

# Valentine's Reflection: True Love and Marriage

By Mary Esselman and Elizabeth Velez

The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight. It inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs the course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life-not necessarily a great clarification . . . but in a momentary stay against confusion.

--Robert Frost

This Valentine's Day even as florists jacked up the prices of roses, responding to their mandatory consumption by the married or the engaged, internet sites broadcast their successful marriage rates, responding to the expected pressure on singles to find a sweetheart/spouse for whom to buy those overpriced roses . . . if not in time for this February 14th, then at least in time for next year. As if commercialized love weren't confusing and stressful enough, this year we're faced not only with the usual Valentine's Day hype, but also with the ultimate in anti-romance shows like "The Bachelorette," "Joe Millionaire," "The Littlest Groom" and "My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiance." The drama of these shows rests on a baldly exposed truth: marriage promises entry way into the world of conspicuous consumption. The strived-for unions have nothing to do with the day-to-day, up-and-down struggles of partnership and/or raising a family and everything to do with the dream that marriage will lift contestants out of middle-class jobs and glamour-free lives. This is the "reality" of true love in 2004? Over-priced roses,, "diamonds-and-thigh-highs-are-forever" ads, and a bunch of brain-dead, money-grubbing exhibitionists competing to win America's heart?

Impossible. Surely we long for something else. Deep down we must know that Valentine's Day is a crock, and Joe Millionaire is a happy idiot. So why do we buy into it all? Why do we let Valentine's Day send us into an FTD frenzy if we're in a relationship, and into a Ben & Jerry's binge if we're single? Why do we tune in to see if the Bachelorette will give her heart, or just a hickey, to her latest hottie?

Maybe what we need is a reality check -- what Robert Frost might call a "momentary stay against confusion." We need to be reminded of something we know is true -- that real love, as opposed to commercialized love does exist, in huge range and depth and pitch. And we can find it by flipping off the TV, ignoring Hallmark hooey, and turning to what poet laureate Billy Collins has called "the only history of the human heart we have" -- poetry. In poetry, we'll find

the real thing, love in all its trouble and simplicity, a centuries-old "reality" story told by the world's most brilliant, hilarious, heartbreaking observers of the human condition. In poetry, we'll find love as Frost describes it, an experience that "begins in delight . . . inclines to the impulse . . . runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life."

This February 14th, clarify your life. Forget Valentine's Day -- but remember love, through poetry.

Remember love's bliss:

I have slept with you  
All night long while  
The dark earth spins  
With the living and the dead,  
And on waking suddenly  
In the midst of the shadow  
My arm encircled your waist.  
Neither night nor sleep  
Could separate us.

--From "Night on the Island," by Pablo Neruda

And its betrayals:

You fit into me  
Like a hook into an eye

A fish hook  
An open eye

--"you fit into me" by Margaret Atwood

Its acceptance of earthly imperfection:

To live in this world

You must be able

To do three things:

To love what is mortal;

To hold it

Against your bones knowing

Your own life depends on it;

And when the time comes to let it go,

To let it go.

--From "In Blackwater Woods," by Mary Oliver

And its promise of hope:

As when far off in the middle of the ocean

A breast-shaped curve of wave begins to whiten

And rise above the surface, then rolling on

Gathers and gathers until it reaches land

Huge as a mountain and crashes among the rocks

With a prodigious roar, and what was deep

Comes churning up from the bottom in mighty swirls

Of sunken sand and living things and water--

So in the springtime every race of people

And all the creatures on earth or in the water,

Wild animals and flocks and all the birds

In all their painted colors, all rush to charge

Into the fire that burns them: love moves them all

--Virgil (trans. Robert Pinsky)

Another Valentine's Day has come and gone--the chocolates eaten, the flowers now past their prime. Lucky for all of us, poetry offers us a chance to appreciate the real beauty, richness, and pain of love, beyond our formal marital status--every day of the year.

Mary D. Esselman and Elizabeth Ash Velez are co-editors of *The Hell with Love: Poems to Mend a Broken Heart and Kiss Off: Poems to Set You Free*.

Opinions expressed are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Alternatives to Marriage Project.