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Wising Up Press, 2008

# *LOVE AFTER 70*



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## 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:

## JOYCE RICHARDSON

### *HOW DO SEPTUAGENARIANS MAKE LOVE?*

Without socks,  
Without sheets,  
Without counting,  
Without apology.

After checking the mail,  
but before supper.  
After putting out the cats, but often  
in front of the dogs.

After drinks,  
After fights,  
Afternoons,  
Afterglow.

As delicate as butterflies,  
As fierce as lumberjacks,  
As clamorous as clowns.

With tact,  
With the greatest of tact,

With no tact whatsoever.

### *MEET ME IN SPOLETO*

If you should go first,  
(as we always planned)  
I being a woman,  
and a little younger than you,  
and I follow after...  
Meet me in the Piazza Mercato...  
I know you'll be waiting  
under the blueblue Italian sky—lovely, but  
not the only heaven we've known.

But if I should go first,  
(as we've always suspected)  
my being who I am, I mean  
I could fall down steps  
and be gone just like that.  
Don't forget the Piazza Mercato  
and the bar on the corner beside the face fountain...  
I'll trip over the cobblestones to greet you,  
to see again your blueblue eyes.  
Meet me, meet me:  
you, the only heaven I've known.



## ROXANNE HOFFMAN

### *THE DATING SCENE AT 80*

Yes, there is a dating scene at 80! *Just who did you think was buying all that Viagra?*

My mother is a widow in her 80's. She's 83, I think. And being 83 she's starting to forget stuff like her glasses, her teeth, her walker, *her age*. Some things she never forgets:

- Her lipstick, Revlon's fire engine red *Forever Scarlet*.
- Her pick up line—"My middle name is *Flora Selva*. It means Flower of the Jungle."
- And her black *stiletto* pumps! (Just why did you think she *needs* the walker?)

The other day, we're in Central Park and my mother strikes up a conversation with a lime-green parrot perched on this guy's shoulder. Apparently, she and the parrot are both from Ecuador. (The parrot speaks excellent Spanish. And Mom, she's pretty good at Parrot.) And the guy, it seems he's a collector. He collects exotic creatures:

- Parrots,
- Iguanas,
- Lava Lizards,
- Chinchillas,
- Spider Monkeys,
- Blue Morpho Butterflies,
- Ocelots,
- Pythons,
- And *Women...*

They exchange phone numbers and negotiate a rendezvous at the Cowgirl bar in the West Village. (I'm talking about Mom and the owner of the parrot, not the parrot, here. Of course, the parrot was pretty cute.)

After we get home I rib my mom about her date: "You're picking them a bit young. That guy could not have been a day over 55."

## *STATISTIC*

Half the marriages break up  
 before the thirteenth year. Gone:  
 the calypso that once played.  
 Gone: the grace of the marimbas,  
 the steel drums in the straight-away.  
 On our honeymoon, what did we know  
 of the perpetual trellis that raising  
 children is, the consistent drench  
 of monthly bills, life  
 insurance, memberships, and the requisite  
 home repairs, a better screw gun,  
 the better tub of gunk  
 to strip the buildup in the space  
 between oven and vent. It has  
 taken me twenty years to discover  
 cracks in my apparent happiness,  
 my own capacity for cowardice,  
 all my petty exits. Still  
 I am amazed when she sets the table  
 with our wedding silver,  
 fills the centerpiece with mangos,  
 kumquats, kiwis that open like geodes,  
 papayas and Medjool  
 dates, lustful and clustered,  
 and I am happy again  
 just to watch her breathe  
 just to watch her  
 knit. The clicking needles turn  
 some boundless timeline  
 into thousands of closures  
 and openings, so that marriage may  
 put on its sweater,



go out into the world—  
 no weeping unwept  
 nor any laughter unlaughed,  
 though of course there are  
 roadblocks and holdbacks,  
 so many pitfalls—  
 and it will return, for we are  
 lock and lock bolt, cup  
 and saucer. Everything completed.

## SYLVIE TERESPOLSKI

### WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT, KETZEL?

I was at the hospital visiting a friend of fifty years, Ketznel, who just had quadruple bypass surgery after she suffered a heart attack and as people are wont to do when they've had a close call she began to tear up as I sat by her bedside. She took my hand and softly said, "You're so beautiful and smart and kind, I can't understand why you never found someone to love you after your divorce."

I said nothing because I found myself in semi-shock. This topic had never come up between us and I sat there bristling at what I interpreted as pity and an erroneous perspective. My being alone after my divorce twenty-seven years ago and after a miserable twenty-six-year marriage never struck me as a particularly unfortunate situation. Many people live with tons of loneliness even if they live with someone or a bunch of people and I had long ago concluded that fear of being alone was the number one reason that people got together after propagating years were over. I guess my silence sent the message that she should continue. "Do you ever think about it?"

I remained mute because I couldn't tell her what I really mused about while she was struggling between the here and the ever after. One cannot start the eighth decade of life without being aware of the certainty of death. At this stage, I am more than ever aware of the hangman's noose and I certainly didn't want to answer her with death on my mind. In one year, I lost nine acquaintances, six women and three men. While they were not necessarily part of my daily life, they were present at some time in my story. Most were my contemporary—some a bit older or younger. Sometime in the recent present, I had talked to them and was deeply aware of their existence and suddenly my once-in-a-while lunch date, or "here's a good book to read" adviser is gone. No possibility of telephone calls, dates for coffee, laughs, tears, remembrances.

I didn't tell my friend lying there with fluid in her lungs and oxygen feeders that my most powerful musing lately is how is "it" going to happen?

And the "it" is not "love." Cancer, heart, stroke, Alzheimer's anyone? The statistics are enough to make one less than cheerful. If you live to be 85, your chances are one in three that you'll develop Alzheimer's. I read the obituaries in *The New York Times* searching for clues for longevity especially when I see someone, a perfect stranger close to my age of 73. How did they live their lives that brought about their premature death? At least, I consider death in one's seventies premature. I'm a bit smug with the silent answer. Surely, with my good living of exercise, proper diet, I will have a longer healthier expectancy than they did. The limitations? What will the limitations be? Diminished eyesight, hearing, flexibility, strength, toughness? Diminished, diminished, diminished. Even worse, people will have diminished expectations and automatically put you into the "old lady" slot.

Right now, I'm just a bit slower on the "Jeopardy" questions and the crossword puzzle answers. The responses are on the tip of my tongue but the synapses don't connect immediately. Maybe a split second later or maybe at 2:00 a.m., I'll remember that George Fox founded the Quakers or that the Congo is the longest semi-circular river in Africa, or that Dylan's other name is Zimmerman.

A lot really to think about—the unknown, the somewhat scary, the "out of your hands" events in your life.

Eventually, I found enough voice to say to her, "How could I not think about love? It's everywhere. I mean everywhere and the majority of it is about carnal cravings." (I'm writing this as *Sex and the City* is being distributed worldwide.) "I wonder if anyone ever did a scientific study of what we learned by osmosis—just by flicking the radio dial, seeing a newspaper headline, hearing an advertisement for a movie, watching the world of people walk by on a Sunday afternoon in the park, reading a book.

"Where would Alfred Hitchcock's movie, *Notorious* be without those gorgeous love scenes between Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman? I know younger people might find their models in today's romantic comedies but no contemporary movie says it better than those scenes between Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman, or Ingrid Bergman with Humphrey Bogart. With all their clothes on their love was palpable and could reach out from the screen and touch your heart and you would say to yourself, 'I want that. Whatever it is they're having, I want it.' I said that before that line became famous in *When Harry Met Sally*."

**FRANK SALVIDIO**
*SHADOWLAND*

If I should slip into the shadows of  
 Your mind, there to become a living ghost,  
 Half-seen, mistaken for some other love,  
 Some other friend, my face forgotten, lost  
 Upon a sea of shapes, a distant ship  
 Obscured in mist and fog, my voice unheard  
 Or poised in breath upon another's lip,  
 A whisper that will not become a word:  
 In this confusion, can my memory  
 Of us survive if I do not survive  
 In you—if you can neither hear nor see  
 The common memory that keeps us alive?  
 If our two memories are lived as one,  
 How can both live when one of them is done?

*NOW*

I know there was a time before your time,  
 But I do not remember it; do not  
 Recall when music, movie, book or rhyme  
 Did not involve your mind in mine, nor art  
 Impress without your knowing nod; your word  
 Not make the ancient apologue seem new,  
 The long-accepted narrative absurd,  
 Not separate the bogus from the true.  
 And if no longer lovers now, what are  
 We then, so intimately bound in thought  
 We think each in the other's mind, who were  
 But bodies once and only passion sought?  
 Say, two turbulent streams—met suddenly—  
 Conjoined to one to run on tranquilly.



## PHYLLIS LANGTON

### *WAITING*

—Dedicated to Gentleman George

It is October of 2000, and George's appointment with the neurologist falls on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>. On that ominous date, we sit in the neurologist's office as he tells us the news. "George," he says, "I think you have a motor neuron disease, ALS, commonly referred to as Lou Gehrig's disease. It causes rapid deterioration of voluntary muscle activity. You probably have six months to live. Go out and have a good time; do all the fun things you've wanted to do and haven't done, while you can still do them. The only treatment is a drug, Rilutek, which may extend your life another month, though it does have potential side effects, such as liver and kidney damage. Before you start it, I need to do multiple tests and extensive blood work. You should consider the drug. Come back and see me in a week."

I am devastated. I drop my purse on the floor when George answers him. "You tell me I have six months to live, but if I take a drug that involves more tests and possible liver damage, I may live another month or two, with a lousy quality of life. What the hell nonsense is that? My liver is working just fine, and it will stay that way until I die. I see no reason to return. Thank you."

George stand ups and prepares to leave. I watch his face and can see his lips drawn tight in a thin line that I recognize as controlled anger. His pupils are fixed. I know he has shut down and isn't going to listen, or negotiate anything. I hold his arm as we leave the office.

He has just been given a death sentence, and I am scared he might fall on the way to the car. He has been falling more often lately. When we approach the car he says, "Well, I guess I know what's going to be on my death certificate. That's more than you can say." He pats my arm as if to reassure me. With the wit, courage, and strength of that moment, he sets the tone for the journey we will travel.

It is now October 2002, two years later. The wicked disease is relentlessly devouring his body, eating its way through arm and leg muscles, and making its way toward the diaphragm muscle he must use to breathe. Just when his body adjusts to one change, without warning, he falls to another plateau.

And yet George is brave. He is also stoic, and gentlemanly, having been born in the 1920s in a polite community in New Jersey at a time when children hid their feelings and were to be seen and not heard. As for me, I am strong too, but I'm a scrappy fighter, with noisy, impish tendencies—a graduate of a Boston orphanage where I was dumped in the Great Depression of the early 1930s.

But while we are polar opposites on the surface, under the skin we're the same. We always manage to work through any disagreements, such as when he is cranky and stubborn when I use the handicapped parking spaces. He tells me to park some other place, or he'll stay in the car. He doesn't want to be viewed as a "cripple."

I try tough love, saying that he can sit in the car and enjoy his stubbornness if he doesn't want to help me with the necessary errands, or get out to enjoy the first sunny day in two weeks. Then I add, "There's nothing to be embarrassed about. You have this lousy disease and unfortunately you're dying, but you're just human." As I start to get out of the car he mutters, "OK, woman, get me out of here."

I reach over and hug him, run to the back of the car and pull out the lightweight leather transport wheelchair that I can throw in the back of the car when he has to walk any distance, or in the house when he is tired. After two severe falls, I insist we use the wheelchair in public. This is our compromise, as he objects to a heavy, battery-operated wheelchair that he sees as useless; he can't control his lifeless arms and fingers.

After dinner one evening in July, after we have finished watching the Wimbledon tennis finals in the family room, he is especially quiet. Tennis was always such an important part of our lives together and with our friends. We are feeling a little weepy as we joke about the fact that I still play for him in his men's groups, using his god-awful heavy racket, so that he is still "on the court" with his buddies. He watches from the balcony of the indoor tennis facility, and his friends tease him at dinner, telling him I am prettier and faster than he. On the way home he remarks how different the

game looks when he's sitting on the bench, as he coaches me on their playing strategies.

As I finish cleaning up the kitchen, I ask him to tell me about some of his greatest frustrations so far during this journey. He doesn't answer. I wonder if he's heard me since he doesn't wear his hearing aid anymore. Or perhaps he's gone to sleep.

Finally, he says, "I'm tired of waiting."

"Waiting? For what?" I ask.

"That could take all night. There's just too much to say."

"Well, I have all night. Let's talk about it."

I prepare him a hot toddy with his favorite Bushmills Irish whiskey, which is his only pain medicine, and a glass of pinot noir wine for me. I lift him from the wheelchair, tuck him into his favorite black leather chair, and cover his legs with a light, summer blanket, as his legs get cold and painful now when he sits for more than an hour. I place his drink on the cherry end table next to his chair so he can bend down and sip it from a long glass straw, without my help. I know this pleases him because he winks at me as he sips his drink.

We talk for more than an hour, with our eyes tearing up in pain and tender laughter. It is the first time he shares what it means to him to wait for each moment of living—and dying. George says:

"When I wake up, I wait to see if my eyes are getting worse and if I can move my head, arms, or legs. My eyes don't focus like they used to, and each day I can move less. I look back six months, three months and see what I have lost.

"I wait to see if I can still whistle. I worry that I won't be able to call you when I need you, if I lose my whistle. We joke that this is the only time I can get away with whistling for you without getting a shoe thrown at me.

"I wait for your smile.

"I wait for you to get me out of bed into the wheelchair; lift me out of the wheelchair onto the bidet; and then close the bathroom door and let me sit a few minutes, alone for a few minutes. You tell me it's time for bowel movements with Beethoven, as you turn on the Bose music system. You add that you would love to smell some sweet-smelling shit when you come back. You tease me and tell me there are no bowel movements in heaven and that's why all you men want to go there.

"I wait for you to get me back into my wheelchair, wash my hands

## THIS IS LOUIS WYMOND

Arriving at age 80 is a shock. Where did the time go? How much time is left? It is neither a good nor a bad feeling—just one of amazement. Looking around at this eightieth celebration, I see my children, their spouses, my grandchildren, a niece and her children—it's fine, special really. But it has a sense of ending. A life well enough lived—both bad and good with some moments of wonderful. But wait! That was July and in October there will be a jolt, a surprise far surpassing turning 80. Love is waiting in the wings.

Picture a golden October day, bright and shiny as only October can be. Picture an eighty-year-old sitting on her couch talking to a young man about a mayoral race we are working on for an upcoming election. The phone rings.

“Nancy?” A man's deep voice.

“What is this about?” My cold response to a telemarketer.

“Nancy, this is Louis Wymond.”

Finally I can speak. “Louis Wymond?”

I turn to Dan. “You'll have to leave now. You'll have to let yourself out. This is an old boyfriend I haven't heard from in over sixty years.”

Dutifully Dan gets up and leaves, and I turn back to the phone. All sorts of memories fill my head, of Louis as a junior and senior, the handsomest boy in our class at Anchorage High School in Kentucky, of my thrill to be his date for proms, for Ann Bullitt Brewer's ballroom dancing class, and occasionally, when he could get the car, for a date to the movies in Louisville. I struggle to get my breath. Everything has changed in some impossible to imagine way. After 64 years of no communication, Louis Wymond is back in my life.

So the courtship begins. By phone. I tell him I am busy, and I am. I am assistant director of a play at our local community theater. Thanksgiving and Christmas are coming up with all the family time that entails. When he asks to come to visit me—from Boise, Idaho, of all places—I suggest some time in January. But the phone calls come—regularly. At first, one each evening after rehearsals, and I hurry home in eager anticipation of hearing his deep voice once more. I begin to leave messages for him in case he calls.



“Hi, Louis, I'm out with friends. I'll be home around nine.” Who cares what anyone else who calls thinks about this message?

Now the phone calls are coming twice a day, one morning, one evening. We talk of our children—we each have four, two girls and two boys, each six grandchildren, three girls and three boys. We tell of our divorces—mine 29 years ago, his not over yet—of our health, his sextuple bypass and diabetes, my tachycardia and atrial fib. As we talk, I continue to have this picture of him at eighteen, dark hair, dark eyes, an endearing crooked smile. For me there was always something mysterious about him, something unreachable. I tell him that I still have the gold identification bracelet that he gave me for my sixteenth birthday, the one with Nancy engraved on one side, Louis and my birthdate on the other.

And then we exchange pictures. I begin to adjust. White hair—a full head I'm glad to see—jowls, but still the same high cheekbones, lighter colored eyes than I remember. If I look very closely, I can see the boy I remembered. Boy? He's 82. What does he see with my pictures? Short hair instead of the pageboy, glasses, a little fuller of face, lines. Since that day after graduation in 1940 when I moved away with my family, we have both lived whole lifetimes. Apart.

The phone calls become more intense and the next thing I know Louis is coming to visit in mid-November. I write worrying about his expectations and mine. “Either of us could call a halt; neither of us seems to want to. Believe me, you are the *only* person I would be so curious to see. It's as if we were being allowed an unusual chance to go back all those years to remember who we were and to experience who we have turned into. My memory of our high school junior/senior relationship is one of sweetness, innocence, and pleasure in one another's company.... This sudden reconnection is an adventure. And I love adventures. Apparently you do, too. And it is wonderful to have, out of the blue, this particular one. Two Leo's meeting after sixty-four years.”

As I drive the two hours from Marietta, Ohio, to Columbus to pick him up, I feel ridiculous. This is folly. How could we possibly be compatible after all this time? Why hadn't I just said no? In the airport I walk to the out-of-the-way place where Southwest comes in. No benches, no waiting room. A red line marks the area past which I can not go, and a dour-looking man sits on a high stool to keep watch.

“Is it all right to stand here? I'm meeting someone I haven't seen in