

On the complicated relationship between romantic love and writing



Writer Shiv Kotecha on subverting traditional poetic forms, the creative pitfalls of love, and why writing shorter and smarter should be the goal.

May 2, 2019 -

As told to Thora Siemsen, 2446 words.

Tags: [Poetry](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Education](#).

In your poem "[I'm Sorry Shiv. I'm Sorry Diana.](#)," you write about "the constant disagreements and difficulties that are inevitable in any ongoing inquiry." What are some of these difficulties and how do they affect your inquiry?

"I'm Sorry Shiv. I'm Sorry Diana." is a long, conversational poem between two best friends who refuse to fuck one another. I guess the idea of refusal, or of disagreement, or of difficulty, was a kind of formal device in the poem which allowed the stakes of the conversation to be reset or to be re-established. "Can we fuck?" "No." "Okay, let's move on, but also, can we fuck?" Otherwise, when I first started writing, I wanted to make the maybe too-cheap argument that love was bad, and that's a reason why one should stick with friendship. You're able to endure a lot more in friendship, and maybe learn a lot more, too. Love doesn't really have anything to do with knowledge, does it? It's blind or whatever?

I also think there's something about the idea of promise and union, and more precisely the language of agreement (the "couples who eat or vote or agree with one another stay together" kind of bullshit) within heteronormative coupling that I wanted to challenge. A lot of the conversations that went into the book are not conversations I had with my IRL roommate and friend, the poet [Diana Hamilton](#), but were actual situations that I had with a male lover who I think still identifies as straight. It was a frustrating, fatiguing affair.

Instead of having the book be a conversation between two men, which would be boring, I thought it would be better to stage it as a kind of terrifying heterosexual domestic spiral. I was thinking a lot about the kinds of domestic tensions between lovers and between generations in Ingmar Bergman's films, but also the aimless smoky bedroom scene in *Breathless*. I also loved the fucked-up straight hell in *Phantom Thread*. Inquiry doesn't go beyond domestic promise in that movie—it's drab, and repetitious, and perverse—and that's a terrifying idea.

What are you finding disagreeable lately?

Waking up. Sleeping. Like everyone else I'm finding the constant barrage of bad news and the insanity of responses to the news and to the world by bad powerful white people suffocating and disarming. It has really started to feel like we've all been written into some kind of farcical, never-ending chamber play and there's no way out. I hope I am wrong.

I find my own writing disagreeable, often, and especially in periods between projects. Writing, though, and my relationship to it, might not be so bad if we didn't have to work jobs. Jobs are disagreeable.

Doctors are disagreeable. Medications and tummies are disagreeable. Also the internet.

Because you mentioned medication, I remember that in the book you quote Hervé Guibert saying, "It does affect me, knowing it is chemical substances that are writing a book." Why did you include this quote?

I think Guibert was earnestly trying to say that substances wrote his book, *The Compassion Protocol*, which is where the quote comes from. Though I'm not sure I have the same relationship to it. Here and elsewhere Guibert swings himself and his reader into one of many delirious spaces, caused by illness or obsession. He also wrote and rewrote his own death into his books, using writing as a way to confront the frailty of the body and the effects of aging. He wrote his first novel *Blindsight* from an eerily predictive speaking position of a blind person, which foretold his own fate with the AIDS virus—he eventually went blind, but he kept writing.

What I like about this sentiment, however, is the way it dilutes narrative authority by attributing the writing itself to a series of external substances—curatives, opiates, booze, and love alike. I think it's the moments like this that allowed Guibert to move beyond the autofictional and to start pursuing fiction. I'm probably wrong, but it's in that book, *The Compassion Protocol*, where his books as works start feeling more like fiction, and they start getting really good.

I wanted to stage a similar thing in *The Switch*, particularly in the second part, "Obedience Residency Manual," which pretty explicitly cedes personal conflict to bigger forces and structures. Sex drives; pornography and visual culture; social relations; addiction; feigned delirium. Including this citation felt like a good way to stage those forces in a longer tradition of autobiographical writing. We're knowingly suspending our belief in regard to the author or the author's penchant for telling the truth. It gave me license to lie.

What are some examples of disappearances in art that you admire?

There's Bruce Nauman, who assists his viewers in disappearing, [Vito] Acconci who follows until you do. And there's this moment in Sade's *Juliette* that I always think about in relation to art that I like. I think it's a description of the blinding effects of lust:

"But lust, which all too quickly crowns our actors, might not have allowed the artist time to portray them. It is not easy for art, which is motionless, to depict an activity the essence of which is movement."

I guess that's not a disappearance as much as it is a metaphor for art's difficulty in being able to depict actual disappearance.

But I like these moments. I have a soft spot for novels that don't have proper endings; novels in which characters lose control, or we lose control of them. Or novels that are given up on and yet still make it into our hands as readers. I love Melville's *Pierre; Or the Ambiguities*, in which, it's arguable, the main character disappears about halfway through the book. Honestly, the whole book disappears about halfway through. The second half of the book entirely cannibalizes the first. Poe's "Man of the Crowd." The narrator in [Samuel] Delany's *Dhalgren* tries to leave Bellona, but can't. Gogol's *Dead Souls* is another. In each of these, the endings proliferate, they become impossible to follow.

I love the detective novel for this reason—it's full of the missing person. I think I tried to write something like detection into the *The Switch* (with "The Hypothesis of the Stolen Head") but, I think what I ended up with was more like an adventure story. I like when evidence has gone missing and you have to write the other possible ways it might be and/or is recuperated. Using evidence is a good constraint.

If I taught a class, I would love to teach a semester on detective fiction and poetics. Of course Poe, but also Gertrude Stein wrote a detective novel. Jack Spicer wrote a detective novel, one that's super difficult to read because of how racist and anti-semitic it is, but which plays out as this very snarky, weird sociological study of gay (read: white) culture and poetry-gossip in 1950s San Francisco. He also wrote "The Holy Grail," which to me reads as another kind of detective fiction, because it is a poem that's constantly searching for an object

that can't actually be found.

Which courses have you taught?

I teach writing at an organization in Manhattan called Fountain House. They have programs for students who have left their home institutions to deal with their mental health. The class I teach is a part of a bridge program geared to help these students get re-socialized into school. We write personal essays and essays about other things than the self, but we constantly talk about how writing is related to anxiety, and to social spaces (as opposed to hermetic places of exception), and to the externalization of feelings and ideas more generally.

As a Ph.D. student at NYU, I TA'd there a bunch. I taught one course on the American Short Story. I'd love to teach a class about poetry and cinema, but I might have to become an academic to do that, and I'm resisting.

Your epigraph comes from Anne Garréta's *Sphinx*, a Oulipian text. What are some examples of times you've written in constrained techniques?

My previous book, *EXTRIGUE*, was really invested in the methods of the Oulipo tradition wholesale. The book rendered Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* shot-by-shot. I wrote down every object in every shot of the movie. Blinded by lust for his client, the beautiful Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), the insurance agent Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) is unable to see his own death. I tried to fix the error with the book, name all the things in the film Neff was unable to see for himself. In *The Switch*, my aim was different. I wanted to engage these procedural devices, but I also wanted to foreground poetic visual styles that seemed to me incongruous with these modes. I wrote the poem "I'm Sorry Shiv. I'm Sorry Diana." in couplets, which I've never really done before. This was a way of actually thinking about the line that was messier than before. Diana always said that periods at the end of text messages were a hostile form of grammar, and I liked that as a rubric for the poetic line.

The second part of the book, "Obedience Residency Manual" is much more informed by Oulipo, but it was really about making the constraint and then veering away from it. When I lived in Berlin, I was obsessed with this dude lover that lived in L.A. and I would chat with Diana about him all the time, like, "I don't know what to do, I just want to tell him I love him." She'd say, "Don't do that. Write me a letter instead." And she was right. I wrote her many letters, but then I made a list of things I could do, things that would keep me from writing to him at least. And that ended up looking like a series of prompts. I decided to take those as my constraint. If I said, "Watch porn," that became a setting for writing.

Do you resent love for arousing the platitudinous?

I absolutely resent love for it. It brings out the worst in me. It brings out the worst in a lot of us, but I do see the reasons for it, too. It's also fantastic. I look forward to the platitudes that come with love. And there's something very comforting about that.

When do you find writing boring?

Writing is very hard for me. Maybe a lot of the time. I take a lot longer than I think other people do to get things down in a way that is not word vomit. But I'm okay with it being boring. It's also frustrating, and exciting, and a totally ludicrous activity. I think writing is less boring when we can detach ourselves from it and get others' opinions. Sharing helps me write more. Writing is not a hermetic activity to me. There are no geniuses. Genius is a racist term.

Academic writing is probably the most obviously boring, though. It was 2008 when I decided to go to grad school. I heard there'd be jobs in 10 years, so now I have training in this kind of writing, but I still think it's bad. In either case, I think that there's already too much language out there. I think we need to learn how to write shortly, and better. I should also learn this, given that I write very long poems.

You renamed the Acknowledgements section of your book "Sorrys." Why did you choose to end on an apologetic note?

I have had a lot of conversations about the apology, both with my therapist and with Diana. Three years ago, when I moved in with Diana, we were both going through rather terrible breakups and really just needed a great friend. People we could profusely love and apologize to. We're in very different, better places now, and I am constantly grateful for her company.

It's a little excessive to apologize constantly, but I like that excess. I think that an apology can often be bullshit, but I'm interested in the bullshit. I'm interested in the kind of froth that an apology makes between people. It's evidence we care.

Shiv Kotecha recommends:

Bill Gunn's *Personal Problems* (1980)

Rami Karim's "Smile and Nod" (2018)

Divya Bharghi's "Saat Samundar Paar" (1992)

Ulker's Turkish Labneh

David Robilliard's poem-paintings

Madeline Gins and Arakawa's *Making Dying Illegal* (2006):

Aurelia Guo's NYT (2018)

Tilda Swinton's reading of "Loomings," from Moby Dick

Powder's Beats in Space mix (2018)

Kathleen Collins's *Whatever Happened to Interracial Love* (2016):

Trisha Low's *Socialist Realism* (2019):

Tony Conrad: A Retrospective at ICA Philadelphia

Eliza Haywood's *Fantomina; or Love in a Maze* (1725), a short-ish novel in which the protagonist disguises herself as four different women in her efforts to understand how a man may interact with each individual persona. Here is one of my favorite parts:

He therefore took Pen and Paper, and answer'd her Letter in Terms tender enough for a Man who had never seen the Person to whom he wrote. The Words were as follows:

To the Obliging and Witty Incognita.

Though to tell me I am happy enough to be lik'd by a Woman, such, as by your Manner of Writing, I imagine you to be, is an Honour which I can never sufficiently acknowledge, yet I know not how I am able to content myself with admiring the Wonders of your Wit alone: I am certain, a Soul like yours must shine in your Eyes with a Vivacity, which must bless all they look on. – I shall, however, endeavour to restrain myself in those Bounds you are pleas'd to set me, till by the Knowledge of my inviolable Fidelity, I may be thought worthy of gazing on that Heaven I am now but to enjoy in Contemplation. – You need not doubt my glad Compliance with your obliging summons: There is a Charm in your Lines, which gives too sweet an Idea of their lovely Author to be resisted. – I am all impatient for the blissful Moment, which is to throw me at your Feet, and give me an Opportunity of convincing you that I am,

Your everlasting Slave, Beauplaisir

Name

Shiv Kotecha

Vocation

Poet, Writer

□

Photo credit: Jameson Fitzpatrick