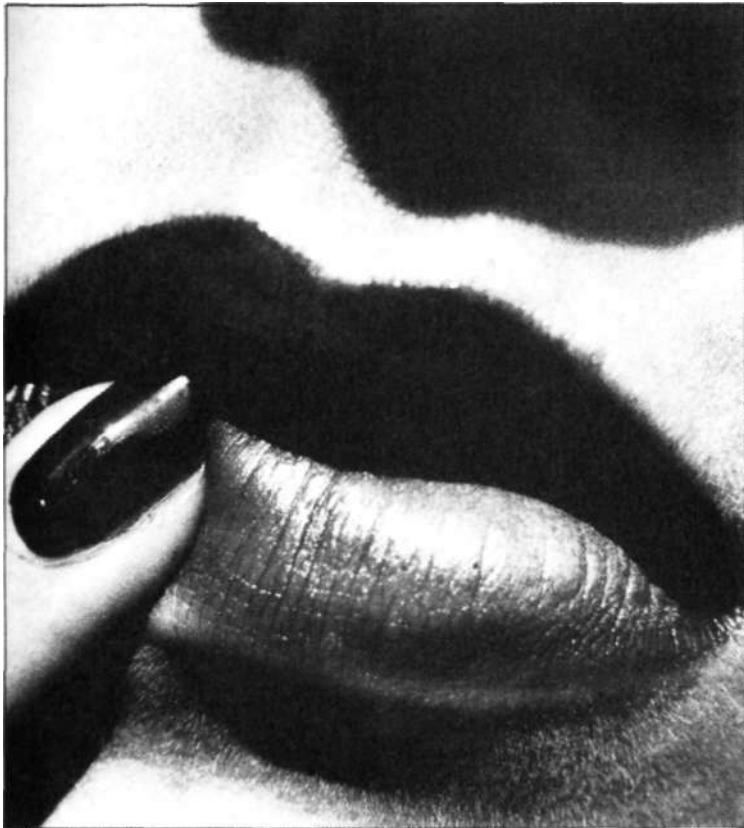


# BOOKS

Suzanne Raitt on poetry and desire

## Strains Of Love



Love can seem at times a dubious pleasure. And it is its dubiousness, as much as its pleasure, that is celebrated in this anthology of women's poetry, appearing close on the heels of John Fuller's *Chatto Book Of Love Poetry*. The *Virago Book Of Love Poetry* (*Virago, pbk £6.99*), edited by Wendy Mulford, makes a virtue out of editorial idiosyncrasy (Mulford emphasises that 'the editors have not tried to be fair or representative'), and this makes for a collection that is at times irritating and even baffling.

But probably this is how it should be. The editors wanted to 'deconstruct the love poem as such', and often, searching for our own experience in these pages, we are frustrated, aware of how much is lacking not only from this book, but also from love itself.

There are all sorts of unexpected inclusions here, like Blaga Dimitrova's poem about her mother ('Her skinny hand/pulls mine into the dark'), and Anne Stevenson's about her child. But this rich diversity cannot drown out the anger and the disappoint-

ment of Anna Akhmatova's 'You Thought I Was That Type', or Georgia Johnson's 'The Heart Of A Woman'. Reading so much about love, one cannot help wondering what women ever had to gain from it. Perhaps the topography of anger and resentment simply makes more impression than the contours of satisfied desire, found in Sylvia Townsend Warner's beautiful but static 'Drawing You, Heavy With Sleep'.

It is sad to feel this way, even though there are consolations, like Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea's poems to her husband. But, in a collection informed, as Mulford tells us, by its editors' feminist commitment, contradiction and a lack of easy answers are inevitable. The matter-of-fact mingling of lesbian and heterosexual erotic poetry is to be applauded: here lesbian love is welcomed without comment into what has been at times an oppressively short-sighted tradition. Its presence is a part of the eclectic aims of this volume: nobody and, just as importantly, no *feeling* must be left out.

But not all feelings are love; and not all writing spread irregularly on the page is poetry. We wonder about art as well as about affection. Where do we draw the line? Every reader will find some poems whose presence here seems intrusive, on aesthetic or emotional grounds. The volume is uneven, its provocativeness not always under control. It should perhaps have had a stronger argument, a less eccentric way of proceeding; and we might then have learnt something out of the ordinary about love and politics.

For in spite of all the differences so carefully in relief here (differences of nationality, of race, of class, of sexuality), there is a curious monotony weighing down this book. Too many of the poems are contemporary, free verse rhapsodies or polemics, for there to be

much spice in the reading of it. We feel very strongly the personal taste of the editors, the pressure to include more, and often more of the same.

It could be, too, that to have a considerable number of poems in translation deadens the language in the collection. In a book largely about bodies and sexual love, not to have all the poems in their original incarnations triggers another set of frustrations. To leave them out might have been equally a deprivation, but reading love in translation makes us feel even more hollowly at a distance.

Yet it is because of such feelings - of remoteness, of absence, of fright - that we are always so hungry for more: more love, more feelings, more ways of saying it. Many of the sins of *The Virago Book Of Love Poetry* are also its virtues: rather like love itself, in fact. ©