
*Poetry*
you move me to silence.
I sit with you, mellowing
to the outside world
heeding my fluid inner.
I wake with you, all day
mine, others, friends, those dead
all day you, and the rest is life.

from ‘Book Launch’(65)

In her second collection of poetry, *Letters to my Lover from a Small Mountain Town*, Heather Taylor Johnson writes of family life and love in a Rocky Mountains town. The poems spill over with a range of feelings - at times broody and emotional, at times elated and joyous, but always deeply wedded to a sense of place. Her first collection, *Exit Wounds*, was published by Picaro Press in 2007 and its broad subject matter was birth, death, and motherhood. This second collection, containing 48 poems, was published by Interactive Press in 2012. There are echoes of the earlier themes in *Letters to my Lover...* but its focus is *living* in connection with *place*; of experiencing all that a particular place in the world has to offer, through the prism of family life, love and emotion.

Taylor Johnson was born in the United States and moved to Australia in 1999. She resides in Adelaide, holds a PhD in creative writing from The University of Adelaide, and is the poetry editor for *Wet Ink*. In 2010 she moved back to the United States to spend a year living in the Colorado Rockies with her family, and it was here that her new collection was born.

*Letters to my Lover* begins with a short and reverent poem to the town of Salida

You have always been –
when the sun rose
as the trout swam
before the Rockies had a name.
This mountain town makes us ancient.
We have always been. (3)

It is a poem that expresses the desire to (re)connect with something ancient, pure and timeless, and sets the scene for the poems that follow. There is a sense in which the act of moving to this mountain town represents a wish to fully embrace life, nature and the elements, to meld with an undefined essential ‘esprit’, to renew the creative spirit.

Two distinct settings recur throughout the collection – that of cosy domesticity, around the wood stove with a pot of beans or soup simmering on the stovetop; and being in the marvellous outdoors, with the snow, the wind, the mountains, or sunflowers beside the road. Underpinning everything is love – love of place, love of nature, love of family and hearty food, and the intimacy between two lovers.

Book reviews: *Letters to My Lover from a Small Mountain Town* by Heather Taylor Johnson. Deb Matthews-Zott.
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because after the mountains
my eyes found yours
and then we gasped
forgetting to breath (sic)
forgetting the snow
forgetting even
the mountains. (4-5)

In my view, it is a very feminine and fecund collection – an impression created, perhaps, by poems that feature topics such as menstruation and the desire for a baby. The poem ‘Wild’ expresses joy at encountering sunflowers along the roadside during a bike ride. Joy is a counterpoint to the heavy and unfathomable tearfulness experienced during menstruation, and the poem concludes with an image of harmony and celebration.

I had been crying –
something idle however pivotal,
and bleeding – so make of it what you will.
a woman menstruating at summer’s end
storm clouds, the mountains: something lonely
however connected.

... and then the sunflowers!
in the breeze they nodded, chanting we are
we are, and how they bled their colours
into mine! (7)

Throughout the collection there are undertones of an impending death held at bay. Perhaps an illness that threatens to spoil complete happiness. Maybe it is the line ‘cancer changes everything’ , in the poem ‘Bearable’, that implies this; or the dead and eyeless deer passed during a bike ride.

I smelt them.
they caught in my throat;
and the deer I rode past
had no eyes, smelt much worse
than fresh dung fertilised
by an early morning rain. (27)

Taylor Johnson writes honest poems that avoid becoming too sentimental, while recognising tensions and refusing to neatly resolve them, as in this poem ‘We are all consonants’.

There were knots we sometimes caught
and chose to leave in tangles
but we were ultimately untanglers,
substantially emotive,
women with reason for tears. (8)

Every now and then there is a backward glance to Australia – ‘Australia’s first female / prime minister’ and ‘the distant South Australian sea’. There is no evident yearning to return to Australia; the lovers are happy in their small mountain town and there is pride in being a hybrid and an ex-pat.

   Without you there would be no ex-pat.
   Without me no working visa.
   We inhabit this earth as if it were our own. (45)

Deb Matthews-Zott