

30 CAROL ANN DUFFY - NEW SELECTED POEMS (Revised 2011) December 2020



At the beginning of the summer we were given two twin kittens whom we named Ronnie and Reggie, the Kray Brothers. They have turned into the most delightful pair of cats, very affectionate with us and each other – but also killers! Silent stalkers, they’re now a gangland menace to our innocent, slightly dozy bird population, who had been taking things easy after the untimely death of our poor Twist (see a previous posting – No.21 Nonsense). So, how could I resist Carol Ann Duffy’s poem on the putative Kray *sisters*?

When I first started out teaching, back in the seventies at Thomas Tallis, a comprehensive that served the infamous Kidbrooke Estate (where there were many quite poor families rehoused from clearances in West Ham), as well as the moneyed middle classes of Blackheath and Greenwich, I once set my Year Two class a homework. Most of the boys were Millwall supporters, a football club which had a certain reputation for high-spirited violence back then (I later took a party of French teenagers to a needle-match of Millwall – at home - against Bristol City, for a nostalgic “cultural visit” before we attended Jonathan Miller’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream that evening in the West End - the students deeply impressed by the 35 ambulances drawn up in readiness - their subsequent interviews, of the Millwall supporters around us in the stands, largely unprintable).

The homework back in 1976 was: “Interview your parents and do a write-up on how they used to spend their weekends when they were your age.” The pupils enjoyed reading out their pieces to the rest of the class, and three boys (three!), from completely different families, wrote about how their fathers had *wonderful* memories of Saturday afternoons spent riding their bikes around with the Kray Brothers – thirteen-year olds. “We went around, nicking things in the shops, beating up other gangs, cycling around the Isle of Dogs. Those were the days!” their fathers had said wistfully.



The Kray twins, Reggie and Ronnie, were the most vicious, sadistic, ruthless gang-leaders (“The Firm”) of the East End of London in the late Fifties and Sixties, mixing with celebrities such as Sinatra (Frank), Judy Garland, Diana Dors, and even politicians, drawn to their sleazy night-club.

This would be a hard poem to teach here in France – talk about *culture-specific*, with its East End rhyming slang, jargon and oblique references (eg Austin Princess)!

Here, anyway, is “The Kray Sisters”:

The Kray Sisters

There go the twins! geezers would say
 when we walked down the frog and toad
 in our Savile Row whistle and flutes, tailored
 to flatter our thr'penny bits, which were big,
 like our East End hearts. No one could tell us apart,
 except when one twin wore glasses or shades
 over two of our four mince pies. Oh, London, London,
 London Town, made for a girl and her double
 To swagger around, or be driven at speed
 In the back of an Austin Princess, black,
 Up West to a club, to order up bubbly, the best
 In a bucket of ice. Garland singing that night. Nice.

Childhood. When we were God Forbids, we lived
 With our grandmather – God Rest Her Soul – a tough suffragette
 who'd knocked out a Grand National horse, name of
 Ballytown Boy, with one punch, in front of the King,
 for the cause. She was known round our manor thereafter
 as Cannonball Vi. By the time we were six,
 we were sat at her skirts, inhaling the juniper fumes
 of her Vera Lynn; hearing the stories of Emmeline's Army
 before and after the '14 war. Diamond ladies,
 they were, those birds who fought for the Vote, salt
 of the earth. And maybe this marked us for ever,
 because of the loss of our mother, who died giving birth

to the pair of unusual us. Straight up, we knew,
 even then, what we wanted to be; had, you could say,
 a vocation. We wanted respect for the way
 we entered a bar, or handled a car, or shrivelled
 a hard-on with simply a menacing look, a threatening word
 ina hairy ear, a knee in the orchestra stalls. Belles
 of the balls. Queens of the Smoke. We dreamed it all,
 trudging for miles, holding the hand of the past, learning
 the map of the city under our feet; clocking the boozers,
 back alleys, mews, the churches and bridges, the parks,
 the Underground stations, the grand hotels where Vita and Violet,
 pin-ups of ours, had given it wallop. We stared from Hungerford Bridge
 as the lights of London tarted up the old Thames. All right,

we made our mistakes in those early years. We were soft
 when we should have been hard; enrolled a few girls
 in the firm who were well out of order – two of them
 getting engaged; a third sneaking back up the Mile End Road
 every night to be some plonker's wife. Rule Number One –

A boyfriend's for Christmas, not just for life.
 But we learned – and our twenty-first birthday saw us installed
 In the first of our clubs, Ballbreakers, just off
 Evering Road. The word got around and about
 that any woman in trouble could come to the Krays,
 no questions asked, for Protection. We soon earned the clout
 and the dosh and respect for a move, Piccadilly way,

to a classier gaff to the club at the heart of our legend,
 Prickteasers. We admit, bang to rights, that the fruits
 of feminism – fact – made us rich, feared, famous,
 friends of the stars. Have a good butcher's at these –
 there we are forever in glamorous black and white,
 assertively staring out next to Germaine, Bardot,
 Sandy, Diana Dors. And London was safer then
 On account of us. Look at the letters we get –
*Dear Twins, them were the good old days when you ruled
 The streets. There was none of this mugging old ladies
 Or touching young girls.* We hear what's being said.

Remember us at our peak, in our prime, dressed to kill
 and swaggering into our club, stroke of twelve,
 the evening we leaned on Sinatra to sing for free.
 There was always a bit of a buzz when we entered, stopping
 at favoured tables, giving a nod or a wink, buying someone
 a drink, lighting a fag, lending an ear. That particular night
 something electric, trembling, blue, crackled the air. Leave us both there,
 spotlight, strong, at the top of our world, with Sinatra drawling, *And here's
 a song for the twins*, then opening her beautiful throat to take
 it away. *These boots are made for walking, and that's
 just what they'll do. One of these days these boots
 are gonna walk all over you. Are you ready, boots? Start walkin'...*

I love the way the last joke is delivered dead-pan. Not Frank Sinatra (as we masculine-groomed readers might have expected, of course, and known by the Twins), but Nancy, of course, the song beautifully chiming with women having their revenge.

This is taken from *The World's Wife*, perhaps Duffy's most well-known collection, a good selection of which appear in the luscious volume of her *New Selected Poems (Revised 2011)*. These are not so new now, but what I love about this poem and others like it, is the way they ironically take on the world of masculine assumptions and stereotypes and offer a starkly opposed perspective: "Mrs Tiresias", "Mrs Aesop", "Mrs Darwin", "Mrs Faust", "Queen Kong", "Frau Freud", "Mrs Beast". The jokes add up to a prolonged assault, directly and subliminally on our received responses.

Not all Duffy's poems, however, are such raucously hilarious 'sorties' against the 'male of the species'. She can be surprisingly tender, too.

Child's Sleep

I stood at the edge of my child's sleep,
 hearing her breathe;
 although I could not enter there,
 I could not leave.

Her sleep was a small wood,
 perfumed with flowers;
 dark, peaceful, sacred,
 aced in hours.

And she was the spirit that lives
 in the heart of the woods;
 without time, without history,
 wordlessly good.

I spoke her name, a pebble dropped
 in the still night,
 and saw her stir, both open palms
 cupping their soft light;

then went to the window. The greater dark
 outside the room
 gazed back, maternal, wise,
 with its face of moon.

The near-rhymes and the utter simplicity of the form and the language create a reflective, harmonious atmosphere, appropriate to thoughts about a child asleep. Compare this with Margaret Atwood's poem on roughly the same subject, reflecting on a sleeping child, but invoking the ghosts of the *natural* world in a Canadian setting. I love both, needless to say (don't you love "aced in hours"?)

Night Poem

There is nothing to be afraid of,
 it is only the wind
 changing to the east, it is only
 your father the thunder
 your mother the rain

In this country of water
 with its beige moon damp as a mushroom,
 its drowned stumps and long birds
 that swim, where the moss grows
 on all sides of the trees
 and your shadow is not your shadow
 but your reflection,

your true parents disappear
 when the curtain covers your door.
 We are the others,
 the ones from under the lake
 who stand silently beside your bed
 with our heads of darkness.
 We have come to cover you
 with red wool,
 with our tears and distant whispers.

You rock in the rain's arms
 the chilly ark of your sleep,
 while we wait, your night
 father and mother
 with our cold hands and dead flashlight,
 knowing we are only
 the wavering shadows thrown
 by one candle, in this echo
 you will hear twenty years later.

The persona here is the child's ghostly '*natural*' parents, and there is a very finely balanced mixture of reassurance and fear, entirely in keeping with childhood bedtimes.

From *Feminine Gospels*, I think this next is a marvellous poem, which reflects upon beauty, its associations, as well as its hidden and not so hidden agenda. We've been recently bingeing, I'm afraid, on "The Crown" Series 4. It may be unfair (or not) to the stiff, conventional, tight-lipped Royals, but it's magnificent drama. Shakespeare, after all, changed *his* historical dramas around. This series gives us very much Diana's perspective (and is also interesting in giving us the spat between H.M. and Thatcher). Make sure you don't miss the one with Michael Fagan (still alive today) breaking into Buckingham Palace (twice!) to talk to the Queen as she lay sleeping in The Royal Bedroom! The acting is superb throughout the series.

Here, anyway, is Duffy's pre-Netflix take on Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, Marilyn Monroe and Princess Diana. The poet is not concerned so much with the philosophy behind 'Beauty' – as with how beautiful women in legend and in history have been used as backdrops for men's fantasies, creating sexual myths with a terrible potential for reification, violence and death. The picture, however, is not one-sided – Cleopatra is an artful, political player – there is plenty of nuance in how beauty can *burn*. ('Specious' comes from the Latin, meaning originally – *beautiful*.)

Beautiful

She was born from an egg,
 a daughter of the gods,
 divinely fair, a pearl, drop-dead
 gorgeous, beautiful, a peach,
 a child of grace, a stunner, in her face
 the starlike sorrows of immortal eyes.
 Who looked there, loved.

She won the heart
 of every man she saw.
 They stood in line, sighed,
 knelt, beseeched Be Mine.
 She married one,
 but every other mother's son
 swore to be true to her
 till death, enchanted
 by the perfume of her breath,
 her skin's celebrity.

So when she took a lover, fled,
 was nowhere to be seen,
 her side of the bed unslept in, cold,
 the small coin of her wedding ring
 left on the bedside table like a tip,
 the wardrobe empty
 of the drama of her clothes,
 it was War.

A thousand ships –
 on every one a thousand men,
 each heaving at an oar,
 each with her face
 before his stinging eyes
 her name tattooed
 upon the muscle of his arm,
 a handkerchief she'd dropped once
 for his lucky charm,
 each seeing her as a local girl
 made good, the girl next door,
 a princess with the common touch,

queen of his heart, pin-up, superstar,
the heads of every coin he'd tossed,
the smile on every note he'd bet at cards –
bragged and shoved across a thousand miles of sea.

Meanwhile, lovely she lay high up
in a foreign castle's walls, clasped
in a hero's brawn, loved and loved
and loved again, her cries
like the bird of calamity's,
drifting down to the boys at the gates
who marched now to the syllables of her name.

Beauty is fame. Some said
she turned into a cloud
and floated home,
falling there like rain, or tears,
upon her husband's face.
Some said her lover woke
to find her gone,
his sword and clothes gone too,
before they sliced a last grin in his throat.

Some swore they saw her smuggled
on a boat dressed as a boy,
rowed to a ship which slid away at dusk,
beckoned by the finger of the moon.
Some vowed that they were in the crowd
that saw her hung, stared up at her body
as it swung there on the creaking rope,
and noticed how the black silk of her dress
clung to her form, a stylish shroud.

Her maid, who loved her most,
refused to say one word
to anyone at any time or place,
would not describe one aspect of her face
or tell one anecdote about her life and loves.

But lived alone
and kept a little bird inside a cage.

* * *

She never aged.
She sashayed up the river
in a golden barge,

her fit girls giggling at her jokes.
She'd tumbled from a rug at Caesar's feet,
seen him kneel to pick her up
and felt him want her as he did.
She had him gibbering in bed at twelve.

But now, she rolled her carpet on the sand,
put up her crimson tent, laid out
silver plate with grapes and honey, yoghurt,
roasted songbirds, gleaming figs, soft wines,
and soaked herself in jasmine-scented milk.

She knew her man. She knew that when
he stood that night, ten times her strength,
inside the fragrant boudoir of her tent,
and saw her wrapped in satins like a gift,
his time would slow to nothing, zilch,
until his tongue could utter in her mouth.
She reached and pulled him down
to Alexandria, the warm, muddy Nile.

Tough beauty. She played with him
at dice, rolled sixes in the dust,
cleaned up, slipped her gambling hand
into his pouch and took his gold, bit it,
Caesar's head between her teeth.
He crouched with lust. On her couch,
she lay upon him, painted him,
her lipstick smeared on his mouth,
her powder blushing on his stubble,
the turquoise of her eyes over his lids.
She matched him glass for glass
in drinking games: sucked lemons, licked
at salt, swallowed something from a bottle
where a dead rat floated, gargled doubles
over trebles, downed a liquid fire in one,
until the big man slid beneath the table wrecked.

She watched him hunt. He killed a stag.
She hacked the heart out, held it,
dripping, in the apron of her dress.
She watched him exercise in arms.
His soldiers marched, eyes right, her way.
She let her shawl slip down to show
her shoulders, breasts, and every man
that night saw them again and prayed
her name. She waved him off to war,

then pulled on boy's clothes, crept
 at dusk into his camp, his shadowed tent,
 touched him, made him fuck her as a lad.
 He had no choice, upped sticks,
 downed tools, went back with her,
 swooned on her flesh for months,
 her fingers in his ears, her kiss
 closing his eyes, her stories blethering
 on his lips: of armies changing sides,
 of cities lost forever in the sea of snakes.

* * *

The camera loved her, close-up, back-lit,
 Adored the waxy pouting of her mouth,
 Her sleepy, startled gaze. She breathed
 the script out in her little voice. They filmed her
 famous, filmed her beautiful. Guys fell
 in love, dames copied her. An athlete
 licked the raindrops from her fingertips
 to quench his thirst. She married him.
 The US whooped.

They filmed her harder, harder, till her hair
 Was platinum, her teeth gems, her eyes
 Sapphires pressed by a banker's thumb.
 She sang to camera one, gushed
 at the greased-up lens, her skin investors' gold
 her fingernails mother-of-pearl, her voice
 champagne to sip from her lips. A poet came,
 found her wondrous to behold. She married him.
 The whole world swooned.

Dumb beauty. She slept in an eye-mask, naked,
 drugged, till the maid came, sponged

at her her puffy face, painted the beauty on in khaki,
 pinks, blues. Then it was coffee, pills, booze,
 Frank on the record player, it was put on the mink,
 get in the studio car. Somebody big was watching her –
 white fur, mouth at the mike, under the lights. Happy
 Birthday to you. Happy Birthday, Mr President.
 The audience drooled.

They filmed on, deep, dumped what they couldn't use
 on the cutting-room floor, filmed more, quiet please,
 action, cut, till she couldn't die when she died,

couldn't get older, ill, couldn't stop saying the lines
or singing the tunes. The smoking cop who watched
as they zipped her into the body-bag noticed
her strong resemblance to herself, the dark roots
of her pubic hair.

* * *

Dead, she's elegant bone
in mud, ankles crossed,
knees clamped, hands clasped,
empty head. You know her name.

Plain women turned in the streets
where her shadow fell, under
her spell, swore that what she wore
they'd wear, coloured their hair.

The whole town came
to wave at her on the balcony,
to stare and stare and stare.
Her face was surely a star.

Beauty is fate. They gaped
as her bones danced
in a golden dress in the arms
of her wooden prince, gawped

as she posed alone
in front of the Taj Mahal,
betrayed, beautifully pale.
The cameras gibbered away.

Act like a fucking princess –
how they loved her,
the men from the press –
Give us a smile, cunt.

And her blue eyes widened
To take it all in: the flashbulbs,
The half-mast flags, the acres of flowers,
History's stinking breath in her face.

There are antecedents, I think, for this poem; it particularly reminds me of W.B. Yeats' poem "The "Long-legged Fly", (which I wrote about in No. 18 – Last Posts) with its trio of historical and cultural greats, unnamed in the text in a similar fashion: Caesar, Helen of Troy

and Michelangelo. Also, perhaps Auden's tribute to Yeats with the narrowing of the verse form in the final part. (?) I like the way "Beauty is fame" turns neatly to "Beauty is fate". Unmistakably linked are key themes of sex, power and death resulting from male idealisations, mythopoeic fantasising about female beauty, leading to violence and death. Eros and Thanatos. Perhaps Duffy dwells a bit too long in places, but you can see that she's carried away by the rush of her rhetoric, the wit that itself generates the power and charisma of the women it celebrates. The poem enacts the fascination it portrays, along with the bitter conclusions. The colloquial language sets us in the here and now, where each sex idol picks up from the last. Jokey, but also serious.

And to finish, how about this lovely tribute to *an* English teacher, whether imagined or real? What if *all* teaching could draw such eulogies?

Death of a Teacher

The big trees outside are into their poker game again,
shuffling and dealing, turning and folding their leaves

drifting down to the lawn, floating away, ace high,
on a breeze. You died yesterday.

When I heard the hour – home time, last bell,
late afternoon – I closed my eyes. English, of course,

three decades back, and me thirteen. You sat on your desk,
swinging your legs, reading a poem by Yeats

to the bored girls, except my heart stumbled and blushed
as it fell in love with the words and I saw the tree

in the scratched old desk under my hands, heard the bird
in the oak outside scribble itself on the air. We were truly there,

present, Miss, or later the smoke from your black cigarette
braided itself with lines from Keats. Teaching

is endless love; the poems by heart, spells, the lists
lovely on the learning tongue, the lessons, just as you said,

for life. Under the gambling trees, the gold light thins and burns
the edge of a page of a book, precious, waiting to be turned.

It's a very graceful tribute, with the solidity of trees and wood running through the poem, until the poker play of the leaves "shuffling and dealing" outside (much of education and 'life' is a lottery or a poker game of bluffing one's way along, hoping for the best) becomes the leaves of pages that can be turned.

The black cigarette calls to mind the Edinburgh riffs on teaching in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. English teachers, the best ones (for me, at any rate), have always been a bit unorthodox (“you sat on your desk”), sweeping aside boredom with its antidote – literature. This poem becomes just such literature, with its attention (underneath the apparent informality of the construction) to small details: “We were truly there...” runs on, with gentle irony, to the everyday roll-call of: “present, Miss”. There are Duffy’s trademark internal rhymes (rather than the old predictable ‘end-of-line’ rhyming) and her careful enjambement that is so useful in highlighting words and ideas (“Teaching / is endless love;”). Falling in love, then, not so much with the teacher herself, but with what she was trying to pass on – poetry and literature.

Like Heaney and all the “greats”, Carol Ann Duffy knows how to create a magical finale: “Under the gambling (and we are hearing also ‘gambolling’?) trees, the gold light thins and burns / the edge of a page of a book, precious, waiting to be turned.”

Education is also all about ‘turning over new leaves’ psychologically, developmentally and artistically.

“Little Red-Cap”, which I wrote about in No.4 Poetry and Storytelling, is still for me her quintessential poem (from *The World’s Wife* selection). Here it is again as it’s worth a re-read. It combines her raunchy brand of feminism, her sharp sense of humour, her approach to the past as well as the future, where she emerges from the darkness of the wood (“I come with my flowers, singing, all alone.”) and her absolute mastery of form and language. The subject is serious, but there are so many jokes (“allotments / kept, like mistresses, by kneeling married men...”) and so much crackling wit. Don’t forget that a Red-Cap is a poisonous mushroom, a reminder that innocent little girls may not, ‘in her book’, be quite so innocent.

Little Red-Cap

At childhood’s end, the houses petered out
 into playing fields, the factory, allotments
 kept, like mistresses, by kneeling married men,
 the silent railway line, the hermit’s caravan,
 till you came at last to the edge of the woods.
 It was there that I first clapped eyes on the wolf.
 He stood in a clearing, reading his verse out loud
 in his wolfy drawl, a paperback in his hairy paw,
 red wine staining his bearded jaw. What big ears
 he had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!
 In the interval, I made quite sure he spotted me,
 sweet sixteen, never been, babe, waif, and bought me a drink,
 my first. You might ask why. Here’s why. Poetry.
 The wolf, I knew, would lead me deep into the woods,
 away from home, to a dark tangled thorny place
 lit by the eyes of owls. I crawled in his wake,
 my stockings ripped to shreds, scraps of red from my blazer
 snagged on twig and branch, murder clues. I lost both shoes

but got there, wolf's lair, better beware. Lesson one that night,
breath of the wolf in my ear, was the love poem.
I clung till dawn to his thrashing fur, for
what little girl doesn't dearly love a wolf?
Then I slid from between his heavy matted paws
and went in search of a living bird – white dove –
which flew, straight, from my hands to his open mouth.
One bite, dead. How nice, breakfast in bed, he said,
licking his chops. As soon as he slept, I crept to the back
of the lair, where a whole wall was crimson, gold, aglow with books.
Words, words were truly alive on the tongue, in the head,
warm, beating, frantic, winged; music and blood.
But then I was young – and it took ten years
in the woods to tell that a mushroom
stoppers the mouth of a buried corpse, that birds
are the uttered thought of trees, that a greying wolf
howls the same old song at the moon, year in, year out,
season after season, same rhyme, same reason. I took an axe
to a willow to see how it wept. I took an axe to a salmon
to see how it leapt. I took an axe to the wolf
as he slept, one chop, scrotum to throat, and saw
the glistening, virgin white of my grandmother's bones.
I filled his old belly with stones. I stitched him up.
Out of the forest I come with my flowers, singing, all alone.

Carol Ann Duffy 1999

So, here's your solution for Christmas presents, this year.
Have a good, safe December!