

SHANTA ACHARYA

Belonging

To be touched with tenderness,
the curve of your thoughts explored,

shapes they sing in, syllables uttered,
meanings inhaled the way elephants

smell water from a distance.
If only words were licked, turned over,

nuzzled as a matriarch might linger
on the bare bones of an ancestor

lost in a deep, long meditation on a half-
recognised kingdom, every desire a covenant,

when the herd stop to mourn one of their own,
scan the horizon lit by distant flashings

from the past, reading the land as they rumble
on with their journey to a new home.

Only she with the majestic tusks pauses
to taste sorrow, celebrate the chance encounter,

stroking, twirling, twisting, feeling,
her sensitive trunk caressing the carcass

as a blind person memorises a face,
touching, smelling, kissing, holding

on to memories that travel from bone to bone
like words from mouth to mouth.

The Only Tale Worth Telling

Anne Stevenson, *Completing The Circle*, Bloodaxe Books
2020, 80 pages, £10.99

Anne Stevenson's *Completing the Circle* is a collection of moving elegies, meditations, sonnets, narratives and celebrations written in her 80s during the early decades of what she prophetically refers to in her Preface as 'a newly transformed, already terrifying century'. Reflecting on this collection herself, she finds it 'consistent in maintaining a tone that is serious without being funereal, acquiescent without indulging in confessional despair'. And full of wit and wisdom, one is inclined to add.

Remembering her friends (Esther Newcomb Goody, Dana Gioia, Bernard Roberts, Fleur Adcock and Janet Wiltshire to name a few) and family (mother, sons John and Charles), these poems provide glimpses into her own creative life. There is even a poem for her dentist. The writing is testimony to the largesse of her imagination, to the contrariness, beauty and terror of being human. In 'Poppy Day', for example, she observes:

Is the overmuchness of us
Too heavy to hang on the cross?
Upright red for the killer in us,
Horizontal white for the kindness in us,
The figure of a question crucified
In the crooked shape of our bodies;
A bowed head praying ... or is it sobbing?

Partly influenced by Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, which she was reading at the time of writing the title poem, and by a confrontation with death brought on by the premature death of a talented writer who was a close friend of her sister-in-law, *Completing the Circle* expresses the poet's belief that 'death naturally and rightly completes the cycle we recognize and accept as life'. The poem, 'Remembering

Susan Cooper and Anita Jackson', speaks of dying as 'the water side of waking':

Rainbow is not all.
You can strike light

out of the bruised seventh
of the Dorian scale,
or out of the imaginary curve

that completes the full circle,
a life's yearning
solely at night, beyond eyesight.

Stevenson has spoken eloquently about the complex craft of poetry, and in the Preface she does so again:

My aim – articulated in *terza rima* in 'How Poems Arrive' – is almost always to allow any poem I find myself wrestling with, to tell me finally what it means. Painful feelings need to be loosened by detachment and sometimes lightened by wit. Memories can be better understood when shorn of self-pity and given a context in a larger reality. Personal and impersonal subjects must be treated with the same attention to the way they will sound when read aloud. Getting the tone of a poem right is even more important than getting its rhythm and sounds right; or rather, a poem's tone so much depends on how its sound and rhythms are deployed that it can take weeks to settle into a final version.

In 'How Poems Arrive' she writes:

You say them as your undertongue declares,
Then let them knock about your upper mind
Until the shape of what they mean appears.

Like love, they're strongest when admitted blind,
Judging by feel, feeling with sharpened sense
While yet their need to be is undefined.

Knowing that 'The ways of words are tight and selfish ways / And each one wants a slot to suit its weight,' she reminds us that 'something like a pulse must integrate / The noise a poem makes with its invention. / Otherwise, write prose. Or simply wait // Till it arrives and tells you its intention?'

Stevenson's lifelong concern with the art of poetry leaves us in no doubt of her vocation. It is not surprising the collection begins with a poem entitled 'Saying the World':

The way you say the world is what you get.
What's more, you haven't time to change or choose.
The words swim out and pin you in their net

Before you guess you're in a TV set
Lit up and sizzling with unfriendly news.
The word machine – and you depend on it –

Reels out the formulas you have to fit,
The ritual syllables you need to use
To charm the world and not be crushed by it.

Besides pinning you 'in their net', words, for her also possess a magic and power that creates our reality – 'the Word made wings / and other things' ('The Bully Thrush'). With her fine ear for truth, however, she is also wary of a merely celebratory mode:

The world is vaster than the alphabet,
And profligate, and meaner than the muse.
A jewel in the universe? Or shit?

Whichever way, you say the world you get,
Though what there is is always there to lose.

For one keen on getting the tone of a poem right, and knowing poems can take years to settle into a final version, she mentions in passing that the nine lines of her poem 'Candles' went through over twenty drafts. The grace and simplicity of these nine lines belie the complexity of their creation:

What are they yearning for?
Where are their bodies going,
disappearing without dying
under their rising souls?
Do you think, now we
abandon them, they will
live with us as symbols?
Does working electricity
have time for immortality?

These poems testify to profound, all-embracing acceptance. In her tribute to the jazz singer Sandi Russell at 70, 'Sandy Russell Sings', Stevenson says that 'The only tale worth telling is the truth / of what happened'. Most of these poems, recording her persistent wrestle with words and meaning, look back on her past from 'the viewpoint of a bewildered survivor facing up to the realities of time passing and beloved contemporaries dying' (Preface). In 'Anaesthesia',

Age is an exercise in unconcern,
An anaesthetic, lest the misery
Of fresh departures make the final one
Unwelcome.

And the poem ends:

And now this *you* and now that *she* is gone,
There's less and less of me that needs to die.
Nor do those vacant spaces terrify.

In the poem in memory of her friend Lee Harwood, 'Defeating the Gloom Monster', she celebrates another's pursuit of truth that matches and recalls her own:

to tell your story or part of it,
as much truth as the truth will bear,
always stopping at the border where language
smudges the lines or draws its own conclusions –
such was your appeal against the monster.

The idea of the cycle of life and death inevitably acknowledges and accepts death as the beginning of a new life. In 'A Compensation of Sorts', written after watching John Eliot Gardner conduct Beethoven's Fifth Symphony on BBC television in May 2016, Stevenson spells it out thus: 'To die and be transformed into a name; / to be a star, like Keats, yet never know it...' In her words, 'Keats was born when suffering John Keats died'. There is the suggestion of a similar transcendence when she speaks of Beethoven:

...which would have made him happier,
living with his music in his head,
or *being* it, perfectly alive now he is dead?

All great artists live on in their work, *are* their creations though death does not always guarantee the survival of an artist's legacy. While fame and fortune can seem random, the thought that one *is* one's creation and the hope that it will acquire a life of its own is nonetheless real. In the words of Dylan Thomas:

A good poem is a contribution to reality. The world is never the same once a good poem has been added to it. A good poem helps to change the shape of the universe, helps to extend everyone's knowledge of himself and the world around him.

The shifts of mood and subject matter that characterise these poems are part of a process of evolution, insights that come slowly with experience. In his memorable study, *The Necessary Angel*, Wallace Stevens suggested that poetry might be defined as a 'process of the personality of the poet'. For Marianne Moore, 'poetry is after all personal'. Quoting them both, Stevenson goes on to write, in the Preface again, that

it [poetry] relates essentially to a poet's prolonged exploration of a life's experience and at its most genuine is neither a matter of competitive opportunity nor of academic dispute. It is at the same time an art that sets the poet at a remove from natural selfishness, so that the satisfaction of successfully completing even the most minor poem becomes, for a few hours, its own priceless reward.

For a true poet like Stevenson, the joy of creation is a vital aspect of her life. However, like happiness it fades. What she aspires to is something that is longer lasting –

the recognition that these verbal footprints that have seemed so important and maybe cost so much emotionally to leave in the sands of what one day will be the past have fulfilled their purpose only if they have contributed in a very small way to a much more vital and impersonal human inheritance. In the end, art has to triumph over experience or all will be lost.

Nevertheless, her knowledge of transience is clear-sighted. In 'The Day', she notes:

The day after I die will be lively with traffic. Business
doubtless be up and doing, fuelled by creative percentages;
... my absence won't matter a bit and will never be noticed.

Recipient of innumerable prizes and fellowships for her work, it is difficult, however, to image her voice being forgotten in the 'pitiful

rubble' of time. Her awards include Britain's biggest literary prize, the Northern Rock Foundation Writer's Award (the inaugural winner in 2002), the Lannan Lifetime Achievement Award for Poetry, a Neglected Masters Award from the Poetry Foundation of Chicago and The Aitken Taylor Award in Modern American Poetry from The Sewanee Review – all in 2007. In 2008, the Library of America published *Anne Stevenson: Selected Poems* – a series exclusively devoted to the greatest figures in American literature.

Having dedicated her life to her art, she has contributed to that 'vital and impersonal human inheritance'. As one of her peers, George Szirtes, notes:

While Anne Stevenson is most certainly, and rightly, regarded as one of the major poets of our period, it has never been by virtue of this or that much anthologised poem, but by the work or mind as a whole. It is not so much a matter of the odd lightning-struck tree as of an entire landscape, and that landscape is always humane, intelligent and sane, composed of both natural and rational elements, and amply furnished with patches of wit and fury, which only serve to bring out the humanity.

To say that her art triumphs over experience is not an overstatement if one takes the trouble of examining the body of her work. Fusing a glorious 'gallimaufry of themes, forms and approaches', this collection is both a meditation on and a celebration of what it means to get older, gathering the years in one's *being*. *Completing the Circle* extends our notion of what poetry is and can do, inviting the reader to return to her body of work, to the new insights her poems keep yielding. In my view she is one of the finest poets of our time, and I'd like to end with her sonnet, 'At 85', written on her birthday:

I look from the tower of years I call my life
Into the pit: no time but space, no here but there,

No sense but memory, everywhere nowhere –
The doubtful story, the knotted handkerchief,
The where-are-you ever-present dead, whose names
Transport me instantly to childhood, tracking
The long way back to Christmas in a stocking.
So DNA designs the stuff of dreams,
And old is an age that doesn't need to be.
Some Proustian taste or scent or singing phrase
Defies the natural law it disobeys.
Life will be mine as long as my mind is me.
While youth? Its wounds, anxieties and pain
Are best remembered, not endured again.

