

'Mean Time'

Carol Ann Duffy (1993)

'Mean Time' won the Forward Poetry Prize in 1993.

The third poem in this collection is entitled 'Nostalgia', a word which sums up one of the major themes that runs through many of the poems in this collection: a father disappointed with his 'thick kids' relives his schoolboy glory days: the revelling of a child saying 'fuck off' in a room full of adults. In 'Stafford Afternoons' this sense of nostalgic innocence is snatched away by a flasher, showing the darker underbelly of Duffy's work at play. In 'Brothers' and 'Before you were Mine' this sense of nostalgia, of memory, moves towards the family of four brothers and a mother imagined before the birth of a child. We return to the memory of school in poems such as 'Welltread' and 'The Good Teachers' which deal with how memories stick with you through life and are formative, asking us why do we remember such things? With the character of the Head Teacher Welltread becoming a 'well tread' memory in the life of the speaker. The sense of memory becoming toxic and problematic is shown in poems such as 'The Cliché Kid' and 'Beachcomber'. In the former the comic tone deflects somewhat from the sense of panic that the speaker feels as they ask for help, with the final stanza becoming quite desperate in their need for answers. In 'Beachcomber' we are presented with a past that we cannot access beyond the vague outlines of things. The past cannot be accessed or changed, so why try? In the second half of the collection Duffy shifts away from the direct contemplation of nostalgia that has intrigued her in the first, but it is still bubbling away underneath the surface. The poems become more caustic as we enter the world of adult relationships, of love and break-ups. In 'Valentine' she boils down the metaphor of an onion as being representative of the perfect valentine gift, that ends darkly with the image of a knife. In 'Adultery' the stripped back language and use of clever simile/metaphor builds up a sense of expectation to the point where we are privy at the end to the break up of a relationship. And of course, there are the Duffy trademark dramatic monologues, a form she would bring to perfection in her later collection 'World's Wife'. In 'Mean Time' we are treated to poems in the voice of Miss Havisham, Charles Dickens, Robert Maxwell and Oscar Wilde – all strong and infective poems in their own right. All in all 'Mean Time' is a collection that bristles with memory and asks us how do we live in the present moment with so many ghosts at our backs.

Colin Bancroft