

Poems by Carol Ann Duffy

January 26, 2024

#1 Words, Wide Night Carol Ann Duffy from *The Other Country* 1990

Somewhere on the other side of this wide night
and the distance between us, I am thinking of you.
The room is turning slowly away from the moon.

This is pleasurable. Or shall I cross that out and say
it is sad? In one of the tenses I singing
an impossible song of desire that you cannot hear.

La la la la. See? I close my eyes and imagine
the dark hills I would have to cross
to reach you. For I am in love with you and this
is what it is like or what it is like in words.

#2 Valentine Carol Ann Duffy from *Mean Time* 1993

Not a red rose or a satin heart.

I give you an onion.
It is a moon wrapped in brown paper. It promises light
like the careful undressing of love.

Here.
It will blind you with tears like a lover.
It will make your reflection a wobbling photo of grief.

I am trying to be truthful.
Not a cute card or a kissogram.

I give you an onion.
Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips, possessive and faithful
as we are,
for as long as we are.

Take it.
Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding-ring, if you like. Lethal.
Its scent will cling to your fingers, cling to your knife.

#3 If I Was Dead Carol Ann Duffy from *Rapture* 2005

If I was dead,
and my bones adrift

like dropped oars
in the deep, turning earth;

or drowned,
and my skull
a listening shell
on the dark ocean bed

if I was dead,
and my heart
soft mulch
for a red, red rose;

or burned,
and my body
a fistful of grit, thrown
in the face of the wind;

if I was dead,
and my eyes,
blind at the roots of flowers,
wept into nothing,

I swear your love
would raise me
out of my grave,
in my flesh and blood,

like Lazarus;
hungry for this,
and this, and this,
your living kiss.

#4 Mrs. Midas Carol Ann Duffy from *The World's Wife* 1999

It was late September. I'd just poured a glass of wine, begun to unwind, while the vegetables cook. The kitchen filled with the smell of itself, relaxed, its steamy breath gently blanching the windows. So I opened one,

then with my fingers wiped the other's glass like a brow. He was standing under the pear tree snapping a twig.

Now the garden was long and the visibility poor, the way the dark of the ground seems to drink the light of the sky, but that twig in his hand was gold. And then he plucked a pear from a branch - we grew Fondante d'Automne - and it sat in his palm like a light bulb. On.

I thought to myself, Is he putting fairy lights in the tree?

He came into the house. The doorknobs gleamed.
He drew the blinds. You know the mind; I thought of

the Field of the Cloth of Gold and of Miss Macready.
He sat in that chair like a king on a burnished throne.
The look on his face was strange, wild, vain. I said,
What in the name of God is going on? He started to laugh.

I served up the meal. For starters, corn on the cob.
Within seconds he was spitting out the teeth of the rich.
He toyed with his spoon, then mine, then with the knives, the forks. He asked where was the wine. I poured
with shaking hand,
a fragrant, bone-dry white from Italy, then watched
as he picked up the glass, goblet, golden chalice, drank.

It was then that I started to scream. He sank to his knees. After we had both calmed down, I finished the wine
on my own, hearing him out. I made him sit
on the other side of the room and keep his hands to himself. I locked the cat in the cellar. I moved the phone.

The toilet I didn't mind. I couldn't believe my ears:

how he'd had a wish. Look, we all have wishes; granted.
But who has wishes granted? Him. Do you know about gold? It feeds no one; aurum, soft, untarnishable;
slakes
no thirst. He tried to light a cigarette; I gazed, entranced,
as the blue flame played on its luteous stem. At least,
I said, you'll be able to give up smoking for good.

Separate beds. In fact, I put a chair against my door,
near petrified. He was below, turning the spare room
into the tomb of Tutankhamun. You see, we were passionate then, in those halcyon days; unwrapping each
other, rapidly,
like presents, fast food. But now I feared his honeyed embrace, the kiss that would turn my lips to a work of
art.

And who, when it comes to the crunch, can live with a heart of gold? That night, I dreamt I bore his child, its
perfect ore limbs, its little tongue like a precious latch, its amber eyes

holding their pupils like flies. My dream-milk burned in my breasts. I woke to the streaming sun.

So he had to move out. We'd a caravan
in the wilds, in a glade of its own. I drove him up
under cover of dark. He sat in the back.

And then I came home, the women who married the fool who wished for gold. At first I visited, odd times,
parking the car a good way off, then walking.

You knew you were getting close. Golden trout
on the grass. One day, a hare hung from a larch, a beautiful lemon mistake. And then his footprints, glistening
next to the river's path. He was thin, delirious; hearing, he said, the music of Pan
from the woods. Listen. That was the last straw.

What gets me now is not the idiocy or greed
but lack of thought for me. Pure selfishness. I sold
the contents of the house and came down here.
I think of him in certain lights, dawn, late afternoon,
and once a bowl of apples stopped me dead. I miss most, even now, his hands, his warm hands on my skin, his
touch.

#5 The Scottish Prince Carol Ann Duffy
from *The Good Child's Guide to Rock 'n' Roll* (London: Faber, 2003)

Every summer, I visit the Scottish Prince
at his castle high on a hill outside Crieff.
We dine on haggis and tatties and neeps –
I drink water with mine and the Prince sips
at a peaty peppery dram. Then it's time for the dance.

*O Scottish Prince, the heathery air sweetens the night.
Bats hang upside down in the pines like lamps waiting
for light. Ask me, ask me to dance to the skirl o' the pipes.*

All the girls are in dresses. The boys are in kilts,
but no boy's so fine as the Prince in his tartan pleats.
I wait for a glance from the Prince, for the chance
to prance or flounce by his side, to bounce hand in hand
down the Gay Gordon line. Och, the pleasure's a' mine!

*O Scottish Prince, the heathery air sweetens the night.
Bats hang upside down in the pines like lamps waiting
for light. Ask me, ask me to dance to the skirl o' the pipes.*

At the end of summer, I say goodbye to the Scottish Prince
and catch a train to the South, over the border, the other side
of the purple hills, far from the blue and white flag, waving farewell
from the castle roof. The Prince will expect me back again
next year – here's a sprig of heather pressed in my hand as proof.

*O Scottish Prince, the heathery air sweetens the night.
Bats hang upside down in the pines like lamps waiting
for light. Ask me, ask me to dance to the skirl o' the pipes.
Ask me, ask me, ask me to dance to the skirl o' the pipes.*

#6 War Photographer by Carol Ann Duffy from Standing Female Nude 1985

In his darkroom he is finally alone
with spools of suffering set out in ordered rows. The only light is red and softly glows,
as though this were a church and he
a priest preparing to intone a Mass.
Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh. All flesh is grass.

He has a job to do. Solutions slop in trays beneath his hands which did not tremble then though seem to now. Rural
England. Home again to ordinary pain which simple weather can dispel, to fields which don't explode beneath the feet
of running children in a nightmare heat.

Something is happening. A stranger's features faintly start to twist before his eyes,
a half-formed ghost. He remembers the cries of this man's wife, how he sought approval without words to do what
someone must

and how the blood stained into foreign dust.

A hundred agonies in black-and-white
from which his editor will pick out five or six
for Sunday's supplement. The reader's eyeballs prick with tears between bath and pre-lunch beers.
From aeroplane he stares impassively at where
he earns a living and they do not care.

#7 Warming Her Pearls by Carol Ann Duffy 1987

for Judith Radstone

Next to my own skin, her pearls. My mistress
bids me wear them, warm them, until evening
when I'll brush her hair. At six, I place them
round her cool, white throat. All day I think of her,

resting in the Yellow Room, contemplating silk
or taffeta, which gown tonight? She fans herself
whilst I work willingly, my slow heat entering
each pearl. Slack on my neck, her rope.

She's beautiful. I dream about her
in my attic bed; picture her dancing
with tall men, puzzled by my faint, persistent scent
beneath her French perfume, her milky stones.

I dust her shoulders with a rabbit's foot,
watch the soft blush seep through her skin
like an indolent sigh. In her looking-glass
my red lips part as though I want to speak.

Full moon. Her carriage brings her home. I see
her every movement in my head.... Undressing,
taking off her jewels, her slim hand reaching
for the case, slipping naked into bed, the way

she always does.... And I lie here awake,
knowing the pearls are cooling even now

in the room where my mistress sleeps. All night
I feel their absence and I burn.

8 Standing Female Nude by Carol Ann Duffy 1985

Six hours like this for a few francs.
Belly nipple arse in the window light,
he drains the colour from me. Further to the right,
Madam. And do try to be still.
I shall be represented analytically and hung
in great museums. The bourgeoisie will coo
at such an image of a river-whore. They call it Art.

Maybe. He is concerned with volume, space.
I with the next meal. You're getting thin,
Madam, this is not good. My breasts hang
slightly low, the studio is cold. In the tealeaves
I can see the Queen of England gazing
on my shape. Magnificent, she murmurs
moving on. It makes me laugh. His name

is Georges. He tells me he's a genius.
There are times he does not concentrate
and stiffens for my warmth. Men think of their mothers.
He possesses me on canvas as he dips the brush
repeatedly into the paint. Little men,
you've not the money for the arts I sell.
Both poor, we make our living how we can.

I ask him Why do you do this? Because
I have to. There's no choice. Don't talk.
My smile confuses him. These artists
take themselves too seriously. At night I fill myself
with wine and dance around the bars. When it's finished
he shows me proudly, lights a cigarette. I say
Twelve francs and get my shawl. It does not look like me.

If we have time:

#9 Rain by Carol Ann Duffy

Not so hot as this for a hundred years.
You were where I was going. I was in tears.
I surrendered my heart to the judgement of my peers.

A century's heat in the garden, fierce as love.
You returned on the day I had to leave.
I mimed the full, rich, busy life I had to live.

Hotter than hell. I burned for you day and night;
got bits of your body wrong, bits of it right,
in the huge mouth of the dark, in the bite of the light.

I planted a rose, burnt orange, the colour of flame,
gave it the last of the water, gave it your name.
It flared back at the sun in a perfect rhyme.

Then the rain came, like stammered kisses at first
on the back of my neck. I unfurled my fist
for the rain to caress with its lips. I turned up my face,

and water flooded my mouth, baptised my head,
and the rainclouds gathered like midnight overhead,
and the rain came down like a lover comes to a bed.

#10 Originally by Carol Duffy from *The Other Country* 1990

We came from our own country in a red room which fell through the fields, our mother singing our father's name to the turn of the wheels.

My brothers cried, one of them bawling Home, Home, as the miles rushed back to the city, the street, the house, the vacant rooms

where we didn't live any more. I stared
at the eyes of a blind toy, holding its paw.

All childhood is an emigration. Some are slow,
leaving you standing, resigned, up an avenue
where no one you know stays. Others are sudden.

Your accent wrong. Corners, which seem familiar, leading to unimagined, pebble-dashed estates, big boys eating worms and shouting words you don't understand. My parents' anxiety stirred like a loose tooth

in my head. I want our own country, I said.

But then you forget, or don't recall, or change,
and, seeing your brother swallow a slug, feel only
a skelf of shame. I remember my tongue
shedding its skin like a snake, my voice
in the classroom sounding just like the rest. Do I only think I lost a river, culture, speech, sense of first space and the right place? Now, Where do you come from? strangers ask. Originally? And I hesitate.