

Love Poem
John Frederick Nims

My clumsiest dear, whose hands shipwreck vases,
At whose quick touch all glasses chip and ring,
Whose palms are bulls in china, burs in linen,
And have no cunning with any soft thing

5 Except all ill-at-ease fidgeting people:

The refugee uncertain at the door
You make at home; deftly you steady
The drunk clambering on his undulant floor.

Comment [CBC1]: This simple title suggests something generic and conventional, but this is in fact a very *unconventional* love poem.

Comment [CBC2]: The **audience** (also the **subject** of the poem) is apparently someone the speaker loves, but the **juxtaposition** of "clumsiest" (an insulting adjective) with "dear" (an affectionate term) is surprising, and it establishes a **tone** of both candor and humor. It also makes clear from the first phrase (which functions as a salutation) that this is a unique love poem: while most love poems idealize and romanticize their subjects, this one uses frankness softened with humor to show its sincerity.

Comment [CBC3]: Hyperbole: The breaking of a vase isn't normally something you would refer to with the term "shipwreck," but this exaggerated image is consistent with the **tone** and **style** established by the opening phrase.

Comment [CBC4]: The "chipping" and "ringing" of glasses suggests that they are being accidentally damaged, and the adjective "all" emphasizes the subject's clumsiness.

Comment [CBC5]: The first phrase here is intended to suggest the idiom "a bull in a china shop," which is used to describe destructively clumsy people; "burs in linen" likewise suggests something bothersome that mars the beauty of the linen and causes irritation and discomfort.

Comment [CBC6]: The use of the word "cunning" to describe someone's palms is an example of unusual and interesting **diction**, as well as **personification**.

Comment [CBC7]: Rhyme scheme: The second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme.

Comment [CBC8]: This line changes the **tone** and direction of the speaker's description of the subject and establishes the alternating pattern of the stanzas in the poem. The **tone** changes to warm, loving, and complimentary as the speaker makes a contrast between the clumsiness of the subject's physical self and the grace, skill, intelligence, humor, and warmth of her social/verbal/emotional self. The extreme contrast between these two sides serves to intensify the praise the speaker expresses—this is a love poem, after all.

Comment [CBC9]: A "refugee" in this sense might be anyone who is troubled by a problem he or she is trying to escape.

Comment [CBC10]: The subject of the poem has the grace and charm to put even very uncomfortable people at ease (to make them feel "at home"), whatever the cause of their discomfort—relationship problems, misfortune of some kind, or intoxication.

Comment [CBC11]: The choice of the word "undulant" here is an interesting way of conveying the way intoxication affects your senses, making you feel as though the world is spinning around you.

Unpredictable dear, the taxi drivers' terror,
10 Shrinking from far headlights pale as a dime
Yet leaping before apopleptic streetcars—
Misfit in any space. And never on time.

Comment [CBC12]: By addressing the subject this way, the speaker again changes the **tone** and the thrust of his description.

Comment [CBC13]: As a pedestrian she is "the taxi drivers' terror" because she makes them nervous and cuts them off by stepping into the street at unpredictable times.

Comment [CBC14]: In the physical world (as opposed to the social/verbal world), she has poor judgment; she "shrinks" from cars when they are far away yet "leaps" before them when they are close.

Comment [CBC15]: Metonymy: By referring to "streetcars" to suggest the drivers of the streetcars, the speaker creates a surprising and interesting **personification** effect. The drivers are "apopleptic" because the subject has made them slam on their brakes.

Comment [CBC16]: The juxtaposition of "space" and "time" calls to mind physics (the "space-time continuum") and suggests a broad, **hyperbolic** application of the subject's clumsiness: her difficulty in maneuvering in either space or time makes her an awkward outcast anywhere in the physical universe.

A wrench in clocks and the solar system. Only
With words and people and love you move at ease;
15 In traffic of wit expertly maneuver
And keep us, all devotion, at your knees.

Comment [CBC17]: This phrase calls to mind the expression "to throw a wrench in the works," referring to destructive actions that upset the order of a system or process—the effect of the subject's clumsiness. The reference to "the solar system" reinforces the "space-time" **imagery** and **hyperbole** developed at the end of the previous stanza: her clumsiness is so prodigious that she can throw the entire solar system out of whack.

Comment [CBC18]: Here the speaker transitions back into praise again for the rest of this stanza.

Comment [CBC19]: Again, the subject's clumsiness in the physical world is contrasted with her grace in the verbal, social, and emotional worlds.

Comment [CBC20]: The **metaphor** "traffic of wit" builds on the references to vehicular traffic in the previous stanza.

Comment [CBC21]: Those people who know the subject are devoted to her and even worshipful ("at your knees") because her social gifts are so remarkable and compelling.

Forgetting your coffee spreading on our flannel,
Your lipstick grinning on our coat,
So gaily in love's unbreakable heaven
20 Our souls on glory of spilt bourbon float.

Comment [CBC22]: Spilling coffee on the speaker's clothes is another instance of the subject's clumsiness.

Comment [CBC23]: This personification of lipstick accidentally smeared onto the speaker's coat (it looks like a smiling mouth) fits the **tone** and **mood** of the stanza: the subject inspires both amusement and joy.

Comment [CBC24]: This metaphor compares the love that the subject and the speaker feel for each other to heaven and suggests that this state of love and joy is so strong as to be invulnerable—even the subject's vast clumsiness can't shatter it.

Comment [CBC25]: Bourbon has literal and figurative meanings here: literally, it is an alcoholic beverage they drink together and that the clumsy subject spills; as a metaphor, it suggests a state of emotional intoxication. This emotion is akin to floating in that it makes them feel free and comfortable. The use of the strong word "glory" further emphasizes the intensity of this feeling.

Comment [CBC26]: Overall, this stanza (lines 17-20) brings together the motifs of physical destructiveness and emotional gracefulness and suggests that the former is far outweighed by the latter; the joy inspired by the subject renders the physical havoc she wreaks insignificant. In the intoxicated joy of being with her, her clumsiness is ignored and forgotten.

Be with me, darling, early and late. Smash glasses—
I will study wry music for your sake.
For should your hands drop white and empty
All the toys of the world would break.

Comment [CBC27]: To be with someone "early and late" implies spending a lot of time together (perhaps spending *all* of their time together); it also suggests that the speaker wants to spend the night with the subject.

Comment [CBC28]: Here, the speaker seems to be telling the subject "go ahead and be clumsy and destructive—I'll learn to just laugh it off"; "wry music" suggests the droll reaction of someone who knows this destructiveness can't be helped—think of the music in a cartoon scene showing the reaction of a hapless character to the unfortunate events that have befallen him.

Comment [CBC29]: "White and empty" hands are hands devoid of blood and life, so this line means "If you should die..."

Comment [CBC30]: "Toys of the world" is a metaphor for happiness and innocence; if the subject died, there would be no joy left in the world. This line is also an instance of **hyperbole**, the effect of which is to emphasize the importance of the subject's presence to the happiness of many people, and **irony**, because even though the speaker is so destructive, it is through her death, not through her living hands, that she would cause the most destruction.

Comment [CBC31]: The last two lines give this humorous poem a very serious and earnest ending, and this contrast in **tone** gives these lines added poignance. Despite the subject's amusing lack of physical grace, as the source of all of the speaker's joy (and the joy of others), she is profoundly important to him.