronation  
is met with our resignation  
but not his.

Where the detonation  
of rape allegations are archived as hallucinations,  
#MeToo intonations met with recrimination  
and the culmination  
of a supreme court nomination.

Where a flimsy explanation  
of a journalist’s assassination  
meets little consternation.

Where the dissemination  
of “news” is an abomination  
of truth, an indoctrination  
of hate, where the impersonation  
of democracy unleashes a termination  
of democracy, our stagnation  
as we face ruination, more procrastination  
following our long hibernation.



Denise Duhamel's most recent books of poetry are *Second Story* (Pittsburgh, 2021) and *Scald* (Pittsburgh, 2017). *Blowout* (Pittsburgh, 2013) was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her other titles include *Ka-Ching!* (Pittsburgh, 2009); *Two and Two* (Pittsburgh, 2005); *Queen for a Day: Selected and New Poems* (Pittsburgh, 2001); *The Star-Spangled Banner* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1999); and *Kinky* (Orhisis, 1997). She and Maureen Seaton have co-authored four collections, the most recent of which is *CAPRICE* (Collaborations: Collected, Uncollected, and New) (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2015). And she and Julie Marie Wade co-authored *The Unrhymables: Collaborations in Prose* (Noctuary Press, 2019). Duhamel is a recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts and served as the guest editor for *The Best American Poetry* 2013. She is a Distinguished University Professor in the MFA program at Florida International University in Miami.