

REVIEW

SALIMAH VALIANI (2021) *29 LEADS TO LOVE: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS*. TORONTO: INANNA PUBLICATIONS AND EDUCATION INC.

CORINNE SANDWITH

Named the winner of the American Bookfest International Book Awards for Contemporary Poetry in 2022, *29 leads to love* offers a timely invitation to explore the multiple shades and textures of radical love, the varied ways it can be approached and the many ways it can mean: love as ‘the faceless call/that only some hear’; love as ‘common as pigeons’; love as the creation of a finely-wrought bracelet and love as ‘public services’ like the Turkish Baths in Cape Town or the Plante Bath in Ottawa. Love as both ‘ever present’ and what is still yearned for; love as being in synch or going one’s own way; love as ‘doing [things] differently’ or simply taking the time to see.

Exploring the multiple shapes that love can take, *29 leads to love* also documents the many forces against which love is opposed – corporate rapacity, environmental and military devastation, racism and the ‘violence of the market’. As such it maps out an intricate scene of global inequalities and struggles – Iraq, Mexico, India, South Africa, Canada – while insisting on their intimate connections. ‘This longitude struggle/This longitude strife’ – international struggles both past and present – are reimagined as the connective tissue, cartilage and joints of the larger body politic. The pressing concern is the search for forms of personal-political action that will transcend borders, bind and embrace; the search for ways in which the traumatic experience of ‘feeling unheld’ can be transposed into powerful forms of ‘holding together’.

The ethics and politics of connection that mark these poems are to be found in their wide-ranging but intimate global reach as well as in the practice of staging intermittent dialogues with poets, musicians

and art-makers from a range of historical and geographical contexts. The unexpected experience of reading poems with footnotes and the parallel tactic of leaving some things unexplained also serves as an important reminder of the many things that remain opaque, distinct, not easily grasped; thus, a warning against interpretive certainty and the postures of 'omnipotence'.

Several poems, 'Mexico City or, On Love (vii)', 'Cumberland 2019', 'On love (xxvi)' and 'On love (xxviii)' explore the question of what is known to history and how this comes to be. The poems pay attention to hidden scenes and ordinary, anonymous lives; they seek to understand as well as to act against historical marginalisation and erasure and the ways in which so many are 'barred from making history'. In the latter case, the poems take care to surface the histories of lesser known political struggles, often involving women – the 'little known stitches' in the carpet of global resistance which mostly go unrecognised. This tender and lucid documentation of ordinary experience often takes the form of unexplained vignettes, snapshots or extreme close ups – a device which both addresses their singularity and sets them in dialogue with comparable scenes: a woman 'gulping, breathless/from a cup/mid-walk; a 'woman flipping blue tortillas in a tianguis/filling them with squash flowers'; the 'barebacked' ballerina; the 'worker owned/loved/run Umi café'; a 'little boy clown balloons for buttocks/winding in traffic in search of pesos'.

29 leads to love draws the eye towards overlooked and often unloved things and asks the reader to see in new ways: it explores quiet, close-up views of an artist's movement and coming to rest; the sun yellowing a leaf; 'creeping red Virginias'; and 'dusty eyes parched lips gritty teeth'. In the poem entitled 'seeing', the readers' eyes are brought to rest on as ordinary an object as a table, thus asked to observe the multiple forms of community and intimacy it makes possible as well as the labour it conceals. Other poems record acts of transgressive or unorthodox re-imagining – solidity recast as space or monumental environmental features – mountains and volcanoes – taking on the value of 'dear art'. This poetics of seeing anew is reinforced by the use of unconventional line gaps, use of white space and artful arrangements on the page, all of which encourage slower reading practices and an attentive disposition.

The poems' singular, close up focus on grass, wind, ants, leaves, 'oily shine of hadeda's wings' register the collections' pervasive environmental consciousness and its call to 'cool the ecocide'. Here, the forms of love explored in the poem are extended to the dimensions and layers of non-human consciousness while also revealing the sympathetic connections between animals and humans. What is surfaced is the secretive, mysterious life of the non-human world, its ongoing presence and steady 'polishing', irrespective of human non-seeing and looming threat.

The poems' concerns with tracing connections are also extended to the past, to the quiet uncovering of historical palimpsests, layers, connections and prior lineages as in the pre-Hispanic and pre-Aztec

cultures of Mexico City or forms of precolonial world-making in India. These poems are attentive to the ghosts that inhabit our spaces and the ongoing resonance of previous enactments, ancient scripts and long-trodden paths. In 'Diamond Sunset (Somaria Northern Cape)', the space is imagined as the 'caged tension of centuries', a scene in which long-standing historical claims continue to be ignored, even after 25 years of independence. Another poem, 'Conserve a Exposição' explores the reading of monumental architecture as imperial stamp while also tracing its opposites: 'lightness transparency/kinetic rhythms/movement'. In this way other possibilities can be imagined and 'sculpture distanced from imperiousness'.

The poems in *29 leads to love* explore everyday suffering, slow violence, states of precarity and exhaustion while also hinting at small acts of survival, creativity and tenacity. The extractive, violent logics of both colonialism and the market are represented in the form of both detailed, specific histories and archetypal scenes. In many cases, the interpersonal and institutional forms of scapegoating, plundering, violation and shaming take shape as a kind of cataloguing, an accumulative gesture which also emphasises their terrible ordinariness. Also foregrounded are the distancing effects of normative modes of social assessment disguised as care: statistics, reports and diagnoses. All these are counterposed and disrupted with various forms of political witnessing, commemoration and remembrance. Against the violence of extraction and occupation, the poems evince an alternative logic, the desire to inhabit or dwell in different ways, to touch with 'heart and eyes'. In this way, the poems move towards an exploration of holding, not as possession or taking away but as seeing and appreciating, of finding ways 'to do it differently'. By calling attention both to the 'lives within the structures' and the structures within the lives, this collection anticipates the process of 'rebeginning' and the possibilities of our 'fullest wakefulness'.

Salimah Valianah's latest collection, *Love Pandemic* has just been published by Daraja Press.