RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

When Love Speaks

Adam O'Riordan

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About the Book

Selected by the poet Adam O'Riordan

'And when Love speaks, the voice of all the gods
Makes heaven drowsy with harmony'
Love's Labour's Lost, William Shakespeare

When Love Speaks brings together the greatest writing on love and commitment – from Donne to Cole Porter, Sappho to P.G. Wodehouse, love letters of the great composers to Edwardian marriage advice. These poems and passages capture high romance and everyday happiness, feverish first love and tender union. This joyful anthology provides a range of unique and inspiring readings for a wedding or civil ceremony.

'I bring you with reverent hands
The books of my numberless dreams'
'A Poet to His Beloved', W.B. Yeats

About the Author

Adam O’Riordan was born in Manchester in 1982, and educated at the universities of Oxford and London. In 2008 he was awarded an Eric Gregory Award and was Poet-in-Residence at the Wordsworth Trust in Grasmere. He is the author of *In the Flesh*. He lives in London.

This book is for Alice, with all my love

When Love Speaks

Poetry and prose for weddings, relationships and married life

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY

Adam O'Riordan

VINTAGE BOOKS
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Introduction

A few years ago, standing beside a rose arch on a late-summer afternoon in upstate New York, I found myself suddenly overcome with nerves. My old friends from university, the bride and groom, were seated before me and behind them a sea of expectant faces. My mouth was dry and the microphone felt huge and clumsy in my hand. I was about to read a poem by W.B. Yeats when it struck me not just how much depended on the reading but how arduous the process of choosing the right words for this rite of passage had been.

After hours of poring over anthologies the couple had chosen ‘He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven’. It had seemed the right poem, not just because the bride worked in fashion or the groom first tried to woo her as an exchange student at Oxford by reading Yeats aloud in her room, but also because the high romance of the tone was balanced by the delicate repetitions and the vulnerability of the poet’s offering, ‘I have spread my dreams under your feet; / Tread softly because you tread on my dreams’.

As I read, I felt the tension dissipate, and with the readings that followed and the exchange of vows, a sense of togetherness spread through the guests, many of whom had been strangers earlier. It felt as if some great glowing net had been cast over us. The poems read seemed to resonate not just with the poetry readers in the audience, a decade out of university there were still a few, but with others too, colleagues from the bride’s father’s factory,

doctors, bankers, lawyers, people who weren't supposed to like poetry.

As I retook my seat I remembered just how many of the books we had looked at that purported to contain wedding poems but were, in fact, full of clichés and tired-sounding greeting-card rhymes. It occurred to me that an anthology of writing to mark and memorialise this act of union would surely be one of the most pleasurable, and necessary, types of book to edit and to read.

So in this spirit I set to work compiling *When Love Speaks*. I wanted to gather together poems and passages that captured some of the strangeness of the wedding day, the tensions, the anticipation, as well as the moments of uncommon happiness. Nobel prize-winner Seamus Heaney's poem 'Wedding Day' is a perfect example, combining myriad elements of the day as experienced by the groom:

I am afraid.
Sound has stopped in the day
And the images reel over
And over…

the speaker tells us at the poem's opening before asking of his new wife at the poem's close: 'Let me/ Sleep on your breast to the airport'.

From Heaney's contemporary, Michael Longley, we have the poem 'No Continuing City', where the voice of a man on the eve of his wedding dismisses the memories of lovers who have come before; telling his wife-to-be:

…she is welcome,
Advising her to make this last,
To be sure of finding room in me
(I embody bed and breakfast) –

To eat and drink me out of house and home.

While Derek Mahon, who together with Heaney and Longley form a golden generation of contemporary Irish poets, imagines in his ‘Preface to a Love Poem’ that:

The words are aching in their own pursuit
To say ‘I love you’ out of indolence
As one might speak at sea without forethought

and in doing so introduces that note of pervasive, barely restrained, ecstasy we might recognise from a wedding day.

Celebratory, strange and containing a sense of wonder, these three poems set the tone for the anthology: a selection of prose and poetry in which the reader might wander aimlessly or, with the help of the index, quickly pick out something specific to read aloud, words that might be returned to long after the wedding day had passed.

So where to begin? The poems and passages have been divided into six sections, the title of each taken from a traditional order of service for a wedding: The Welcome, The Declarations, The Vows, The Giving of Rings, The Blessing of the Marriage and The Recession. Though religious in origin, each term has been interpreted as broadly as possible.

The Welcome contains poems and passages celebrating the occasion and setting the tone, from Charles Darwin musing on the pros and cons of marriage, to Robert Louis Stevenson writing on falling in love. Next comes The Declarations, personal expressions of love and togetherness, from the knowing lyrics of Princeton professor and part-time rock musician Paul Muldoon to poet and apothecary John Keats’ impassioned writing in his poem ‘Bright Star’.

Next are The Vows, more formal expressions of commitment and union, like James Fenton's 'Hinterhof' in which he declares, 'Stay true to me and I'll stay true to you'. The Giving of Rings section is concerned with capturing the wedding day itself, from Charles Dickens' description of a wedding in *The Pickwick Papers* to Edgar Allan Poe glorying in the sound of church bells and the 'world of merriment their melody foretells!'

The next section is The Blessing of the Marriage, which contains wisdom and advice on marriage and married life from voices as varied as the Pre-Raphaelite poet Christina Rossetti to an Edwardian guide on *Modern Marriage and How to Bear It*. The final section, The Recession, looks at marriage over time, probing how love is both tested and endures, as in 'In Our Tenth Year' by Simon Armitage, 'A decade on, now we astound ourselves; / still two, still twinned but doubled now with love'.

Within these sections, the poems are grouped so that one poem or passage might shed light upon the other, echoing similar tones. Scottish poet Kathleen Jamie's poem of everyday intimacy 'Duet', in which the voice declares, 'I am the music of the string duet / In the Métro … Again and again I discover that I love you', sits alongside Irish poet Leanne O'Sullivan's 'Comrades', addressed to 'My heart's saviour, / my best friend'. While Edmund Spenser's 'Amoretti' (1595) and Alice Oswald's 'Wedding' (1996) display a communality of feeling that spans the centuries as well as poets' continuing inventiveness when looking for metaphors and images to describe love and togetherness. For Oswald, love is, among other things, 'a sail' and 'a swallowtail'.

The anthology contains a number of epithalamia ('epithalamium' is a good-looking but disconcertingly formal word meaning, simply, a poem composed for a bride), from sixteenth-century poet and later Dean of St Paul's cathedral, John Donne, to Scottish poet and

quizmaster, Roddy Lumsden. Written some five hundred years apart, the epithalamia of Donne and Lumsden stand as testament to the ongoing draw of the occasion to poets. In ‘An Epithalamion or Marriage Song on the Lady Elizabeth and Count Palatine being Married on St Valentine’s Day’, Donne declares:

Hail Bishop Valentine, whose day this is;
All the air is thy diocese,
And all the chirping choristers

In Lumsden’s complex and demotic ‘On a Promise (an epithalamium)’ the voice in the poem describes the act of giving over and letting go that occurs when two people are married:

And if not caution, then its conduit
Is given to the wind. A giddy ship
Of fools and family, rocking loose

Both poems fizz with metaphysical intensity as language is put to work mapping the machinations of the soul.

When Love Speaks contains some poems and passages to be declared aloud in churches and register offices, like the august offerings from Algernon Charles Swinburne and William Morris, and others to be reflected on in private, such as the poem ‘My Second Marriage to my First Husband’ or the passage from Edith Wharton that reveals love and marriage, commitment and longing, to be possessed of a greater complexity than some of the happier pieces in the anthology might suggest.

Not all of the poems and passages are explicitly about weddings or married life. Some have been chosen to stand for the things we think of when we think of two people beginning a life together. We have the devotional poetry of

seventeenth-century Anglican priest George Herbert. Here a man talking to his God might be used, for our purposes, as a vow of devotion exchanged by a couple. In his poem 'A Wreath', which opens the Vows section, Herbert offers a 'wreathed garland of deservèd praise' to 'Thee, who knowest all my ways, / My crooked winding ways, wherein I live'. While the aptly named Reverend Church's version of the story of the Sirens from Homer's *Odyssey* stands as a warning about temptation.

There are words to cement the ceremony but also words that capture and reflect the moments before and after the celebration. Like Thomas Hardy's 'The Dawn After the Dance', where 'a new strange bond between our days was formed' but in which he warns at its close 'the vows of man and maid are frail as filmy gossamere'.

The wisdom gathered in the book is not always the fruit of happy marriages. The meeting of Gertrude Coppard and Walter Morel in the passage from D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* portends to darker times ahead. We have Emma in *Madame Bovary* already dreaming of escape and life outside the confines of her marriage:

> Sitting on the grass that she dug up with little prods of her sunshade, Emma repeated to herself, 'Good heavens! Why did I marry?'

Neither are all the marriages in the anthology conventional. We hear poet and gardener Vita Sackville-West describe her first meeting in 1920 with her future husband, the diplomat and later Member of Parliament Harold Nicholson. She records him being 'very young and alive and charming'. Theirs would go on to be a famously open relationship, catering for the bisexuality of man and wife, but one at the core of which remained a genuine

tenderness. I hope that these poems and passages will be of value to partnerships and pairings of all kinds.

As well as Nobel prize-winners, like Lessing and Heaney, and canonical and popular texts, I wanted to bring to readers poetry from contemporaries whose invention and artistry I love. Clare Pollard, whose poem ‘To My Fiancé’ opens the book, tells how ‘At first, engaged, unused to jewellery, / I turn the ring like a loose tooth’, while Frances Leviston in her arresting and assured poem ‘Dragonflies’ describes observing the mating insects:

I think of delicate clumsinesses
lovers who have not yet mentioned
love aloud enact.

Inspired by the dragonflies coupling in flight and resistance to stasis, Leviston asks finally, ‘How can I demand love stop, and speak?’

Paul Batchelor shows that contemporary poetry’s use of the mythological need not be dry or inaccessible. In his sensual and visceral ‘Pygmalion’s Prayer to Venus’ the voice in the poem prays to the goddess that she might:

Grant my idiot wish for flesh & blood
and that will be enough, more than enough,
for one who only ever worshipped you,
your belly: cedar-gold; your shoulder: cedar-sweet

While Jacob Polley in a beautiful and brutal six-line poem, in a tradition come down from De Sade and Baudelaire, muses on a ring made from a dor beetle: ‘scavenger on slug flesh, shit eater / I wear you on my wedding finger’, demanding, ‘At the end of love, start burrowing.’

A similar affecting strangeness is shown in the work of the preceding generation of poets. Fiona Sampson

describes the entrapments and snarings between two lovers in ‘World Asleep’ in the final section, The Recession. She tells how: ‘My fingers on your latch / are tender when they lift the tongue’. In the same section Scottish poet and novelist John Burnside in ‘Anniversary’ captures ‘unrecorded love’ in ‘some blind creature circling the roof’. These wilder imaginings sit alongside the touching tenderness of poems like Andrew Motion’s ‘A Goodnight Kiss’, where he holds his lover’s ‘amazingly light body’ in his arms and Linda Chase’s ‘Kiss in the Dark’, where the object of the poem in growing old has:

thickened around the middle
like a successful custard
on a wooden spoon

And yet, Chase adds, in a note of partial promise and erotic potential at the poem’s close:

She loves you, nevertheless.
At arm’s length, she ventures
a first caress in the dark.
Will you go on from there?

So this anthology, while being celebratory, aims to capture as many various moods and moments as exist in any one relationship. The idea of ‘spring’ and ‘growth’ and ‘planting’, recorded in various forms, is a touchstone of the book. Be it in Edward Thomas’ poem ‘Sowing’:

It was a perfect day
For sowing; just
As sweet and dry was the ground
As tobacco-dust

or the passage from Katherine Swift's *The Morville Hours*, where she describes the passion for one's garden as: 'a love affair… the very smell intoxicates like the smell of a lover.'

But the anthology tries not to rely purely on the poetic. In it you will find the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*'s online entry for 'Love' as well as a definition of being 'wed' from a 1926 *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. In his masterful work *The Lodger: Shakespeare on Silver Street*, Charles Nicholl reveals the bard's involvement in a 'handfasting', a traditional ceremony where 'gifts would often be exchanged in token of the betrothal'. The idea of gift giving is brought to life by Irish poet Eavan Boland in her poem 'The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me'. It speaks of a gift from her father to her mother courting in Paris, where:

The past is an empty café terrace.
An airless dusk before thunder.
A man running

There is comic writing from G.K. Chesterton in 'A Defense of Rash Vows' and from P.G. Wodehouse, who tells us: 'Dudley Pickering was not a self-starter in the motordrome of love'. These appear alongside finds made among books of Victorian and Edwardian etiquette and wedding comportment. In the 1910 *Modern Marriage and How to Bear It* Maud Churton Braby declares, 'I believe one can be fairly happy in marriage without love, once the ardours and madness of extreme youth have passed' but cautions that 'Without respect one can never be anything but wretched'. There is also an Edwardian piece promoting the merits of sport for couples.

There are poems in the anthology that perhaps can't really claim a rightful place: gate-crashers, voices that

might speak out when the priest asks if anyone knows of any lawful impediment. Sir Thomas Wyatt's 'Whoso List to Hunt' is a plaintive poem of suppressed passion thought to be written about Henry the VIII's wife Anne Boleyn. Smitten by the unattainable Boleyn, Wyatt compares her to a 'hind', or deer, he may not hunt:

There is written, her fair neck round about:
'*Noli me tangere*, for Caesar's I am,
And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.'

I imagined the poem being picked up and mused on by some anxious best man with an undeclared longstanding love for the bride or offered as some kind of votive to the ghosts of former lovers that may flit across the minds of the betrothed at some point on their wedding day.

The second is W.B. Yeats' 'The Collar-Bone of a Hare'. The poem challenges the reader to find inside this anthology the proof that Yeats' vision of changing 'my loves while dancing / And pay but a kiss for a kiss' is untrue. While Lady Grizel Baillie's eighteenth-century song of longing 'Werena My Heart Licht I Wad Dee' reminds us every marriage has a hinterland, and lovers left behind.

In compiling an anthology such as this and living with the poems and passages, it is hard not to develop favourites. W.B. Yeats could have filled half the book, so could John Donne. And in the selecting from Shakespeare I have tried to avoid the obvious choices. The book's title comes from Biron's speech in *Love's Labour's Lost:*

And when Love speaks, the voice of all the gods
Makes heaven drowsy with the harmony.
Never durst poet touch a pen to write
Until his ink were temper'd with Love's sighs

Literature has the power to both capture and invoke the wonder, angst and dizzying happiness of a wedding day. I hope that in this anthology there are pieces that do just that. Some poems and passages stand out for their clarity and their rightness of tone: emotion and intellect perfectly coupled. The words themselves ideally suited to send any pair off together into married life. None more so than Sir Philip Sidney's 'The Bargain', which reads like an elegantly simple solution to the complex puzzle that love can sometimes be. It therefore seems right to give him the last word:

My true love hath my heart, and I have his,
By just exchange one for another given:
I hold his dear, and mine he cannot miss,
There never was a better bargain driven.

Adam O'Riordan, 2011

The Welcome

CLARE POLLARD

For My Fiancé

At first, engaged, unused to jewellery,
I turn the ring like a loose tooth –
lying in bed aware of its touch, like the touch
of a finger to thigh. Eyes open to the silvered blinds,
I imagine outside: how the lakes will spangle
and bloat, skies clear and then pummel with storms, rivers
break banks, how roses will explode then gulp
to dust, and towers jerk up
like fingers, counting.
Throughout all this we will wake up together –
crumple-faced, eyes pearled with sleep, grouchy
or thirsting for tea or juice, or you will finger
these breasts until they raise up pips,
stir me where I blizzard and yolk,
make a bead of me;
have me call this pillow to a sour mash.
You will squash me against you when I’m crying like the rain,
croon and comfort. And for you I’ll do the same.
Whilst the world wars, darling, such things will stay certain –
these fingers that thread your woolly chest,
this jumble of legs, this nest,
this waking to light and ourselves.

CHARLES DARWIN

Note on Marriage

This is the question

Mary

Children — (if it Please God) — Constant companion, (& friend in old age) who will feel interested in one, — object to be beloved & played with. — — better than a dog anyhow. — Home, & someone to take care of house — Charms of music & female chit-chat. — These things good for one's health. — *but terrible loss of time*. —

My God, it is intolerable to think of spending one's whole life, like a neuter bee, working, working, & nothing after all. — No, no won't do. — Imagine living all one's day solitarily in smoky dirty London House. — Only picture to yourself a nice soft wife on a sofa with good fire, & books & music perhaps — Compare this vision with the dingy reality of Grt. Marlbro' St.

Marry — Marry — Marry Q.E.D.

Not Mary

No children, (no second life), no one to care for one in old age.— What is the use of working 'in' without sympathy from near & dear friends—who are near & dear friends to the old, except relatives

Freedom to go where one liked — choice of Society & *little of it*. — Conversation of clever men at clubs — Not forced to visit relatives, & to bend in every trifle. — to have

the expense & anxiety of children — perhaps quarelling — Loss of time. — cannot read in the Evenings — fatness & idleness — Anxiety & responsibility — less money for books &c — if many children forced to gain one's bread. — (But then it is very bad for one's health to work too much)

Perhaps my wife won't like London; then the sentence is banishment & degradation into indolent, idle fool —