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Sestina

I am four: for today's lesson
my father takes my hand and writes,
his hand over mine, my name,
its three straight letters. The alphabet
is new to me, its letters like the bodies
of animals. I cannot spell the word *love*.

This is how my father expresses love,
when he bends over me to read the lesson
I have done, my name repeating. His body
smells of cigarettes and coffee, warm. He writes
more letters, our last name, the name
he gave me. I look at the mysterious alphabet.

My father understands no other alphabet.
He does not know about my love
for him, so long and complicated it has no name.
What can I do but copy the lesson
he has given me until my fingers sting, write
the same words over and over, hug my body.

My father keeps me company, he leans his body
against the door frame. I see the alphabet
in his straight arms, round eyes. If I write
my name twenty times I will deserve his love.
I think I understand the lesson:
what attaches us is mostly this, our name.

I have learned my name. He writes his name,
my mother's, our address. Beside me, his body
is like mine, his arms and feet lessened

to fit in me. Our bodies are an alphabet
I cannot read. Is writing love?
I think he thinks so. I keep writing.

I think he will leave me only through his writing.
I stand at the door to his study, whisper his name.
He is busy, he doesn't hear me. I love
his back curved over his desk. Is this leaving, the body
turned away? I can read his posture, that alphabet.
My father loves me as he can. I've learned no lesson

but this lesson: I'll leave him too, my writing
hidden in a diary. I'll take his name, the alphabet.
I curve my body, try to write it, *love*.