

Denise Duhamel

**The Difference Between
Pepsi and Pope**

I have this blind spot, a dark line, thin as a hair, that obliterates a stroke of scenery on the right side of my field of vision so that often I get whole words at the end of sentences wrong like when I first saw the title of David Lehman's poem "The Difference Between Pepsi and Coke" and I misread "Coke" for "Pope." This blind spot makes me a terrible driver, a bad judge of distances, a Ping-Pong player that inspires giggles from the opposite team.

I knew a poet who dressed up as a cookie and passed out a new brand in a crowded supermarket. The next day he gave the Pepsi Challenge to passersby in a mall.

I felt old-fashioned admitting to this poet that I prefer Coke, that wavy hyphen that separates its full name Coca~Cola. Like the bar let down in the limbo dance, the Spanish tilde comes down until not even a lowercase letter can squeeze under it. I searched for that character recently, writing to David Lehman, telling him about an electronic magazine, the address of which had this ~ in it. I couldn't find it, although I stared at my computer keyboard for more than a few minutes. I only noticed it today in the upper left hand corner, above the tab, the alternate of ` , if you hit the shift key. I wonder if I also have a blind spot in my left eye. I wonder if the poet who dressed as a cookie is happy in his new marriage. I wonder if you can still get a bottle of Tab anywhere, that awful soda my forever-dieting aunt used to drink, with its pink logo, its "a" all swirls, looking like @.

Yesterday,
when my husband was waiting at an intersection, he said, *Is anyone coming?*
I looked from the passenger seat and said confidently, *We can make it.*
Then we were almost run off the road. I said
I'm sorry I'm sorry through the exchange of honks and fists
and couldn't believe when my husband forgave me so quickly.

Not only that,
but I'm a bad proofreader, I thought to myself as I made a mental list
of ways that I felt inadequate. One friend also recently noted that maybe I
talk too much about myself, so I told her the Bette Midler joke,
Enough about me, what do YOU think of me? which doesn't *really*
bring me back to David Lehman and his poem, but does make me realize
how far away I strayed from my original point
which was that I thought his poem would be funny because of the title,
not the real title, but my mistaken one. I started to guess his poem
in my head: Pepsi is bubbly and brown while the Pope
is flat and white. Pepsi doesn't have a big white hat. The Pope
can't get rid of fender rust. Pepsi is all for premarital sex.
The Pope won't stain your teeth.

But "The Difference
Between Pepsi and Coke" is a tender poem about a father
whom the speaker reveres and I wonder if David Lehman's own father
is alive or dead which is something I often do—wonder
how much is true—when I read a poem by someone I like
which I know is not the right way to read a poem even though
Molly Peacock said at her reading that she is the "I"
in all of hers and doesn't use the word "speaker" anymore.

Still,
I feel like a Peeping Tom, although this is really about what I can't see,
my blind spots, and how easy it is for me to doubt my decisions,
how I relate to the father in Lehman's poem who "won't admit his dread
of boredom" and panics and forgives. How easy it is to live for stretches at a time
in that skinny dark line, how easy it is to get so many things all wrong.

from *[Salt Hill](#)*

The David Lehman poem Duhamel refers to can be found at
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54875/the-difference-between-pepsi-and-coke>