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From lines about a love that dizzies up the brain's back room to haunting fragments beckoning death and decline in a suffering world, Kim Addonizio articulates the way that our connections - to the world, to self, and to others - endure and help make us whole.

What Is This Thing Called Love: Poems Details

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From Reader Review What Is This Thing Called Love: Poems for online ebook

Julie Ehlers says

I believe I liked this one better than *Lucifer at the Starlite* but not quite as much as *Tell Me*. It was still totally excellent and deserves the same five stars as those collections received from me. Favorite poem: "Bugdom."

David Schaafsma says

First Kiss

Kim Addonizio

Afterwards you had that drunk, drugged look
my daughter used to get, when she had let go
of my nipple, her mouth gone slack and her eyes
turned vague and filmy, as though behind them
the milk was rising up to fill her
whole head, that would loll on the small
white stalk of her neck so I would have to hold her
closer, amazed at the sheer power
of satiety, which was nothing like the needing
to be fed, the wild flailing and crying until she fastened
herself to me and made the seal tight
between us, and sucked, drawing the liquid down
and out of my body; no, this was the crowning
moment, this giving of herself, knowing
she could show me how helpless
she was—that's what I saw, that night when you
pulled your mouth from mine and
leaned back against a chain-link fence,
in front of a burned-out church: a man
who was going to be that vulnerable,
that easy and impossible to hurt.

The review should probably just end there, per my discussion with Roger. In other words, that poem is all you need to put the book on your TBR list. Ah, but I can't resist, damn it, so here goes:

Isaac Asimov wrote a short story in response to an essay he had read in *Playboy* asserting that most science fiction is about aliens and sex. Asimov probably found this thesis hilarious. Anyway, the story was published with a new title, "What is This Thing Called Love?" taken from Cole Porter's song by the same name:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?...>

Here is the incomparable Ella Fitzgerald singing the Cole Porter song by the same name, just for the hell of it, and well, it does have something to do with the underlying purpose of the poems in this collection, maybe:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qo2P7...>

You're welcome.

I think Addonizio has in mind in this book the work of poet Sharon Olds, who wrote with similar confessional boldness about sex and death. One poem actually references Olds. Both write about the body in sexual heat, the aging body, death. Addonizio once said if you write poetry and you don't also read poetry your writing is going to suck. Addonizio reads Olds and her poetry doesn't suck. At all. Narrative, reflective poetry, with pizzazz, with edge, with passion, honesty, humor, sadness, keen observation.

I like it that she takes on interesting formal challenges, including a paradelle (sort of like a parody of a villanelle), from Billy Collins, who made up the form. And I was introduced to a sonnenizio. She gives you models for you to work from, hooks you can build on yourself to write poetry "in the manner of," or topics you know you have something to write about.

In this book you will find:

* a poem about ex-boyfriends.

* poems about her mother's body's decline, her own body's decline, and a poem about watching her young daughter get dressed to go out on the town, putting on lipstick, and so on.

* blues poems. "Blues for Robert Johnson."

Some favorite lines/titles:

"Love's merciless, the way it travels in and keeps emitting light."

"When he takes off his clothes I think of a stick of butter being unwrapped. . ."

"This Poem Wants to be a Rock and Roll Poem So Bad".

"Tonight I am awed by all the people making love
While I sit alone in my pajamas in a foreign country."

"Chicken": "Why did she cross the road?"

Addonizio also writes about memory: "What happened, happened once. So now it's best in memory--an orange sliced; the skin unbroken, then the knife, the chilled wedge lifted to my mouth, his mouth. . ."

And this last poem that brings everything all together:

Kisses
Kim Addonizio

All the kisses I've ever been given, today I feel them on my mouth
And my knees feel them, the reckless ones placed there
through the holes in my jeans while I sat on a car hood
or a broken sofa in somebody's basement, the way I was
in those days, still amazed that boys and even men would want to
lower their beautiful heads like horses drinking from a river and taste me.
The back of my neck feels them, my hair swept aside to expose the nape,
and my breasts tingle the way they did when my milk came in after the birth,
when I was swollen, and sleepless, and my daughter fed and fed until I pried

her from me and laid her in her crib. Even the chaste kisses that brushed my check, the fatherly ones on my forehead, I feel them rising up from underneath the skin of the past, a delicate, roseate rash; and the ravishing ones, God, I think of them and the filaments in my brain start buzzing crazily and flare out. Every kiss is here somewhere, all over me like a fine, shiny grit, like I'm a pale fish that's been dipped in a thick swirl of raw egg and dragged through flour, slid down into a deep skillet, into burning. Today I know I've lost no one. My loves are here: wrists, eyelids, damp toes, all scars, and my mouth pouring praises, still asking, saying kiss me; when I'm dead kiss this poem, it needs you to know it goes on, give it your lovely mouth, your living tongue.

Ryan Steele says

“what is this thing called love” by Kim Addonizio.
W. W. Norton & Company Inc., New York, 2004.

Love seems so simple through poetry.

Kim Addonizio explores some of the largest subjects encountered in life, all through short, visceral poems that aren't afraid to be blunt, abrasive, and sometimes brutally honest. Summarizing a poetry collection is never an easy task, but Kim Addonizio kept her subject matter universal enough so that everyone can relate, addressing things such as: death, love, love lost, child rearing, significance in the world, lost or wasted youth, depression, and human flaws. More or less, “what is this thing called love” tackles what it means to be alive.

Kim Addonizio uses a standard form and structure in most of the poems throughout “what is this thing called love”, coupled with language that is fairly simple. However, it's the in your face attitude of the poems, and the concreteness of them that brings out the emotion, and it's also what helps makes the poems so real and relatable. There is even a poem dedicated to this style of writing. The poem “Fuck” is about some poets disgust with the word fuck in poetry. However, Kim then proceeds to ask “wouldn't that be the first thing you'd say?” if an anvil were to come crashing down on your dinner table. She then proceeds to relate the poem to life, moving the image from an anvil crushing a table, moving on to discuss how sometimes “there's only one word that means what you need it to mean.”

Many of the poems throughout the collection take on this approach. Start with a small subject, or one single, focused image, and then expand, and keep going, until the poem becomes almost all encompassing. In a way, it's almost as if Addonizio is giving a workshop on how to write guttural, instinctive poetry. This is the greatest strength, and yet, it can also be considered the biggest downfall in the collection. Such poems as “Lush Life” address heavy alcohol use, even drug use, and, while being such a down and dirty subject, it may alienate readers who have never battled such demons, or who don't partake in such activities. They may not understand what it is to be “shaking before a toilet, your hair limp, the sour evening rising up.” It becomes a game of balances that Addonizio does very well, toeing the line between being too specific, and being just specific enough so that any reader can at least picture the scene and think about the position in life that it is relating too, even if they've never been there.

All of the poems are thought inducing, if not completely relatable. Such poems as “Romance” and “Miniatures” question what life is all about, and if there ever really is any sort of discernable destination. It's the honesty and sincerity of all of the pieces that make it such a testament to the power of poetry. Addonizio

shows that it's not just up to novels and long theses to tackle the larger issues of life. Poetry can do it just as well. She also dispels the notions of poetry having to be lofty and elegant, going for a more "meat and potatoes" style of approach, a refreshing refrain from so many intricate, transcendental poems. Anyone interested in reading about the grittiness and complications of life should give "what is this thing called love" a chance. As a writer, Kim Addonizio's punchy, real style has inspired me and reinforced my love for dirty, direct poems.

Allison Floyd says

What is this thing called poetry? As a recovering poet, I've devoted no small amount of thought to this subject. The best answer I can give you is tinfoil in the microwave. That's poetry. Unfortunately, most poetry reads more like saran wrap in the refrigerator. Which is why it was such a pleasure to happen upon this collection. While it doesn't quite approach the level of a full-blown kitchen disaster, certainly there are sparks. And it's always nice to find a soul as morbid as I am (see "31-Year-Old Lover;" also, there's an entire section devoted to the D-word--that's Death. As someone who used to write impassioned poems to Azrael, I appreciate this). Also, check out the poem that references Sharon Olds in the title. Soooo good (said in a Teen Girl Squad voice)!

While this book didn't quite shake my notion of poetry as anything other than a doomed, if pretty, exercise in futility, it did serve as a reminder of what I saw in the genre. It was rather like finding a sweater you used to wear all the time in a pile of castoff clothes. You might not go there again, but you look back fondly on what was.

Steven Godin says

Reading poetry from a familiar poet and knowing it's going to be good is one thing, reading poetry from a poet you know nothing about and being blown away is quite another. Kim Addonizio has reaffirmed my faith that poetry in the 21st century is alive and kicking. Her verse is down to earth, dealing with everyday issues, and I love the fact she doesn't hold back, expressing her most intimate thoughts with a sexuality you can almost feel dripping from her words. It's uncomfortable and raw at times, provocative and edgy, but also sweepingly beautiful, exploring the pleasures of love, sex, the pains of mourning, and the efforts of motherhood. The first two parts of this five-part collection repeat single subjects as well, first the erotic life, then moving on to death, before getting lighter in tone towards the end. Addonizio touches on these subjects in a glancing and contemporary manner in a way that stretches, squeezes, and reshapes these topics to result in a brilliant collection. Written from the head, from the heart, and from the guts. This is in-your-face poetry that hits the core. Will definitely seek out more of her work.

"First Kiss"

Afterwards you had that drunk, drugged look
my daughter used to get, when she had let go
of my nipple, her mouth gone slack and her eyes
turned vague and filmy, as though behind them
the milk was rising up to fill her
whole head, that would loll on the small
white stalk of her neck so I would have to hold her

closer, amazed at the sheer power
of satiety, which was nothing like the needing
to be fed, the wild flailing and crying until she fastened
herself to me and made the seal tight
between us, and sucked, drawing the liquid down
and out of my body; no, this was the crowning
moment, this giving of herself, knowing
she could show me how helpless
she was—that's what I saw, that night when you
pulled your mouth from mine and
leaned back against a chain-link fence,
in front of a burned-out church: a man
who was going to be that vulnerable,
that easy and impossible to hurt.

Melody says

Addonizio continues to kick my feet from under me, slam me remorselessly to the mat, and growl in my ear,
"Had enough, girl?"

Highly recommended.

Meg Tuite says

Addonizio is my favorite poet out there! I am reading everything she's written. You don't just read it; you live it, know it in your internal organs! Brilliant and wrenching! LOVE!

Hasan Makhzoum says

Addonizio is like the feminine equivalent of Bukowski. This analogy came up to my mind even before I fell on the title of her autobiographical pieces in **Bukowski In A Sundress**. Probably it's because of the booze and the explicit language in her writings. Actually, she has once defined herself as "Emily Dickinson with a strap-on" and that she got drunk at poetry conferences.

With the frequent employment of bold expressions and smutty imagery in her poems, we get the impression that Addonizio is vicious, brash, depressive, melancholic, cynical, upfront at times, but never pretentious..

<https://goo.gl/images/Asl9Xg>

When I looked at her pictures the first time, she seemed to me like a tattooed badass biker in a black leather jacket, or a woman with a gothic adolescent appearance that refuses to grow up. That's to say that I was confused and didn't know what to expect before I start reading her poetry.

However, these poems has revealed to me how beautiful Addonizio is: charismatic when defiantly confronting the stereotypes, intriguing, sexy, dark, 'entière' (a french adjective to describe a frank person that doesn't care to hide his imperfections) and witty.

I liked her because she writes 'avec ses tripes' (i think the equivalent of this expression in English is "from

his guts”).

In my journey of reading poetic texts (and believe me I have read a lot, mostly in Arabic though) I have come to the conviction that the honesty, the integrity and the 'authenticity' of the author are mirrored in his texts, and are as important as his writing skills (that's why I hate every spurious moralistic sentence ever written by Coelho and al.).

Addonizio is one of those passionate and idiosyncratic poets who write so they won't die.

According to an article in The Guardian, Addonizio wouldn't hesitate sometimes to use unusual and unacademic devices and methods to teach the poetic terms to her students:

Call someone a douche bag and you're using metonymy. Tell him he's an asshole; that's synecdoche.
(LOL)

This hilarious educational methodology reminded me of my father when, one day, he was teaching grammar to my little brother who was having a hard time to learn at school how to conjugate a verb in the 'Muthanna' form in Arabic grammar.. Desperate, he used the words F*** and Bitch in the exercises and it has worked as magic.

Speaking of the F word, here is an excerpt from her poem titled **Fuck**

There are people who will tell you that using the word fuck in a poem indicates a serious lapse of taste, or imagination, or both. It's vulgar, indecorous, an obscenity that crashes down like an anvil falling through a skylight to land on a restaurant table, on the white linen, the cut-glass vase of lilacs.

Far from being murky and abstract, her poems are accessible for the simplicity and the directness of her language.. So accessible that I rarely had to open the dictionary, and that is rare.

Her extrovert personality is mirrored in her poems that reveal, with unflinching sincerity and an acerbic wit, her strengths and weaknesses, her deceptions, her painful memories, unfulfilled desires..

Like the intimate photographs of Nan Goldin (Btw I was lucky to attend her huge exhibition in Paris in 2007 after winning her well deserved prestigious international prize), Addonizio incorporates her personal experiences into the poems: the loss of her friends, her relationships, her affection to her daughter, the single parenting, the sickness of her mother..

The poems tackle a raw of issues and deals with themes we encounter in the daily life; love, divorce, death, solitude, parenthood.. they are sort of vignettes that capture details of reality.

The 'I' implies the egocentrism of the poet, but at no point Addonizio appears to be self-centered. Even when drowned in her emotions and observations, she identifies herself with the reader in a way (say, when employing the second person narrative) that allows her personal truths to resonate in his experience.

This short video inspired by the poem **Creased Map of the Underworld** from her collection **My Black Angel: Blues Poems & Portraits** is amazing. In a touching scene, death is visually illustrated while the poem is recited

<https://vimeo.com/129687787>

**Nothing is so beautiful as death,
thinks Death: stilled lark on the lawn,
its twiggy legs drawn up, squashed blossoms**

of skunks and opossums on the freeway,
dog that drags itself trembling down
the front porch step, and stops
in a black-gummed grimace
before toppling into the poppies.
The ugly poppies. In Afghanistan
they are again made beautiful
by a mysterious blight. Ugly
are the arriving American soldiers, newly shorn
and checking their email,
but beautiful when face-up in the road
or their parts scattered
like bullet- or sprinkler-spray
or stellar remains. Lovely
is the nearly expired star
casting its mass into outer space,
lovelier the supernova
tearing itself apart
or collapsing like Lana Turner
in Frank O'Hara's poem.
Nothing is so beautiful as a poem
except maybe a nightingale,
thinks the poet writing about death,
sinking Lethe-wards. Lovely river
in which the names are carefully entered.
In this quadrant are the rivers of grief and fire.
Grid north. Black azimuth.
Down rivers of Fuck yous and orchids
steer lit hearts in little boats
gamely making their way,
spinning and flaming, flaming
and spiraling, always down--
down, the most beautiful of the directions.

The thoughts and feelings Addonizio openly shares in her poems seems autobiographical and intimate. Through the verses, we get the impression of knowing her up close and personal.. Reading her texts becomes almost an act of voyeurism as if we, readers, are sneaking up on her private life.

Therefore It was evident for me to categorize her lyric poems as Confessional.

However, I learned when i read her interview that she considers this term as a "curse" and her argument is convincing: **she transforms and even lies about some of those experiences. "I killed my mother before she died," Addonizio writes, in an essay that lists all the times she changed the facts to suit a poem.**

(<https://www.google.com.lb/amp/s/amp.t...>)

My favorite poem in this collection is **Eating Together** where Addonizio brilliantly conveys melancholy, suffer and death with subtlety (for ex, the mentioning of the young age of the waiter, in contrast with her friend, going through the terminal phase). At no point she speaks to her friend; she avoids the subject and observes her quietly. This heavy silence could be interpreted as the expression of her repressed pain, frustration and sorrow.

My mother is fighting Cancer, so I would like to dedicate it to her:

**I know my friend is going,
though she still sits there
across from me in the restaurant,
and leans over the table to dip
her bread in the oil on my plate; I know
how thick her hair used to be,
and what it takes for her to discard
her man's cap partway through our meal,
to look straight at the young waiter
and smile when he asks
how we are liking it. She eats
as though starving—chicken, dolmata,
the buttery flakes of filo—
and what's killing her
eats, too. I watch her lift
a glistening black olive and peel
the meat from the pit, watch
her fine long fingers, and her face,
puffy from medication. She lowers
her eyes to the food, pretending
not to know what I know. She's going.
And we go on eating.**

P.S. I posted the same review on her other collection **Tell Me**, except few additional notes regarding poems included in this one.

Btw I have read Addinizio's poems in English and also in Arabic. An Anthology gathering 60 poems is translated by the Lebanese poet Samer Abou Hawash (Al-Kamel Verlag, 2009).

Tarryn says

Addonizio's poems are raw, passionate and painful. She doesn't hold back for anyone. She doesn't care about what makes you uncomfortable or what makes you look a little deeper than you wanted to within yourself. And there were times when I felt these ways, but I loved every single second of it.

What Is This Thing Called Love: Poems is divided into five sections, each hitting on a different type of love. Though not every poem resonates, the majority had an effect similar to feeling as though my skin was buzzing. I love the sexuality that drips from her words. She can make every day things, things as far from sex as possible, overflow with pure sensuality.

Addonizio is the first poet I've ever connected to enough to go out and buy her collections and so far, I have not a single regret and am looking forward to reading more.

Rob McMonigal says

Now I know it's going to sound weird to those of you who heard me rant about gratuitous sexual comments thrown into poetry that I actually enjoyed this book, which contains poems that have quite a bit of sexual energy charged into nearly every one. Before I even get to the text, I think I need to explain why it works here.

I think the reason is that since the language of the poetry is that of a sexual nature--this is a set of poems that have a lot to say about sex and relationships--the sexual references feel as natural an allusion to birds would in a pastoral poem. It's not the sexual content that can bother me--it's using it out of place.

And what's what I like about this collection from Addonizo--none of her poems have things out of place. If it's an angry scene, we get angry images. If she's talking about getting older, she uses the poetic description of age to show us what she means. Need to describe a dead, kidnapped boy in verse? She can help you find a way to do that. While the poetry is all very much in the style of in-your-face (so if you're not a fan of edgy, darker stuff, stay well clear of this one), the words she uses to get in your face with morph and change as needed for the material.

Here's two examples. First is "Stolen Moments"

"What happened, happened once. So now it's best
in memory--an orange he sliced: the skin
unbroken, then the knife, the chilled wedge
lifted to my mouth, his mouth, the thin
membrane between us, the exquisite orange,
tongue, orange, my nakedness and his,
the way he pushed me up against the fridge--
Now I get to feel his hands again, the kiss
that didn't last, but sent some neural twin
flashing wildly through the cortex. Love's
merciless, the way it travels in
and keeps emitting light. Beside the stove
we ate an orange. And there were purple flowers
on the table and we still had hours."

Compare that to "Dear Sir or Madam"

This letter is the one you shouldn't open.
Or if you have, please don't read further.
It's going to give you terrible news.

Oh sir, or madam, we are strangers
but forgive me, I feel as though I love you
typing this on the forty-seventh floor

alone except for the man who cleans the carpets.
Forgive me if I grow distracted,
and think of my own burdens...

a wife's ashes, a boy who rocks back and forth
all day, and babbles nonsense. His photograph

and hers are on my desk; he doesn't smile.

The doctors test and test, then send
him to another. Maybe you, sir or madam,
have felt a kind of helplessness at how things go?

I'm trying to finish this, to tell you
what I'm paid to tell you,
what I have stayed here late to compose

in just the right fashion, even if it takes
all night--the janitor has gone,
turning off all the lights. There's only my lamp,

and the quiet....My wife liked quiet. She liked
to hold me without either of us talking,
just breathing together. Sir,

breath with me now. Madam, hold on to me.
There is news I must give you.
Let's not speak of it yet."

Be honest now--if I didn't link the two to the same author, would *you* know they were written by the same remarkable woman? I certainly wouldn't have. Both draw you in and tell us a story in a few simple lines. If you are the picturing type--I'm not--you can form the images in your head with just these simple phrases.

This is true of all the poems in this collection. Addonizo changes form and voice, going from the serious when writing as a lost, dead child to the flippant when playfully tweaking her critics about her use of profanity in her voice. The strongest poems in the collection may very well be her personal poems towards the end, where she talks about interacting with her daughter. There's a personalization in these poems that makes them shine among a collection of very good writing. Sadly, the library does not have much of her work, which is a shame because I'd love to read more. (Library, 01/08)

Trebby's Take: A strong collection well worth the read.

SmarterLilac says

Amazing. One of those books that rose up out of the morass of our national pain in 2004 to be an example of a master poet's ability to salve harsh wounds. I continue to be astounded at Addonizio's ability to elevate the every day to a state of grace, of holy virtue, yet do so in such plain language. The artistry here is fine. I was particularly moved by the piece, "February 14," a poem for the medical team who helped the speaker's brother get a new liver, and by "One Nation Under God," which should be a kind of American poets' anthem, to be read (at least once) by anyone who seeks to understand the miseries of our country at their core.

Eleanor says

I'm freshly obsessed with poetry at the moment and I hope it lasts. Addonizio's is sexy, smoky, bluesy. The

final poem in this collection, "Kisses", in which she imagines every kiss she's ever received imprinted on her body, is worth the price of admission on its own, I think. (You can read it for free here if you need convincing.)

Dominic says

I've become a fan of Kim Addonizio over the past couple years after reading many of her poems scattered across the web. I've used many of her poems with horror movie themes in my classroom, and I love how accessible her work is while also being earthy, sensual, and cheeky. More people truly should be familiar with her work.

That said, *What Is This Thing Called Love* is just the first book of her poetry I've read. It's at turns sexy and honest and playful and raw. The second section of the book (a series of poems asking questions about death) is pitch perfect, but I never wanted to put the book down through all five sections. I would love to know Addonizio, a poet whose work speaks open-heartedly of a life lived comfortable in one's own skin.

Robert Beveridge says

Marguerite Marceau Henderson, **Small Plates: Appetizers As Meals** (Gibbs Smith, 2006)

An intriguing idea for a cookbook, this; appetizer-style recipes quirked into meal form. I'm not sure it's entirely successful, concept-wise; too many of these seem more like scaled-down entrees than scaled-up appetizers, which makes me wonder how it differs from your basic cookbook. But the recipes themselves are solid, so I can't be all that hard on it. Pick it up from the library and give it a look before deciding you want it in your permanent collection. *** ½

Ian says

Reading Kim Addonizio is sort of like reading a slutty, less dorky Billy Collins. By that I mean this: It's enjoyable, even sometimes touching, but in the way that hearing from your slightly obnoxious drunk cousin can be entertaining. You get tired of them.

Most of these poems are fun, sometimes even funny, and there is a certain charm of her ability to write about things that most people would simply refuse to turn into a poem; for instance, the crappy computer game "Bugdom" turned out to be whimsically tragic and one of my favorites. But poems like "Fuck" that complain about the arguments against using that word in a poem, just seem to be too whiny and heavy-handed in their hatred of traditional or more conservative poetry.

Anyway, I'm glad I read these poems, but I don't imagine I'll spend much time thinking about them.
