

EDITORIAL

Jubilees

Carol Ann Duffy's *Jubilee Lines: 60 Poets for 60 Years* (Faber, 2012) is characteristic of her achievement as Poet Laureate so far: an imaginative drawing together of poets in a common creative enterprise that gives poetry its due voice in the public sphere. Smaller anthologies of this kind have been a very welcome feature of the *Guardian's* 'Saturday Review' for the last few years thanks to her collaborative leadership as Laureate. This anthology deftly combines a celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of Elizabeth II's accession to the throne with an invitation to sixty fellow poets from the UK and the Commonwealth to reflect on that same span of years. The poets duly oblige and, as one might expect, they frequently splice the intimate life of romance or poetry itself with those other familiar markers of time in our current culture: the deaths of great celebrities; the advent of wars and social conflicts; the rise and fall of political administrations; the freaks of our climate such as the drought of 1976, the storm of 1987, and the seemingly unpronounceable Icelandic volcano of 2010; and, most frequently, the changes in the popular musical soundtrack to our lives. Groucho Marx, Marlene Dietrich, James Dean, Bill Hayley, Elvis, Vidal Sassoon, John Lennon; all make an appearance here.

Ruth Fainlight's 'World Events' most starkly draws attention to this parallelism – as it might, given that her year is 1963. Here JFK mixes with Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space; and the one transition in the poem takes the form of an admission that the poet has googled 'world events' for the year, but with resonant understatement she informs us that she 'had no problem remembering/ what [she'd] been doing'. Her personal life as a 'new mother' turns out to include a close association with Sylvia Plath and a reflection of a month promised, but not spent together in that fateful year. Fainlight's last stanza records the strangely anachronistic inventions of 1963: 'Credit cards, Vallium, cassette tapes/ remote controls for TV', before reflecting that 'each protagonist of this sad tale/ bar me, is dead – yet all of us are blessed: / we live through poetry.'

That truncated last line of the poem resonates throughout this anthology. In what ways do we live through poetry? How does it mark time, mark our time, leave its mark on our time. In what she refers to as 'a fascinating mix of the personal and the public, the political and poetic', Duffy describes the voices of her selected poets as 'variously accessible or complex, free or formal' and suggests that together they form 'a truly democratic mix'. After reminding us that 'all poetry is concerned with time' she proffers the word 'vigilance': a slightly hushed suggestion in her brisk introduction that poets might be charged with or possessed of some more than usual

attentiveness, some focused intensity in their awareness of the passage of our time.

The most interesting poems here challenge the very mechanism of a simple process of recall or record by focusing on the faulty nature of memory and the complex nature of experienced time: how it is refracted and distorted and multiple. As Imtiaz Dharker puts it in his contribution for 1977: 'Time is easily tangled. It falls over its own feet'. Dharker's metaphors indicate that this is a process recorded not simply by poetry, but in poetry; and that makes a difference. Like a number of the contributors, Geoffrey Hill, in his contribution for 1961, brings the familial into conjunction with the larger forces of history. War-torn Coventry – its 'unlaunched Odeon' and its re-built cathedral – lies at the heart of his poem. In Hill's case, these forces are thus refracted through the workings and re-workings of art so that the aesthetics of poetry and music are placed in provocative alignment with the remembered fidelities of popular culture. The beguilingly paradoxical poetic maxim articulated here – 'There is no true feeling without structure' – tests out poetry's capacity to handle the truth of emotion as much as our desire for true feeling. The transience and frailty of both emotion and structure are challenged by the workings and wrecks of the historical process.

The very best poems here make creative play out of the inadequacy of our usual computations by foregrounding poetry's own combination of frailty and power in relation to


the workings of time. With characteristic playfulness, Ian Duhig's 'Fermat's Lost Theorem' has poets getting 'lost in translational symmetry'. 'Lisping numbers poets don't count well,' he asserts. By comparison with the straight line of mathematics they might be considered 'lettered monkeys', but they have before them, he reminds us, 'numberless magical formulae' and 'infinite A-Zs to infinite dead-ends'.

Poetry's own particular capacity to mark time, to offer in its organization of rhythm the chance to hear ourselves articulated in a way not previously imagined so that it establishes a new pulse to the lives we lead and becomes the way we hear and understand ourselves might bear comparison with those dead musical celebrities who head-line the elegaic time-line of this volume.

Stand has been marking our time in its own inimitable way since its humble origins in 1952 when Jon Silkin used his severance pay from his job as a lavatory cleaner to print the first mimeographed copies for 8d. So it too will be celebrating a 60th Jubilee this year, with a gathering of poets and novelists on 14 and 15 September at the University of Leeds. During those sixty years we hope its pages will have been home to a democratic historical process taking place at the level of form. Towards the end of his life, in a brief preface to his pamphlet *Watersmeet* (1994), Jon Silkin refers us, in writing of an 'unresolved clash between metrical and free verse', to 'vital energies' which are 'part of the process of democratisation'.

This provides another kind of reminder of how we might 'live through poetry' and how poetry might live through us in the struggle to find the rhythm of our lives.

John Whale



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