

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.'

Demeter. Carol Ann Duffy.

Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* explores the finitude and silences of romantic love narratives. The Collection's glittering monologues testify to the pathos and irony of 'enduring' affection, particularly marital affection, which historically and culturally have dispossessed women of their identity and speech. The reader's journey through Duffy's *World's Wife* is witty, uncomfortable and liberating. And then finally, just when we have become acclimatised to a 'worldly' acceptance of love unmasked and dissembled, Duffy offers the reader a profoundly intimate gift. This gift celebrates once more what we thought was irretrievably lost; the resurrection of a truly loving communion. Thus *The World's Wife* ends with her sonnet to 'Demeter', possibly I feel her most brilliant poem, a poem which significantly celebrates an emotionally redemptive connection between two women.

The poem revisits the myth of the Greek Goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone and explores the isolating privacy of mourning. The original story centres on Demeter's loss of her daughter Persephone to Hades, the King of the Underworld. Demeter in her abject maternal grief and anger plunges the world into everlasting winter until her daughter is returned to her for part of the calendar year by Hades after pressure from other Gods.

Duffy takes the sonnet, a rigorous and formally constraining poetic form associated with love, to explore the tension between loss and resurrection; between abject despair and the consummate revelation of love returned.

And the deeply affecting irony which haunts the poem is that it is Demeter who is more 'dead' than Persephone. Indeed it is Persephone who returns from the place of the dead to rescue her mother. For the poem reveals the abject nullity of grief. The loss of a uniquely beloved figure has consigned the mourner to the emotional wilderness of a hell on earth. Memory can make us mad in its frantic aftermath. We cannot escape the dead's monumental significance for us when they are gone. How devastating after all is the term 'wake' after a funeral?

As Adam Phillips insightfully advises in **Side Effects**:

'Indeed, death often reveals most shockingly not only whether people have mattered to us, and the unexpected ways in which they did and didn't, but also how we shied away from them, how we kept to ourselves. It is easy not to notice people when one is in their presence, and far more difficult to hide from them when they are no longer there.' (p.105)

Revealingly the experience of resurrection in the poem is related from Demeter's viewpoint rather from that of her daughter Persephone. This viewpoint is central to the poem's message and affect. It is Demeter's poem and reflects and refracts, the wretched 'realities' of grief. The opening verse testifies to the nullity of any life without a loved one:

'Where I lived- winter and hard earth.'

I sat in my cold stone room

Choosing tough words, granite, flint,'

Life is but incidental when the beloved has gone. Any sense of place, of orientation, is arbitrary. Duffy's speaker is harshly indifferent to a world without her love. The world is a barren infertile place for the mother without her child and the sharpness of the images reveals the irredeemable suffering. Demeter's language presents the reader with her immunity to anything. She can only bear to select words that reflect her estrangement and isolation. She is incarcerated in a world that has become a literal and metaphorical tomb without her daughter's presence.

Even, and especially her words, resist involvement and connection: nothing and no one get to reach her. She cannot bring her daughter (and by implication herself) back from the place of the dead. Her words are arid and lifeless.

The apparent inversion of:

'to break the ice. My broken heart -'

reveals the disordering affects of grief. Grief estranges us from the illusory security of 'sense'. Here, 'heart' dominates the second verse, as it literally looms over it, loosened from its moorings by the awkwardness of its sense achieved through its odd, 'rupturing' of cohesion embodied in the proximity of the hyphen which causes a faltering of breath at the end of the line.

This pause which delays the movement to the next line's qualification, 'I tried that' mirrors the speaker's attempt to regather herself and to move forward through her mourning. Such an attempt is desultorily represented through the image of the 'flat' heart stone hardly registering on the 'frozen lake' that is her diminished life.

The psychical state of Demeter, the grief struck mother, is utterly abject. She is immovable in the devastating experience of loss. Demeter has not even been able to speak directly of Persephone at all in the first two verses, yet we know that the name of her child, of her beloved, is ALL she can think on.

Then comes the monumental change; how tentative is the cinematic hopefulness and 'longing' of the perspective that the poem now delivers? Notably Persephone is named through the pronoun 'she'. No other embellishment is necessary.

'She came from a long, long way,

but I saw her at last, walking,

my daughter, my girl, across the fields,' (emphasis added)

The sense of revelation is palpable. Persephone is re-entering the world of life after inhabiting the underworld, the world of the dead. Demeter's world and words have returned to her. Demeter is returning from the

dead too, hence the dream like quality of the vision. She is reborn. Love is the resurrection and the life.

We see the reanimation of the mother's 'dead' words through this sighting and reunion. Demeter uses just the pronoun 'she' as 'she' is all the world to her. Only love can make us so pointedly referential. There can be no ambiguity about the identity of the 'she' as 'she' is all words to Demeter. How wondrous is the joy (and pain) of such referentiality?

The repetition of 'long' communicates the distance that Persephone has to come to be with her mother and the time that Demeter has had to endure without her. It engenders a deeply emotive sense of longevity without the beloved. Repetition underlines the recollection of Demeter. She is readdressing the interminability of life without Persephone. What suffering and then utter relief is communicated through this 'echo' affect, as Demeter hears her own voice repeating itself in a strange tunnel of 'longing' remembrance before the unmistakable confirmation that the sighting of her beloved is not just a deluded dream.

She uses the language of maternal and even romantic love: 'my daughter' 'my girl' as the two elide in the acknowledgement that this above all else is a love poem. It testifies to the healing energies of love and the euphoria of reunion and reconciliation. A reader would have to have a heart of stone not to be moved by the passionate, fiercely proprietorial acknowledgement: 'my daughter, my girl.'

Maternal 'territory' is regained. How much we all need someone to be uniquely special to us.

Demeter's evocation of Persephone's 'bare feet' gives us the magical free-spiritedness of her daughter and her 'gift' of liberation for her mother's battered heart. It is wonderfully tender. It has the lightness of joy; the pure nakedness of utter adoration and enchantment.

Duffy superbly moves the poem's perspective away from the 'I' of Demeter's suffocating wintry grief, to Demeter being observed 'outside' herself as a 'mother' a primary representative of a universal relationship. And until the beloved returns, the 'house' cannot be a home. The designation of the 'I' as a third person subject, as mother, also shows how shocking the possibility of happiness seems. This sense of 'unreality' makes her

view herself perhaps as an outsider, in slow motion
'beyond' the limitation of the personal self.

The emotional resonance of 'I swear' is profound. A moment of intense catharsis in the poem. The enjambment as the poem runs on from this admission shows how the emotions of the mother cannot be contained or held in check. Demeter can breathe again and therefore so can the world. Spring's return is heralded through the open vowels in the internal rhymes of 'swear' bare' and 'air'. Demeter thus 'swears' an exultant oath to the awe of love and life returning and regained.

'with the small shy mouth of a new moon.'

Change. Hesitation. Meeting again. Renewal. The most tender of all kisses. A new cycle. You've come back to me.

'I swear...'