

COUNTING BACKWARDS: POEMS 1975-2017

SARAH WESTCOTT REASSESSSES HELEN DUNMORE'S WORK

Helen Dunmore's distilled-yet-expansive poems are special to me – she was one of the first women writers I encountered and responded to when I began reading poetry deeply some 15 years ago. Her work appears accessible yet frequently opens into darker seams and spaces, leaving room for the reader to make their own connections. Her National Poetry Competition-winning *The Malarkey* is a fine example – laced with the ambiguity of loss, it is capacious as a novel, encompassing decades yet reading as fresh as yesterday:

You looked away just once
as you leaned on the chip-shop counter,
and forty years were gone.

You have been telling them forever
Stop that malarkey in the back there!
Now they have gone and done it.
Is that mist, or water with breath in it?

In an interview, Dunmore said the poem is about being 'haunted by loss'. 'All children vanish into adulthood', she said, 'and maybe you long to capture that time'.

As the title of this 432pp. retrospective implies, Dunmore is a poet concerned with time and its pockets and anomalies. *Counting Backwards* reaches back over four decades of her remarkable writing life. The book, published just nine months after her death in June 2017, takes the reader through Dunmore's considerable body of poetry, spanning ten collections and ending with her 1983 debut *The Apple Fall*. It begins with her final book, the Costa Prize-winning *Inside the Wave* and from the first pages, there is a profound feeling of reading backwards into a remarkable life.

Inside the Wave is notable for its clarity and tenderness towards the world as it pushes at the limits of mortality. Several of the poems were written from Dunmore's hospital bed and in her hands, death becomes a humane, benevolent and even tender force, while life is cherished:

Pain is yards away
Held off like bad weather,

In the ward's beautiful contentment
Freed by opiates.
Hooked to oxygen
We live for the moment.

Plane tree outside Ward 78

Dunmore's final poem, *Hold out your arms*, was written in May 2017, less than two weeks before she died at the age of 64. It is a moving reckoning with death which recasts the narrator as a little girl ("in my funny dress") and conjures death as a maternal, nurturing force:

Death, hold out your arms for me
Embrace me
Give me your motherly caress,
Through all this suffering
You have not forgotten me.

Counting Backwards is full of such moments of economy and grace. What makes the book remarkable, also, is the breadth of it. The reader can follow Dunmore's development as a poet which

(perhaps rightly for an acclaimed novelist) takes on its own narrative arc. It is interesting to read work from *The Apple Fall*, published when she was 30. Here the reader encounters at the very beginning what can only be described as Dunmore's voice; nimble, clear and humane. In *Domestic Poem*, she writes of a maternity hospital rich with the "feel and the spore / of babies' sleep" while her own home "...closes us // [...] like fruit we rest in its ripe branches". Her poems of early motherhood push at the limitations of domesticity and, I suspect, were ahead of their time in articulating an ambivalent postpartum existence:

The house enrages me.
I go miles, pushing the pram,
thinking about Christina Rossetti's
Black dresses – my own absent poems.

Approaches to winter

A keen but never didactic ecological awareness is also a key strand of Dunmore's work and it often reads as if she was writing ahead of her time. In *Porpoise washed up on the beach*, written over thirty years ago, teen boys "cut windows out of surprise / or idleness" from the side of a beached animal, "like a blank wall, inviting them".

Glad of these times wears its gravity lightly yet with deadly seriousness and explores modern femininity: "I do not breathe pure air or walk green lanes ... // ... but I am glad of my times, ... / /... where JCBs move motherly / widening the packed motorway".

I found the middle sections of the book, particularly the mid-nineties collection *Recovering a Body* thematically less interesting than Dunmore's other work. Her use of language also feels less inventive and exciting – a lizard, for example, is "gone in a blink" (*Adders*). Some poems begin to suggest repetition – many turning and returning to the theme of the darker reaches of childhood. There are also instances where I felt the poems would have read better with their last lines cut or poems that occasionally read like the much-maligned 'chopped-up prose'. Dunmore is a writer of her time and I found the 'tic' of ending a poem with a single word reminiscent of Carol Ann Duffy's earlier work.

However, her bold and brave descriptions of the female body as it nears the menopause should be praised. She writes candidly of the promise of a surprise late pregnancy, breaking what must have been new ground for women poets in the early 1990s. There is also, often, a sly humour at work. In *Scan at 8 weeks*, the "white receiver / slides up my vagina" reaching a "much-used womb / which to my astonishment / still looks immaculate."

I was also struck by Dunmore's facility with form – she writes in full-rhyme and her poems range from tiny pieces to short stories, notably *Writ in Water* which imagines Keats' last days in Rome, through the eyes of a friend.

In *Crossing the Field*, she writes with characteristic grace: "... all are folded into the dark of the field / and need more days / to paint them, than life gives". Dunmore herself needed more days than life gave her and *Counting Backwards* is fine testament to this talented, generous poet. Who could fail to respond to *To my nine-year-old self* – a poem steeped in the sensory joy of being a child absorbed in her own body, as we all were, once:

I leave you in an ecstasy of concentration
slowly peeling a ripe scab from your knee
to taste it on your tongue.



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