

Malachi Edwin Vethamani, *Love and Loss. Petaling Jaya: Maya Press Sdn. Bhd, 2022. 87pp. ISBN: 978-983-2737-64-3*

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Malachi Edwin Vethamani's fifth book, not inclusive of the anthologies he has edited, is at once a delicate and bold pronouncement of a topic that is best left in the hands of the experienced: love, and its inevitable shadow, loss. Rainer Maria Rilke famously warned in his *Letters to a Young Poet* against writing about love unless the subject has been earned: "Don't write love poems; avoid those forms that are too facile and ordinary: they are the hardest to work with, and it takes a great, fully ripened power to create something individual where good, even glorious, traditions exist in abundance" (Letter 1).

Vethamani not only asserts his ability to tackle such a difficult subject—difficult precisely because it is so common—but also positions himself, whether consciously or not, in an ancient literary genealogy of love poets, from the force of Sapphic emotionalism to the hot urgency and doubt of Elizabeth Barret Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Vethamani's brand of love is mature, seasoned with insight and a surprising mix of wisdom and vulnerable longings. The collection consists of poems from earlier collections, *Complicated Lives* (2016) and *Life Happens* (2017) as well as new ones. What is most striking about this collection is its trajectory and proclamations about love: what appears, at the start, to be a meditation on the confluence of lovers—"our minds mingled/before our bodily/fluids mixed" ('Entwined'); "our spirits/touch a becoming" ('You are, I am')—eventually becomes a series of explorations of the wounding and anguish that often accompanies the leap lovers must take "into a darkness/searching for that light" ('Love's Lies'). The light, in *Love and Loss*, is one that is speckled with blind spots and uncertainty; it is a light that has to be tested via "sorely stretched

tests” before it *may* begin to shine bright (‘Love Stretched’). But Vethamani is more interested in why and how the light is not able to shine just yet—“What you can’t catch/you get to feel./ What you can’t feel/ you get to yearn” (‘Fragment II’). It is this quality of yearning and the keen attention paid to the many faces of grief that truly stands out in this collection. Indeed the aspects of loss are more pronounced and central, and this reflects Vethamani’s core take on the process of loving another human being: “We pay the price/ for those we love...What we thought is love/opens despair’s doors” (‘Price of Love’). Vethamani gets at the subject of love through darkness, through what it negates and denies, rather than what it affirms.

The renowned Malaysian poet, Wong Phui Nam, in his introduction to the collection comments that “love in this collection is thoroughly 21st century. As its title, *Love and Loss*, indicates the poems are actually about its losses, losses which modern psychoanalysis suggests may be due to a central condition of the human self” (1). The 21st century dimension that Wong highlights is another area where the collection carves out its own place within the vast tradition of love poetry. Its 21st century dimension appears in gender-fluid lines like “You are/ not male/ not female/ not man/ not woman” (‘You Are, I Am’), in poems such as ‘Caresses on My Computer Keyboard’ that open up the boundaries between virtual and physical connections, and in poems that showcase the range of romantic relationships beyond what is considered conventional. In the mix, en route to a seemingly perennial deferral of stable love, is carnal pleasure that translates into sensual poems like ‘Sandalwood Fragrant Lover’, and into poems like ‘Encounters’, ‘Transient Companions’ and ‘Adultery’ that ruminate on brief sexual escapades devoid of the kind of love that is “a marvel/a miracle” (‘Love’s Lies’).

But at the heart of this collection is a profound valuing of that miraculous love, even if it mainly evades the poems’ speakers and alights only very briefly in the lives of a lucky few. “Wouldn’t it be lovely?” the speaker of ‘If’ asks, “If we could hold hands for all to see/ If we could kiss when we wish.” Right up until the closing of the collection, this love, like an errant

lover, runs off the boundaries of most poems, and when it reappears, it stands out, bearing its promised light, demonstrating the nature of this love as both ideal and sensuous: “I will gently sip the wine/My love you are the wine./My senses surge/ As I’m roused by the wine./ Beloved, don’t speak/ Let me be intoxicated by your wine” (‘Tonight’).

The motif of the beloved and wine is one of a few elements that Vethamani incorporates into his poems from Persian devotional poetry. Another aspect is the prevalence of yearning for the beloved which in devotional poetry either leads to or shines a light on that communion, but which in Vethamani’s poems, dwell on the darkness that precedes the light. And finally, the poems resemble the immediacy and simplicity of the devotional poems of Sufi poets like Hafiz and Rumi. The minimalist lines, the absence of adjectives, and the refusal to waste words on introductions and elaborations reflect the exigency true love and loss produces.

It is noteworthy and fitting that the poems do not reach the stratospheric heights of Sufi love poetry because, after all, Vethamani is interested in revealing not the successes of love but where it fails to take off so that when it does, the fruits of what could be dazzle brighter. The turbulence of relationships and love affairs is what these poems generally excel in depicting and it is this content, rather than a mere celebration of love, that makes these poems raw and relatable. In short, it is the vulnerabilities of these poems that have the capacity to magnetise and move the reader.

Works Cited

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters to a Young Poet*. London: Penguin Classics, 2016.

Wong, Phui Nam. “Introduction” in *Love and Loss* by Malachi Edwin Vethamani. Petaling Jaya: Maya Press Sd. Bhd., 2022.