

### In Mrs Tilscher's class

In Mrs Tilscher's class  
You could travel up the Blue Nile  
with your finger, tracing the route  
while Mrs Tilscher chanted the scenery.  
"Tana. Ethiopia. Khartoum. Aswan."  
That for an hour,  
then a skittle of milk  
and the chalky Pyramids rubbed into dust.  
A window opened with a long pole.  
The laugh of a bell swung by a running child.

This was better than home. Enthralling books.  
The classroom glowed like a sweetshop.  
Sugar paper. Coloured shapes. Brady and Hindley  
faded, like the faint, uneasy smudge of a mistake.  
Mrs Tilscher loved you. Some mornings, you found  
she'd left a gold star by your name.  
The scent of a pencil slowly, carefully, shaved.  
A xylophone's nonsense heard from another form.

Over the Easter term the inky tadpoles changed  
from commas into exclamation marks. Three frogs  
hopped in the playground, freed by a dunce  
followed by a line of kids, jumping and croaking  
away from the lunch queue. A rough boy  
told you how you were born. You kicked him, but stared  
at your parents, appalled, when you got back  
home

That feverish July, the air tasted of electricity.  
A tangible alarm made you always untidy, hot,  
fractious under the heavy, sexy sky. You asked her  
how you were born and Mrs Tilscher smiled  
then turned away. Reports were handed out.  
You ran through the gates, impatient to be grown  
the sky split open into a thunderstorm.

### Mrs Midas

- 1 It was late September. I'd just poured a glass of wine, begun to unwind, while the vegetables cooked. The kitchen filled with the smell of itself, relaxed, its steamy breath gently blanching the windows. So I opened one, then with my fingers wiped the other's glass like a brow. He was standing under the pear tree snapping a twig.
- 2 Now the garden was long and the visibility poor, the way the dark of the ground seems to drink the light of the sky, but that twig in his hand was gold. And then he plucked a pear from a branch. – we grew Fondante d'Automne – and it sat in his palm, like a lightbulb. On.  
I thought to myself, Is he putting fairy lights in the tree?
- 3 He came into the house. The doorknobs gleamed. He drew the blinds. You know the mind; I thought of the Field of the Cloth of Gold and of Miss Macready. He sat in that chair like a king on a burnished throne. The look on his face was strange, wild, vain. I said, What in the name of God is going on? He started to laugh.
- 4 I served up the meal. For starters, corn on the cob. Within seconds he was spitting out the teeth of the rich. He toyed with his spoon, then mine, then with the knives, the forks. He asked where was the wine. I poured with a shaking hand, a fragrant, bone-dry white from Italy, then watched as he picked up the glass, goblet, golden chalice, drank.

- 5 It was then that I started to scream. He sank to his knees.  
After we'd both calmed down, I finished the wine  
on my own, hearing him out. I made him sit  
on the other side of the room and keep his hands to himself.  
I locked the cat in the cellar. I moved the phone.  
The toilet I didn't mind. I couldn't believe my ears:
- 6 how he'd had a wish. Look, we all have wishes; granted.  
But who has wishes granted? Him. Do you know about gold?  
It feeds no one; aurum, soft, untarnishable; slakes  
no thirst. He tried to light a cigarette; I gazed, entranced,  
as the blue flame played on its luteous stem. At least,  
I said, you'll be able to give up smoking for good.
- 7 Separate beds. in fact, I put a chair against my door,  
near petrified. He was below, turning the spare room  
into the tomb of Tutankhamun. You see, we were passionate then,  
in those halcyon days; unwrapping each other, rapidly,  
like presents, fast food. But now I feared his honeyed embrace,  
the kiss that would turn my lips to a work of art.
- 8 And who, when it comes to the crunch, can live  
with a heart of gold? That night, I dreamt I bore  
his child, its perfect ore limbs, its little tongue  
like a precious latch, its amber eyes  
holding their pupils like flies. My dream milk  
burned in my breasts. I woke to the streaming sun.

- 9     So he had to move out. We'd a caravan  
      in the wilds, in a glade of its own. I drove him up  
      under the cover of dark. He sat in the back.  
      And then I came home, the woman who married the fool  
      who wished for gold. At first, I visited, odd times,  
      parking the car a good way off, then walking.
- 10    You knew you were getting close. Golden trout  
      on the grass. One day, a hare hung from a larch,  
      a beautiful lemon mistake. And then his footprints,  
      glistening next to the river's path. He was thin,  
      delirious; hearing, he said, the music of Pan  
      from the woods. Listen. That was the last straw.
- 11    What gets me now is not the idiocy or greed  
      but lack of thought for me. Pure selfishness. I sold  
      the contents of the house and came down here.  
      I think of him in certain lights, dawn, late afternoon,  
      and once a bowl of apples stopped me dead. I miss most,  
      even now, his hands, his warm hands on my skin, his touch.

Carol Ann Duffy

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## **Originally**

We came from our own country in a red room  
which fell through the fields, our mother singing  
our father's name to the turn of the wheels.

My brothers cried, one of them bawling, *Home*,  
*Home*, as the miles rushed back to the city,  
the street, the house, the vacant rooms  
where we didn't live any more. I stared  
at the eyes of a blind toy, holding its paw.

All childhood is an emigration. Some are slow,  
leaving you standing, resigned, up an avenue  
where no one you know stays. Others are sudden.  
Your accent wrong. Corners, which seem familiar,  
leading to unimagined pebble-dashed estates, big boys  
eating worms and shouting words you don't understand.  
My parents' anxiety stirred like a loose tooth  
in my head. *I want our own country*, I said.

But then you forget, or don't recall, or change,  
and, seeing your brother swallow a slug, feel only  
a skelf of shame. I remember my tongue  
shedding its skin like a snake, my voice  
in the classroom sounding just like the rest. Do I only think  
I lost a river, culture, speech, sense of first space  
and the right place? Now, *Where do you come from?*  
strangers ask. *Originally?* And I hesitate.

## The Way My Mother Speaks

I say her phrases to myself  
in my head  
or under the shallows of my breath,  
restful shapes moving.  
*The day and ever. The day and ever.*

The train this slow evening  
goes down England  
browsing for the right sky,  
too blue swapped for a cool grey.  
For miles I have been saying  
*What like is it.*

Only tonight  
I am happy and sad  
like a child  
who stood at the end of summer  
and dipped a net  
in a green, erotic pond. *The day  
and ever. The day and ever.*  
I am homesick, free, in love  
with the way my mother speaks.

## Valentine by Carol Ann Duffy

Not a red rose or a satin heart.

I give you an onion.

It is a moon wrapped in brown paper.

It promises light

like the careful undressing of love.

Here.

It will blind you with tears

like a lover.

It will make your reflection

a wobbling photo of grief.

I am trying to be truthful.

Not a cute card or kissogram.

I give you an onion.

Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips,

possessive and faithful

as we are,

for as long as we are.

Take it.

Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring,

if you like.

Lethal.

Its scent will cling to your fingers,

cling to your knife.

## **War Photographer**

In his darkroom he is finally alone  
with spools of suffering set out in ordered rows.  
The only light is red and softly glows,  
as though this were a church and he  
a priest preparing to intone a Mass.  
Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh. All flesh is grass.

He has a job to do. Solutions slop in trays  
beneath his hands, which did not tremble then  
though seem to now. Rural England. Home again  
to ordinary pain which simple weather can dispel  
to fields which don't explode beneath the feet  
of running children in a nightmare heat.

Something is happening. A stranger's features  
faintly start to twist before his eyes  
a half-formed ghost. He remembers the cries  
of this man's wife, how he sought approval  
without words to do what someone must  
and how blood stained into foreign dust.

A hundred agonies in black-and-white  
from which his editor will pick out five or six  
for Sunday's supplement. The reader's eyeballs prick  
with tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers.  
From the aeroplane he stares impassively at where  
he earns his living and they do not care.