

“All You Need is... ”

A Review of Tina Giannoukos’s *Bull Days*
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The modern sonnet is a precarious poetic form. It is best recognised by its number of lines— twelve to fourteen—and its sense of being written “to” a person, animal, natural place, or even an abstract idea. It may or may not be conversational. It may or may not rhyme. It might be an argument, a dedication, or even an individual’s expression of intimacy. It either has its Petrarchan-style volta pulled up around its midsection, or, more likely, offers a Shakespearean volta—its last couplet comprising a sting in its tail. Upon reading a modern sonnet, you might have to read it back over to check it is not merely a short poem, and then wonder how exactly you were able to tell the difference.

One certainty of the modern sonnet is that, unlike some other traditional forms, it remains publishable. Little appeals more to the editor of a literary magazine than the one-page poem. Yet its small but fierce poetic punch is not the limit of the sonnet’s appeal; the possibilities of sonnet sequences continue to be explored in millennial Australian poetry collections. Jordie Albiston’s poetry, for example, often employs poetic forms and sequences. Her 2009 collection, *the*

sonnet according to 'm',¹ is both skilful and playful with the technical aspects of the form. Likewise, M. T. C. Cronin has exhibited an affinity for sequences, as evident in her 2004 collection *<More or Less than>1–100*.² And she has also played specifically with the sonnet form in such poems as “I Imagine a Love Sonnet with the Wrong Number of Lines.”³ Into this space, a zone full of strange tensions between traditional forms and language games, comes Tina Giannoukos’s second poetry collection, *Bull Days*.

This collection seemingly departs from the range of urban and often more externalised personas of Giannoukos’s first book, *In a Bigger City* (2005),⁴ to explore intimacy and ambiguity: a voice or possibly a range of voices, talking about a lover, or a range of lovers. The open-ended nature of Giannoukos’s sonnets leaves the reader eavesdropping; they have to guess who the speaker is and who it is they are addressing. However, in publishing the collection for a wider audience, Giannoukos places the reader in a precarious position: they are both an intended and unintended participant in the conversation. Built into this ambiguity is a critique of the subject-versus-object relationship already established between men and women in classical sonnets, where the man, the active voice, describes the woman, the object of desire, through blazon—the act of “carving up” the woman into her eyes, ruby lips, marbled breasts, and so forth. This rhetorical stratagem has long been considered in feminist critique not only as an act of sexual objectification, but a morbid kind of violence.⁵

The majority of voices in the collection appear to be women, and many of them are (perhaps too easily) attributable to Giannoukos herself. A Melbourne poet, fiction writer, and reviewer with a PhD in creative writing from the University of Melbourne, Giannoukos has worked in teaching, law, and journalism, careers and industries that perhaps foreground the worldliness and confidence exhibited in her debut collection. She notes in her biography that she is widely travelled throughout Europe, and that she has been to Indonesia, China, and Egypt, all of which makes it tempting to attribute the opening lines of Sonnet VI to Giannoukos’s personal experience: “You’ve been a lover in every port / I’ve been loved in every port.” Indeed,

this temptation coyly reminds us just how easy it is to read women's poetry as confession.

Although there is genuine intimacy and personal experience in the sonnets, this is not the limit of what the poems offer. The sequence grapples, in a bodily way, with the nature of love and the possibility of spiritual fulfilment that it offers, against the backdrop of a cynical, contemporary, patriarchal world slated against the female participant in either love or sex. There are many tongue-in-cheek psychosexual references. Sonnet I ends with the following lines:

In a singular moment the explosion
that drove all things apart drove us too.
In space I hold the horn of plenty.

The poems afford a veritable orgy of recurring yonic symbolism: mouths, armpits, and ports are "wet with the moisture of the earth." Such images are humorously juxtaposed with the occasional volcanic eruption, a "huge cobra," or a pelican with "one deep, dragged eye cocked toward eternity." The poet offers an earthy embrace to these apparently ecological aspects of sex that is evident in the collection's title, to which the poet makes explicit reference in Sonnet II: "The tongue of love tastes rough in these bull days." The poem ends with a foreshadowing couplet: "This is the conspiracy of the figure two / the flowers in the garden grow mottled." Problematic dualities dominate the sonnet sequence, especially where the poet illustrates the dance of sex and death between the matador and bull, man and woman. In keeping with many feminists' criticism of Cartesian dualism, where woman is aligned with the body and man with the mind, Giannoukos's woman is bestial, sensual, lusty, and often ironises the positions and oppositions into which she is thrust.⁶ Yet these are not merely playful ironies—some are dark, serious, satirical. In Sonnet VI, the speaker is explicit:

I'm not being ironic when I say
no song's been written or poem

that can explain why I don't miss
your touch

Even in the sonnet or lyrical poetic form, which is often presumed exhausted, there remains the potential to explore what is inexplicable in this “final frontier” of millennial feminism; that is, the politics of the heterosexual relationship, constituted here by sex with men, love with men, and the power dynamics that arise with men. The woman, as the bull, is violently “carved up” through blazon:

You slit my throat with your kiss
You split my ear with your tongue
My hand coolly slices through vein
Red is the colour of my humiliation

The contest, of course, is rigged; in a bullfight, the bull will die, even if it wins. External social and patriarchal pressure is figured as the desires of the audience and the actions of matador's assistants in Sonnet XIV, where bullfighting again comes to the fore:

You must sever my aorta
snap the spinal cord. Be quick.
Make the fans happy.
... This is cowardice,
not tenderness.
...
I'm ready. Your men did their bit.
Now do yours. I hang my head.

In this sonnet, a feminist and animal politics of violence is interwoven with a spiritual longing that is self-depreciating, but not entirely farcical. The poet signals her desire for a metaphysical union that love is supposed to provide. Ritual animal sacrifices are then conflated with the Eucharist and sacrifice of Christ in palpable blood/wine symbolism:

Don't listen to your critics. Mine
are drinking wine in anticipation.

...

My back gleams red. Celebrate
This richness. I'm waiting.
Blood drenches my mouth.

The imperative “Don't listen to your critics” and the internal rhyme of “mine” and “wine” simultaneously addresses those who enjoy the violence—the tradition of bullfighting—and those who protest it. The lines also suggest the carnality and violence of eating beef and pairing it with red wine. Behind these lines there is a further wry intimation of Giannoukos herself, whose poetic search for love is likewise offered up to the wine-swilling critics. Giannoukos makes use of a more externalised persona, common in her first collection, again in Sonnet VII, and the biblical story of Salome:

It is impossible to say when
or how, but the crude reluctance
of this encounter to out itself
as the fabrication of two people
in love with hate is typical
of how world affairs proceed—let's say
Salome's tantalising dance...
My stars say to find the rhythm
of my breath in the lips that I kiss.
Tonight I kiss the lips of a dead man.

Salome represents unbridled lust; she is bestial, irrational and indifferent, especially given that she is convinced to ask for the head of John the Baptist as a reward for her dance for Herod. In its Wildean version, the dance of the seven veils equates to a strip-tease: Salome performs her nakedness, and yet remains inscrutable.⁷ Here Giannoukos acknowledges the art of poetic confession, the ability to perform one's vulnerability and to handle unmentionable subjects. In the

sixties, when confessionalism was in vogue, these “unmentionable subjects” were sex and madness; however, in the cynical twenty-first century, it is love itself and sentimentality that are taboo. Giannoukos is self-referential in Sonnet LVI:

yet in mid-note I turn magpie,
carolling my love, my grubby self
before an audience gagging with laughter.

Songbirds—standing in both for lyrical poetry and the “magic” of romance—appear as motifs throughout the sonnets, but here they are comically reversed. The ugly truth that must face, even by those of us who are professed feminists, is that the desperation to fall “in love,” generated by the fiction of Disney and Hollywood—and indeed most Romantic fiction—chafes against reality. In Sonnet XXV, love is merely “a reflection on screen” and the general temporality of twenty-first century love means “the digital long take seems avant-garde / it is the long duration of my love / that breaks with tradition and is radical.” The promise of meaning through being “in love” and the curse of being defined by one’s relationship status both persist and haunt the contemporary woman. As Giannoukos puts it: “the delirium of love continues in the age of the self-help book.” The spiritual void that arises from this absence of fictionalised love becomes evident in Sonnet XL:

Our bones and ashes carry the words
that holy men, accustomed to love’s cancer
put to music or poetry when in temper.

...

I am a keen hearer of the birdsong
... even bland words seduce lovers.

Likewise, in Sonnet XLVI, the speaker admits:

I am a skygazer. I am witness to your
eclipse... In the old temple
love-astrologers hand out business cards.

Giannoukos creates a precarious conception of love that is cynical, visceral, spiritual, and ecological all at once. It is a messy lived experience nested in the messiness of nature and the chaos of existence. Love “bursts like a paint bomb,” inaugurating a violent cycle that “punctures itself at the exact moment of our exhaustion.” Love is the voice and hand of God, but it is also a “shitty-eyed” lover, torn muscles, and lonely travellers sending each other photographs. Love is ownership, from the submission of admitting “I don’t care if I’m yours,” to the more sinister keeping of trophies: “my ear, my tail, my hooves?” Despite her knowledge and cataloguing of love’s undesirable features, the speaker stargazes and strains her ears in order to be a part of it.

In her final poem, Sonnet LVIII, this messy cycle of violence and hope is presented as an accursed mix of faith and addiction:

The wind that blows away the dust of hope
takes night’s loss for a sign—a reformed gambler,
I’m still gambling on signs, as if the gods
might yet sprinkle their blessings and bounty over me.

However, as Giannoukos notes, “the gods are cruel.” Furthermore, they do not exist. In Sonnet L, the poet avows a Beckettian/Lyotardian denial of grand narratives so that spirituality, love, human progress, and meaning must all now be regarded as tenuous:

The sharp relief of winter never arrives.
This journey is long. I’ve made a mistake.
... Tomorrow
I will scoop fallen narratives,
like so many fragments never
again assembled or reglued.

The child peeks over the horizon.
Will it be the same story? The same death?

The doomed cycle of this search for love repeats itself in each act of coitus, in each new partner, in each generation and species, becoming as universal as the cycle of the seasons. Thus these oppositions, or the various cynical and hopeful positions of the speakers, are not paradoxical; they are merely representative of different seasons or distinct moments in the cycle. The philosophical pursuit of love and its associated problems, however, is not particularly soothing to the individual's lived experience. As Sonnet XVIII exclaims, "Thirty per cent of women live alone. Whoa!" And as is evident in Sonnet LV, uncertainty pervades the individual who is not balmed by companionship and the subsequent comfort, even in the illusion of narrative closure offered by the state of being "in love":

It's the unthinkable that berates me. What if,
what if I were to tell you that it's the long
hour of the night ticking away like a dying
sun that bothers me... what if
I were to tell you that at the moment it's the impossibility
of our being which troubles me more than our love.

Giannoukos's second work wilfully exposes itself to the gagging critique that typically accompanies traditional forms and love themes. The collection is at its best when the poet blends critical humour with a commanding knowledge of her subject so as to valorise her conviction that love is important, existential, and worthy of continued exploration. The collection's language play offers many ways into the poems, especially as we look for what "dazes" us and what we might "bulldoze." But the collection is perhaps at its weakest when abstractions or a lack of particulars create moments of vagueness or generality. These moments allow the contemporary reader's native scorn for love to creep in, especially scorn towards love as a serious academic subject.

Nevertheless, *Bull Days* is brave work, a collection that is prepared to dodge the labels of sad, desperate, sentimental, and confessional in order to explore the precarious nature of those signs, songs, fictions, and narratives by which we navigate love. Giannoukos's modern sonnet sequence skilfully exposes visceral truths about what drives us as humans and, moreover, as animals.

Notes

1. Jordie Albiston, *the sonnet according to 'm'* (Victoria: John Leonard Press, 2009).
2. M. T. C. Cronin, *<More or Less Than>1–100* (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2004).
3. M. T. C. Cronin, *The World Beyond the Fig* (Wollongong: Five Islands Press, 1998).
4. Tina Giannoukos, *In a Bigger City* (Carlton: Five Islands Press, 2005).
5. See, for instance, Sara Louise Morrison's dissertation thesis: *Agency in Dis-memberment: Revisioning the Blazon in Early Modern English Literature* (Denver, CO: University of Colorado Press, 2002).
6. See, for instance, Marcelle Maistre Welch and Vivien Elizabeth Bosley, *Three Feminist Treatises* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
7. See Oscar Wilde, *Salome: A Tragedy in One Act* (London: Elkin Mathews & John Lane, 1894).