

When Tony Curtis appeared at this year's StAnza Festival, the hall was packed AND they ran out of his book – Folk- to sell to the queues waiting patiently afterwards. Tony Curtis is self-deprecating and very funny, he tells a story and a joke like the best sort of stand-up and he shimmers with Irish charm. It's no wonder he reads to big crowds all over the world: you're left always wanting more. But he is at the same time a serious poet.

Folk is rich, overflowing with poems you want to return to and when you do, they reward re-reading, revealing different and surprising layers of themselves. Rather as Billy Collins, Curtis' imagination turns the familiar world upside down, his language playful but exact.

The 'folk' of this book are not just family from the past and present but a motley crew - poets important to him, Basho, Yeats, Bishop, Whitman, Michael Hartnett, to name just a few. Others include Johnny Cash, patients of The Sentimental Hospital (real name : The Central Mental Hospital) and random people he meets and connects with on his travels such as 'The Amish Woman' (one of my favourite poems) complete the gathering.

The poems are clear-sighted about time passing and how lives and spirit can become worn-down in the travelling towards death. The poets and their poems are as alive to him as the people he meets every day, he but he has no illusions about eternity. In the moving 'Two Poems for Michael Hartnett' he imagines poems as birds, fragile migrants both preyed upon and blessed by the world : '...ten years from now/I know only a handful/will have made it home'.

Many of his 'folk' are pilgrims in their travelling – Basho, his newly-married parents on their motorbike, Alcock and Brown, even himself, travelling across Scotland in an unreliable car:

...I now know a prayer
will carry you twenty miles, while a poem
will carry you about half that distance. So every time
my car cruised to a halt by the side of the road

I first said a prayer and then said a poem.
I did that all day, a pilgrim making his way
mile by snowy mile. ('The Pilgrim')

Some lose their way, like the poet Delmore Schwartz ('For Poetry, This'), the young woman from the asylum in 'The Maiden's Collar' and the uprooted, homeless Bishop.

For all Curtis's love of his family and friends, his home, garden and his country, and for all the lovely humour, lightness of tone, economy and grace which echoes Basho, there are undercurrents of sadness, a lonely feeling of displacement.

In the first part of the book this is treated with a lightness of touch : in 'Thrift', which could almost read as his literary manifesto the poet collects 'a string of barnacle geese', 'a blue whale', 'that small island/with the tower, the church/and five thousand puffins' and puts it all, and more, in a box 'at the back of the shed'. This 'shed' returns in other poems, signifier of a space apart, where imagination lives. (Alcock and Brown's airplane is 'a kite, attached to a garden shed' in 'Errislanan'). The tone in 'Thrift' starts playful, but then he says: 'I'll have to go through them/and sell or give away/what isn't poetry./I need space/to put away/the world I've known/before it's run-out, worn-out,/knocked-out. Gone.'

There's a similar anxiety in 'Watercross', which describes a journey taken by a rickety cable car across to Dursey Island off the Irish coast. 'Cable car? Think old garden shed'. The journey is risky and the island frightening in its 'endless sky'. The poet brings home watercross, supposed to be 'a great cure for madness':

It will come in useful on black days
when my mind is a storm-tossed island
and the cable out to me is fraying.

The contradictory pull between the profound loneliness of that space and the sociable exterior world, full of people and amusing happenings, is a powerful dynamic in this book. The long poem in the second section of the collection, 'The Scarecrow', explores this – seen by all, yet invisible, a half-sinister, half pathetic sight, the scarecrow exists set apart : 'staked out in the middle of a field,/the scarecrow would have died/of loneliness but for the heart/that learned to change.' The scarecrow is also a watcher, clear-sighted and blue-eyed, like the figure of a poet whose gaze is too powerful: 'the blue will startle you,/will hold your breath/until you look away'.

These are poems that hold their complexities well, that don't seek to answer or solve, only seemingly to entertain, yet speak to the most profound aspects of the human condition. To give a flavour of the 'delicious oddness' Helena Nelson praises, the final poem, 'Company', is worth quoting in full:

I keep thinking
there are cobwebs
between the pages
of this book

but you have been
good enough
to open it
and blow.

In his generosity of spirit Tony Curtis has included us, the readers, in his 'folk'.

When Tony Curtis appeared at this year's StAnza Festival, the hall was packed AND they ran out of his book – Folk- to sell to the queues waiting patiently afterwards. Tony Curtis is self-deprecating and very funny, he tells a story and a joke like the best sort of stand-up and he shimmers with Irish charm. It's no wonder he reads to big crowds all over the world: you're left always wanting more. But he is at the same time a serious poet.

Folk is rich, overflowing with poems you want to return to and when you do, they reward re-reading, revealing different and surprising layers of themselves. Rather as Billy Collins, Curtis' imagination turns the familiar world upside down, his language playful but exact.

The 'folk' of this book are not just family from the past and present but a motley crew - poets important to him, Basho, Yeats, Bishop, Whitman, Michael Hartnett, to name just a few. Others include Johnny Cash, patients of The Sentimental Hospital (real

name : The Central Mental Hospital) and random people he meets and connects with on his travels such as 'The Amish Woman' (one of my favourite poems) complete the gathering.

The poems are clear-sighted about time passing and how lives and spirit can become worn-down in the travelling towards death. The poets and their poems are as alive to him as the people he meets every day, he but he has no illusions about eternity. In the moving 'Two Poems for Michael Hartnett' he imagines poems as birds, fragile migrants both preyed upon and blessed by the world : '...ten years from now/I know only a handful/will have made it home'.

Many of his 'folk' are pilgrims in their travelling – Basho, his newly-married parents on their motorbike, Alcock and Brown, even himself, travelling across Scotland in an unreliable car:

...I now know a prayer
will carry you twenty miles, while a poem
will carry you about half that distance. So every time
my car cruised to a halt by the side of the road

I first said a prayer and then said a poem.
I did that all day, a pilgrim making his way
mile by snowy mile. ('The Pilgrim')

Some lose their way, like the poet Delmore Schwartz ('For Poetry, This'), the young woman from the asylum in 'The Maiden's Collar' and the uprooted, homeless Bishop.

For all Curtis's love of his family and friends, his home, garden and his country, and for all the lovely humour, lightness of tone, economy and grace which echoes Basho, there are undercurrents of sadness, a lonely feeling of displacement.

In the first part of the book this is treated with a lightness of touch : in 'Thrift', which could almost read as his literary manifesto the poet collects 'a string of barnacle geese', 'a blue whale', 'that small island/with the tower, the church/and five thousand puffins' and puts it all, and more, in a box 'at the back of the shed'. This 'shed' returns in other poems, signifier of a space apart, where imagination lives. (Alcock and Brown's airplane is 'a kite, attached to a garden shed' in 'Errislanan'). The tone in 'Thrift' starts playful, but then he says: 'I'll have to go through them/and sell or give away/what isn't poetry./I need space/to put away/the world I've known/before it's run-out, worn-out,/knocked-out. Gone.'

There's a similar anxiety in 'Watercross', which describes a journey taken by a rickety cable car across to Dursey Island off the Irish coast. 'Cable car? Think old garden shed'. The journey is risky and the island frightening in its 'endless sky'. The poet brings home watercross, supposed to be 'a great cure for madness':

It will come in useful on black days
when my mind is a storm-tossed island
and the cable out to me is fraying.

The contradictory pull between the profound loneliness of that space and the sociable exterior world, full of people and amusing happenings, is a powerful dynamic in this book. The long poem in the second section of the collection, 'The Scarecrow', explores this – seen by all, yet invisible, a half-sinister, half pathetic sight, the scarecrow exists set apart : 'staked out in the middle of a field,/the scarecrow would have died/of loneliness but for the heart/that learned to change.' The scarecrow is also a watcher, clear-sighted and blue-eyed, like the figure of a poet whose gaze is too powerful: 'the blue will startle you,/will hold your breath/until you look away'.

These are poems that hold their complexities well, that don't seek to answer or solve, only seemingly to entertain, yet speak to the most profound aspects of the human condition. To give a flavour of the 'delicious oddness' Helena Nelson praises, the final poem, 'Company', is worth quoting in full:

I keep thinking
there are cobwebs
between the pages
of this book

but you have been
good enough
to open it
and blow.

In his generosity of spirit Tony Curtis has included us, the readers, in his 'folk'.

hi Tony, here is a review of Folk which will appear in The North in October
hope you like it
I have loved reading your poems
all best
Pippa