**Selected Poems of Carol Ann Duffy**

*“Poetry, above all, is a series of intense moments – its power is not in narrative. I’m not dealing with facts, I’m dealing with emotions.” ~ Carol Ann Duffy*

**“Shooting Stars”**

from *Standing Female Nude*

**“Education for Leisure”**

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**“Pilate’s Wife**

from *The World’s Wife*

 **“Demeter”**

 **“Medusa”**

from ***Standing Female Nude* (1985)**

**“Shooting Stars”**

After I no longer speak they break our fingers

to salvage my wedding ring. Rebecca Rachel Ruth

Aaron Emmanuel David, stars on all our brows

beneath the gaze of men with guns. Mourn for the daughters,

upright as statues, brave. You would not look at me.

You waited for the bullet. Fell. I say Remember.

Remember these appalling days which make the world

for ever bad. One saw I was alive. Loosened

his belt. My bowels opened in a ragged gape of fear.

Between the gap of corpses I could see a child.

The soldiers laughed. Only a matter of days separate

this from acts of torture now. They shot her in the eye.

How would you prepare to die, on a perfect April evening

with young men gossiping and smoking by the graves?

My bare feet felt the earth and urine trickled

down my legs until I heard the click. Not yet. A trick.

After immense suffering someone takes tea on the lawn.

After the terrible moans a boy washes his uniform.

After the history lesson children run to their toys the world

turns in its sleep the spades shovel soil Sra Ezra . . .

Sister, if the sea parts us, do you not consider me?

Tell them I sang the ancient psalms at dusk

inside the wire and strong men wept. Turn thee

unto me with mercy, for I am desolate and lost.

**“Education for Leisure”**

Today I am going to kill something. Anything.

I have had enough of being ignored and today

I am going to play God. It is an ordinary day,

a sort of grey with boredom stirring in the streets.

I squash a fly against the window with my thumb.

We did that at school. Shakespeare. It was in

another language and now the fly is in another language.

I breathe out talent on the glass to write my name.

I am a genius. I could be anything at all, with half

the chance. But today I am going to change the world.

Something’s world. The cat avoids me. The cat

knows I am a genius, and has hidden itself.

I pour the goldfish down the bog. I pull the chain.

I see that it is good. The budgie is panicking.

Once a fortnight, I walk the tow miles to town

for signing on. They don’t appreciate my autograph.

There is nothing left to kill. I dial the radio

and tell the man he’s talking to a superstar.

He cuts me off. I get our bread-knife and go out.

The pavements glitter suddenly. I touch your arm.

 **“War Photographer”**

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 the bath and pre-lunch beers.

From the aeroplane he stares impassively at where

he earns his living and they do not care.

*from* ***Selling Manhattan (1987)***

**“Selling Manhattan”**

Background Info: The name Manhattan is derived from an Algonquian term for “island of hills”. In 1609 the English navigator Henry Hudson made an extensive exploration of the area, to which the Dutch laid claim; in 1624 a Dutch trading post, called New Amsterdam, was established on southern Manhattan Island. To secure the Dutch claim, Peter Minuit, the director general of the Dutch colony of New Netherland, purchased (1626) the island from the Native Americans for goods valued at about 60 guilders, or some $24.

*All yours, Injun, twenty-four bucks’ worth of glass beads,*

*Gaudy cloth. I got myself a bargain. I brandish*

*fire-arms and fire-water. Praise the Lord.*

*Now get your red ass out of here.*

I wonder if the ground has anything to say.

You have made me drunk, drowned out

the world’s slow truth with rapid lies.

But today I hear again and plainly see. Wherever

you have touched the earth, the earth is sore.

I wonder if the spirit of the water has anything

to say. That you will poison it. That you

can no more own the rivers and the grass than own

the air. I sing with true love for the land;

dawn chant, the song of sunset, starlight psalm.

Trust your dreams. No good will come of this.

My heart is on the ground, as when my loved one

fell back in my arms and died. I have learned

the solemn laws of joy and sorrow, in the distance

between morning’s frost and firefly’s flash at night.

Man who fears death, how many acres do you need

to lengthen your shadow under the endless sky?

Last time, this moment, now, a boy feels his freedom

vanish, like the salmon going mysteriously

out to sea. Loss holds the silence of great stones.

I will live in the ghost of grasshopper and buffalo.

The evening trembles and is sad.

A little shadow runs across the grass

and disappears into the darkening pines.

**“Stealing”**

The most unusual thing I ever stole? A snowman.

Midnight. He looked magnificent; a tall, white mute

beneath the winter moon. I wanted him, a mate

with a mind as cold as the slice of ice

within my own brain. I started with the head.

Better off dead than giving in, not taking

what you want. He weighed a ton; his torso,

frozen stiff, hugged to my chest, a fierce chill

piercing my gut. Part of the thrill was knowing

that children would cry in the morning. Life's tough.

Sometimes I steal things I don't need. I joy-ride cars

to nowhere, break into houses just to have a look.

I'm a mucky ghost, leave a mess, maybe pinch a camera.

I watch my gloved hand twisting the doorknob.

A stranger's bedroom. Mirrors. I sigh like this - Aah.

It took some time. Reassembled in the yard,

he didn't look the same. I took a run

and booted him. Again. Again. My breath ripped out

in rags. It seems daft now. Then I was standing

alone among lumps of snow, sick of the world.

Boredom. Mostly I'm so bored I could eat myself.

One time, I stole a guitar and thought I might

learn to play. I nicked a bust of Shakespeare once,

flogged it, but the snowman was the strangest.

You don't understand a word I'm saying, do you?

**“Miles Away”**

I want you and you are not here. I pause

in this garden, breathing the colour thought is

before language into still air. Even your name

is a pale ghost and, though I exhale it again

and again, it will not stay with me. Tonight

I make you up, imagine you, your movements clearer

than the words I have you say you said before.

Wherever you are now, inside my head you fix me

with a look, standing here whilst cool late light

dissolves into the earth. I have got your mouth wrong,

but still it smiles. I hold you closer miles away,

inventing love, until the calls of nightjars

interrupt and turn what was to come, was certain,

into memory. The stars are filming us for no one.

*from* ***The Other Country (1990)***

**“In Mrs. Tilscher’s Class”**

You could travel up the Blue Nile

with your finger, tracing the route

while Mrs. Tilscher chanted the scenery.

Tana. Ethiopia. Khartoum. Aswân.

That for a hour, then a skittle of milk

and the chalky Pyramids rubbed into dust.

A window opened with a long pole.

The laugh of a bell swung by a running child.

This was better than home. Enthralling books.

The classroom glowed like a sweetshop.

Sugar paper, Coloured shapes. Brady and Hindley

faded, like the faint, uneasy smudge of a mistake.

Mrs. Tilscher loved you. Some mornings you found

she’d left a good gold star by your name.

The scent of a pencil slowly, carefully shaved.

A xylophone’s nonsense heard from another form.

Over the Easter term, the inky tadpoles changed

from commas into exclamation marks. Three frogs

hopped in the playground, freed by a dance,

followed by a line of kids, jumping and croaking

away from the lunch queue. A rough boy

told you how you were born. You kicked him, but stared

at your parents, appalled, when you got back home.

That feverish July, the air tasted of electricity.

A tangible alarm made you always untidy, hot,

fractious under the heavy, sexy sky. You asked her

how you were born and Mrs. Tilscher smiled,

then turned away. Reports were handed out.

You ran through the gates, impatient to be grown,

as the sky split open into a thunderstorm.

**“We Remember Your Childhood Well”**

Nobody hurt you. Nobody turned off the light and argued

with somebody else all night. The bad man on the moors

was only a movie you saw. Nobody locked the door.

Your questions were answered fully. No. That didn't occur.

You couldn't sing anyway, cared less. The moment's a blur, a Film Fun

laughing itself to death in the coal fire. Anyone's guess.

Nobody forced you. You wanted to go that day. Begged. You chose

the dress. Here are the pictures, look at you. Look at us all,

smiling and waving, younger. The whole thing is inside your head.

What you recall are impressions; we have the facts. We called the tune.

The secret police of your childhood were older and wiser than you, bigger

than you. Call back the sound of their voices. Boom. Boom. Boom.

Nobody sent you away. That was an extra holiday, with people

you seemed to like. They were firm, there was nothing to fear.

There was none but yourself to blame if it ended in tears.

What does it matter now? No, no, nobody left the skidmarks of sin

on your soul and laid you wide open for Hell. You were loved.

Always. We did what was best. We remember your childhood well.

**“Originally”**

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.

*from* ***Mean Time* (1993)**

**“Before You Were Mine”**

I'm ten years away from the corner you laugh on

with your pals, Maggie McGeeney and Jean Duff.

The three of you bend from the waist, holding

each other, or your knees, and shriek at the pavement.

Your polka-dot dress blows round your legs. Marilyn.

I'm not here yet. The thought of me doesn't occur

in the ballroom with the thousand eyes, the fizzy, movie tomorrows

the right walk home could bring. I knew you would dance

like that. Before you were mine, your Ma stands at the close

with a hiding for the late one. You reckon it's worth it.

The decade ahead of my loud, possessive yell was the best one, eh?

I remember my hands in those high-heeled red shoes, relics,

and now your ghost clatters toward me over George Square

till I see you, clear as scent, under the tree,

with its lights, and whose small bites on your neck, sweetheart?

Cha cha cha! You'd teach me the steps on the way home from Mass,

stamping stars from the wrong pavement. Even then

I wanted the bold girl winking in Portobello, somewhere

in Scotland, before I was born. That glamorous love lasts

where you sparkle and waltz and laugh before you were mine.

**“The Captain of the 1964 Top of the Form Team”**

*Do Wah Diddy Diddy, Baby Love, Oh Pretty Woman*

were in the Top Ten that month, October, and the Beatles

were everywhere else. I can give you the B-side

of the Supremes one. Hang On. *Come See About Me?*

I lived in a kind of fizzing hope. Gargling

with Vitmo. The clever smell of my satchel. Convent girls

I pulled my hair straight forward with a steel comb that I blew

like Mick, my lips numb as a two-hour snog.

No snags. The Nile rises in April. Blue and White.

The humming-bird’s song is made by its wings, which beat

so fast that they blur in flight. I knew the capitals,

the Kings and Queens, the dates. In class, the white sleeve

of my shirt saluted again and again. *Sir! . . . Correct*.

Later, I whooped at the side of my bike, a cowboy,

mounted it running in one jump. I sped down Dyke Hill,

no hands, famous, learning, *dominus, domine, dominum*.

*Dave Dee Dozy* . . . Try me. Come on. My mother kept my mascot Gonk.

on the TV set for a year. And the photograph. I look

so brainy you’d think I’d just had a bath. The blazer.

The badge. The tie. The first chord of *A Hard Day’s Night*

loud in my head. I ran to the Spinney in my prize shoes,

up Churchill Way, up Nelson Drive, over pink pavements

the paw prints of badgers and skunks in the mud. My country.

I want it back. The Captain. The one with all the answers. Bzz.

My name was in red on Lucille Green’s jotter. I smiled

as wide as a child who went missing on the way home

from school. The keeny. I say to my stale wife

*Six hits by Dusty Springfield*. I say to my boss *A pint!*

*How can we know the dancer from the dance?* Nobody.

My thick kids wince. *Name the Prime Minister of Rhodesia*.

My country. *How many florins in a pound?*

**“Litany”**

The soundtrack then was a litany – *candlewick*

*bedspread three piece suite display cabinet –*

and stiff-haired wives balanced their red smiles,

passing the catalogue. *Pyrex.* A tiny ladder

ran up Mrs. Barr’s American Tan leg, sly

like a rumor. Language embarrassed them.

The terrible marriages crackled, cellophane

round polyester shirts, and then The Lounge

would seem to bristle with eyes, hard

as the bright stones in engagement rings,

and sharp hands poised over biscuits as a word

was spelled out. An embarrassing word, broken

to bits, which tensed the air like an accident.

This was the code I learnt at my mother’s knee, pretending

to read, where no one had cancer, or sex, or debts,

and certainly not leukemia, which no one could spell.

The year was a mass grave of wasps bobbed in a jam-jar;

a butterfly stammered itself in my curious hands.

*A boy in the playground,* I said, *told me*

*to [f#@%] off;* and a thrilled malicious pause

salted my tongue like an imminent storm. Then

uproar. *I’m sorry, Mrs. Barr, Mrs. Hunt, Mrs. Emery,*

*sorry, Mrs. Raine.* Yes, I can summon their names.

My mother’s mute shame. The taste of soap.

**“The Good Teachers”**

You run round the back to be in it again.

No bigger than your thumbs, those virtuous women

size you up from the front row. Soon now,

Miss Ross will take you for double History.

You breathe on the glass, making a ghost of her, say

South Sea Bubble Defenestration of Prague.

You love Miss Pirie. So much, you are top

of her class. So much, you need two of you

to stare out from the year, serious, passionate.

The River’s Tale by Rudyard Kipling by heart.

Her kind intelligent green eye. Her cruel blue one.

You are making a poem up for her in your head.

But not Miss Sheridan. Comment vous appelez.

But not Miss Appleby. Equal to the square

of the other two sides. Never Miss Webb.

Dar es Salaam. Kilimanjaro. Look. The good teachers

swish down the corridor in long, brown skirts,

snobbish and proud and clean and qualified.

And they’ve got your number. You roll the waistband

of your skirt over and over, all leg, all

dumb insolence, smoke-rings. You won’t pass.

You could do better. But there’s the wall you climb

into dancing, lovebites, marriage, the Cheltenham

and Gloucester, today. The day you’ll be sorry one day.

**“Valentine”**

Not a red rose or a sating 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.

*from* **The World’s Wife (1999)**

**“Mrs. Midas”**

It was late September, I'd just poured a glass of wine, begun

to unwind, while the vegetables cooked. 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 the branch, we grew Fondante d'Automne –

and it sat in his hand like a light-bulb. On.

I thought to myself, Is he putting fairy lights on 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 a 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'd 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, untarnished; 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 Tutankhamen. 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, it's perfect ore limbs, it's little tongue

like a precious latch, it's amber eyes

holding their pupils like flies. My dream-milk

burned in my breasts. I woke up to the streaming sun.

So he had to move out. We'd a caravan

in the wilds, in a glade of it's own. I drove him up

under the cover of dark. He sat in the back.

And then I came home, the woman who'd married the fool

who'd 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 rivers 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.

**“Pilate’s Wife”**

Firstly, his hands — a woman's. Softer than mine,

with pearly nails, like shells from Galilee.

Indolent hands. Camp hands that clapped for grapes.

Their pale, mothy touch made me flinch. Pontius.

I longed for Rome, home, someone else. When the Nazarene

entered Jerusalem, my maid and I crept out,

bored stiff, disguised, and joined the frenzied crowd.

I tripped, clutched the bridle of an \*\*\*, looked up

and there he was. His face? Ugly. Talented.

He looked at me. I mean he looked at *me*. My God.

His eyes were eyes to die for. Then he was gone,

his rough men shouldering a pathway to the gates.

The night before his trial, I dreamt of him.

His brown hands touched me. Then it hurt.

Then blood. I saw that each tough palm was skewered

by a nail. I woke up, sweating, sexual, terrified.

*Leave him alone*. I sent a warning note, then quickly dressed.

When I arrived, the Nazarene was crowned with thorns.

The crowd was baying for Barabbas. Pilate saw me,

looked away, then carefully turned up his sleeves

and slowly washed his useless, perfumed hands.

They seized the prophet then and dragged him out,

up to the Place of Skulls. My maid knows all the rest.

Was he God? Of course not. Pilate believed he was.

**“Demeter”**

Where I lived – winter and hard earth.

I sat in my cold stone room

choosing tough words, granite, flint,

to break the ice. My broken heart –

I tried that, but it skimmed,

flat, over the frozen lake.

She came from a long, long way,

but I saw her at last, walking,

my daughter, my girl, across the fields,

in bare feet, bringing all spring’s flowers

to her mother’s house. I swear

the air softened and warmed as she moved,

the blue sky smiling, none too soon,

with the small shy mouth of a new moon.

**“Medusa”**

I stared in the mirror.

Love gone bad

showed me a Gorgon.

I stared at a dragon.

Fire spewed

from the mouth of a mountain.

And here you come

with a shield for a heart

and a sword for a tongue

and your girls, your girls.

Wasn’t I beautiful?

Wasn’t I fragrant and young?

Look at me now.

A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy

grew in my mind,

which turned the hairs on my head to filthy snakes,

as though my thoughts

hissed and spat on my scalp.

My bride’s breath soured, stank

in the grey bags of my lungs.

I’m foul mouthed now, foul tongued,

yellow fanged.

There are bullet tears in my eyes.

Are you terrified?

Be terrified.

It’s you I love,

perfect man, Greek God, my own;

but I know you’ll go, betray me, stray

from home.

So better by far for me if you were stone.

I glanced at a buzzing bee,

a dull grey pebble fell

to the ground.

I glanced at a singing bird,

a handful of dusty gravel

spattered down.

I looked at a ginger cat,

a housebrick

shattered a bowl of milk.

I looked at a snuffling pig,

a boulder rolled

in a heap of [poop].