

You Old Dog!

Laura Kipnis

The Friend

by Sigrid Nunez.
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These are dark days for aging male seducers, particularly those plying their trade as writing professors. Imagine yourself as a committed shagger of students—it's your lifeblood! it keeps you vital!—graying out of the charisma you once possessed. Your theories about the erotics of the classroom sounded more convincing back in the 1980s. Once it was easy to attract young acolytes who followed you around, hanging on your every literary reference. These days they find you a little gross, recoil from your kisses—charges are likely to be brought. Even calling them “dear” creates complaints. When you manage to wrangle one into the sack, she's not exactly aswoon with desire. You catch a glimpse of your flaccid torso in a full-length hotel room mirror and suddenly understand why.

What's left but to kill yourself, as the mentor and friend addressed only as “you” by the unnamed narrator of Sigrid Nunez's *The Friend* has done (we're not told how), shortly before the novel opens. Which is how the narrator—let me call her N for convenience—comes to inherit a depressed and aging 180-pound Great Dane named Apollo with a head like a pony's, who barely fits into her rent-stabilized five-hundred-square-foot New York apartment where dogs aren't allowed in the first place. (Losing a rent-stabilized apartment would be a tragedy of such epic proportions that the only human character granted a name in this book is the building's Mexican super, Hector. Recall that Apollo came to Hector's aid in the *Iliad*; here Hector returns the favor by not getting N evicted.)

But first, a few words about “you,” whom we come to know entirely through N's obsessive reminiscences, since dwelling on him is a way of keeping him with her. “When a solipsist dies, after all, everything goes with him,” David Foster Wallace wrote in a famously patricidal (and exceedingly sanctimonious, I've always thought) essay on writers he designated the “Great Male Narcissists” of the postwar generation, namely Norman Mailer, John Updike, and Philip Roth. The prospect of their own deaths, invariably preceded by the demise of their sexual prowess, seemed to these “literary phalocrats” coterminous with the death of the novel itself, said Wallace, pounding sharp reprimanding nails into their collective coffin. Though no less self-absorbed and certainly no less a phalocrat, “you” never quite made it to these elevated literary echelons. Midlist at best (unless sub-midlist is a category), he nevertheless regarded his physical decline and the decline of literary value as twinned catastrophes.

Is *The Friend* a tribute or a nail in a coffin? Nunez certainly nails a type. Though N is nothing if not generous regarding “you”'s shortcomings, among her themes is status in the literary world, about which she's delightfully scathing: the viperish competitiveness (“I hope there are more people than this at my memorial”), the tragedy of not achieving what you'd envisioned for



Sigrid Nunez, 2011; photograph by Marion Ettlinger

yourself as a writer, the wounded vanity and requisite self-deceptions that ensue. And the depression. And the writer's block.

The portrait of “you” is devastatingly drawn and all too familiar: the “writer's writer” who consoles himself that selling more than three thousand copies is selling out, who'd once had his more adoring students convinced he might someday nab a Nobel. Jeff Daniels delivered an agonizingly, preeningly acute performance of exactly this man in Noah Baumbach's film *The Squid and the Whale* (2005): a Brooklyn writing professor and once-promising novelist who regards himself as serious competition for every classic on the bookshelf. You understand that the pomposity is required to perfume over the stench of failure, you may even feel pained on his behalf, but it's still a queasy-making spectacle to witness.

“You” had recently given up teaching, which may have contributed to his depression, but also sounds pragmatic given the new imperatives. The sexual correctness of students had become unbearable—as it has for most writing professors I've talked to lately. (A friend recently described an MFA seminar devoted to Chekhov's “Lady with the Dog” in which students focused entirely on whether Gurov was a predator for the duration of a three-hour class.) Even for aspiring writers, self-censorship is the rule—physical descriptions of characters are limited to hair color for fear of offending someone. There's plenty of cynical inside dope on the teaching racket in *The Friend* for those who aren't living that particular dream: the misery of office hours, the inanity of faculty meetings (pressing agenda item: should students

be allowed to read assigned books on their cell phones?), the dark jokes over drinks in the faculty club about which students one would or wouldn't take a bullet for in the event of a school shooting.

N was once one of “you”'s devoted student coterie—they joked they were a literary Manson family and pathetically imitated his style. Now a writer and teacher herself, N has been his loyal lieutenant in the ego-boosting department for the past thirty years, still hanging on his literary insights (“write about what you see,” “no writing is ever wasted”) these many years later. Yet there was something more than a tad unrequited in their perfect friendship. “I never heard the news that you'd fallen in love without experiencing a pang, nor could I suppress a surge of joy each time I heard that you were breaking up with someone.” She counts herself lucky for never having had her heart broken by him—or that's what she says. (“*Didn't you?* A therapist once goaded me,” she confesses.) Is “you” why N has stayed single all these years, she shrinks. As do we.

The painful unasked question: Given their wonderful intimacy, why wasn't “you”'s love life with N? He'd bedded her once, years ago, after being her teacher—startling her by telling her bluntly, after they'd commenced a friendship, that they should fuck. (“We should *find that out about each other*” is how he puts it.) To which she, of course, accedes, after which he inexplicably friendzones her, to use the current parlance.

Her feelings of rejection quelled (sort of), they've become the best of pals—closest when he's in between wives, when they playact at coupledom, since “you” is incapable of being alone. But who really gets over being

erotically sidelined? He'd gone on to marry a classmate and friend of N's, and envy about their passion eats at her decades later—“Even now it has the force of legend for me: beautiful, terrible, doomed.” Being around the two of them “was like being near a furnace.” It was a passion he certainly never felt for her, yet about which he frequently spoke to her, mulling over his erotic messes and enlisting her as the keeper of his secrets, including from his subsequent wives. N hates hearing his sexual confessions, yet ever-compliant, never mentions that to him.

Not surprisingly, one detects in N a certain tartness toward the various women “you” has left behind, those more successful at lodging themselves in his erotic affections than she had been. She assigns the wives numbers, like inmates—One, Two, and Three; a recent conquest is labeled “nineteen-and-a-half” because that's her age, so young that the “half” still makes a difference. When it comes to her feelings for “you,” there's some reading between the lines required since N is a master of indirection, with a compendium of artful digressions up her sleeve. We learn, for instance, that as a child she imagined herself a fairy-tale princess in Grimm's Rapunzel story, whose tears might save the wounded prince who'd been blinded in a suicide attempt. About the witch who'd driven him to it, peeved to have lost Rapunzel to him: “Even as a child I thought the witch had a right to be angry. A promise is a promise.”

Who had promised what to whom? Had “you” promised something and reneged? Perhaps so, emotionally speaking, but N never held it against him. Right?

N is one of those narrators over whom a small cloud of unreliability hovers: she's slightly self-estranged, bookish, emotionally unfamiliar with herself. Despite so much time spent in her own company she seems on formal terms with her desires; a bit libidinally muted. There are places she doesn't wish to press herself too hard about, such as the porousness between friendship, unrequited love, and buried hostility. Instead she moves through the world with a cauldron of unexpressed rage simmering beneath the surface. (None of it directed at “you,” however, her therapist points out.) Some percentage is channeled into her observations about the activity of writing itself and the inherent aggression of the activity, as when she detects in Christa Wolf “the fear that writing about someone is a way of killing that person.” An unnamed author is quoted on the subject of “word people” versus “fist people.” Adds N: “As if words could not also be fists. Aren't often fists.”

As they certainly are here. Not just fists, but very sharp daggers, as when N remarks on the pattern of “you”'s late sexual style, which centered on young women more attracted to “the thrill of bringing an older man in a position of authority to his knees” than in actually having sex with him. Was there ever a more devastating commentary on the humiliations in store for aging lotharios? Nevertheless, the punches aren't cheap, nor are these political

points being scored; it's not that kind of book; it's as much elegy as indictment. The writing is beautifully spare and controlled, a style suited to fragmented tales such as N's with "you." Thoughts are cut short, as was his life. The jokes are dark, as is her world. The form itself is fickle: a novel impersonating a memoir impersonating a grieving friend, stuck on a frustrating love interest, and circling around and around a simple emotional truth, which is that someone didn't love her the way she wanted to be loved. Or perhaps not at all.

Enter a new love. After being alerted by Wife Three that "you" had promised N would take Apollo if necessary (the first N has heard of it), the dog moves in. N is still devastated by the suicide—grieving like a wife or lover, her shrink points out. So is the dog, who is subject to anxiety fits, cowering and shivering uncontrollably for the first few weeks of their cohabitation. "Don't expect him to change into Mr. Happy Dog," says the vet, as if diagnosing his previous owner too.

Indeed, this massive intruder into her life has hazel eyes that are "strikingly human; they remind me of yours." The two of them certainly seemed to this reader like stand-ins for one another. Apollo treats her in a similarly high-handed way: they sleep together at his insistence, mirroring her night with "you." Like "you" Apollo takes what he wants, climbing into her bed night after night, though the vet proscribes it. (Unlike his former owner, he's been neutered.) He's the one who calls the shots in the relationship and

sets the pace—sometimes he's fascinated by her, the rest of the time indifferent. He does what he wants with her body, thrusting his nose into her neck, waking her in the middle of the night. In bed he puts a massive paw "the size of a man's fist" on her chest. "He must be able to feel my heart," she thinks. (Unlike "you," I thought.)

"Remember, the last thing you want is for him to start thinking you're his bitch," instructs the vet, advice N might have profited from a few decades earlier. Apollo is so large that he attracts stares on the street; even the size of his turds—N takes to carrying a child's sand pail and a garden trowel to clean them up—are cause for amazement and glee by assorted passersby. "I can't believe they dumped a monster like that on you," says Wife One when she gets a look at Apollo on Skype. "No wonder no one wants him."

Yes, N has been left to shovel up the shit, but in her scrambled, grieving psyche, by saving this unwanted dog perhaps she'll be saving "you" as well? Maybe she'll wake up one morning to find him in her bed in place of Apollo, and other forms of magical thinking. When she confesses to Wife One the belief that it's her job to "act selflessly and make sacrifices for him," Wife One replies acutely, "Who are we talking about?"

But perhaps "you" has done something unwittingly generous in the end, leaving N with this huge warm body in her bed, "the size of a man and stretched out with his head on his own pillow." It's not long before she's referring to the two of them as "we" ("We like cold weather. We like the city in win-

ter"), along with all the other annoying codependent couples. She reads Apollo poetry (Rilke) and trims his nails, and cuts evenings short to rush home to his company. Meanwhile she's getting final notices from her building's management office and her friends are starting to avoid her, fearful that she'll be evicted and show up on their doorsteps with a suitcase and Apollo. One asks if she has considered a therapist. When she says she's skeptical about pet shrinks, he replies, "That's not what I meant."

J.R. Ackerley covered similar territory in *My Dog Tulip*, a book N takes as a touchstone despite finding it appallingly misogynist on second reading. At least she spares us Ackerley's preoccupation with doggy physicality: we get far less on Apollo's bowels and no interspecies sexual diddling—thankfully this is love of a more spiritual variety. No fingers enter animal orifices. (Not a "dog person" myself, I think it will be a long time before I get over the image of the homosexual bachelor Ackerley manually lubricating the female Tulip in preparation for her deflowering, an event in which he seemed peculiarly invested.)

My Dog Tulip was a thoroughly queer book, in all the best senses. So is *The Friend*. It reimagines coupledom and the intimacies possible between sentient creatures. N professes to be unsettled when another woman on the street calls Apollo "sexy," declaring herself jealous of N, but it's not as though she's oblivious to the erotics in their relationship. "You" had been appalled that Ackerley's most significant relationship was with a dog, while N saw Ackerley as having achieved "the kind of mutual unconditional love that everyone craves but most people never know." She wonders at one point if she's taken a dog as a husband, but the answer is obvious—she frequently sounds like a besotted newlywed, no less so as Apollo ages, when his beauty still regularly draws gasps. "To think what he was like in his prime," she muses, feeling cheated not to have known him as a puppy, as one sometimes hears people voice retrospective jealousy about a spouse acquired in middle age. How unfair that someone else got to paw them in their dewy youth!

Given the fulsome adoration, it's curious when N remarks, rather clinically, of Ackerley's transference with Tulip that clearly he'd channeled all his human pain and sexual frustrations through his dog. *Et tu, N?* Perhaps we're all equal parts self-obtuseness and self-acuity, better diagnosticians of others than of ourselves. N's self-acuity returns on the subject of pet owners' projections, as when she remarks that wanting to talk to our dogs is a fantasy—if they could tell us who they were, that would ruin everything. We feel pity for suffering animals because they evoke self-pity for our own helplessness at earlier moments in our lives, she elsewhere reflects. Does she mean, I wondered, that our relations with animals are essentially narcissistic, that we love them because we see ourselves through their eyes? When she reminisces about Apollo inhaling every inch of her, searching for data about who she is, does she love him because his curiosity about her has awoken her love for herself? Thus curing her?

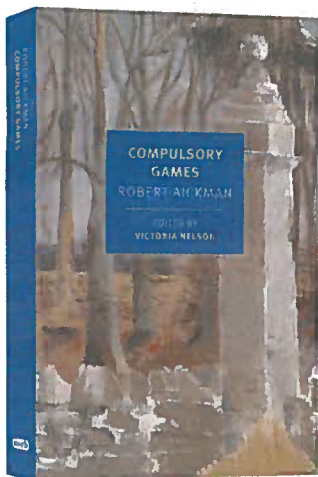
If it's not clear from these questions, Nunez has done something subtle and rather odd here, creating a narrator about whom the reader often feels she knows more than the narrator does about herself. At the same time, I was never entirely sure whether N's unreliability was wholly due to Nunez's artfulness, or whether she'd so thoroughly immersed herself in this character that N's blind spots are her own. I don't recall previously puzzling in quite the same way about whether it was a character or an author at the reins—it's usually clear when a character's limitations are the author's or, conversely, when an author is "writing down" to a character, feeling herself superior in brains and savvy to her creation. When N says to herself late in the book, regarding "you," "I never knew if I actually loved him," I wanted to shake her and say: Do you really not recall the extent to which you transformed your apartment into a one-bedroom suttee following his death? That you've spent an entire book obsessing about him? Is Nunez cluing us in to the limits of N's self-understanding, or is she the one I should be shaking?

Then there are the many tipoffs along the way that "you"—known to us only through N's elliptical and possibly undependable account—was probably not the great friend or wise oracle she's convinced herself he was. When the book briefly revives him—essaying a different plot line in which he didn't succeed in killing himself but was found and revived—it turns out that he's furious at her for writing about him, despite all those high-flown maxims about writing as a freedom to be seized. "Right now I can tell you it feels like a betrayal," he spits angrily. Writing about him when he's at the lowest moment of his life was "downright sleazy." Alive, he's a far less cooperative subject—in fact he's charmless and whiny.

Dead or alive, it's hard not to conclude that of the two, Apollo was the better friend, the better man. Generally I have patience for narcissistic male writers, but "you" wore on even me. I found myself a little indignant at him on N's behalf, for fucking her once, claiming ownership like a dog marking its territory, then leaving her in a conveniently protracted state of worshipful devotion. It says something about the persuasive charms of this small book that you're left wanting to defend an unnamed narrator from a suicidal ego-maniac who may not even be dead.

The Friend is a delicious read, but also a wrenching one. All perfect friendships eventually come to an end, and less-than-perfect ones too: this is a book about two deaths. And about flawed loves, and the loneliness we seek flawed love to evade, and the books we turn to when that doesn't suffice either. If an air of loss haunts the scene, of better days gone by (better days for writers certainly), it's also a tribute to literature—the most enduring relationships in this book are with other books. If you love someone who doesn't love you back, disappoints or dies, is bad in bed or a different species, there are still the consolations of print. That solace—forged across centuries, languages, souls—is the closest thing to requited love Nunez offers. Perhaps more perfect than even the love of a big dog.

As for big narcissists—well, they continue to attract their loyalists. □



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