

“And can this be my own world?”: A Contact Dream with Kathryn Davis’s *Duplex*

In Kathryn Davis’s *Duplex*, Miss Vicks “had been fond of a book that began ‘And can this be my own world?’”

Sometimes I pose this question to myself when reading. The world of a book is often a duplex of my own, one I enter through the portal of the page. *Duplex* is at once a most familiar world of canasta, sycamore trees, and summer days at the shore; and it is a defamiliarized realm where Yellow Bears become daughters named Blue-Eyes, where characters lose their souls, and where a family of robots fly out of their house after the humans have gone to sleep.

Downie, the mascot of a baseball team, tells another character, Mary: “The most important thing to remember is that a duplex’s properties are stretchable but they aren’t infinite. One minute the opening will be right there in front of you, and the next minute you won’t even know where it went.” Such is also the nature of Davis’s sentences. Each line seems to suggest an opening to a different time or place or world, and the next minute—the next word or clause—you don’t know where the opening went, or where you are.

For example, Eddie has been living without a soul ever since he disappeared one night (in the book’s opening chapter). Years later during one of his baseball games he proclaims that he wants his soul back. At that moment he collides with another player as they both attempt to field the ball, and Eddie loses consciousness. When he is awakened by his physical therapist, he recalls: “People were screaming with excitement and there was a falling star coming at him, falling right toward him through the black night sky.” He didn’t catch it; instead, says the narrator, “it got trapped behind one of the room’s many woven tapestries.” The fly-ball-turned-falling-star got trapped behind a tapestry?

In the charmed paths of Davis’s sentences, a reader does not always know if, how, or when she is transported from one world to the next, and it is disorienting and not always pleasant. But this unpredictability also yields surprising and delightful images. Like when Eddie discovers

a large white dog panting on his bed and knows that it is not a real dog; in fact, “it was very old, maybe even a thousand, older than a breastplate of hammered bronze or a virus.” Or later, when the sky at the beach is described as “a shade of blue-violet more usually thought of as coming from a dactilo port, with handfuls of things falling loose beneath it that turned out to be seagulls.”

To read any book is to experience a contact dream as described in *Duplex*: “In a contact dream the dreamer’s mind got swallowed by the mind of another dreamer, usually someone who lived in close proximity though not in the same house. . . . People living in duplexes were especially susceptible.” I read Davis’s novels, and I am swallowed by her mind, a visitor in her vivid and unsettling dream world.

But Davis is not just a writer; she is also a reader whose novels are infused with the stories she reads. “This novel is haunted,” she writes in her acknowledgments, “by the ghosts of Sappho, *Mopsa the Fairy*, and ‘The New Mother.’”

“The New Mother” is a nineteenth-century British story of two sisters, Blue-Eyes and Turkey, who are tempted by a strange girl who promises to show them a miniature man and woman that she carries around in a box—if only they will be naughty. When the girls go home and act naughty, their mother says that if they continue to misbehave, she will go away and be replaced by a new mother with glass eyes and a wooden tail. And they do, and she does.

“The New Mother” certainly haunts *Duplex*, but only with the illogic of a dream. Despite the concrete correlation of a character named Blue-Eyes, there is no direct analog between the story and the novel. Instead of a naughty girl with a glass-eyed new mother, Blue-Eyes is the name of Mary’s glass-eyed “new daughter.” Blue-Eyes is eventually sent to a boarding school, which also seems to be a hotel for the dead. Miss Vicks arrives there late one night after a journey by horse and ferry, and the next morning finds that the age spots on her hands are gone, replaced by the “creamy, hydrated skin of her youth.” Meanwhile, in another world, Eddie’s father reports to Eddie that Miss Vicks is dead.

Mopsa the Fairy, also a nineteenth-century British tale, is the story of young Jack, who plunges into a hollow tree trunk and discovers a nest of fairies. He leaves his world for the fairy world, where time and space are disrupted, where a queen tells stories not of what has happened

but what will happen (“Anybody could tell the other sort”), and where Jack meets “another Jack” who looks just like him and who is heir to the fairy throne. But Jack discovers that their world is also his world, that he did not travel in space but in time. Mopsa tells him: “When the albatross brought you, she did not fly with you a long way off, but a long way back, hundreds and hundreds of years. This is your world, as you can see; but none of your people are here, because they are not made yet. I don’t think any of them will be made for a thousand years.”

Mopsa the Fairy begins: “And can this be my own world?” The opening verse concludes:

’Tis thy world, ’tis my world,
City, mead, and shore,
For he that hath his own world
Hath many worlds more.

In another plane of *Duplex*, Janice is the queen storyteller, just like the queen in Mopsa’s fairyland. Janice sits on the stoop of her duplex and tells the neighborhood girls the important histories of their world, the ones depicted in the tapestries in Eddie’s room: the Descent of the Aquanauts, Space Drift, the Four Horsewomen, the Rain of Beads, and the Great Division. But years later, when one of the girls dies, Janice narrates the quotidian tale of the deceased girl’s life, and one of the remaining girls asks: “What became of all the interesting parts . . . things like getting taken up into the sky, or being part horse, or being immortal?” To which Janice responds, “Well, duh. . . . That’s the Great Division, like I was saying. That’s the hinge. On one side, St. Francis there receives the stigmata. On the other side, he isn’t even a saint.” Thus, on one side of the hinge—like the dividing wall of a duplex—is one world, perhaps the “interesting parts”; on the other side is a similar world with an entirely different, perhaps more banal, set of circumstances. Both are “real,” both are temporal, both are eternal.

If *Duplex* is haunted by these stories, Davis’s 1998 novel *Hell* is similarly haunted by *Wuthering Heights*, *Little Women*, *The Girl from Limberlost*, and other stories. Davis has written many other books, but together *Duplex* and *Hell* form two halves of a duplex. Both are set on quiet suburban streets in midcentury America; both feature dachshunds, drunken parents, disappearing children, and the Jersey shore. Both

conflate time and space, and both even have paintings that are at once central and peripheral to the plots. Both are demanding and rewarding to read, a contact dream one resists and submits to.

But what is it like to read *Duplex*? To experience a contact dream with Davis?

One night in Berlin, where I read *Duplex* late at night in my hostel, I went alone to a neighborhood kino, a small independent theater with no more than thirty seats—ten rows, three seats across—to watch Jim Jarmusch's 1991 film *Night on Earth*. The movie is an assortment of five vignettes featuring taxi drivers and their customers on the same night in Los Angeles, New York, Paris, Rome, and Helsinki. The first two sections in LA and New York were spoken in English with German subtitles, and aside from Winona Ryder's unconvincing portrayal of a tomboy cab driver, I was drawn into the characters, their stories, and their chance encounters with one another. The third vignette took place in Paris, and the characters spoke in French. The fourth, set in Rome, was in Italian. The final story, set in Helsinki, was spoken in Finnish. The German subtitles continued through the entire film.

Reading *Duplex* is like watching the Jarmusch vignettes, spoken in one language I don't understand with subtitles in another language I don't understand. Such an experience is dizzying and can be delightful because I notice things I might not notice otherwise. In the movie I found myself studying the characters' body language and expressions as well as the sound cues more closely than I would have otherwise. I experienced their dramas without entirely understanding them. And so with *Duplex*. I often felt disoriented, distanced from both the characters and plot, but I also felt very clearly that my own world was cracking open, somehow both dividing into parts and multiplying into endless possibilities.