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
Shrinking from far headlights pale as a dime
Yet leaping before apopleptic streetcars—
Misfit in any space. And never on time.

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

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 “apoplectic” 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.

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
Our souls on glory of spilt bourbon float.

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Be with me, darling, early and late.
I will study wry music for your sake.

For should your hands drop white and empty
All the toys of the world would break.