**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? whats a 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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*SUMANA SEN-BAGCHEE*