

# Thresholds

## Poets in residence

It is often said that the true subject of the lyric poem is love. Around 600 BC or so, Sappho, accompanying herself on the lyre, would have sung her passionate, radically personal, love poetry to her island audience of studious young women. In our 21st Century, one of the most popular readings at weddings and civil partnerships is Shakespeare's Sonnet CXV1- 'Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediment'. As St. Valentine's Day approaches, our bookshops flirt with us, displaying their anthologies of love poetry, tempting as heart-shaped boxes of chocolates - the contents telling the sweet list of the poets' names, Marvell, Herrick, Akhmatova, Emily Dickinson, Campion, Keats. I came to write poetry through the reading of it at school (I was blessed in my teachers) and Love Poems, sometimes centuries old, but always weirdly fresh, were definitely my favourite. A love poem in a quiet English lesson seemed as startling and exotic as a wild bird flying in through the classroom window. Electrifying, also, was the discovery of the vividly sexy poems of Catullus (as translated by James Michie) in our Latin GCSE classes. 'How many kisses satisfy,/ How many are enough and more,/ You ask me, Lesbia. I reply/ As many as the Libyan sands/ Sprinkling the Cyrenaic shore...' My homework marks shot up.

Many of us probably begin with the textual treasures of the 16th Century when we think of the love poem in English. Not only Shakespeare's great sonnets of homosexual and heterosexual love, but the poems of Thomas Wyatt and Sir Philip Sidney, among others; and, later, Robert Herrick. 'They flee from me, that sometimes did me seek...' 'My true love hath my heart and I have his...' 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may...' These lines, commonly known, appropriately, by heart are among the first utterances of our national language of love. Poetry is what love speaks in. Longing, desire, delirium, fulfillment, fidelity, betrayal, absence, estrangement, regret, loss, despair, remembrance... every aspect of love has been celebrated or mourned, praised and preserved in poetry. As readers, we are most likely to turn to poetry when we are in love, or troubled by love, or wish to mark its anniversaries, or its private significances. And many of our greatest poets have produced their finest work when writing love poems.

In the 17th Century, along with the 'sweet disorder' of the poems of Herrick (1591-1674) we find Andrew Marvell's evergreen 'To His Coy Mistress'- 'An Hundred years should go to praise/ Thine eyes and on thy forehead gaze;/ Two hundred to adore each breast;/ But thirty thousand to the

rest...' - quite probably the best example in literature of a poem written to persuade the beloved into bed. It is John Donne, however, who tells us how to proceed once successfully between the sheets:

Licence my roving hands, and let them go,  
Before, behind, between, above, below.  
O my America! my new-found land,  
My kingdom safest when with one man mann'd...  
...Full nakedness! All joys are due to thee,  
As souls unbodied, bodies uncloth'd must be...

The finest love poets of the Romantic period were arguably William Blake (1757-1827) and Robert Burns (1759-96). Like Sappho, both poets were singers of songs, deeply musical in their relationship to language. 'Never seek to tell thy love,' Blake sings on the page, 'Love that never told can be.' Burns, one of the most loved poets of any time, possessed (as not all poets do) the lucky gift of memorability in poems like 'Ae Fond Kiss,' 'A Red Red Rose' and 'John Anderson My Jo.' (Oddly though, I would suggest, not in 'Auld Lang Syne', which no-one seems to be able to remember beyond the first verse and the chorus.) Similarly blessed with a musical memorability was W.B. Yeats, whose legacy of love lyrics include 'Down by the Salley Gardens,' 'When You Are Old,' 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven,' and 'The Song of Wandering Aengus,' which was one of the first poems I came to know by heart as a poetry-mad teenager:

Though I am old with wandering  
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,  
I will find out where she has gone,  
And kiss her lips and take her hands;  
And walk among long dappled grass,  
And pluck till time and times are done  
The silver apples of the moon,  
The golden apples of the sun.

There's a lovely setting to music of this poem by the great Irish singer-songwriter, Christy Moore. Yeats' unrequited love for the beautiful Irish Nationalist, Maud Gonne - she turned down four proposals of marriage from him - may have caused 'the troubling of his life' but did provide him with a constant Muse. Thomas Hardy, by contrast, made up one unrelenting half of an unimaginably unhappy 38-year marriage before the death of his first wife, Emma, lanced a traumatic remorse and the dead spouse became Muse for Hardy's towering 'Poems 1912-13' - 'Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me...'. Not great, one imagines, for Florence Dugdale, his mistress then second wife, despite the upgrade.

My own personal treasures include Pablo Neruda's 'Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair,' in the 1966 translation by Nathaniel Tarn - one of the first poetry collections I bought as a student. 'I want to do to you what Spring does to the cherry trees,' wrote the 20-year old Neruda in 1924. The poems today remain as urgently gorgeous as freshly-picked flowers in the hands. E. Powys Mathers' extraordinarily beautiful translation, 'Black Marigolds', a free interpretation of the 11th Century Sanskrit, was first published in 1919. In it, a poet who is to be executed for being the illicit lover of the King's daughter, spends his last night alive recalling their passionate devotion in 50 rapt, ecstatic verses:

Even now  
If my girl with lotus eyes came to me again  
Weary with the dear weight of young love,  
Again I would give her to these starved twins of arms  
And from her mouth drink down the heavy wine,  
As a reeling pirate bee in fluttered ease  
Steals up the honey from the nenuphar.

As a poet, I am left stunned with admiration at those 'starved twins of arms', at that 'pirate bee'. And the heavy wine, flowers and honey here remind us of The Song of Songs, an enigmatic, radiantly erotic book of 117 verses, glowing between Ecclesiastes and Isaiah in the Old Testament. The Song of Songs, attributed to the wise but promiscuous Solomon, is a fragmentary, dream-like poem in which language itself seems smitten by love's excess. It has exerted a profound influence on love poetry throughout the ages. This is from the King James version of the Bible - 'I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse; I have gathered myrrh with my spice'- and this from Tennyson's 'Maud'- 'Come into the garden, Maud/ I am here at the gate alone/ And the woodbine spices are wafted abroad/And the musk of the rose is blown.' Amen.

Another poetic love-treasure is Lady Gregory's translation of 'Donal Og', an anonymous 8th Century Irish poem of love and loss. The director John Huston had a character recite this sublimely, heartbreakingly beautiful poem in his marvelous film of James Joyce's short masterpiece, 'The Dead'; and although the poem wasn't mentioned in the original story, Joyce would surely have approved. His own youthful love lyrics are not as known as they might be.

'I am two fools, I know,' wrote John Donne, 'for loving and for saying so/ In whining poetry.' (Perhaps a typo? Wine and poetry?) Our poets suffer no more than the rest of us in love. They don't feel more deeply or make better lovers - one thinks queasily of Milton here. But they are, the best of them, able, as Auden said, to tell us 'the truth about love' in the hard-earned word-music of their poems. 'Lay your sleeping head, my love,/ Human on my faithless arm...' wrote Auden again,

long before his poor face resembled 'a wedding-cake left out in the rain.' And who would be without Elizabeth Barrett Browning's great sonnet, 'How Do I Love Thee?' or the 'Bright Star' of Keats, or Charlotte Mew's astonishing, skewed love poems, or contemporary love classics like Alan Jenkins' searing collection, 'Harm'? Because it is poets, always, dead or alive, who look in our hearts and write.

Carol Ann Duffy