The Old is Dying and the New Cannot be Born
Laura Miller and Travis Sola

"Don't worry about it right now," he says.
He knows I'm not listening. There are other sounds here. Someone on the
stereo is whispering to me about love and regret, and I'm being sucked into the
surface-passion of it all, just like a woman. And his eyes aren't on me anymore, but
past me to the left, staring at things or people I don't want to see. I want him to
look at me. I want him to see the uncertainty on my face. The lines around my
young eyes, like deep, threatening fissures that will swallow first my lids, then
lashes, then all the white and brown and delicate layers between.

I really do want her to stop worrying. She worries about everything, as if to
avoid more serious problems. What am I thinking? I do the same thing. Maybe if I
ask myself why I worry to forget I'll know what she's thinking. She's always asking
me, "what are you thinking?" In fact, it's pauses like this that invite the questions. I
don't mean to break away from her but ... there I go making excuses. I should say
something before she asks.
"Today was a nice day to come down here."
"Mmm," she nods.
I watch her face for any sign of more to come. Sometimes it's hard to get her to do
more than nod.
"I was thinking about what you said yesterday in Chicago, how you would find
it hard to live there."
She tilts her head to the side and looks into my eyes. "With the smell of it all.
Because I'm short and my face hides nothing."
She does look vulnerable. I remember her frightened reaction to a passerby
who whispered to her. "Nice set."
It makes me angry when she lets those things get
to her. But then, I don't know what it's like to be a woman.
"Oh, baby, you just have to work on your street face."

My street face, he calls it. The contorted inside-out of my skin, a reflection of
all the defenses inside my flushed cheeks. He doesn't know how it feels to be old
and young at the same time.
I like the coffee today, warm and thick on my tongue.
"Good coffee," I say.
"Yeah, it's not too bad. . . . I tried the cream one. Something-Cream."
As he speaks, he brings his left hand to his face and rubs the dark chin-hair
between his thumb and index finger. He strokes it, downward, and pulls at his
lower lip with his top teeth. I think he's feeling distant. Is he thinking about me?
What is he thinking?
"What are you thinking?"
"I don't know. I guess I was thinking . . . Well, let me get it out for you."
"What?"
"This book I've been reading."
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“What are you thinking?”
“Yeah, the idea that truth . . . that a truth can be found and knowledge accumulated.”
He’s tapping at his chin-hair again, his face tilted up, eyes above my head.

“Yeah, I guess I was thinking . . . Well, let me get it out for you.”

“Maybe there’s what?”

“Maybe we’ve created more mystery.”

“I think we’ve created a yearning for more mystery by denying it. Do you need more coffee?”

He slides out the words and turns to fumble through his backpack. It’s black with fraying edges and small tears just above each vinyl strap. He stuffs the bag with too many books, every day, so heavy. He carries it with him everywhere. It was a gift from a man who no longer needed a backpack. The man had graduated from bookbags and was about to buy a leather briefcase.

I hope she finds this interesting. I spend too much time reading this crap. I need to spend more time on things that are important. Practical.

“It’s a book tracing the Greek’s philosophical thought. What I’m thinking and the way I’m thinking right now is due to the ideas and events that happened two and a half thousand years ago.”

I push the open book over for her to see. I get excited about this stuff and I don’t really know why. She gives me an open-mouthed, questioning look and leans in to see the pages, but I know that’s her way of being polite. If I continue, she might really become interested.

“See, there’s Empi, Empedocles’ theory of evolution like we saw on TLC this morning. He thought that in the beginning was love, but strife fractured everything. The severed heads, arms, and legs simply floated around. Then love caused everything to spin and drew the heavier element to the center and the lighter element to the atmosphere. The body parts randomly connected, creating all kinds of creatures. But some died out because they couldn’t breed or they couldn’t get resources. The creatures that made it are what we have now, and love and strife will still struggle in the universe. It’s the first theory of natural selection, way before Darwin.”

“That’s beautiful,” I said. And it is. In these moments, I latch onto the energy of him. He’s thinking, “This is it! This is it!” and I want to believe it all. just as sincerely.

It would be nice if he would touch me. Brush away the strands of sun-bleached hair from my eyes and press a hand against my cheek. Warm and sure. The promise from his skin would ease my mind.

“I think about love a lot. I like the images there, the movement, life floating and colliding, creation in the midst of love and strife.”

“Well . . . they were pretty imaginative. Can you imagine being in a world without the certainty we have today?”

“The certainty?”

“Yeah, the idea that truth . . . that a truth can be found and knowledge accumulated.”

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“Sure, I think I’ll have another.”

“Good coffee,” I say.

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“What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know. I guess I was thinking . . . Well, let me get it out for you.”

“What?”

“This book I’ve been reading.”
She looks down and nods. “I’m gonna go to the bathroom.”

“Okay.”

She gets up and I watch her walk towards the back of the café. I walk up to the counter and wait for the staff to notice me. They’re always too busy moving dishes around, talking to each other. Sometimes I feel like they don’t like me, but I know I’m taking their indifference too personally.

“Sorry, we’re out of Hazelnut Cream. I’m going to brew another.”

“French Roast is fine.”

She slides the cup over without eye contact.

“Thanks.”

I don’t know why I drink so much coffee. It does give me a slight sensation of being more “aware,” but it always gives me gut-rot and cotton mouth. It’s so hot today. Why we ordered coffee, instead of something cool, makes no sense. We do get one free refill.

I sit back down in the booth. There’s not many people in here today. A boy and his father are sitting in the booth across the room from me. Neither one is saying anything, and the boy catches my stare. I bring it back to my cup of coffee and watch the steam lift off the surface and disappear. I can feel my face starting to perspire so I sit back. My armpits are soaked. I start flipping through the stack of magazines that lay on the table. So much crap. Why does she love me? I’ve always tried to tell her how I feel about her, or have I? She must know I need her. I know I’ve told her that.

I remember telling her how important it was to me that we helped each other grow, on all dimensions; how I hated the idea of being stagnant and habitual. I know we’ve grown. Two and a half years now. She looks like my mom, in pictures when mom was younger. The long brown hair, reddened by the sun, the oval face, so innocent and yearning to love and be loved. I can’t imagine her hardened, as the years have hardened my mom.

The lock doesn’t work. So I rush, my back to the wall, my eyes fixed on the door as I unbutton my jeans and slip them down my legs in one swift movement. It is much too hot for jeans, but self-consciousness comes before practicality.

Sometimes I think he’s all too aware of me. He knows me too well, mannerisms, fears, everything. He can probably even tell when I’m trying to block his vision, cloud his eyes from my insides and become opaque. When he looks at me I try so hard to appear at ease.

I like the picture on the walls. I like the colors, moving, circling me, colliding with my vision, creating brilliant, living visions. Rhythms that rock through me, and I believe in them.

My jeans buttoned, hands washed and still wet, I pull open the door and walk slowly to our table and meet his eyes. “What are you thinking? What’s on your mind.”

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**The Cursed Blessing of a Poetic Soul**

*Mary Fisher*

A poet is one
Who doesn’t know enough
To come in out of the rain.
So, instead I stand still
And let it flow under my skin
Soaking into my soul
Until I can hold no more.

A poet is one
Plagued by
An eminent distractibility.
So, if leaves outside the window
Fall like snow in autumn
Or the light beneath the shade
Makes patterns on the floor.
My eyes gravitate
And my mind drifts away
From Algebra or Kafka
Or whatever I’m supposed
To be learning.

A poet is one
Who sees momentousness
In minor matters.
So, I stare at objects
Overlooked by others
And laugh at private jokes
No one else
Can understand.

Is this poetic soul
Bestowed on me
The vilest curse
Or greatest blessing
That man can receive?