

Of Poets & Poetry



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DENISE DUHAMEL

See page 2



Cover photograph by J?

ONE AFTERNOON WHEN BARBIE WANTED TO JOIN THE MILITARY

It was a crazy idea, she admits now,
but camouflage was one costume she still hadn't tried.
Barbie'd gone mod with Go-go boots during Vietnam.
Throughout Panama she was busy playing with a Frisbee
the size of a Coke bottle cap. And while troops
were fighting in the Gulf,
she wore a gown inspired by Ivana Trump.
When Mattel told her, hell no—she couldn't go,
Barbie borrowed GI Joe's fatigues,
safety pinning his pants' big waist
to better fit her own.
She settled in his olive tank.
But Barbie thought it was boring.
"Why don't you try running over something small?"
coaxed GI Joe, who sat naked behind the leg
of a human's living room chair.
Barbie saw imaginary bunnies
hopping through the shag carpet.
"I can't," she said.
GI Joe suggested she gun down the enemy
who was sneaking up behind her.
Barbie couldn't muster up the rage
for killing, even if it were only play.
Maybe if someone tried to take her parking space
or scratched her red Trans Am.
Maybe if someone had called her a derogatory name.
But what had this soldier from the other side done?
GI Joe, seeing their plan was a mistake,
asked her to return his clothes,
making Barbie promise not to tell anyone.
As she slipped back into her classic baby blue
one-piece swimsuit, she realized
this would be her second secret.
She couldn't tell about the time
she posed nude for Hustler.

(Continued on the next page)

A young photographer who lived in the house
dipped her legs in a full bottle of Johnson's Baby Oil,
then swabbed some more on her torso.
Barbie lounged on the red satin lining
of the kid's Sunday jacket. He dimmed
the lights and lit a candle
to create a glossy centerfold mood.
"Lick your lips," he kept saying,
forgetting Barbie didn't have a tongue.
She couldn't pout. She couldn't even bite
the maraschino cherry he dangled in front of her mouth.
Luckily there was no film in his sister's camera,
so the boy's pictures never came out.
Luckily GI Joe wasn't in the real Army
or he said he would risk being court-martialed--
he wasn't supposed to lend his uniform
to anyone, especially a girl.
Just then a human hand deposited Ken from the sky.
Somewhere along the way he'd lost his sandals.
"What have you two been up to?" he asked.
Barbie didn't have the kind of eyes that could shift away
so she lost herself in the memory of a joke
made by her favorite comedian Sandra Bernhard
who said she liked her dates to be androgynous
because if she were going to be with a man
she didn't want to have to face that fact.
Barbie was grateful for Ken's plastic flatfeet
and plastic flat crotch. No military
would ever take him, even if there were a draft.
As GI Joe bullied Ken into a headlock,
Barbie told the boys to cut it out. She threatened
that if he kept it up, GI Joe would
never get that honorable discharge.

~ **Denise Duhamel**

from The Contracted World (U of Pittsburgh Press)



Photography by Gary Lanier

THE POET & EDUCATOR

Denise Duhamel...SERIOUSLY FUN!

Raised in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, poet Denise Duhamel earned a BFA at Emerson College and an MFA at Sarah Lawrence College. | Citing Dylan Thomas and Kathleen Spivack as early influences, Duhamel writes both free verse and fixed-form poems that fearlessly combine the political, sexual, and ephemeral. Introducing Duhamel for *Smartish Pace*, poet Karla Huston observed, “Her poems speak with a wild irreverence. [...] Duhamel experiments with form and subject, creating poetry that challenges the reader’s notion of what poetry should be. She presents what poetry could be as she fully engages pop culture, the joys and horrors of it, while maintaining the ability to poke fun at our foibles—and make us think.” In an interview for *Pif* magazine with Derek Alger, Duhamel stated, “At some point in my development as a writer, I became interested in putting it all in, trusting my leaps, embracing vulnerability in imagery.”

| Duhamel has published numerous collections of poetry, including *Kinky* (Orchisis Press, 1997), *Queen for a Day: Selected and New Poems* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), *Two and Two* (Pittsburgh, 2005), *Ka-Ching!* (Pittsburgh, 2009), and *Blowout* (Pittsburgh, 2013), which was a finalist for a National Books Critics Circle Award. Her most recent volumes are *Second Story* (Pittsburgh, 2021) and *Scald* (Pittsburgh, 2017). | Duhamel has also collaborated with Maureen Seaton on four collections, including *CAPRICE (Collaborations: Collected, Uncollected, and New)* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2015). With Julie Wade, Duhamel co-authored *The Unrhymables: Collaborations in Prose* (Noctuary Press, 2019). With Maureen Seaton and David Trinidad, she edited *Saints of Hysteria: A Half-Century of Collaborative American Poetry* (2007). Duhamel served as the guest editor of *The Best American Poetry 2013*. | Duhamel’s honors include fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. Her work has featured on National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered* and Bill Moyers’s PBS poetry special *Fooling with Words*. She is a Distinguished University Professor in the MFA program at Florida International University in Miami. She lives in Hollywood.

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Photograph taken by ...

Rocheleau: What was growing up like? Were you the smart kid or the smart-aleck kid? Or when did you evolve from one to the other? **Duhamel:** I was definitely the smart kid, but pretty shy. Though I loved jokes (my Aunt Shirley was a great joke teller), I was more of a listener. I had severe asthma and spent almost all of 4th grade in Crawford Children's Hospital. I had always loved reading and drawing, but I mark my tenth year as the year I realized I wanted to be a writer. I befriended other kids with ailments who became the basis for my characters. In one such "novel," the girl with cancer has magical, witchy powers because of her chemo treatments and cast spells turning our foul tasting medicines into apple juice. In another, the boy with cystic fibrosis has a cape and, curing all our illnesses, leads us in an escape from the hospital. My one of a kind, self-published "books" were hand written on 3-hole lined paper, tied together with ribbons to form a spine, and decorated with my own cover art. The backs spouted fake blurbs with celebrities popular in 1971: This book changed my life! Mary Tyler Moore. Or Possibly the best book of the century. Mr. Rogers. | Though I realize now that those blurbs were tongue-in-cheek, It wasn't until I went to Emerson College that I became more of a smart-aleck. My classes were full of creative, loveable outcasts and I finally felt like I fit in the same way I fit in with my friends at the children's hospital.

Rocheleau: Would you like more people to be able to actually pronounce "Woonsocket," a highly musical and poetic word to both Native Americans and French Canadians? (And in actual usage, could it be any worse than Pawtucket?!) Do you ever find yourself explaining the "up North" experience? **Duhamel:** Both Woonsocket and Pawtucket roll off the tongue so easily for me that I forget sometimes how strange our town names really are. I have been in Florida now for twenty one years, but I still find myself saying "idear" instead of idea or "ca" instead of "car" when I am talking to my relatives up north. Often when I say I am from Rhode Island, people in Florida think I mean Long Island. Sometimes I will sing Blossom Dearie's "Rhode Island is Famous for You" to get my point across.

Rocheleau: What is life like for you in South Florida as opposed to New England, and how did each experience inform your poetry? **Duhamel:** Living in South Florida has been a dream for me! I came to teach at Florida International University as a one-semester Visiting Writer in 1999.

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In 1998, Richard Toumy and Lenny DellaRocca (the editor of the *South Florida Poetry Journal*) had invited me to read in the now defunct Hanah Kahn series. It was then I met Campbell McGrath whose work I'd greatly admired. When the opening came up to teach at FIU the next year, he invited me to apply. I loved the students. I loved being warm! As luck (mine and definitely Campbell's!) would happen, Campbell won a MacArthur "genius" Award that semester and was going to be taking some serious time off of teaching and FIU needed a poet. I was in the right place at the right time and happily stayed on. My pediatrician had told my parents that living by the sea (which we couldn't afford) would be very good for my asthma. I do remember them wrapping me up in a blanket and taking me to Scarborough Beach in fall--and my asthma indeed always calmed down by the ocean. One of the great benefits for me of living so close to the beach in Florida is that my asthma symptoms have been greatly reduced. | I find both New England and Florida have influenced my work. Like you, I am French Canadian and grew up in a predominantly French Canadian town. So I was shocked to be living again among so many Candians in Hollywood, FL. You can even get poutine here! Some of my Canadian snowbird neighbors call Hollywood "South Quebec" or "Southern Canada." It's like I have come full circle.



Denise Duhamel, Maureen Seaton and Julie Marie Wade

Rocheleau: Most of your poems have an easy delivery, prose-poem like, with interesting breaks and non-breaks. How do you think that came about? **Duhamel:** I didn't realize there were any living poets until I went to college! I kid you not. Because we'd only read dead poets in high school, I had a sense that all poets were dead—that no one wrote poems anymore just as no one still made their own shoes. I had many years of writing vignettes or short stories until I learned poetic form. In my earliest published work, I felt comfortable in free verse and the prose poem, but sonnets were a struggle. I didn't really feel comfortable using traditional/received forms until much later. I credit Maureen Seaton, my collaborator, in getting me to write in form. She felt completely at ease writing in form and made the process enjoyable.

Rocheleau: Humor is important in your work, whether at the core of a light poem, or as a veneer for a more serious one. What separates great humor in poetry from forced attempts at it with the focus on a funny line or a cute rhyme we see in so many amateur poems?

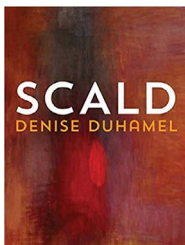
Duhamel: Barbara Hamby and David Kirby (proud Floridians!) edited a terrific anthology *Seriously Funny: Poems about Love, Death, Religion, Art, Politics, Sex, and Everything Else*. The introduction to the book is one of the smartest defenses of humor as a way to engage a reader.

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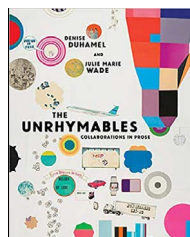


Denise Duhamel & friend Rick Karlin on Barbie's 60th birthday
Photo by Gregg Shapiro

TWO RECENT BOOKS



[Link to Book](#)



[Link to Book](#)

You don't want poetry to give its readers a mindless chuckle, though I have no problem with mindless chuckles in jingles or sit coms or dinner parties. Matthew Roher makes his point in "Serious Art That's Funny," writing, "Oppression cannot work alongside irony because it believes in its own righteousness and a monolithic concept of truth that must be asserted to the oppressed with a straight face. Irony and satire are the tools by which the oppressed get to make fun of the oppressors without the oppressors getting it."

Rocheleau: Who are the humorists or comedians, in poetry specifically or in broader comedy performance who may have influenced your outlook along the way? **Duhamel:** In poetry, I was very drawn to Bill Knott, Albert Goldbarth, and Frank O'Hara. Denis Leary (yes, that one—but before he was a famous comedian) taught at Emerson College and gave students free passes to the comedy clubs where he was perfecting his act. Then we'd meet to talk about his routine—where he got the laughs, where the audience seemed to lose him, how far he could go with any given topic. We monitored the precise moments people were most engaged and the precise moments they started to groan or worse began to carry on private conversations and ignore Dennis Leary all together. Watching the makings of a comic and comic timing was fascinating to me. It was amazing how fluid the crossover of techniques was from comedy to poetry, though it took me a few years to integrate what I'd learned. Now I am obsessed with Sarah Silverman, Chelsea Handler, and Kathy Griffin.

Rocheleau: You have published a book of poetic collaborations. What are the advantages and difficulties of the collaborative process? **Duhamel:** Maureen Seaton and I have published four volumes of poetry! And more recently I collaborated with the poet/creative nonfiction writer Julie Marie Wade on a book of essays. I absolutely love collaborating with the right people. While I might get lazy and not finish a solo poem on any given day when I am feeling blue or overwhelmed, I would never let down a collaborator by not providing the next line or passage. It's crucial though that writers choose the right partners. Maureen and I put together a set of guidelines we call "The 10 Commandments of Collaboration:"

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THE 10 COMMANDMENTS OF COLLABORATION

1. Thou shalt trust thy collaborator's art with thy whole heart.
2. Thou shalt trust thy collaborator's judgment with thy whole mind.
3. Thou shalt trust thy collaborator's integrity with thy whole spirit.
4. Honor thy own voice.
5. Honor thy collaborator's spouse.
6. Thou shalt not be an egotistical asshole.
7. Thou shalt not covet all the glory.
8. Thou shalt love the same foods as your collaborator.
9. Thou shalt eat and tire at the same time.
10. Above all, honor the muse.

Rocheleau: Referring to one of your poems, do you actually finger the rosary in your head when you write in meter? Slightly more seriously, what has been your experience when writing in fixed forms and meter? **Duhamel:** As a fellow Catholic you might remember this saying--if the Catholic Church has you at five, they have you the rest of your life! I have loved writing in fixed forms and meter, first with Maureen, but now more frequently on my own. I've found that I've been able to surprise myself by condensing (for syllable counts) and coming up with oddball rhymes. Writing in form has been very useful when I'm stuck. I can lift lines from my notebooks of freewriting and see if I can take them anywhere through pantoums, sestinas, etc.

Rocheleau: The amazing Barbie poems, are they intended as direct effect and extension of a child's imagination, or just the perfect ingenious vehicle for a cache of poems that contain adult commentary? Is there a balance there? **Duhamel:** I think it's a bit of both, to tell you the truth! Carl Jung observed "the creation of something new is not accomplished by intellect but by the play instinct." I think of writing poetry as seriously fun play.

Rocheleau: Well, let's get down to it. Do you think Ken was mostly faithful to Barbie? When you played with them way back, did he have a Nabokov-like thing for Skipper? (By posing and answering this question, we have of course gone too far...) **Duhamel:** I honestly think Ken liked other Kens! "Magic Earring Ken" (1993) pretty much says it all. Ken tried his best to come out, but Mattel pulled this particular Ken from the shelves.

Rocheleau: The Poet Laureate process drags on. No doubt you've thought about what you might do in the post. Can you share? **Duhamel:** I would love to bring accessible poetry to as many elementary and secondary school students as possible. Reading poetry can offer solace and joy. Writing poetry can give students a chance to engage with language in so many unpredictable ways, to explore their identity/identities. Reading should be fun. Writing should be fun. Poetry should be relevant and readily available. I don't want another generation to grow up thinking all poets are dead.

Rocheleau: You'll be with us in October for your installation as an FSPA Chancellor alongside Virgil Suarez and Silvia Curbelo. In fact, it is possible that most or all our chancellors will be actively involved in that convention. Any last thoughts? **Duhamel:** I am a big fan of both Virgil's and Silvia's work and am honored to be installed alongside them!

NOAH AND JOAN

It's not that I'm proud of the fact
 that twenty percent of Americans believe
 that Noah (of Noah's Ark) was married
 to Joan of Arc. It's true. I'll admit it--
 Americans are pretty dumb and forgetful
 when it comes to history. And they're notorious
 for interpreting the Bible to suit themselves.
 You don't have to tell me we can't spell anymore--
 Ark or Arc, it's all the same to us.

But think about it, just a second, time-line aside,
 it's not such an awful mistake. The real Noah's Missis
 was never even given a name. She was sort of milquetoasty,
 a shadowy figure lugging sacks of oats up a plank.
 I mean, Joan could have helped Noah build that ark
 in her sensible slacks and hiking boots. She was good with swords
 and, presumably, power tools. I think Noah and Joan
 might have been a good match, visionaries
 once mistaken for flood-phobic and heretic.

Never mind France wasn't France yet--
 all the continents probably blended together,
 one big mush. Those Bible days would have been
 good for Joan, those early times when premonitions
 were common, when animals popped up
 out of nowhere, when people were getting cured
 left and right. Instead of battles and prisons
 and iron cages, Joan could have cruised
 the Mediterranean, wherever the flood waters took that ark.

And Noah would have felt more like Dr. Doolittle,
 a supportive Joan saying, "Let's not waste any time!
 Hand over those boat blueprints, honey!"
 All that sawing and hammering would have helped
 calm her nightmares of mean kings and crowns,
 a nasty futuristic place called England.
 She'd convince Noah to become vegetarian.
 She'd live to be much older than 19, those parakeets
 and antelope leaping about her like children.

From TWO AND TWO
 ~ **Denise Duhamel**
 in "Tasting Like Gravity,"
 U. of Tampa Press

DELTA FLIGHT 659

to Sean Penn

I'm writing this on a plane, Sean Penn,
with my black Pilot Razor ball point 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 towards 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.

From KA-CHING!
~ **Denise Duhamel**

HOW IT WILL END

We're walking on the boardwalk
 but stop when we see a lifeguard and his girlfriend
 fighting. We can't hear what they're saying,
 but it is as good as a movie. We sit on a bench to find out
 how it will end. I can tell by her body language
 he's done something really bad. She stands at the bottom
 of the ramp that leads to his hut. He tries to walk halfway down
 to meet her, but she keeps signaling don't come closer.
 My husband says, "Boy, he's sure in for it,"
 and I say, "He deserves whatever's coming to him."
 My husband thinks the lifeguard's cheated, but I think
 she's sick of him only working part time
 or maybe he forgot to put the rent in the mail.
 The lifeguard tries to reach out
 and she holds her hand like Diana Ross
 when she performed "Stop in the Name of Love."
 The red flag that slaps against his station means strong currents.
 "She has to just get it out of her system,"
 my husband laughs, but I'm not laughing.
 I start to coach the girl to leave her no-good lifeguard,
 but my husband predicts she'll never leave.
 I'm angry at him for seeing glee in their situation
 and say, "That's your problem—you think every fight
 is funny. You never take her seriously," and he says,
 "You never even give the guy a chance and you're always nagging,
 so how can he tell the real issues from the nitpicking?"
 and I say, "She doesn't nitpick!" and he says, "Oh really?
 Maybe he should start recording her tirades," and I say
 "Maybe he should help out more," and he says
 "Maybe she should be more supportive," and I say
 "Do you mean supportive or do you mean support him?"
 and my husband says that he's doing the best he can,
 that's he's a lifeguard for Christ's sake, and I say
 that her job is much harder, that she's a waitress
 who works nights carrying heavy trays and is hit on all the time
 by creepy tourists and he just sits there most days napping
 and listening to "Power 96" and then ooh
 he gets to be the big hero blowing his whistle
 and running into the water to save beach bunnies who flatter him,
 and my husband says it's not as though she's Miss Innocence
 and what about the way she flirts, giving free refills
 when her boss isn't looking or cutting extra-large pieces of pie
 to get bigger tips, oh no she wouldn't do that because she's a saint
 and he's the devil, and I say, "I don't know why you can't just admit
 he's a jerk," and my husband says, "I don't know why you can't admit
 she's a killjoy," and then out of the blue the couple is making up.
 The red flag flutters, then hangs limp.
 She has her arms around his neck and is crying into his shoulder.
 He whisks her up into his hut. We look around, but no one is watching us.

From BLOWOUT
 ~ **Denise Duhamel**

ON THE OCCASION OF TYPING MY FIRST EMAIL ON A BRAND NEW PHONE

When I sign "Denise,"
 autocorrect suggests Denise Richards
 which makes my ex-husband Charlie Sheen,
 which makes me a mother of three daughters,
 and sometimes more, as I also volunteer
 to take care of the twins
 Charlie fathered with his third wife Brooke Mueller
 while she's in rehab.
 In my new identity, I'm ten years younger,
 a lot skinnier, but I haven't read much.
 In my new identity, I get breast implants
 so I can be in Wild Things
 for which I become pretty famous
 because of a sex scene with Neve Campbell in a pool.
 But after that, my acting goes nowhere
 except for bit parts and my now-cancelled reality show
 It's Complicated, which only runs for a year,
 and for which Charlie calls me "greedy and vain."
 Sure, I get to be in The World is Not Enough,
 but Entertainment Weekly rates me
 the worst Bond Girl of all time.
 In my new identity, I still have a sister named Michelle.
 I'm still French Canadian, raised Roman Catholic.
 I still get to be a writer, but when I'm Denise Richards,
 instead of poems, I publish a memoir
 The Real Girl Next Door.
 I'm a New York Times bestseller,
 but deep down I know
 it's not because I wield a great sentence.
 In my new identity, instead of overeating,
 I get more plastic surgery and pose for Playboy
 when my marriage heads south
 and I no longer "feel sexy"
 and just want to "prove something."
 In my new identity, my mother has passed,
 but my father is still alive
 going to The Millionaire Matchmaker
 to look for new love. Though I'm no
 genius, I'm generally respected
 because I don't badmouth anyone,
 even when I'm on Howard Stern.
 I repeatedly decline to talk
 about the restraining order
 or any of Sheen's public subsequent meltdowns.
 What's the point? Besides, I need to protect my kids.
 There aren't many famous Denise's,
 and I wonder why my phone, if it's that "smart,"
 doesn't suggest Levertov. When I erase Richards,
 autocorrect still doesn't recognize who I am.
 As I try to re-sign, Samsung asks
 if I'm sure I'm just a plain old Denise.
 Might I really mean "Denies"
 or maybe "Demise?"

From SCALD
 ~ **Denise Duhamel**