



HEATHER TOSTESON

FOREWORD

Just how do septuagenarians do it? Joyce Richardson muses in her poem, and the answer is—every way imaginable, and then some. There is a generous sensuality in the work we find here, strong passions, and a sense of surprise at their persistence. If we didn't know most of our writers were over 70, I'm not sure we would think of them that way if we listen to their most personal of voices—which is part of the fun and the invitation of this anthology. Until we get there, we don't know what this age is really like. And until we ask, those who have been there may not volunteer their road maps. But we are the richer, wiser, and more lively for having them.

I remember twenty years ago, when I was in my late thirties, having a wonderful friend, Tema Nason, a fellow writer, a beautiful redhead, seventy-six years old, widowed for many years, and, to her occasional exasperation and occasional delight, dating. It didn't sound much different from what I was going through. The wave of hope, the dizzying disappointment. Actually, if I remember right, I was at the beginning of a long moratorium on love. She was the one who had the juicy details to share.

"What really irritates me," she said one day, standing up with a restless surge at the memory, "is when people tell me, 'You don't look seventy-six.' What on earth am I supposed to answer? I tell them, 'This is what seventy-six looks like.' But what bugs me even more is when people talk to me as if I know what I'm doing. 'How should I know what's an appropriate response,' I tell them. 'I've never been seventy-six before.'"

I've returned to Tema's outburst again and again in my mind. "How am I supposed to know what's an appropriate response," I'll mutter in the throws of joy, passion, or despair. "I've never been thirty-seven, forty-seven, fifty-seven before." But I have a wonderful sense of Tema—of the energy and passion in her writing and her elegant, earthy and slightly imperious way of being in the world. I've always felt comforted by the vivid but reduced expectations she introduced me to. Wisdom wasn't going to shroud

me anytime soon. I might even one day be seventy-six and passionately wondering, “How should I know? I’ve never been here before.”

In the last two years, I’ve heard some variant of Tema’s comment from a number of my trail-blazing friends, including my marvelous co-editors, and it seemed a wonderful project to compare notes far and wide. There’s a lot going on after seventy, as much, or more, as there was before. If you closed your eyes and just listened to the words, it might be hard to tell the difference from thirty or fifty or sixty.

With this difference, I think. There’s a lot more zest—and a lot more death. More self-acceptance. More surprise. There’s a treasury of long relationships and a lot of jumping back into the roiling flow of love with both feet, ready or not. There’s a lot of knowing, now that it’s gone, the wonder of what we have known. There’s a lot of knowing it before it goes too. And a lot of learning to love what comes to take its place when the one we love no longer knows us. It’s hard to start anew, reinvent ourselves, and very few of us want to. On the other hand, life is busy engraving our skin and erasing our mental connections, stripping away our most treasured life-defining commitments. If not now, when? isn’t a cliché, it’s an imperative. But an imperative to what? “How should I know,” Tema says with a snort. “I’ve never been here before.”

The works Nancy, Megan and I chose seem to fall naturally into the categories we’ve used here. First off, that wonderful question, our *Overture*: How do septuagenarians make love? What is it about turning seventy that distinguishes it? What changes, what remains the same? The talk about chicks? The taste for finery? Our glee at throwing our hands up and hearing the clear crack of the whip of life?

Our second section, *View from A Distance*, gathers some of the poems and memoirs that explore what we imagine love after seventy might be like, whether we are in our thirties at the time, like Anna Steegmann, or coming close on that age ourselves, like Don Thackrey. Did we ever have a real, carnate sense of what went on between our parents? Our grandparents? When in our lives do they come back to us insisting we revision them more generously—and ourselves in the process?

The third section, *The Real Stuff*, enchants me each time I read it over. So many wonderful writers, so many distinct voices, but such a

harmonic between them. We find everything here. Passion allied with something so clear-eyed and steady it stops us, shores us, helps us see anew.

William Borden writes,

and I’ll be looking at you with new eyes,
too, knowing you’re hiding surprises
in that cerebellum, and those sagging
breasts and silver hairs are really brand
new models, and our dandy dendrites and
capering mitochondria are right
now making everything a wonder.

Maureen Flannery talks of the mysterious fusion of identity that comes from long love:

. . .
It is strange that sometimes I can’t feel

as I touch you, which skin pads
my fingertips and which is stretched
across your shoulder blades
like a suspension bridge.

Grey Held, too, talks about the relief he feels, breaking the last of the Waterford glasses from their wedding: “Actually, I’m happy/the Being Careful is over with.” But not the passionate attention and presence: “I want to tuck your bangs behind your ear./ I would like to/introduce myself to you again.”

Most of this section is poetry, perhaps because it best captures the bittersweet lyricism of the moment, the complexity of love over time, love until death, since death hovers like a shadow or a grace note, just like youth, everywhere you look. Ada Jill Schneider’s poems play with this tension:

...We watch
our babies grow up and our parents slowly leave
and can’t take our eyes off these used-to-be
smiling people we’re converting to DVD
so they can always live with and beyond us,
going round and round in this once-only world.

There is anger here, loss, betrayal, and rediscovery. So many ways to know love, in so many realms, so infused that past is with this future. Sondra Zeidenstein writes, “I lie awake grieving how lost/one of us will be forever from the other, one day.” Myrna Goodman plays with the letters that signify her husband’s retirement: