Forces in Motion

*Your Relationship to Motion Has Changed*, Amish Trivedi (83pp, Shearsman)

*Plain Talk Rising*, Mark Dow (57pp, PTR)

It's a bit of a shock to find Carol Ann Duffy in her 'Judge's Report' in the *Poetry Book Society Spring Bulletin 2019*, pronouncing that she's 'always looking for poems with a sense of life, light and force about them', poems that 'need to have a reason to exist, a kind of psychic necessity.' These all seem pretty unquantifiable terms to me, and I wonder how on earth she marks work at the University where she works?

Thankfully, form and use of language get mentioned later on, but even so I was pretty alarmed by the continuing focus on effect and content of a poem rather than the language and shape. But then I think the friend who sent me the *Bulletin* did so partly to wind me up anyway, which she partially succeeded in.

But of course, the *Bulletin* was also interesting because there are statements about the chosen books by the selectors (not Carol Ann Duffy) and the selected authors themselves, as well as sample poems. Amish Trivedi's book has been sitting on the review pile for a few weeks now, ignored, but on the back of his discussion of memory, experience and time (experiential time, really: 'The rate of change over time' is what he says) I pulled it out and started reading.

Within *Your Relationship...*'s bright cover are some seemingly straightforward narrative poems, or perhaps monologue poems, that at first move in a straight line but often take a sharp turn towards the end of their, often brief, form. They tend to start, move, shift, then stop, almost mid-thought and sentence, often in interesting places – certainly compared to where they begin. The one thing I don't like is the sometimes declamatory tone, where the narrator feels very present, but I do very much like those twists and turns in these stories. Here's 'A Thousand Years of Staring. VIII.':

 We imagine death as God looking back at us from

 an abyss we've reached into, but nerves don't stop

 firing right at the last signal: they fire us as they

 degrade into soil or immolation clears us. These

 sensations are just the body fighting evolutionary

 return. As we begin again, we see adoration and

 want it to be every day, but you end up nostalgic

 for silence.

Here, we start with the narrator inviting the reader in to share his idea of death before moving beyond death to conjecture the experience of decay, but also something he calls 'evolutionary return'. Is this reincarnation or heaven, the dead evolving into something *other*? 'Begin again' might suggest the former, the 'adoration' might allude to an idea of heaven where angels constantly sing. Either way, it seems our narrator is nostalgic for silence, either the silence of death, or of a place where adoration isn't always occurring.

It may not be 'psychic necessity', but that's pretty good going for seven-and-a-half line poem. Death is a recurring theme here, as is decay, absence and movement vs. stasis. The long title poem begins 'Having nowhere to go / is the best place to be' and after seven-and-a-half pages concludes that:

 Nothing builds

 to any resolution: it is just a desire

 to complete words or ideas,

 but ultimately, we go

 nowhere all the time.

This is carefully controlled and considered poetry that deftly takes us on experiential journeys to elsewhere. They chart the process of language, time and thought, in poems that can be brief and sharply focused, or step-by-step extended meditations which gently meander towards their surprising conclusion.

Mark Dow's *Plain Talk Rising* is, as befits its title, a much plainer book, housed in plain grey with the title and author's name on. But it's plainness hides a series of often extended, plainly spoken (or written) poems and prose-poems that play with ideas of memory, re-presentation and sound & language. This time the sound is often from the world around the narrator, who carefully describes and places the poem within a specific setting:

 Middle-nigh rain with two voices, one through the window to the

 left on the street where the traffic lights click, the other out the right

 one opening to the porch that's open to the walkway perpendicular to

 the street.

 (from 'Double Lull')

The description continues, slowly losing its specificity to adopt a series of metaphorical images where the landscape and its constituents speaks, 'words blurred to pure sound'.

Dow is well aware of the artifice of his poems, the devices he uses to invigorate the everyday and mundane, to draw attention to what we often ignore. If he is occasionally a little over-insistent, as in 'Listener's Guide' which starts 'So sad and unbearably sad these nocturnes, listen', rather than evocative, he is also playful and self-aware of what he is doing. 'Children make up the rules / and mean it and change them as they go' he says in the long poem 'Between the Lines and Above the Gaze Which is a Phrase of Mallarmé's', and one gets the feeling he adopts this approach too.

One of my favourite poems here is 'Partial Inventory of Immediate Surroundings Omitted from the Preceding Poem' which, as you might suspect, is a list poem that seems to have no connection at all to the poem which precedes it, and is, in fact, much longer. The book is full of poems that declare they are 'not the poem', poems where 'what someone who hasn't said it is saying', and a poem that 'might have started just / like that with some easygoing banter / before unfolding itself to take itself too seriously'. It ends with a joke, a blank page entitled 'Stop Me if You've Heard This One', but this book is smarter than that. Like Trivedi, Dow is all too aware of how thought and language works, its intricacies, misdirection and confusions. On one level this is a book of plain talk, but plain talk that moves 'further into form' than that might suggest.

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