

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Mark Tredinnick (ed.), *Australian Love Poems 2013* (Inkerman & Blunt, 2013)

What's not to love about love – or love poems? They allow us to indulge in expressions of admiration and longing. They touch on our better behaviour and wishes, our devotion and commitment; and they can provide a platform for addressing the sense of loss implicit in unreciprocated desire. Importantly, they permit us to wallow in our emotions in a place where hate seldom has anywhere to hang its hat.

But love poetry also inhabits a territory that is often unliterary; where its exponents might expect they need nothing more than the urge to tell about their emotional state. A fair critic would not deny the possibly real sentiments underlying such poetry, but should also not turn away from cracks in the design of the material. So it is with this anthology: while the notion of collecting love poems is nominally a 'good thing', the quality of the poems is sometimes found wanting.

Editor Mark Tredinnick is a prize-winning poet himself. One of the pleasing aspects of *Australian Love Poems* is his warm and insightful introduction. Sure, there are statements about how many submissions were made and how hard it was to narrow if not winnow the selection, but those almost obligatory expressions (and statistics) aside, he clearly conveys knowledge of his subject. One might also be tempted to surrender to the well-honed quotable quotes that, though reflecting a truth, still have a greeting card flavour about them:

Poems are the prayers of the secular world (1)

Love is the poetry of the body and the mind (5)

Love may be poetry's most natural habitat (6)

One enters love like the underworld, or the future (11)

Then again, it is difficult for a poet to completely avoid a poetically telling mode when explaining an editorial outlook.

Many thematic anthologies resort to a simple chronological ordering plus a long reach into the past, in the manner of Betjeman and Taylor's *English Love Poems* (1957). This may also get around those nagging copyright and royalties issues. Alternatively, they label sections for a linear journey from courtship to rapturous union, and perhaps subsequent loss. These are the volumes you are liable to find in bookshops where the shelf says 'Verse & Sentiment'.

Before returning to Tredinnick's anthology, I would like to look further about the field. James Fenton's *The New Faber Book of Love Poems* takes a different tack compared with the kind of book I described a moment ago. He does not much explain the rationale behind his choices, and though they stretch back to the seventeenth century, he settles for the serendipitous effects of alphabetical sorting by author name: 'as useful a way as any of jumbling the poets up, so that they seem to speak to each other, and hear each other sing'.<sup>1</sup> Old and new lie together in a manner that allows the reader to see correspondences between nearby pieces as the reading itself progresses. You might think that such ordering would tend to diminish such connections but Fenton has chosen carefully, and it works. Lauris Edmond's *New Zealand Love Poems* (Oxford University Press, 2000) is another title that

<sup>1</sup> James Fenton (ed.), *The New Faber Book of Love Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008) xxxv.

shrugs safe pathways, tending to prefer the subversive and oblique in both its poems and their arrangement.

One can also find poems collected for reading at weddings, frequently clichéd and cloying, though in my experience often well received at the functions themselves. Perhaps an exception is Adam O’Riordan’s edited collection *When Love Speaks* (Vintage Books, 2011), which is inclined to take more risks and to credit the audience with more intelligence, despite the somewhat conventional structure of following the order of the Western wedding service. O’Riordan, like Fenton, organises material so that one poem may seem to talk to another, and he welcomes the strange, ecstatic, and even unhappy poem.

Thus we do not need to resign ourselves to *Australian Love Poems* necessarily conforming to a pedestrian rationale and organisation. Thankfully, Tredinnick offers its poems in sections that avoid some of the more predictable categories.

But then there is the abiding question of what one wants from love poetry, anyway. The answers may be various. It could be to answer curiosity about how others discover joy in love or suffer for the lack of it. It may be to explore the art of the writing, the technical virtuosity in the crafting of a poem. It may even be to borrow lines for reading to a loved one. And the varied moods of the poems, too, are to be tasted; elegiac, tentative, headlong, joyous, realist, hard-nosed, mournful, wistful, and so on.

There are many poems to savour in *Australian Love Poems 2013*, but also quite a few whose place I would argue is undeserved. Some poems in the anthology adopt a direct approach to tackling affairs of the heart, at least outwardly. Stephen Magee’s ‘Brief loves’ is simply sketched and unadorned, denying a numbness that nevertheless informs the narrator’s voice. It opens:

And then one day  
he simply said  
there was someone  
else (280)

Blending the heightened pleasure of love with the sorrow of absence, Chris Mansell’s delightful ‘Once, Spring Morning’ (285) takes a similarly uncomplicated path towards its final season metaphor. Nothing is overdone in its delivery of not so little griefs. Michael Crane achieves a lovely note of humour in his over the top ‘On her Wedding Day’:

Who is going to tell the groom  
that a thousand men are in mourning,  
and that limousines parked  
on the street have her name  
engraved on their number plates? (186-7)

Jennifer Compton works gentle wonders with her poem on love between older people in ‘He Nods Off’ (199), as a woman senses loss foreshadowed when she spies her partner having fallen asleep in a chair out of doors. In a very different mode, Anne Walsh Miller’s ‘Everyone Waiting for a Cab’ (254) is a delirious gush of words that a reader can surf across and yet not lose touch with the detail. It is as if someone rather tipsy has just embarked on a monologue with a lover, driven by an irresistible longing to pour out a previously dammed excess of emotion.

Erin Shiel sensually essays a reunion of lovers in 'Nacred', painting with tender detail that is restrained, and also offers a judiciously poised open ending. It begins:

He arrives like a southerly. She ushers him in. Hungry  
As he always was. They have three hours... (89-90)

Kate Lumley's 'La Petite Mort' (316) is a direct and consummate rendering of a chance encounter on a jet flight that reveals one person's experience of death and love intertwined. The hint of taboo promotes rather than undermines the feeling of the lovers' commitment.

On the other hand, there were less successful works such as the worn imagery of Ben Adams' 'love' (21), Stevie Nicholson's 'text poem' (30), which seems to be included simply because it employs a txt format (sorry, already old hat), and Fiona McIlroy's saccharine 'Just One Kiss' (32): 'the fire in the belly / of two poets / about to ignite'. Joe Dolce's 'Estrella' ballad (39) is scarily juvenile. Rereading it reveals no apparent irony that might explain its wrenching style.

Anthologies are often curious beasts, uneven but hopefully with highlights, and *Australian Love Poems 2013* is no exception. Love poems have no innate immunity from the critical eye, and the act of assembling an anthology of love poems – while it might be opportunistic and even occasionally cynical – must be capable of withstanding scrutiny. John Betjeman (paraphrasing Samuel Taylor Coleridge, without attribution) writes that 'poetry, like no other art, can crystallize by using the right words in the right order those thoughts and conditions which love provokes'.<sup>2</sup>

A test of a poetry volume's worth to its reader might be to see which poems one returns to, which are memorable, or which ones acquire a dot next to their listing on the contents page, for instance, because they had an impact on first encounter. Mark Tredinnick writes that, 'Poetry keeps its secrets; but ... tells us our own. All good art performs this holy trick' (7). You won't find any pages listing individual poems and poets at the front of this book, by the way, but there is an index of poems' titles at the back – and mine has lots of dots. I guess that means that this anthology is speaking some of my secrets, if not all of the time.

## Steve Evans

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<sup>2</sup> John Betjeman & Geoffrey Taylor (eds), *English Love Poems* (London: Faber and Faber), p. 7.