

# Other Poetry

## Helena Nelson

Mike Stocks writes sonnets—but then so do many poets. Even these days, the small, square, sonnet look-alike has amazing survival instincts. However, what's different here is that Stocks really *can* do it, and this book, entirely comprised of sonnets, is the proof. Not only does he demonstrate mastery of the form, in all sorts of different manifestations (nothing boring here), but he can do that magical thing with compression. You get to the end of a disarming little poem and snap! It whips you right back inside to work out what was going *on*.

This isn't a long book—just 48 poems—and it's not a sonnet sequence. Each poem works independently of the rest and creates its own world. Having said this, some of them have close connections: one set demonstrates that it's possible to construct anything (from a junk email to a set of property particulars) in sonnet form. Here Stocks is having fun and he is fun to read. However, his ability to explore the full emotional register shouldn't be underestimated. The opening poem (about two small boys trapped in a disused mine) packs a devastating emotive punch:

The fathers waiting at the top were told,  
but didn't know whose boy was quarry-cold  
until the live one was brought out at last...

You can hear the iambic tread there, and there's no doubt that Stocks loves a line of iambic pentameter, even though he exploits wide metrical variation. Now and again, a suspicion creeps in that the rhythm's a little *too* regular—and then—almost without fail—he does something quite astonishing. For example, in 'To a Dog Tied to a Tree in a High Street', the opening lines are neat but regularly so: 'All passing ankles are superfluous/ but those that hinge onto your Owner's knees'. You get the feeling this is conscious sonnet phrasing, deliberately placing its syllables into an iambic plod. But then it gets complicated. Why is the poet addressing a dog? Why does he invite the dog to sniff some blood spots on a tree? And then the form suddenly lifts:

There was a fight last night.  
Two men lashed out for nothing much, while blue  
with cold the girl looked on, as pigeons slept  
  
as cars drove past, as puddles captured light  
then gave it back. When morning came it swept  
the street with work. And the tree, dog, grew.

The imagery in the last three lines is strange and beautiful, the control of pacing and enjambement pure mastery—and the last five words with the deliberate pause, are a tour de force. See what I mean? Snap! Back inside the poem to work out what on earth was going on.

The emotive charge often has something to do with relationships—a triangle. From time to time, a poem shocks with its intensity and bitterness, feelings only offset by the sonnet form itself, which plays with the idea, rehearses the pain, traps it in a little box and dares you to take off the lid. Mike Stocks can do laughter, pain, cynicism, poignancy, sarcasm, disgust and fun. But what I admire above all is the haunting beauty of some of his lines:

Each night you worry what the day will bring,  
and that I don't believe in anything,  
and that it isn't true that absence of

belief in things is more like love than love,  
and I—I stroke them in the darkness there,  
your hundred thousand filaments of hair.

Pure poetry, unmistakable. I take my hat off to him.