

Irresistible Sonnets

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The sheer variety in this poignant collection reveals that the sonnet is very much a living art form.

In the world of contemporary poetry, free verse and experimentation remain our era's taste and tendency, so where does this leave traditional forms, like the sonnet? *Irresistible Sonnets*, edited by poet Mary Meriam, collects seventy-one examples of this compact, often emotionally dense form, and in doing so, demonstrates its contemporariness.

Reading these poems by living writers from the US, New Zealand, Australia, England, and elsewhere makes clear that great thematic and aesthetic variety exists within this living tradition. And it's interesting to observe how the imagination flourishes, in spite of the numerous constraints that govern the sonnet's form. In fact, it's precisely the tension between these rules and the need to speak in one's own voice that likely explains the sonnet's enduring significance to poets of all kinds.

Meriam's book suggests that the rigor of the form concentrates a particular potency into poems about uncomfortable subjects and emotions—for example, a father's feelings regarding the parenting agreement following a divorce; or Catherine Tufariello's "Meditation on Middle Age," in which we find the speaker shifting from bitterness to resignation to relief, in the span of several lines: "With or without knives, needles, lasers, dyes, / You'll lose this war. But losses can be freeing, / And there were things you missed while locked in seeing / Yourself, in your mind's eye, through others' eyes." The final section of the poem describes what's gained even as much is lost, and it concludes with an appreciation for the speaker's ability to embody a new alertness, so different from where she started her meditation. Another hallmark of the sonnet is the way it embodies transformation.

This is not one of those doorstep tomes you'll graze before shelving it next to *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Instead, by being similar in length to a typical book of poems, it can be read from cover to cover in a couple of sittings. The selection is various enough that the greater value of the book is the opportunity to explore contemporary sonnets in one handy collection. Doing so will imprint the reader's ear with the standard rhythms of iambic pentameter, the particular energy found in fourteen lines, and the thrilling pivot that happens in the closing couplet. In fact, this book may be especially useful to writers who'd like to try their hand at the form because it provides so many different approaches to what goes by one name: the sonnet.

HOLLY WREN SPAULDING (Summer 2014)

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