

Writing love poetry in a culture dominated by the prurient consumption of celebrity is a risky business. Negotiating between our current idioms of passion and the stylized rigours of the amorous makes it even more difficult. With poems like 'Valentine' and 'Warming Her Pearls', Carol Ann Duffy established herself as a poet capable of articulating a distinctive contemporary language of love. At their best, her lyrics exploit a direct, sometimes curt speaking voice to discover an amorous and even erotic charge in everyday objects. In 'Valentine', the stark repeated line – 'I give you an onion' – characteristically offers the poem a necessary hint of aggression and the self-confidence of defining itself against the usual stuff of love poems. The apparent toughness and indirectness provide the contemporary edge against which to temper the release of emotion. With the recent publication of *Rapture*, an ambitious sequence of fifty-two poems, Duffy has firmly and confidently proved herself to be a love poet of real force.

As might be expected, a volume which charts the variety of love's settings in our contemporary culture engages with the new technologies of communication. There's a deft poem on the xx of a text message on a mobile which the poet 'tend[s]' 'like an injured bird'; another where (in melodramatic fashion) the wounded lover wields mobile and landline like a gunslinger; and, in one of the sequence's best poems, 'Venus', Duffy moves from the apparently diaristic particularity of the subtitle – '6.19 a.m., 8th June 2004' –

to the resolved scientific conclusion of watching 'the transit of Venus/ across the face of the sun'. More generally, this conjuring of the intimately biographical alongside the impersonal will, no doubt, provide many readers and audiences with the temptation to read these artful poems as a moving, perhaps even sentimental exposé of the poet's private life. The ambition and the risk of Duffy's latest volume, however, lies not in its biographical proximity, but in the way it wholeheartedly embraces and reworks a rich English tradition of love lyrics: from Donne and Shakespeare to Tennyson and Browning; from Renaissance sonneteers to the romantic ballads of popular folksong.

The epigraph to the sequence is provided by Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and its opening line is a clear statement of intent and specialised resolution: 'Now no discourse, except it be of love'. Browning's 'wise thrush' from 'Home-thoughts, from Abroad' provides the epigraph to the final poem 'Over' and, fittingly, gives some explanation of the volume's title and structure in its 'sing[ing] each song twice over,/ Lest you should think he never could recapture/ That first fine careless rapture!' With this emphasis on poetry's capacity (or incapacity) to capture love's original intensity, the volume is premised on loss. In its charting of the times, places, and seasons of the heart's agonies and the abiding absence of the beloved, Tennyson's *In Memoriam* seems as relevant as Browning's 'Love in a Life'. Such pervasive literary awareness comes together in 'The Love Poem' where a collage of phrases from Shakespeare and Donne offers an explicit commentary on the role of language in the unfolding sequence where 'love's lips [are] pursed to quotation marks'. In more typical fashion, in 'Syntax',

Duffy cleverly juxtaposes the archaic poetic language of love with our contemporary English: 'I want to call you thou'. Alert as ever to the spoken idiom, she pushes through 'I love,/ thou, I love, thou I love, not/ I love you' to 'Because I so do/ as we say now'. Such attentiveness to the difference between the inflections of ordinary speech and the stressed discourse of poetry is a recurrent, successful and deeply enjoyable feature of *Rapture*.

In such a self-consciously literary context, one of the shorter poems, 'Betrothal', captures best Duffy's ability to exploit the curt extremities of love. In the form of a pared-down folk ballad, its taut quatrains offer a harrowing profession of passion, recalling songs such as 'Barbara Allen' where women are the victims of male violence. Here, in contrast, the speaker insistently offers herself up to scenes of murder as the poem begins with the eerie: 'I will be yours, be yours./ I'll walk the moors/ with my spade'; and then progresses gradually towards its chilling denouement: 'I'll say I do, I do./ I'll be ash in a jar for you/ to scatter my life./ Make me your wife'. In the poem's reduction lies its strength. The intensity of *Rapture* is characteristically captured in these fractured repetitions of an urgent speaking voice: 'text, text, text'; 'and this, and this'; 'yes, yes'; 'the same, the same'. Love's language, according to Duffy, 'starts, stops, starts'. Halting repetitions constitute her discourse of modern love; and they cut against and keep in check the perceived excess of a more traditional, rhetorical lyricism.

The painful excess of love's metamorphosis is also, as might be expected, a major part of *Rapture*. In the first poem of the sequence, the beloved is successfully conjured 'like a gift, like a touchable

dream'. In the best tradition of love poetry amorous passion is seen to involve a disturbing reconstitution of the self, both ecstasy and madness; but it also offers a welcome respite from the usual business of mortality, what one poem here refers to chillingly as 'queuing for death'. As a gift, epiphany, or transcendence, rapture violently disrupts the usual narratives of life. The context of love here is often domestic, urban, everyday, sometimes cosmopolitan, crossing commuter journeys and even international time zones, but there's also a repeatedly conjured pastoral scene of love comprising a forest and a river, the book's own version of the magical wood outside Athens of *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*. The general tenor of this sequence, though, is rapture as a memory rekindled from the agonised perspective of love-longing after the break-down of relationship. The abiding emotion is one of loss, or, more precisely, romantic grief.

In making a book out of such dangerous rapture, Duffy does something more transformative and risky than a mere representation of the original passion: she gives it form within the specialised and disciplining discourse of love poetry. Proximate to Duffy's own life as the sequence may be, its success as poetry depends not on any simple confessional veracity about the relationship with the unnamed beloved, but on the way it can successfully engage with 'love's lips' now 'pursed to quotation marks'. Those who might be tempted to read *Rapture* in an insistently biographical way, will risk reducing its artful exploration of passion to mere sentiment. Love poetry needs and, at its best, engenders, as here, a more powerfully disciplined response.

Kirill Sokolov (1930–2004)

The artist Kirill Sokolov who died on 22 May 2004, had a long-standing association with Jon Silkin, who commissioned several of his works for the covers of *Stand*. Kirill also designed, in 1976, the cover and provided a vignette for *The Little Timekeeper* and, in 1986, the set for Silkin's play *Black Notes*.

Kirill Sokolov began his artistic career in Moscow in the mid-1950s, achieving distinction as a highly original engraver and illustrator of some 50 books, including works by Bulgakov and Trifonov. These reveal the fantasmagoric rhythms and the sense of threatened individual consciousness in a disintegrating world which, in one way or another, remained the subject of his art.

In 1963, he married in Moscow the English writer and biographer of Blok, Avril Pyman, with whom he subsequently

collaborated on a number of works, including an edition of Blok's *Selected Poems*, Akhmatova's *Requiem*, and – as recently as last year – a selection of poems by Tiutchev.

In 1974, he and his wife left Russia for England, where he continued to paint, engrave and sculpt prolifically. In the 1980s he discovered a powerful link between past and future, Russia and the West, in Greece (Crete, Athos, Patmos), alive with memory of ancient myth and the birthplace of Byzantine Christianity, which meant so much to him.

His work was widely exhibited in this country and in Russia, where his last exhibitions in the spring of this year were devoted to Blok and Goethe's *Faust*. Right to the end, he was planning new works, including a series of woodcuts on the Apocalypse.

At his request, his ashes were buried in the cemetery of Peredelkino, the writers' village near Moscow, close to the graves of his mother and grandmother.