

How Does He Love Me?

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A Collection of Love Sonnets

BRAD LUSSIER

Foreword by
JOANNA WEIR OUSTON

RESOURCE *Publications* • Eugene, Oregon

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Resource Publications
An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

www.wipfandstock.com

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-7252-8856-0
HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-7252-8857-7
EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-7252-8858-4

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

12/29/20

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Foreword

Some fourteen years ago I was running an intensive voice and text workshop for Elements Theatre Company which focused on scenes and monologues from Shakespeare's plays. For one of the assignments, I asked the participants to learn a classical sonnet which had a complex emotional journey. Most brought a sonnet by Shakespeare, some had learnt one of John Donne's Holy Sonnets, and Brad brought one I had never heard before. It was very beautiful and moving, and while it echoed the traditional Shakespearean sonnet style, it had a more contemporary feel and was definitely by a more modern writer. It conformed to classical forms of language and rhythm, but the thoughts were linguistically more accessible than in some of Shakespeare or Donne's more complex sonnets. I was curious about the author of this beautiful sonnet, but all Brad told me initially was that the author was "unknown." After a little more questioning, Brad finally, with a degree of embarrassment, revealed the author's name.

It transpired that Brad had written quite a few sonnets and had printed them up into a small booklet which he allowed me to read—a rare privilege as at that point the sonnets were a private vehicle for artistic expression rather than something to be broadly published. The sonnets were lovely. Each one beautifully and profoundly encapsulated moments in the experience and celebration of passionate,

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courtly love: a fusion of physical attraction and spiritual admiration. They revealed enormous emotional sensitivity, vulnerability and understanding of the human desire for deep, true romantic love.

How is it that our hearts same rhythm find
And inspiration of our breaths we share,
That your one knowing look fast probes my mind,
While in one word I read your every care?
Secrets to None Other Known

A love sonnet encapsulates the meeting of mind, body and soul, in which the forces of nature, Heaven and the poet conjoin in devotion to illuminate, protect, celebrate, or simply be in awe of the perfection of the subject of their adoration. Take for example *Colors All Appropriate*:

This morning I rose early as I'm wont
And took my seat in corner as I do
And waited for the dawn to bring his font
Of colors all appropriate to you.

Yet, when dawn arrived with his palette and brush, "And on your cheek prepared to paint his blush" he "stopped, withdrew his hand." Realizing there was no work which needed to be done he instead, in rapture, bowed his head in admiration of the perfection asleep before him. About to leave (as he knew his work would be cut out for him at my house!) he had to take yet one more admiring look at beauty divine. Now that's a sonnet that will melt any woman's heart, as will *Babbles Fade to Whispers* where:

For every ray of sun upon your face
Morn's dewy droplets diamonds fast declare,
While currents coursing playful in their chase
Spin strands of gold to plait amidst your hair.

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At the end of our workshop the actors presented some of their work and, unusually, I presented something as well: the above sonnet which begins “Were you a stream, sure I should be a leaf.” I think it was the first time Brad had heard someone else speak one of his sonnets. I urged him to have them published but with typical bashfulness he balked at the idea. Consequently, I was absolutely delighted when, all these years later, Brad informed me he had written more sonnets and invited me to write the foreword for this collection.

The sonnet is a highly charged and intimate poetic form because within its prescribed and limiting structure, the imaginary writer’s entire heart and world are revealed. The evolving ‘crisis’ is developed dramatically and then turned on its head in what is frequently a surprise resolution or shift in paradigm. The inherent economy of this form, where every single word counts, distills the flow of emotion within the unfolding drama into a passionate, intense experience: a mini play or a dramatic scene with a beginning, middle and end in only fourteen lines.

A heart in ribbons, wrapped and bowed and tied
I offered, trembling, to your waiting hands;
Surrendered there, in pledge, no part denied—
A fleeing captive of the past’s demands.
Dared I to walk this way but once before;
The gift I gave then my love sorely used,
Then spurned and shamed and injured still the more;
This heart, I vowed, would néer be like abused.

Here, in *A Heart in Ribbons*, we have someone who has been deeply wounded by a past love, and who has vowed never to open his vulnerable heart again to the possibility of being emotionally hurt:

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But reason rules not hearts; they none obey
When passion overtakes the measured mind,
So once again I've dared to give away
A heart whose love has made his reason blind.

We are left in suspension, the poet daring once more to love and trust because the love he feels is so intense, the object of his love so special.

It takes about a minute to speak a sonnet, and coincidentally, this is roughly the same time it takes for blood to course through the whole body and back to the heart. So, quite poetically, the *da-DUM da-DUM* rhythm of the iambic pentameter is like the heart's pulse beating life through the emotional journey captured in the words and syllables of a sonnet.

While beats this heart, while breath in me resides
My love is yours; in you my hope abides.
My Heart, All Roguish

Brad is one of the most talented, intelligent and lovely people with whom I have had the pleasure to work. First and foremost, he is a dedicated member of the clergy at the Community of Jesus. He has that rare ability to inspire with memorable sermons and to make scripture immediate, alive and relevant to life today. He is also a gifted poet, writer and dramaturg, blessed with an incredible intellect and a great sense of humor. He is a wonderful actor, can play guitar, sing, and even build houses! He can do anything he puts his mind to, and all to a level of excellence. Yet, he is one of the humblest people I know. That humility is in every syllable of these sonnets. It gives life to the extraordinary experience of the pure emotional

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vulnerability of passion—a precious gift bravely shared with us through these verses.

Who loves and love declares all naked stands
And braving terror shuns a thin disguise.
Hearts Who Dare to Love

Alfred Lord Tennyson famously wrote: “Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.” Reading these sonnets, one safely navigates the emotional trials and tribulations of love and, in an instant, is transported away from the pragmatic preoccupations of daily life and onto a journey of the heart and soul.

In peril those who love their love reveal
For hearts who dare to love so rarely heal.
Hearts Who Dare to Love

These sonnets are a reminder not only of the beauty and depth of intense, selfless love, but also of what it means to be human, complete with fears, vulnerabilities, and frailties.

Off' times when we're apart I steel my mind
My heart to rule that my heart not rule me;
And sometimes hours pass before I find
My mind has failed: my heart has broken free.
Until He Loses

And who but you, with one flirtatious glance
My jealous mind can own, all desperate,
Awash in fear, despairing there's a chance
I'll lose you to another, separate?
While You Shall Choose

I'm sure the world would be a better, happier place if we each savored a sonnet a day, allowing our hearts to

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beat in empathy with the exquisite, sensitive journey of the poet in love. And what better place to start than with this charming volume?

O there to stay, to feast on treasures rare,
And pulse and breath and love forever share!
Babbles Fade to Whispers

Joanna Weir Ouston
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The Oxford School of Drama
August, 2020

Watching Sparrows Woo

A sparrow on the garden wall so near
I might have stretched a hand to stroke her wing
Perched with her mate all innocent of fear
Her heart a niche where naught but calm could cling.
No caution in her gait, no ready stance
To hint at any worry on the stone,
Her eyes intent, consumed but by his dance
As her beau courted, lovers all alone.
And in those moments watching sparrows woo
My heart flew to another of like grace
Whose susurrations all my fears subdue
Who peace affords within her heart's embrace.
Who knows each sparrow, guards them where they be
Knows my needs, too, for he sent you to me.

Shades of Ink

No gift own I with palette, brush, or knife.
In me no apt perspective doth abide;
Nor color, light, nor line in me is rife
Bequeathed by blood, that unction doth provide.
Nor note, nor measure, melody innate
All immanent within each beat of heart,
Nor suite, nor symphony doth permeate
My soul that I might woo you with my art.
So, with my words I paint your beauty rare,
With rhyme the music of your laugh compose,
And with my lines and meter will I dare
To pen this masterpiece all heaven knows.
In shades of ink your graces will I tell
Which ever me to passion doth compel.

Colors All Appropriate

This morning I rose early as I'm wont
And took my place in corner as I do
And waited for the dawn to bring his font
Of colors all appropriate to you.
And he arrived with palette and with brush
And sleepy-eyed crawled over window sill
And on your cheek prepared to paint his blush
But stopped, withdrew his hand, and stood stock-still.
All rapt, he stared a moment, sighed, then bowed
And turned to make his exit as you slept,
But thought the better, and himself allowed
Just one last look 'fore o'er the sill he crept.
Who once beholds your beauty e'er repines,
To linger long nigh charms no art refines.

With Blush and Maiden Smile

How delicate the violet a'dew
With morning's whisper soft upon her ear.
First rising rays paint purple's royal hue,
And charm the blossom from her nightly bier.
And in that moment all my breath is ta'en
For rare such beauty on the eye befalls,
Until with blush and maiden smile you deign
T'appear and shame the bloom the dawning calls.
Those blossoms, unaware of beauty's lure
Know not the power they wield upon the eye,
Nor you, whose charms, whose graces, e'er demure,
Néer fail to raise my helpless, yearning sigh.
Pray, mercy grant to him who can't resist
The beauty of this one the angels kissed.