THIS BOOK, says Geoff Page in his introduction, should ‘cheer up those who are prone to lament the passing of “form” from contemporary poetry’. Speaking as one who does employ the f-word now and again, I’m very glad to hear it, though I catch the note of sardonicism and think that Page rather misses the point when he writes, again a little satirically, that some ‘may complain that fourteen lines “do not a sonnet always make”’. I, for one, am more likely to complain that a poem of roughly sonnet proportions ‘does not a decent poem make’; the sonnet (I’d say) is a means, not an end. Apart from the obvious cases of ‘straitjacketing’, of forcing a form upon such content as may be naturally resistant to it, there is the fact that too smooth a rehashing of forms is one of the things — just think of Kipling — that announces a poet as irretrievably minor. Take the Shakespearean sonnet, for example: in poets of only moderate skill, its closing couplet will tend to betray a cluck of self-congratulation.

A rhyme scheme down the side is de rigueur.
Elizabethan maybe — or Petrarchan.
And cooks from Spenser on will all concur
the sonnet is the dish to make your mark in.
By God, we’re there and, yes, you’re doing fine.
And now, like pepper, add the fourteenth line.

This is from Page’s own ‘The Recipe’, and, although it is clearly a joke at the expense of the kind of poet I’m talking about, it still induces a surge of embarrassment. For glibness, the sonnet, no less than the clerihew, affords abundant opportunities.

John Manifold’s poem ‘Office Block’ is one of the better Shakespearean sonnets in the Indigo anthology. It begins with a description of the block itself:

The main construction is in flexibrick,
Pre-stressed, fatigue-proof, never used before,
It’s only fifteen millimetres thick
But carries eighteen thousand tons and more.

The next two stanzas continue in this vein and are so accomplished as to be quite bland — as bland, indeed, as the corporate tour guide whose spiel we might suppose this is. But the closing couplet lifts the poem above the merely competent, matching the sudden revelation that the poem is set in the dystopian future with a subtle surprise to the reader’s ear:
‘There have been applicants; but now and then / I’ve had suspicions they were only men.’ That the rhyme is plucked from a chatty aside (the run-on line contrasting somewhat with the largely end-stopped lines preceding it) engenders an uneasy resonance and prevents the poem from falling pat.

It occurs to me that an office block built from prestressed flexibricks is a pretty good metaphor for form per se. Form may skew under pressure from content, as Philip Hodgins’s wonderful poem ‘The Last Few Days and Nights’ shows:

A nurse comes in to tend to the machines.  
Reaching across him to one of them her breast,  
the left one, is momentarily pressed  
into his face with pillow-pressure softness.

Arriving at the final line of this, the poem’s superb third stanza, we might expect it to rhyme with the first. That it doesn’t comes as a faint surprise, but the disruption is permissible on the grounds that it reinforces the sense: ‘softness’ finds out ‘breast’ and ‘pressed’ (and how exquisite a rhyme is that?) but is audibly ‘softer’ for the feminine ending and the absence of a final plosive. Of the poems that we might call formally ‘correct’, the best are the ones where rhyme and metre will seem to release the poem’s meaning. From ‘In the Park’, by Gwen Harwood:

She sits in the park. Her clothes are out of date.  
Two children whine and bicker, tug her skirt.  
A third draws aimless patterns in the dirt.  
Someone she loved once passes by — too late  
to feign indifference to that casual nod.

The flash (or flinch) of recognition is perfectly conveyed by the poem’s fourth line, which runs on into the second stanza but is audibly snagged on a rhyme in the first. Here, the traditional ‘envelope stanza’ subverted by Hodgins in the earlier example is given that feel of ‘inevitability’ that is one of the joys of Harwood’s poetry.

There are a number of good ‘traditional’ sonnets — Petrarchan and Shakespearean — in the Indigo anthology. Particularly good are Peter Porter’s ‘Hardy, 1913’, Stephen Edgar’s ‘II (from Vikings)’ and A.D. Hope’s ‘Pasiphaë’. The inclusion of five Gwen Harwood sonnets (more than anyone else, bar Hodgins) is, I think, entirely justified, though the inclusion of ‘Eloisa to Abelard’ (an acrostic reading ‘BLESS THE EDITOR’) is partly an editorial chaff. Another bit of playfulness is the inclusion of Clive James’s knockabout parody ‘Notes for a Revised Sonnet’, from a trio entitled From Robert Lowell’s Notebook. This would have been a lot funnier, however, if the rest of the sequence had been included, since the joke is about Lowell’s ‘revisionism’ as well as the dottiness of his slack ‘fourteeners’.

Some of the best poems in this anthology are not traditional sonnets at all. David Malouf’s ‘Health Farm’ (‘Steamclouds and hissing valves, the heads detached / from their body’s hundredweights that glow in tubs’) and Les Murray’s ‘On Home Beaches’ (‘The great hawk of the beach is outstretched, point to point, / quivering and hunting. Cars are the surf at its back’) are simply excellent poems (though the Murray poem, looking again, does seem to contain the traditional volta). Philip Salom’s ‘Bar Sonnet I’ is particularly impressive. Its yawning, unhymed alexandrines are as soporific as and sorrow-making as a day spent knocking back the sauce: ‘It’s a language not of heroes but about them. In silent moments / their eyes move on the barmaid with a kind of pain.’

This book is slightly spoiled, for me, by Page’s introduction, in which he complains about two anthologies — The Penguin Book of Sonnets and Faber’s 101 Sonnets from Shakespeare to Heaney — which contain, between them, only two Australians, Judith Rodriguez and Les Murray. I haven’t seen the Penguin anthology, but I know the Faber book well and can say that it is a book of gems. ‘[T]he British and American literary cultures are,’ says Page, ‘notoriously insular’, but it is Page who is being insular here (and a little unhistorical): a general anthology of sonnets in English is a gift to English language speakers; national interests don’t come into it. It was a good decision by Page, however, to arrange the book thematically, enabling the poems to form a sort of dialogue. I’ve seen this before, in Emergency Kit, another of Faber’s excellent anthologies, containing, Page will be happy to know, poems by Bruce Dawe, Jamie Grant, Gwen Harwood, Geoffrey Lehmann, Les Murray, Peter Porter and Judith Wright.