Contemporary Poetry. Handout 1. Natália Pikli

CAROL ANN DUFFY: ALPHABET FOR AUDEN

When the words have gone away

there is nothing left to say.

Unformed thought can never be,

what you feel is what you see,

write it down and set it free

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I love, you love, so does he –

long live English Poetry.

Four o’clock is time for tea,

I’ll be Mother, who’ll be me?

Murmur, underneath your breath,

incantations to the deaf.

Here we go again. Goody.

Art can’t alter History.

Praise the language, treasure each

well-earned phrase your labours reach.

In hotels you sit and sigh,

crafting lines where others cry,

puzzled why it doesn’t pay

shoving couplets round all day.

There is vodka on a tray.

Up your nose the hairs are grey.

When the words done gone it’s hell

having nothing left to tell.

Pummel, punch, fondle, knead them

back again to life. Read them

when you doubt yourself and when

you doubt their function, read again.

Verse can say I told you so

but cannot sway the status quo

one inch. Now you get lonely,

Baby want love and love only.

In the mirror you see you.

Love you always, darling. True.

When the words have wandered far,

poets patronise the bar,

understanding less and less.

Truth is anybody’s guess

and Time’s a clock, five of three,

mix another G and T.

Set ’em up, Joe, make that two.

Wallace Stevens thought in blue.

Words drowns in a drunken sea,

dumb, they clutch at memory.

Pissed you have a double view,

something else to trouble you.

Inspiration clears the decks –

if all else fails, write of sex.

Every other word’s a lie,

ain’t no rainbow in the sky.

Som eget lucky, die in bed,

one word stubbed in the ashtray. Dead.

CONTEXTS:

1. ”Every time a poet writes a poem it’s like it’s the first time. When you’ve finished a poem, you don’t know if you’ll ever write another one. Some poems arrive with a weight that’s more significant than other poems and you know it will take a lot of care to do it justice. Poetry, for so long now, has been the way I relate to everything. It’s like a companion. I can’t imagine ever being separated from it.” (interview in Stylist)
2. ”The National Poetry Society Competition has again (see last year) failed to unearth convincing winners from a total of 12,000 submissions. The first prize of ₤ 2,000 was awarded […] to ‘Whoever She Was’ by Carol Ann Duffy. This is quite an effective evocation of some eerie moments in the relation between motherhood and childhood, but much of the detail is predictable, and the language is not very interesting, so that the poem doesn’t improve with repeated readings.” (Review, 1983)
3. 2008: **AQA** (**Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (**an Awarding Body in UK for specifications and holds exams in various subjects at GCSE, AS and A LEVEL and offers vocational qualifications) ‘banned’ Education for Leisure from exams/school anthologies as ‘celebrating violence’
4. 2009: Carol Ann Duffy is Poet Laurate of the United Kingdom

CAROL ANN DUFFY: 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 two miles into 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.

**CAROL ANN DUFFY: MRS. SCHOFILELD’S GSCS**You must prepare your bosom for his knife,

said Portia to Antonio in which

of Shakespeare's Comedies? Who killed his wife,

insane with jealousy? And which Scots witch

knew Something wicked this way comes? Who said

Is this a dagger which I see? Which Tragedy?

Whose blade was drawn which led to Tybalt's death?

To whom did dying Caesar say Et tu? And why?

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark - do you

know what this means? Explain how poetry

pursues the human like the smitten moon

above the weeping, laughing earth; how we

make prayers of it. Nothing will come of nothing:

speak again. Said by which King? You may begin.

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| Seamus HeaneyDEATH OF A NATURALISTAll year the flax-dam festered in the heartOf the townland; green and heavy headedFlax had rotted there, weighted down by huge sods.Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun.Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottlesWove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.There were dragon-flies, spotted butterflies,But best of all was the warm thick slobberOf frogspawn that grew like clotted waterIn the shade of the banks. Here, every springI would fill jampotfuls of the jelliedSpecks to range on window-sills at home,On shelves at school, and wait and watch untilThe fattening dots burst into nimble-Swimming tadpoles. Miss Walls would tell us howThe daddy frog was called a bullfrogAnd how he croaked and how the mammy frogLaid hundreds of little eggs and this wasFrogspawn. You could tell the weather by frogs tooFor they were yellow in the sun and brownIn rain.Then one hot day when fields were rankWith cowdung in the grass the angry frogsInvaded the flax-dam; I ducked through hedgesTo a coarse croaking that I had not heardBefore. The air was thick with a bass chorus.Right down the dam gross-bellied frogs were cockedOn sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails. Some hopped:The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some satPoised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kingsWere gathered there for vengeance and I knewThat if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it. | CAROL ANN DUFFYLITTLE RED-CAPAt childhood’s end, the houses petered outinto playing fields, the factory allotmentskept, 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 loudin his wolfy drawl, a paperback in his hairy paw, red wine staining his bearded jaw. What big earshe 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 placelit by the eyes of owls. I crawled in his wake,my stockings ripped to shreds, scraps of red from my blazersnagged on twig and branch, murder clues. I lost both shoesbut 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, forwhat little girl doesn’t dearly love a wolf?Then I slid from between his heavy matted pawsand 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 backof 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 yearsin the woods to tell that a mushroomstoppers the mouth of a buried corpse, that birdsare the uttered thought of trees, that a greying wolfhowls the same old song at the moon, year in, year out,season after season, sane rhyme, same reason. I took an axeto 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 wolfas he slept, one chop, scrotum to throat, and sawthe glistening, virgin white of my grandmother's bones.I filled his belly with stones. I stitched him up.Out of the forest I come with my flowers, singing, all alone. |

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| **Digging**Between my finger and my thumbThe squat pen rests; as snug as a gun.Under my window a clean rasping soundWhen the spade sinks into gravelly ground:My father, digging. I look downTill his straining rump among the flowerbedsBends low, comes up twenty years awayStooping in rhythm through potato drillsWhere he was digging.The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaftAgainst the inside knee was levered firmly.He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deepTo scatter new potatoes that we pickedLoving their cool hardness in our hands.By God, the old man could handle a spade,Just like his old man.My grandfather could cut more turf in a dayThan any other man on Toner's bog.Once I carried him milk in a bottleCorked sloppily with paper. He straightened upTo drink it, then fell to right awayNicking and slicing neatly, heaving sodsOver his shoulder, digging down and downFor the good turf. Digging.The cold smell of potato mold, the squelch and slapOf soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edgeThrough living roots awaken in my head.But I've no spade to follow men like them.Between my finger and my thumbThe squat pen rests.I'll dig with it. | North**I returned to a long strand,**The hammered shod of a bay,And found only the secularPowers of the Atlantic thundering. I faced the unmagicalInvitations of Iceland,The pathetic coloniesOf Greenland, and suddenly Those fabulous raiders,These lying in Orkney and DublinMeasured againstTheir long swords rusting, Those in the solidBelly of stone ships,Those hacked and glintingIn the gravel of thawed streams Were ocean-deafened voicesWarning me, lifted againIn violence and epiphany. The longship's swimming tongueWas buoyant with hindsight--It said Thor's hammer swungTo geography and trade,Thick-witted couplings and revenges, The hatreds and behindbacksOf the althing, lies and women,Exhaustions nominated peace,Memory incubating the spilled blood. It said, 'Lie downIn the word-hoard, burrowThe coil and gleamOf your furrowed brain. Compose in darkness.Expect aurora borealisIn the long forayBut no cascade of light. Keep your eye clearAs the bleb of the icicle,Trust the feel of what nubbed treasureYour hands have known.' |