

A LIVING CELEBRATION OF SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

JOE TREASURE

Four hundred years after his death, Shakespeare's works still seem inexhaustible as a source of pleasure and a spur to creative collaboration. This anniversary has spawned a range of high-profile projects, including a series of fictional retellings commissioned by Hogarth Press, and the Globe's *Hamlet Globe to Globe* tour, which recently, in a stirring demonstration that enjoyment of Shakespeare should not be limited by borders, gave an open-air performance in the notorious refugee camp outside Calais known as The Jungle.

Now Bloomsbury has published *On Shakespeare's Sonnets, A Poets' Celebration*. Two lecturers at King's College London, Hannah Crawford and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann, invited 30 poets to respond to the sonnets in any way they liked and they present the results here.

I can imagine the potential pitfalls in such a project. Asked which comes first, the words or the music, Cole Porter once replied, 'First comes the phone call.' But I suspect poets are less reliably responsive to commissions than composers of popular songs – poetry comes from a deeper place. And while some may jump at the chance, others may be daunted by the prospect of seeing their poem in print alongside the Shakespeare sonnet that inspired it.

Certainly, there are a few contributors whose poems are too clearly in the master's shadow, their iambs plodding dutifully, their diction slipping uncertainly into archaism and pastiche. At the other extreme, Simon Armitage abandons language altogether and retreats into Dadaist noise, either as a self-effacing response to Shakespeare's genius, or else, perhaps,

signalling the inadequacy of words to express love. Roger McGough also avoids using words of his own, constructing a tolerably coherent 14-liner entirely out of quotations.

But overall the collection is a delight to read. On one level it's a series of technical conversations, with some poets embracing the sonnet structure, some playing variations on it, others engaging with their chosen sonnet through ideas or images. Among those who seem completely at home in the form is the Welsh poet Gillian Clark, who absorbs its metrical pattern effortlessly into natural speech rhythms. And in a series of four 'Rhapsodies' Andrew Motion weaves sinuous sentences through lines of verse to lyrical effect, moving backwards and forwards through time to reflect movingly on the shock of love and the anticipation of loss: 'and always, with the guilt built into grief, / the sense of life now lost not lived enough.' Fiona Sampson, in contrast, avoids formal influence, taking only the phrase 'holds him in chase' as the inspiration for her mimetic meditation on a couple's movements in sleep.

The range of topics is also refreshingly broad. In a startlingly unexpected response to Sonnet 33 ('Fully many a glorious morning I have seen'), Mimi Khalvati remembers the onset of her son's schizophrenia: 'But how you hid when the sky split, the voices came, / Each with a face you drew, wild familiars, / Grotesques that only talking to could tame.'

Offering engaging insights, enjoyable surprises and vivid glimpses of experience, *On Shakespeare's Sonnets* is every much a living celebration.



Here Was a Door

SHAMSUR RAHMAN

Translated from the Bengali: SOFIUL AZAM

Here was a door, above which hung the cherished beauty of Madhobi creepers. There were flower tubs in the porch, a three-wheeler, a green parrot screeching in its cage by the door. Silken smoke used to climb up from the kitchen.

Someone wearing velvet, down-and-out, used to keep a pair of his eyes gleaming very often in the dark. In the morning someone immersed in a newspaper like a quiet globe-trotter would suddenly look at the wall crowded with crows.

He thought about his childhood fields, the regret of losing balls started buzzing anew around him. Every moment he kept losing balls, no whistle could ever stop his losses. In the logbook of his losses, only scattered numbers danced.

Here was a door, above which hung the cherished beauty of Madhobi creepers. Now here is nothing, nothing else left here. Only a stupid wall, shell-wounded, stands somewhat stiff, alone. Some grubby bricks lie spread out here. On the left, you'll catch a glimpse of a broken doll, nothing else left here other than this.

In the ruins, I stand still as if I myself were a sign of wreckage; I rake at ashes with my shoe, hoping that suddenly from the ashes would rise flapping an immortal bird, and that I might see someone's glowing smile, blossomed affection, and love.

A Little Wind

MUZIBUL HAQUE KABIR

Translated from the Bengali
BINOY BARMAN

My fists open like leaves
The silent line of hair
Seen in the dark
The miracle of fine drawing!

I've dipped in myself
The little soul-bird sleeps inside
A little wind, a little movement
Who understands its meaning?

Word-trees are rising in me
In the tumult of blood-water
Spreading my hand
I only touch the sky.

Isn't there anything else?
Yes, there is
Close like shadow I feel
As I throw the light of my eyes
Nothing's anywhere.

YOUR LONELY WALKS

SAMINA A SHAHRUKH

Don't hold my hand
For I shall impede you to move or
walk away.
Don't keep me in your lips
For I shall be the shard that cuts
and makes them bleed.
Don't keep me in your eyes
For I shall be the grain of sand that
irritates.
Don't keep me between your
thighs
For I shall be the fire that burns to
cinders.
Don't keep me in your heart
For I shall be the stone that weighs
it down.
Keep me in your unconsciousness
For I shall be the soothing rain or
the gentle sunshine
In your lonely walks.



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