



# Bereavement in the Arts

## Approaching love and loss with poetry

*The Book of Love and Loss: Poems for today*, edited by June Hall and RV Bailey was published in October 2014. In this article the anthology's editors discuss how the book came about, and look at some of the ways contemporary poets have approached the themes of love and loss. Actress Maureen Lipman who lost her husband Jack Rosenthal eleven years ago has written a moving foreword to the collection, also included here.

It was June's idea. We were having coffee in her sunlit kitchen. 'Why don't we publish a really good anthology of contemporary poetry about loss? We could call it *The Book of Love and Loss*. And we could do it for charity!'

It was the sort of morning when everything seemed possible, so without too much discussion we agreed. The book, we decided, must be contemporary: it would be accessible, wide-ranging, and inclusive. We wanted it to be a book that people would read, not just put on their shelves – something lovers would enjoy, as well as something that would comfort the lonely and the bereaved.

Through networking, through word of mouth, through editors of magazines, we found our poets. For months, every Monday, we sifted, read, re-read, and discussed the piles of poems that came in. If we felt their impact, found them memorable and thought the language well crafted, they were in with a chance; anything semi-literate moved swiftly to the rejection pile. We were amazed to discover how many good poets there are around today.

There is much subject matter for them to work with. Love and loss must surely be the most significant experiences in most people's lives, yet neither can be predicted, and neither, perhaps, avoided. The first is altogether life-enhancing: to be able to love someone, and to be loved by that someone – these things set the world on fire. You are blessed beyond words. Simply because you are human, you may know love, and poets have celebrated this state of affairs with enthusiasm since writing began. We included some of the happiest contemporary love poems in our collection to reflect this.

But once you know love you are a hostage to fortune: the greater the love, the greater the grief of loss, and just as suddenly,

the world can change again. To lose that pearl of great price, having once so miraculously found it, is a mortal blow. Suddenly happiness – as you have known it, perhaps, for a lifetime – has gone for ever.

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'poets know the transforming power of love . . .'

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In such moments of deep distress many of us turn to books for a sense of companionship. We try to find other people's words, other people's experiences, that may legitimise and distance what we feel. Perhaps these writers felt what we feel; perhaps they may be able to help us make sense of this chill world, where we are suddenly lost, suddenly strangers. Poets, more than other writers, seem to know what to say. And they write about all kinds of love and all kinds of loss, for while all deaths are the same – yet all deaths are different: deaths at home, in hospital, of parents and partners and children; the passing of damaged babies, and babies born dead; the death of animals – horses, dogs, cats – and, of course, the part played by animals in comforting. Losing one's home is a kind of death; so is the break-up of a close relationship. It is hard to come to terms with the loss of health, or the loss of your job, and all that it meant to you.

But poets also know the transforming power of love. Grief is like an animal, determined, persuasive, irresistible; but in the end it is love that wins, for love, unlike grief, goes on. The bereaved are braver than they know, refusing to grieve but also, rightly, refusing to be persuaded not to grieve. They know they need strategies to manage grief: *If I get to six o'clock I'll pour myself a*

*drink ...Tonight I'm doing well...This is going to be one of those days when I don't cry...* They learn to recognise the signs of spring, the signals that begin to lift the heart, the moment when it's possible to rearrange the furniture.

There is heartbreak in these poems, and there is love. There is also wit, and courage; there's the attempt to imagine what heaven's like. There are words for you to use when you cannot find your own; there are other people's experiences, that may reassure you that you are not alone, not mad, not exaggerating your pain; there are poems that hold out a hand of friendship when you feel yourself sinking.

Reviewers have welcomed this book as 'a quality product...a great read on its own' as well as 'an amazing resource for those

compiling the service for someone who has died'. So it's something for business as well as for pleasure, so to speak – and it's a good read into the bargain. ■

### **June Hall RV Bailey**

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### **Foreword: by Maureen Lipman**

*A book of poems on love and loss? Yes I'll write an introduction, I told the unknown voice on the phone. Send me some examples of the poems, would you?* I thought I'd check them first, for readability.

The bundle of A4 arrived post hasty, and lay on my desk, though a week of sit-com angst and interviews on Hull until today, when I picked them up and accompanied by a mug of green tea skimmed through them.

The first poem I read was by Simmons – *for Hugh*, and the first line read:

*I am keeping this room swept until you come back.*

And suddenly I was gulping tea through a swollen throat, and tears were billowing – billowing down my face, lodging in my specs, dropping from my chin.

May 29<sup>th</sup> was the day; 2004 was the year. I've had ten whole years to get over my Love and Loss. Surely 'billowing' was a bit over the top, wasn't it?

I swam to the next verse. Wanda Barford wrote:

*I'd love to phone you  
And tell you what's been happening...*

*... Goodness knows what the cost would be  
Over such a long distance.*

And I began to whimper pathetically, like a dog left in a car, and to howl the way you only can when you're alone. And I've had ten whole years this May to pull myself together.

When Jack died, I stopped reading fiction. My imagination died with him. I was always such a reader – *Voracious* was my adjective. *She's always got her nose in a book*, my Mother repeated, as though it was an affliction she had to bear. And Enid Blyton, Lorna Hill, Austen and Elliot provided all my role models.

Only now I had my nose in a box of tissues, and real life was stranger than any fiction.

It took two years for help to arrive in the form of poetry, for Penelope Shuttle and Dannie Abse to do the search-and-rescue on me, in such particular words and precise thoughts to show me I was not alone. And gently, with tough love, they and other poets more or less saved my life.

These pages of poetry are a pace-maker for the broken heart.

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