

# Tense Shifts

shifting uneasily  
on plasticky, revolving seats  
they scowl at me  
the one with her blue-black dye job  
Cleopatra-cut, pouts a ringed lip  
*whatsa a tense shift? whatsa tense?*  
they are not so fresh, more like lost  
in their present  
perhaps slightly burdened  
by their future  
certainly not the past

*well, then . . .* perversity rises like  
gorge from my belly

I list on the whiteboard with a decisive black marker  
the tenses, simple and complex,  
on the left

and then with a gay lilac pen the sentences to  
the right

## **present**

*you give me flowers*  
(knowing this to be the continuum of our  
lives)

## **past**

*you gave me flowers*  
(tiny bouquet of minuscule grass flowers —  
the way one gives or takes swatches of colours —  
a sample of love, as if to see a match)

## **future**

*you will give me flowers*  
(a certainty i live by, why i cannot tell)  
just because

- present perfect**     *you have given me flowers*  
 (for no reason in particular,  
 because i like irises, or because you have  
 seen the first tulips)
- past perfect**     *you had given me flowers*  
 (they arrived via *Tele-Flora*, just like I'd seen  
 advertised in *Time* or *Reader's Digest*)  
 sent trans-Atlantic, the first year you were away)
- future perfect**     *you will have given me flowers*  
 (even on those unremarkable days  
 when we were virtual strangers  
 because that would have been the natural thing  
 to do)
- present progressive**     *you are giving me flowers*  
 (a still from a dream or a snapshot)
- past progressive**     *you were giving me flowers*  
 (on that footbridge across Iguacu,  
 flowers that neither of us knew the names of)
- future progressive**     *you will be giving me flowers*  
 (a credo i need to carry)

**Conjugation:** from Latin *com-*, together +*jugare*, to join, espec. in a pair; coupled.

this is what you do with the verb, the action word, (the act) and do it consistently, i.e. do not shift from one tense to the next randomly. i wonder if i explain anything to anyone but myself.

pens scratching, baseball caps lowered,  
 heaven knows what they are putting down on paper  
 i know what's on my mind.

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