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A Meeting of the Lovers at Susan Inglett Gallery

Madelyn Grace

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On the eve of Valentine's Day and in the name of love, Cortney Connolly and Becket Gourlay tasked the writer and cultural strategist Sam Falb to organize an evening of readings at Susan Inglett Gallery. Falb called it *A Meeting of the Lovers* and opened with a tribute to a notable New York lover, Frank O'Hara:

"Oh god, it's wonderful to get out of bed and drink too much coffee and smoke too many cigarettes and love you so much," he read from the writer's *Lunch Poems* to commence what followed. Talents on the roster Devin Diaz, Chris Murphy, Brianna Lance, Whitney Mallett, Matt Starr, Sahir Ahmed, and Camille Sojit Pechja shared messages from their hearts, accompanied by similarly shaped lollipops and stickers handed out at the front desk. The watchful guest may have noticed that *Lunch Poems* had been stationed between the lollipops and glasses of wine on the way in. I put a sticker on the left side of my pink sweatshirt, and at the time, feeling closer to the Tin Man, I pretended I was a Build-A-Bear."

People packed into the Chelsea gallery, which is currently hosting Saya Woolfalk's "The Woods Woman Method." Its white walls were lined with celestial images that added an allure to an already buzzing energy. The readers were backlit by indigo papier-mâché night skies behind moons lit over oceans.

Sojit Pejcha, who writes the Substack *Pleasure Seeking*, a newsletter about sex and desire, began with an all too familiar experience of overhearing your neighbors having sex. What's it like to witness love through decibels? She read an essay aptly supported by witty statistics. An

acceptable sound level for public noise is that of moderate rainfall or a running refrigerator, certainly not at the caliber of an invitation to “DADDY COME DOWN MY CHIMNEY,” which she cited from a source about inevitable eavesdropping of the act, decked in Christmas cheer.

She gave a good spin to a *Sex and the City* jingle, speculating why people tolerate noise from traffic and proximity in every aspect of life in New York City but find pleasure to be the sound that pushes people over the edge. She distinguishes between two different types of people: the sex-havers and the sex-hearers. “Many of us know too much of each other,” she noted. And I couldn’t help but wonder—.

After all, these private displays of affection are only presented in public by accident. Shakespeare’s Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* says, “love is blind, and lovers cannot see the pretty follies that themselves commit,” and as Sojit Pecha points out, they can’t hear either.

Ahmed came next. Turning the lens inwards, he wrote about first loves and all those that come afterward: “Three people I think about when I think about love” —a construction serendipitously similar to Raymond Carver’s book *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. He shared details of previous relationships – all of them personal, sincere, and relatable — to an extent. Sahir shared an anecdote from the age of four, playing house with another boy in preschool. I smiled at this, remembering my first crush/boyfriend, Jack, who chased me on the playground during the same period.

Through multiple bouts of gonorrhea with multiple partners and blocking one on Grindr just for him to Venmo a dollar to get in contact, he shared feelings of longing, desire, and self-exploration through another. He navigated his history of love. In terms given as advice by his mother, he decided that “in the game of love, losing is the worst I could do.” Though, in his pursuit of reflection, Sahir concluded that “sometimes, the only game you’re playing is with yourself.”

Mallett, founding editor of *The Whitney Review of New Writing*, transitioned from the sentimental into the satirical.

“THANK YOU TO THE ACADEMY!” she began, listing a slew of credits to an array of recipients. Adopting the voice of a character who’s spent “490 years in this dimension,” Mallett thanked long-haired femininity, her lawyer-father for teaching her how to lie with the ease of masculinity, Roman Polanski, Jack Nicholson, and many others with equally humorous and absurd associations. She emphasized her thanks because “GRATITUDE RECIPROCATES!”

This made me laugh. Parroting my 80-something-year-old best friend, Eddie, I open every morning and close every night with, “Thank you! I love you!” Hey, it’s good advice.

In her speech, Mallett declared that one only needs “something to look up to, something to look forward to, and something to chase.” Every “year-o” she is never going to be her “her-o” so she’s always got something to chase!

Murphy, an actor, comedian, and writer for *Vanity Fair*, followed in perfect suit by diving into the vat of celebrity gossip. “If you know anyone in this, don’t tell them,” he prompted before beginning his report on secondhand interpersonal drama between the famous and confusing – Matthew Morrison and Chrishell Stause’s perplexing one-time engagement. His humor seeped through seamlessly, poking at the plausibility of love between sometimes unlikely characters: “Love can’t actually be real if these two think they’re in it!”

Yet the jokes rang true as he pondered the difference between *love* and *thinking you're in love*—two names for the same feeling. “The thing about love,” Murphy said, is that “other people don’t get to decide.”

The night was peppered with collective laughter from an audience who stood until they had to sit. I like readings like this. Next to each other, criss-cross-applesauce, we’re ducks in a row at kindergarten again. Love is as intimate as the memory of childhood. It is something cultivated like remembrance. I thought about O Hara’s later that night when I left a drunken voicemail for my best friend while smoking a cigarette I bummed from a stranger at the bar I was at before. I lit the stick over the counter at my bodega because someone stole my light. “I just wanted to tell you I love you!”

And, maybe this is what love is, the search to repeat something never to be found as it was left.

Painter Lance ended the series with the words of another’s, and hit this nail firmly in place. I saw her holding a copy of Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in line before the activities commenced. Beautiful, next to a favorite book, and dressed in perfect pink, I couldn’t help but stare. Sure, condemn the popularity of a modern classic, it’s a good book for a reason. The novel traverses through love and (always complicated and never simple) human relationships under the backdrop of a collapsing Czechoslovakia in the aftermath of the Prague Spring—the beginning of Soviet occupation implementing the police state. She read from the end of the book, when Tereza is talking about the difference in love between Thomas, her lover, and their dog, Karenin.

I admire Lance’s approach to the reading. A visual artist, she jests about not being skilled in language the way a writer is. I agree that some things are best left said by those who already did. Call it Harold Bloom’s *heresy of paraphrase or, anxiety of influence*, or just plain ART, sometimes the only thing there is to do is to look at the painting itself.

I quote a majority of it here for the simple reason of seeing with your own eyes:

“Perhaps all the questions we ask of love, to measure, test, probe, and save it, have the additional effect of cutting it short. Perhaps the reason we are unable to love is that we yearn to be loved, that is, we demand something (love) from our partner instead of delivering ourselves up to him demand-free and asking for nothing but his company. . . . Tereza accepted Karenin for what he was; she did not try to make him over in her image. . . . If Karenin had been a person instead of a dog, he would surely have long since said to Tereza, Look, I’m sick and tired of carrying that roll in my mouth every day. Can’t you come up with something different? And therein lies the whole of man’s plight. Human time does not turn in a circle; it runs ahead in a straight line. That is why man cannot be happy: happiness is the longing for repetition.”

Tereza says it again to herself, “*Yes, happiness is the longing for repetition.*”