

# The Valentine Poems

*A Chronicle of a Relationship*



Poems by **Linda Lenzke** 1994-2010

Linda Lenzke

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Full of Myself Publications

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## Author's Note

*The Valentine Poems* are a chronicle of the author's personal, committed relationship spanning 15 years. Each year on Valentine's Day I wrote a poem to my partner Cindy. Our 15 year journey together included two sabbaticals and almost three years of living in two households as a commuter relationship. The poems capture both the passion and the mundane nature of everyday life.

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*for Cindy and the sum of us: the you, me and we of our relationship*

## Valentine I

I drink my first cup of coffee  
hoping my brain will engage;  
I think about how this is  
the last drug I allow myself  
(we won't count chocolate).  
I already have an association with coffee and you  
and I muse about that  
as my hands are warmed  
wrapped around ceramic curves  
and my tongue swims in liquid.

I think the first cup of coffee  
you poured me was drugged.  
I'm sure of it being so close  
to Valentine's Day;  
some invisible, gossamer, giggling nymph  
poured in some potion  
that possesses me.  
My symptoms are clear:  
escalating excitement, complete disclosure  
of thoughts and feelings,  
a compelling desire to repeat the experience.

I drink my second cup of coffee  
and have scheming thoughts of you  
and the day ahead  
seduction by voicemail;  
I am possessed.

2/14/94

## Valentine Sabbatical

This is the poem never written  
dedicated to the gap year never shared,  
for the love that was lost, in suspension,  
between the first and second Valentine year.

This is the poem never written,  
constructed with words never heard,  
conversations in abstentia,  
arguments not presented, pleas unaccepted.

This is the shortest poem never written,  
marking the longest year;  
letting go of each other revealed  
the path which brought us back together.

*Written 12/24/08 to commemorate 2/14/95*

## Valentine II

You are sleeping on your side this frigid Sunday afternoon.  
I wrap my body around you as if I were a blanket.  
Pretending to sleep, I match my breathing to yours,  
as I did as a child when I napped and spooned with my mother.  
With you my thoughts are far from innocent, as heat and desire  
generate in that space in between the moon like crescents of your cheeks  
and the moist triangle of my body that presses and rocks against you.  
I make futile bargains and unspoken pleas that you will turn,  
open your eyes, halfway, as you spread your lips to kiss me.  
I imagine my arms reaching for you to love as we had the afternoon before.  
In this sweet moment that bridges dreaming and wakefulness,  
I am filled with the blissful thought that passion and serenity  
have conjoined in this bed in our lovers embrace.  
The visceral knowing that you are my mate  
soothes me as I realize the safe harbor and sheltering protection  
of your love, sparked by the hunger and ache for your touch.

2/14/96



### Valentine III

Writing you on Valentine's Day  
has become a ritual like waking together,  
you with your head buried beneath a blanket,  
me with two cups of coffee and a catalog of questions.  
We are different. It works.

Typical day,  
I ask the litany of questions:  
How late will you work?  
Do you want to have dinner together?  
Do you want me to cook, if yes, what?  
Who will buy the groceries?

I suggest we need new recipes.  
We haven't been together that long, you reply.

I count. Three Valentine's Days,  
two winters, one challenging, consecutive calendar year  
(I don't remember how many Budgets)  
but none of this really matters or measures anything of importance.

What matters is this,  
when we cook; taste and savor anew,  
then each Valentine's confection will be sweeter than the one before.

2/14/97

## Valentine IV

I wonder why we've been fighting all week.  
Is it the lack of nicotine in your veins  
and the missing comfort of your smokeless friends?  
Or is it my impatience with conflict and bulldog desire  
to avoid or challenge the anger of those I love?

The answer that comes is this:  
You are so important to me, that when I look into your eyes,  
I see my future and my love for you reflected.  
When there is anger or ambivalence, I panic.  
My greatest fear is indifference or a broken gaze.

This fifth Valentine's Day that I've known you,  
marks four years celebrated, one sabbatical taken.  
Each day, each year I spend with you, I learn three things:  
how to love you, how to love me and how to be, we.  
This keeps it simple, heartfelt, and spirit-filled.

2/14/98

## Valentine V

Wandering the Hallmark shop,  
I seek the Holy Grail of Valentine cards.  
Speed reading down the aisles,  
I pass by others, who like me  
gather to find the perfect few lines  
of sweet confection captured in a card  
adorned in images in rouge of roses.

The signs direct me to sweetheart or wife,  
to my husband or special someone,  
for my sister and family, best friend,  
and secret admirer. You are all of these and more.  
Yes, this is precisely the challenge.  
All the cards are simply snapshots  
of who we are and what we mean to each other.

I settle upon a line drawing,  
two toothbrushes in a cup on a bathroom sink.  
Somehow this mundane depiction of home and habitation  
(habitation?) is a haiku of my love.  
We inhabit each other's days;  
we share in the simple and sacred rituals of love.  
We dwell in the soul and spirit of life.

2/14/99

## Valentine VI

Seven years have passed  
since I wrote your first Valentine.  
We have entered new decades  
in our birthday years,  
a new millennium  
in the calendar.  
We measure time  
in memories and holidays  
from photos of last year's vacation.

If Romeo and Juliet  
had lived that day  
and their love matured  
would they resemble us?  
Is there high drama in the aging of wine  
or the growing of a ring in a tree trunk?  
Would Shakespeare craft a story,  
detailing their daily routines? Probably not!

If I lost any part  
of what I have today with you  
it would be tragedy  
and the heart of opera.  
Though it may seem  
that I take your love for granted, I don't.  
Though it may appear  
that my passion is hibernating, it's not.  
Beneath the veneer of our ritual kisses  
brews desire and longing.  
In the mirrors of your eyes, I exist  
and you in mine, Valentine.

2/14/00

## Valentine VII

Saturday morning, Wisconsin winter  
I'm dreaming of our green arbor up north,  
safe harbor and wellspring,  
whose territory we have surveyed with promise  
and will tend with sweat and joy,  
a place for our spirit's restoration and weekend retreats.  
The land is hibernating now, protecting its rich reserves for spring.  
Beneath the frost line dreams of new growth are conjured;  
pine and aspen, birch and maple  
blackberry bushes and wildflowers  
ready themselves to send taproots deep and branches high.

Our love is like that too.  
It has seasons and times of suspension,  
cycles of change and anticipation.  
Spring fever, cabin fever builds in me.  
I'm impatient with time, restless in my routines.  
I want to rescue you from your obsession with work  
and instead sleep naked under the stars  
to the sounds of loons and the lake,  
snoring dogs at our feet,  
feeling kisses that linger  
and our bodies trembling with pleasure.

02/14/01

## Valentine VIII

Don't be afraid.  
I don't need all of you,  
or all of your thoughts, wishes, gifts, dreams and desires,  
all of your trust and kisses, or all your bliss and soul's rapture,  
your time, tenderness and energy.  
I don't need to share all of your successes and victories,  
or all of your laughter and affection, prayers and passion.

Don't be afraid. I don't need all of you,  
or all of your doubts and demons, dark nights of the soul,  
resentments and fears, anger, discontent and disasters,  
or all of your failures and foibles, shame, grief and sorrows.  
I don't need all of your apprehensions and anxiety,  
all of your sarcasm, teases and excuses,  
or all of your lies, sins, betrayals and transgressions.

Don't be afraid. I don't need all of you.  
I do love all of you, accept you and desire you,  
trust and respect you, cherish you  
want to be with you, always, you  
bright light and shadow, authentic you, chameleon you,  
precious gift of you,  
emerging you and the presence and essence of you.

Don't be afraid. You don't need all of me.  
I'll give you the best and worst of me.  
Just promise me you'll want me, seek me, cherish me, respect me,  
accept me, desire me, and call me your partner, your friend and your lover,  
your soul mate and family,  
your one and only Valentine,  
as you are mine.

2/14/02

## Valentine IX

I have never loved you more than I have this year  
watching you slip away in a rebel's fray  
of rapid-fire words and silent truces.  
I have never fought for love as I have fought for you  
surrendering control and outcomes  
retreating to mend a wounded heart and eviscerated ego.

I have never loved you more than I have this year  
knowing that my pursuing may be pushing you away.  
I have never sought love as I have sought you  
searching for signs of love and commitment  
in your eyes, your touch, unspoken words and attention.

I have never loved you more than I have this year  
releasing you so I could stay, resisting flight  
to ease my pain and quell the fear.  
I have never let go of love as I have let go of you  
wanting to hold you, I embraced hope  
trusting that healing would come in patient steps.

I have never loved you more than I have this year  
learning that love grows like bones,  
filaments that weave and become strong.  
I have never connected in love as I have connected with you  
realizing that our struggles and growing pains  
measure progress not distance.

I have never loved you more than I have this year  
grieving the journey with gratitude for the experience.  
I have never cherished love as I have cherished you  
accepting that I love you soulfully  
and the work is worth the reward.

2/14/03

## Valentine X

A decade after that first cup of coffee,  
followed by a refill and a story,  
more anecdotes, warmed up coffee in hand,  
aromatic like some exotic incense, years pass.  
5:30 a.m. awakenings repeat  
in mornings awash in honey light,  
rising with the steam of fresh brew,  
from a faraway place.  
We sit across from each other  
drinking coffee and sharing tales of our journeys —  
our lives separate from each other.  
This is the secret of our success.

Our ten minutes of intimacy,  
and three cups of coffee each day for ten years  
equals 25, 24-hour days of  
marathon talk and consumption  
of 10,950 cups of coffee each.  
This is the way we have sex.

(I'm not talking body-slamming, moaning,  
slurping on each others' nipples,  
visiting dark wet places  
with fingers, tongues and other apparatus,  
teasing touch and hot friction,  
I'm so out of breath I think I'm going to die  
kind of sex that ends in orgasm and cigarettes  
[which is always fun and we don't seem to do often enough]).

No, what I'm saying is this — there is no other person in the world  
who both knows me and loves me more than you,  
who shares my mornings and my dreams,  
my evenings and my grief,  
who accepts and tolerates my faults  
and is in awe of my evolving spirit,  
who breathes the same air as I do as you, Valentine.



I love you a decade's worth of Valentine's—  
may your heart always be filled with my love  
your cup filled with coffee  
and our mornings with each other.

2/14/04

## Valentine XI

I've never been with someone for so long a time  
as I have with you, a decade and a year.  
Measured by rings of a tree trunk,  
dog years, cycles of the moon,  
the number of finch nests in a season,  
days lived between brackets of dawn and dusk, dusk and dawn,  
and all the countless, silent moments of a breath, a thought,  
the spasm of a muscle, or a tear caught in space.  
I've never been with someone for so long a time.

I've never known someone as well as I know you.  
Sometimes I think your thoughts for you,  
answer your questions before asked,  
anticipate your regrets. Some days I know you better than myself.  
I know things about you, you can't know,  
what you look like when you sleep,  
how your eyes brighten when you tell me you have a good idea,  
how sadness presses into your shoulders  
and etches frown lines in your brow.  
I've never known someone as well as you.

I've never loved someone as much as I love you.  
Not in the manner of infatuation or lust,  
but in the profound experience  
of shared bliss and  
the mundane familiarity of everyday life.  
I've loved you in ways I've feared,  
past limits of comfort and control,  
loved you in spite and because of my better judgment.  
I've never loved someone as much as you.

2/14/05

## Valentine XII

Distance divides us in the days of the week  
between Monday and Friday.  
Our work lives and material needs  
separate us in miles.  
We have two homes; we are commuters in transit  
between the home we shared  
and the home we created for alternate weekends,  
base camp for your exile from here.

All that truly matters is the abode of our hearts  
you reside in mine every day,  
you inhabit my thoughts and converse with me  
in dreams and email, morning phone calls over coffee  
and evening check-ins, as needed.  
Our routines are altered, rhythms out of sync  
yet our story unfolds in parallel realms in  
this chapter of our lives.

You are always with me  
even when away;  
you are loved every day.  
This is the promise we make as partners;  
our lives are married,  
though not governed by laws and money  
judges and legislators but  
by spirits, hearts and kisses.

2/14/06

## Valentine XIII

Call me lucky, lucky thirteen  
born on Friday the thirteenth,  
celebrations not superstitions marked the day,  
as today, I celebrate, fearlessly.

These past years meander like country roads,  
when you look back, the dangerous curves and detours disappear,  
we marvel at the distance traveled,  
revel in the journey shared.

We spend a lot of time in cars, shuttling between  
homes that support our work lives,  
we map our love in mile markers and memories,  
making the most of the moments we share.

It has taken us time and practice,  
hours logged on highways,  
repeated rituals of packing, and unpacking baggage,  
to become seasoned travel companions.

I've always loved road trips,  
some days too, it feels like I've always loved you —  
don't frown — not in a weary way, but with curious wonderment,  
anticipation of the trip ahead.

We enter territory where we've never been,  
navigating the wilderness of the unknown,  
what lies ahead of us will certainly look different  
than destinations passed.

When I think of our future  
you're behind the wheel of your brand new ragtop,  
my hand rubs your leg while Sweet Penny Rocket,  
points into the passing wind, ears flapping like wings.

Call me lucky, lucky thirteen,  
thirteen years of a journey shared  
celebration not superstitions, mark this day  
as you and I celebrate, fearlessly.

2/14/07

## Valentine XIV

Bitter winds and record snowfall  
push us back into our homes.  
Mounds of ice chunks,  
like cold bones stacked high,  
shake and shiver  
in the swirling, darting wind,  
trembling like eerie chimes.

Cabin fever is epidemic,  
yet dreams are on the move  
teasing imaginations,  
speculating tomorrows.  
I am more alone than ever  
yet hopeful for my future,  
embraced by my own love.

My writing is interrupted;  
our house finches  
return to visit last year's nest.  
Dancing, side-stepping on their perch  
outside the window, under the awning  
they sing in full song, knowing  
Spring is coming, new nests to be built  
cycles of life to repeat, futures to be born.

2/14/08

## Valentine to My Unknown Lover

Whoever you are, whatever you do, wherever you live,  
whenever you're ready, however scared you may be,  
I am waiting for you, my new love. I try to recognize you  
in the faces of the unfamiliar, or in the eyes of friendly others.  
Perhaps I've already met you at the bookstore, or the  
Farmer's Market on the Square, our hands reaching for the same red pepper.  
Were you the woman two rows in front of me  
in the movie theater? I watched you, then the film.  
Maybe we're friends; belong to the same group,  
pass each other on the road during our daily commute.

You may not yet have arrived in town; the new kid at work;  
The neighbor moving into my building,  
whose ripped cardboard box I rescue before hitting the ground,  
our eyes meeting for a second  
in recognition of something important, strangely familiar.  
We ready ourselves for each other each day in our meditations and reverie,  
conversations with friends, when they ask, what will your next girlfriend be like?  
I ponder you. I wonder. My curiosity distracts me in my work, sometimes  
becoming the purpose of my play, inspiration for poetry.  
I write about you in my journal, I conjure you up in my dreams.

Know this sweet woman. I have loved, I love, I will love again.  
I will love you as well as I have learned to love myself,  
sometimes with abundance and generosity of spirit, often imperfectly.  
I can't promise I won't hurt you, I will. It is the nature of life and love,  
yet I will give you my best and hope you can accept the rest.  
My passion and desire will wax and wane, yet my love will always be true  
and yours. You will have my hand, my heart, my attention.  
We will laugh at our similarities, and practice patience with our differences.  
We will hold each other during the dark nights  
and giggle under the covers as the sun peaks in the window in the morning.

Unknown Valentine, come out, come out, whoever you are, whatever you do,  
wherever you live, whenever you're ready, however scared you may be,  
I am waiting for you, my new love.

2/14/09

## Valentine to My Ex

Old habits are hard to break,  
like writing you poems on Valentine's Day.  
Uninvited thoughts rock me  
like a phone call at 3 a.m.  
or a knock at the door  
I don't want to answer.  
Unexpectedly, memories rush in  
interrupt my day,  
disturb my night,  
some pleasant, others still ache,  
yet the sting is gone, the worst is over,  
the letting go behind me,  
the forgiving yet ahead.  
You are often in my thoughts,  
a character in my dreams,  
a messenger, I try to decode  
the cipher, learn the lesson.  
Our relationship, what remains,  
is like your old red flannel shirt.  
Once, you wore it so comfortably,  
it fit you well, you felt good in it,  
it warmed during cold times,  
you could count on the simple pleasure,  
of being in it, rely on the softness of its touch  
and the familiar smell when you drew it close,  
but like that shirt, it's either folded away  
in a box, in a basement or an attic,  
or it's lost and remembered  
on a day when you need it or miss it.

**LLL**

2/14/10



## Author's Biography

Linda Lenzke lives in Madison, Wisconsin and has been writing poetry, prose, comedy and spoken word monologues for the past 30 years. She co-edits a poetry and prose feature for *Our Lives* magazine and is a founding member of LGBTQ Narratives Activist-Writers. Linda is a writer and producer of *Conceal & Carry: Queers Exposed* monologue play and has also authored, *Jenifer Street*, a short play in three scenes. In addition to *The Valentine Poems*, she has self-published poetry chapbooks, *Scenes of Everyday Life* and *Crush(ed)*. Linda is currently working on a memoir entitled, *Perfectly Flawed* and launching a blog, *Mixed Metaphors, Oh My!* Earlier in her writing career, Linda wrote and performed stand-up comedy and was a member of improvisational comedy troupes. Her poetry and prose has been published in print and online in the *Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets 2011 Calendar*, *Our Lives*, *Queers Read This Too*, *Echoes*, *[un]*, *True Stories Well Told*, *Forward Thinking*, *Tales of the Pack*, and *A Voice of One's Own: Twenty-Five Years of Readings at A Room of One's Own Feminist Bookstore*.

