
Poetry d’Amour 2013: Love Poetry for Valentine’s Day, selected by Dennis Haskell, is an anthology that showcases the poetry of 40 poets hailing from Western Australia. It includes work by invited poets performing at the soirée Poetry d’Amour 2013 held in South Perth, as well as poems from entries in the 2013 Poetry d’Amour Love Poetry Competition organised by the Western Australian Poets Inc. Based on romantic love, this distinctive anthology boldly engages with the age old theme and successfully provides its readers a fresh perspective on love and the changing notion of valentine in the contemporary times. Poetry d’Amour 2013 is enriched with a perceptive and erudite introduction by the renowned poet-editor Dennis Haskell that re-establishes the link of love with madness and poetry through a clever use of intertextuality, indeed references to and quotes sourced from canonical poems and poets – ranging from Virgil to Shakespeare, Tennyson to T.S. Eliot – all help establish the range, scope and perennial interest of love as a theme for poetry, a theme well loved by poets all over the world and at all times. The introduction, quirkily subtitled ‘The Cruel Madness of Love’, sets the mood and creates the right ambience for an anthology of Valentine’s Day love poetry. Not only does it let the readers have a rare glimpse into ‘tradition’, that is, the love poetry of olden times, but, most importantly, it also amply showcases the new age poets and their ‘individual talent’, to adapt a well-known phrase used by the venerated poet-critic T.S. Eliot. By connecting the old with the new, the traditional with contemporary and/or original perspectives, Haskell’s introduction sets the tone of the poems to come – poems that speak of the perennial emotion of love but from myriad points of view that are nevertheless situated firmly in the contemporary times. The timeless continuity of the theme is also suggested by the framing quote taken from Virgil (70 BC-19 BC) that contextualises the theme of love in a 2013 anthology.

‘Love is [a] territory ever open to exploration, even though it has been written about for centuries, but poets do need to find new ways to express that exploration,’ writes Haskell in his introduction (viii-ix), and the poets selected for this anthology do exactly that. Each of the poems selected for this rich anthology illustrates not only a novelty in perspective, tone and treatment of this old theme but also an imaginative exploration of this timeless, yet often, as Haskell succinctly states, ‘the most forbidding of poetic subjects’(ix). With subtlety and thoughtfulness, the poets of Poetry d’Amour present the varieties of love in contemporary life. Interpreting the theme of love in surprisingly innovative ways, they successfully create poems that range from the simple to the complex, the sophisticated to the quirky; the use of poetic imagery and techniques, too, are striking in their inventiveness. Many of the poems deal with the anguish of separation and absence of the beloved one, as well as with dream and desire; a few others relate the concept of love with madness or cruelty. The associations of dream and nature with love is further accentuated by the cover illustration titled ‘When Sleep Turns to Dream’ by the artist Beba Hall, which lends an added charm to the present volume.

The poems that won the 2013 Poetry d’Amour Competition have been printed first in the anthology, and their imaginative variety in tackling this age-old theme innovatively is truly remarkable. The winning poem, ‘Broken Memory’ by Gail Willems, is one of the best in the whole selection in its psychologically intricate, complex treatment of love from the perspective of loss and longing, bereavement and memory. The other three poems by Gail Willems included in this selection – ‘When’, ‘In the Mirror It’s Today’ and ‘Paths Of Selkie Silver’, too deserve special mention as

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these poems also foreground the complex emotions of love with a subtlety that speaks to readers. Willems’s poems speak of an everlasting togetherness in love, a place and a mode of being wrought through memory, where ‘your heart enters mine/ alone we happen along in silence’ (53).

The second place winning shape poem, ‘The Flowering Tree’ by Vivienne Glance, delineates love as an experience of transformation through an all-embracing empathy that obliterates the distinction between the Self and the Other and lets the speaker see the world from a different perspective, acquiring with the girl ‘who can change into a tree of jasmine flowers’ an ability to ‘converse with air and rain … [to] hear the rain-soft/ children laugh’ (3). Karen Murphy’s poem ‘Hinge’, the first among the three commended poems, on the other hand, succeeds in realistically capturing the act of lovemaking in words, one of the most difficult aspects of love to represent in poetry.

Among the other two commended poems, the simplicity of Sally Clarke’s poem, ‘Claire – Dear Little Sister’, that deals with love and loss experienced in a war, contrasts sharply with the complexity and technical intricacy of Peter Bibby’s apparently simple poem ‘The Invite’, in which three seven-line stanzas make up a single sentence. This experimentation with technique can again be observed in the use of unconventional punctuations in Scott-Patrick Mitchell’s ‘Processional’. Gary Colombo De Piazz’s ‘My First’ and Josephine Batten’s ‘Longing’ both speak of the timeless yearning for an absent lover, Alison Matthews’s ‘Unconditional Love’ delineates the love of a mother for her little son – a love shown to be as fulfilling and as complete as the normative model of heterosexual love – while Rhonda Rice’s ‘The Other Woman’ brings to the fore the voice of the Other woman, sensitively deploying a marginalized perspective to foreground the emotions of a socially tabooed love. Jean Snelling’s ‘Diamond Wedding’ is especially touching in its personal tone as it wistfully connects the present with the past through the memory of a lost love that still sends an eternal ‘invitation’: ‘inviting me to spend/ my life with you’ (25). ‘Stop Sister’ by Julie Watts or ‘Poem for Everywoman’ by Glen Phillips, on the other hand, employ women-centric perspectives to represent the theme of romantic love.

In conclusion I would like to reiterate Haskell’s opinion that, ‘Although it has been experienced, examined and dissected for centuries, it [love] retains a large element of mystery’ (viii). It is this sense of mystery, an extraordinary feeling that is indescribable in words, that pervades the poems included in this anthology and successfully keeps alive the readers interest in the age-old theme. In his poem ‘Letter to Rhonda’, Haskell captures this ‘wordless’ feeling perfectly: ‘only love can pursue/ silent, where words fail completely’ (34). Love, truly, is perhaps ‘a country discovered by chance’ (60), as Annamaria Weldon so perceptively says in her poem ‘The Practice of Belonging’, and the poems selected for Poetry d’Amour 2013 have been fortunate enough to discover and preserve this omnipresent, omnipotent, yet extremely elusive emotion. Poetry d’Amour 2013 is thus noteworthy as an anthology that ‘surrenders’ to the myriad emotions of love successfully.

Sutapa Chaudhuri