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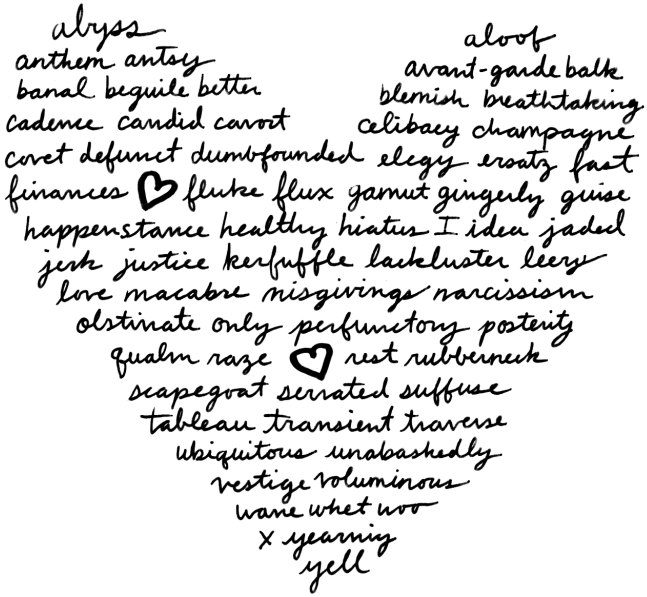
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The Lover's Dictionary



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For my parents, with gratitude and wonder

The Lover's Dictionary

A

aberrant, *adj.*

"I don't normally do this kind of thing," you said.

"Neither do I," I assured you.

Later it turned out we had both met people online before, and we had both slept with people on first dates before, and we had both found ourselves falling too fast before. But we comforted ourselves with what we really meant to say, which was: "I don't normally feel this good about what I'm doing."

Measure the hope of that moment, that feeling.

Everything else will be measured against it.

abstain, *v.*

I'm sorry I was so surprised you didn't drink that night.

"Is something wrong?" I asked. It wasn't like you to turn down a drink after work.

"Go ahead," you said. "Drink for both of us."

So I ordered two Manhattans. I didn't know whether to offer you a sip. I didn't know if it could be this easy to get you, for once, to stop.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

After a dramatic pause, you said, totally serious, "I'm pregnant." And then you cracked up.

I laughed even though I didn't feel like laughing. I raised my Manhattan, tipped it a little in your direction, then asked, "Whose is it?"

abstraction, *n.*

Love is one kind of abstraction. And then there are those nights when I sleep alone, when I curl into a pillow that isn't you, when I hear the tiptoe sounds that aren't yours. It's not as if I can conjure you there completely. I must embrace the idea of you instead.

abyss, *n.*

There are times when I doubt everything. When I regret everything you've taken from me, everything I've given you, and the waste of all the time I've spent on us.

acronym, *n.*

I remember the first time you signed an email with SWAK. I didn't know what it meant. It sounded violent, like a slap connecting. SWAK! Batman knocking down the Riddler. SWAK! Cries of "Liar! Liar!" Tears. SWAK! So I wrote back: *SWAK?* And the next time you wrote, ten minutes later, you explained.

I loved the ridiculous image I got from that, of you leaning over your laptop, touching your lips gently to the screen, sealing your words to me before turning them into electricity. Now every time you SWAK me, the echo of that electricity remains.

adamant, *adj.*

You swore that Meryl Streep won the Best Actress Oscar for *Silkwood*. I said, no, it was *Sophie's Choice*. The way you argued with me, you would have thought we were debating the existence of God or whether or not we should move in together. These kinds of fights can never be won — even if you're the victor, you've hurt the other person, and there has to be some loss associated with that.

We looked it up, of course, and even though you conceded I was right, you still acted like it was a special occasion. I thought about leaving you then. Just for a split second, I was out the door.

akin, *adj.*

I noticed on your profile that you said you loved *Charlotte's Web*. So it was something we talked about on that first date, about how the word *radiant* sealed it for each of us, and how the most heartbreaking moment isn't when Charlotte dies, but when it looks like all of her children will leave Wilbur, too.

In the long view, did it matter that we shared this? Did it matter that we both drank coffee at night and both happened to go to Barcelona the summer after our senior year? In the long view, was it such a revelation that we were both ticklish and that we both liked dogs more than cats? Really, weren't these facts just placeholders until the long view could truly assert itself?

We were painting by numbers, starting with the greens. Because that happened to be our favorite color. And this, we figured, had to mean something.

alfresco, *adv.*

We couldn't stand the city one minute longer, so we walked right into the rent-a-car place, no reservation, and started our journey upstate. As you drove, I called around, and eventually I found us a cabin. We stopped at a supermarket and bought a week's worth of food for two nights.

It wasn't too cold out, so we moved the kitchen table outside. The breeze kept blowing out the candles, but that didn't matter, because for the first time in our relationship, there were plenty of stars above us.

The wine set the tone of our conversation — languid, tipsy, earthy.

"I love dining alfresco," you said, and I laughed a little.

"What?" you asked.

And I said, "We're not naked, silly."

Now it was your turn to laugh.

"That's not what it means," you told me. "And anyway, don't you feel naked now?"

You fell quiet, gestured for me to listen. The sound of the woods, the feel of the air. The wine settling in my thoughts. The sky, so present. And you, watching me take it all in.

Naked to the world. The world, naked to us.

aloof, *adj.*

It has always been my habit, ever since junior high school, to ask that question:

"What are you thinking?"

It is always an act of desperation, and I keep on asking, even though I know it will never work the way I want it to.

anachronism, *n.*

"I'll go get the horse and buggy," you'll say.

And I'll say, "But I thought we were taking the hovercraft!"

anthem, *n.*

It was our sixth (maybe seventh) date. I had cooked and you had insisted on doing the dishes. You wouldn't even let me dry. Then, when you were done, smelling of suds, you sat back down and I poured you another glass of cheapish wine. You put your legs in my lap and slouched as if we'd just had a feast for thousands and you'd been the only chambermaid on duty to clean it up.

There was a pause. I was still scared by every gap in our conversation, fearing that this was it, the point where we had nothing left to say. I was still trying to impress you, and I still wanted to be impressed by you, so I could pass along pieces of your impressiveness in stories to my friends, convincing myself this was possible.

"If you were a country," I said, "what would your national anthem be?"

I meant a pre-existing song — "What a Wonderful World" or "Que Sera, Sera" or something to make it a joke, like "Hey Ya!" ("I would like, more than anything else, for my nation to be shaken like a Polaroid picture.")

But instead you said, "It would have to be a blues song." And then you looked up at the ceiling, closed your eyes, and began to sing a blues riff:

Nuh-nah-nuh-nuh
My work makes me tired

Nuh-nah-nuh-nuh
But I gotta pay my rent
Nuh-nah-nuh-nuh
My parents never loved me
Nuh-nah-nuh-nuh
Left all my emotions bent
Nuh-nah-nuh-nuh
I know what I'm here for
Nuh-nah-nuh-nuh
Make your dishes so clean
Nuh-nah-nuh-nuh
Just be careful what you wish for
Nuh-nah-nuh-nuh
'Cause most my shit is unseen
Nuh-nah-nuh-nuh
So many men
Nuh-nah-nuh-nuh
Fall into my trap
Nuh-nah-nuh-nuh
But, boy, I gotta tell you
Nuh-nah-nuh-nuh
You might rewrite that map
Nuh-nah-nuh-nuh
Because I'm a proud nation
Nuh-nah-nuh-nuh
It's written here on my flag
Nuh-nah-nuh-nuh
It's a fucked-up world, boy
Nuh-nah-nuh-nuh
So you better make me laugh

Then you stopped and opened your eyes to me. I applauded.

"Don't sit there clapping," you said. "Rub this blues singer's feet."

You never asked what my anthem was. But that's okay, because I still don't know what I'd answer.