

The Book Corner

A Drab Room, the Hollows of a Neck, Dancing Boys

The Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse,
edited by Stephen Coote, Penguin, 1983,
410 pp. \$6.95.

But first, what's here and why these? "A gay poem is one that either deals with explicitly gay matters or describes an intense and loving relationship between two people of the same gender." This statement, buried near the end of Coote's excellent introduction to the anthology, defines the nature and part of the scope of this gathering.

Three hundred and forty-seven pages of poems by approximately 180 poets, approximately 25 of whom are women (half of them from the 20th Century). The poems span ?1050 B.C. to the 1970s, come primarily from the Western tradition, and are all given in English. Included are poets you'd expect (Sappho, Plato, Catallus, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Whitman, Verlaine, Stein, Isherwood, Cavafy), those that might surprise you (Goethe, Tennyson, Dickinson, A.E. Housman, Lorca, Pasolini), and many you'll not have known (Woodley, Puttkamer, Seward, Heywood, etc.).

Two quibbles: first, the only place to locate a poem's source is a laborious three pages of Acknowledgements at the front. This is no minor inconvenience, for if the book fulfills one of its purposes (to get you so interested in a poet that you want more), you'll have to scrounge about through the acknowledgements. Second, the majority of poets are represented with a single poem. Hopefully the reader will not assume this one is representative; as Coote states, "I have selected what I found most interesting, most pleasing."

Quibbles aside, a thousand jewels reside in the collection and only a few chunks of fool's gold. The poems span a tremendous range of feelings from bathroom graffiti humor (from "25 Limericks": "When Arthur was homeless and broke,/He would suck off his friends for a coke./The suckees would mutter:/ 'Please bring some drawn butter-/We're going to have Artie choke,'" --or -- "Two dykes went their separate routes:/Said one, 'I just don't give two hoots./No common tie linked us/Except cunnilinctus,/And a penchant for Brooks Brothers Suits.'") to politically-natured poems (from Barber's "Explanation": "I will not stand in the drab beige men's room/ like a fern watered with urine,/and wait for penises. I'm sorry./ Morality will just have to change//I speak directly to the sons of/ your officials, under the moon,/with the professors listening." -- or from Grahn's "A History of Lesbianism": "How they went out of the world,/the women-loving-women/went out one by one/having withstood greater and lesser/trials, and much hated/from other people, they went out/one by one, each

having tried/in her own way to overthrow/ the rule of men over women,/they tried it one by one/and hundred by hundred,/until each came in her own way/to the end of her life/and died:/ The subject of lesbianism/ is very ordinary; it's the question/of male domination that makes everybody/-angry"), from frankly erotic poems (R.M. Brown's "Dancing the Shout to the True Gospel": "I follow the scent of a woman/ Melon heavy/Ripe with joy/Inspiring me/To rip great holes in the night/So the sun blasts through. /And this is all I shall ever know:/Her breath/ Filling the hollows of my neck/A luxury diminishing death" -- or Ortleb's "Some Boys": "When some boys/offer to dance/you can see how innocently/their cocks hang in their pants./Pendulously, as they say,/ connoting/ horses, barns, liquor/hay./Some boys open up their shirts/and the beauty almost hurts./") to a metaphysical appreciation of love (as in the wonderful Katherine Philip's "To my Excellent Friend Lucasia": "No Bridegroom's nor Crown-conqueror's mirth/To mine compared be:/ They have but pieces of this Earth,/I've all the World in thee.//Then let our Flames still light and shine,/And no false fear controul,/As innocent as our Design,/ Immortal as our Soul" -- or from Michelangelo's "To Tommaso de'Cavaliere": "From thy fair face I learn, O my loved Lord,/that which no mortal tongue can rightly say;/the soul, imprisoned in her house of clay,/ holpen by thee to God hath often soared.") to a sentimental ease (as in Mathilda Betham-Edward's "A Valentine": "What shall I send my sweet today,/when all the woods attune in love?/And I would show the lark and dove,/That I can love as well as they" -- or F.S. Woodley's "The Beautiful": "I love this boy, not for his beauty only,/ But just because my life that was so lonely/Knows in his presence some strange healing power,/ An unfamiliar peace--as if each hour/should pause a little in its swift-winged flight/And breathe a benediction.")

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Coote wants the book to be read for more than pleasure: "I would like to think of it also as a record, a history of the different ways in which homosexual people have been seen and have seen themselves. Only if we know something about the past is there a chance we can do something about the future." Historian's plea (see HOMOSEXUAL VERSE on page 12)