

Gate C22 by Ellen Bass

At Gate C22 in the Portland airport
a man in a broad-band leather hat kissed
a woman arriving from Orange County.
They kissed and kissed and kissed. Long after

the other passengers clicked the handles of their carry-ons
and wheeled briskly toward short-term parking,
the couple stood there, arms wrapped around each other
like satin ribbons tying up a gift. And kissing.

Like he'd just staggered off the boat at Ellis Island,
like she'd been released at last from ICU, snapped
out of a coma, survived bone cancer, made it down
from Annapurna in only the clothes she was wearing.

Neither of them was young. His beard was gray.
She carried a few extra pounds you could imagine
her saying she had to lose. But they kissed lavish
kisses like the ocean in the early morning

of a calm day at Big Sur, the way it gathers
and swells, taking each rock slowly
in its mouth, sucking it under, swallowing it
again and again. We were all watching –

the passengers waiting for the delayed flight to San Jose,
the stewardesses, the pilots, the aproned woman icing
Cinnabons, the guy selling sunglasses. We couldn't
look away. We could taste the kisses, crushed

in our mouths like the liquid centers of chocolate cordials.
But the best part was his face. When he drew back
and looked at her, his smile soft with wonder, almost
as though he were a mother still

opened from giving birth, like your mother
must have looked at you,
no matter what happened after –
if she beat you, or left you, or if you're lonely now –

you once lay there, the vernix
not yet wiped off, and someone gazing at you
like you were the first sunrise seen from the earth.
The whole wing of the airport hushed,

each of us trying to slip into that woman's middle-aged body,
her plaid Bermuda shorts, sleeveless blouse,
little gold-hoop earrings, glasses,
all of us, tilting our heads up.