

Art Is Long, Planets Short: The Lasting Power of Carol Ann Duffy's "The Woman in the Moon"

Adrienne Su

I have mixed feelings about my belief that Carol Ann Duffy's "The Woman in the Moon" is likely to endure well into and beyond the 21st century. The happy side is aesthetic: it has disciplined quatrains, playful alliteration, inconspicuous rhymes, and a cascade of clear images that are of the immortal kind. Its metrical dexterity nods to centuries of poetic convention, and while free verse has been more popular than formal for some time now, contemporary poets of enduring power, like Duffy, readily deploy elements of unfree verse even when not writing in strict forms, making poems as musically precise as they are creative and intellectual—the point of poetry. The reason I am unhappy that the poem is likely to be representative of this era is thematic. It's a piece about patriarchal power and the destruction of the planet, and its message is urgent.

"The Woman in the Moon" in the poem speaks in place of the archetypal "man in the moon," recasting that character as a woman who is irritated by the human assumption that this figure of legend must be male. In the wry voice of your most opinionated aunt (who always turns out to be right), she tells the inhabitants of Earth—addressed as "Darlings"—her thoughts on observing them through the ages. Affectionate and annoyed, she sympathizes with their struggles (*our* struggles) yet bemoans their abuse (*our* abuse) of the planet; and the poem's final sentence laments its destruction. Along the way, the speaker shows herself to be a force not only of nurturing watchfulness but also of literary mastery. She is not only talking; she's writing to us, it seems, and this woman in the moon is not just any writer. She is demonstrably a poet.

The first of the four quatrains establishes how under-acknowledged she is, though: "I hide behind famous light." Like a woman poet obscured by male poets of her generation, the speaker occupies the same actual heights but remains unseen. As a figure of legend, she is similarly displaced. The exasperated third line, "How could you think it ever a man up here?" points to the moon's connection to women, who are subject to monthly cycles, and also introduces familiar domestic images connected to the moon: "A cow jumped over. The

dish ran away with / the spoon.” The cow is domesticated, a source of milk; spoons and dishes feed people; and in their own way, those verses evoke childhood, early caregivers, and our first imaginings. While I would like to be able to counter my own remarks with the claim that the domestic is not necessarily feminine, women worldwide still spend significantly more time on unpaid domestic tasks than men do, despite their advances in the workplace. Duffy’s woman in the moon seems to want us to consider that imbalance.

The language of stanza two remains maternal but quickly abandons nursery rhymes. While saying the verses, this mother-moon has not been thinking vacantly of cows and spoons but scrutinizing the experiences of her children down here on Earth: “What reached me were your joys, griefs, / here’s-the-craic, losses, longings . . .” The slangy “here’s-the-craic” offers an embrace of Irishness (“craic” being Gaelic for “fun” or “a good time”) by Britain’s poet laureate, and it also brings familiarity to the list. “Here’s-the-craic” reflects the closeness of a daily caretaker versus the distant concern of a guardian on high. This guardian *is* on high. But she is still an intimate, and perhaps, the poem winks, the female moon-dweller has more knowledge of her charges than the male one, who’s too busy soaking up notice to pay any mind to the daily details.

Duffy continues the list of human vicissitudes that reach up to the woman in the moon, but with a sleight-of-hand line break she turns our attention away from what this character might understand of us and toward our mortality: “What reached me were your joys, griefs, / here’s-the-craic, losses, longings, your lives / brief, mine long, a talented loneliness.” While “your lives” seems, at first, to be a part of what reaches the moon—this great listener—the break suggests that those words are the beginning of a new idea. Instead of the connection between human lives and some outside force, then, we are reminded of our own smallness, briefness. The break also seems to show the speaker’s reluctance to acknowledge that she will outlive her children, as well as a desire to shield those children from that reality.

Of course, that very break creates emphasis on “brief,” and the word is an unwanted yet unavoidable shock. All our squabbles and craic are pretty insignificant, it seems, especially in relation to the woman in the moon, whose life is *not* brief. Immortality, under these circumstances, is overrated, causing “loneliness” this poet, this woman. Yet it is also “a talented loneliness,” a loneliness that allows her to translate a pile-up of our earthly losses into lines and stanzas. Indeed, the woman in the moon is undeniably lyrical in her understanding of us Earth-dwellers, and the full sentence accumulates “s” and “l” sounds that amplify the losses and lonelinesses, yet with a soothing aural effect. It may be all slipping away, the poem suggests, but someone is straining to hear our call.

Still soft in sound, the “woman in the moon” then makes a surprising turn, as if stepping back for perspective, and estimates that she “must have / a thousand names for the earth, my blue vocation.” That she has so many suggests that the earth itself, the environment, is another of her children, and subject to terms of endearment. For a moment, though, all those human lives become too numerous and microscopic to register individually. Meanwhile, the phrase “blue vocation” evokes the smallness of Earth seen from afar, and possible ambivalence toward her role as a watcher and empathizer (an ambivalence many mothers have likely felt). The job of overseeing us has become melancholic, and the woman in the moon, this listener, hears our blues and sees our oceans as well, knowing our lives are often sad, and that Earth is under threat.

Tragic subject matter notwithstanding, Duffy’s poem delights in language. Rhymes appear not at the traditional ends of lines but within. Four lines separate “moon” from “spoon”; “griefs” is echoed two lines later by “brief”; a “sliver of pear” is followed, also two lines later, with a “silver onion”; a catalog of foods to which the moon is compared includes “lemon,” “melon,” and “onion,” invoking not only the harmony of those words pronounced in proximity but also the simple finery of the earth’s products, in their elemental roundness. These lines remind the reader to be grateful to have an onion to chop for dinner, “half an orange” to enjoy at breakfast, a “wedge of lemon” to squeeze into a cup of tea (although it is notable that we mostly see slices, not whole fruits, as if the bounty were not altogether satisfying, or being shared equally).

While the rhymes are not obvious to the eye, they echo in the ear, and the poem’s organized affirmation of rhyme combined with the rejection of its traditional positioning suggests that our received notions of form—like the old pattern of the seasons, now thrown off by climate change—are being upended.

Yet all is not lost; art can still make rhythms, beauty, pleasure, and order.

Those mellifluous-sounding foods, which make up half of Duffy’s third stanza, not only illustrate the moon’s appearance but also reflect what the speaker has to eat. There is no mention of green cheese. Rather, lunar life resembles a feminine, fat-free lunch: “Round I go, the moon a diet of light, sliver of pear, / wedge of lemon, slice of melon, half an orange, / silver onion,” the word “diet” preceding what sounds like a peculiar fruit salad, starting with the zero-calorie “light.” The adjacent orbiting—“Round I go”—even hints at an effort to stay fit (and, of course, slender) on an elliptical machine, stationary bicycle, or track. But just as she does not fully inhabit a nursery rhyme at the outset, nor is the speaker listening to mindless workout music. Instead, our heroine tunes in to “your human sound falling through space, / childbirth’s song, the lover’s

song, the song of death”: the woman in the moon, a consummate poet, listens to life in all its grandeur, its joys and pain.

In addition to her literary obscurity, the speaker shares with many human mothers the condition of being undervalued in her work, as her tireless vigilance seems to be taken for granted. Yet the poem’s humans know that *someone* is watching; at night, in the final stanza, the speaker notices people staring up at her, “gaping back as though [they] hear,” as they search the sky for forces greater than themselves. Unsaid but implicit is the baselessness of their assumption that God (along with the equivalent of God in most religions) takes masculine form. Meanwhile, the phrase “as though you hear” does double duty: not only can people not hear “the woman in the moon” because she is hidden and far away, they also cannot or will not hear warnings about global warming, no matter how audible, fact-based, or accessible.

Part of what makes the poem contemporary but certain to last is that it does not dwell on the ongoing destruction of the planet but takes it as a *fait accompli*, which will seem natural to a future reader of the early 21st century canon. Its final cry—“*Darlings, / what have you done, what have you done to the world?*”—echoes a mother finding her children with a broken vase, perhaps an inherited, irreplaceable one. The poem does not overtly urge readers to help save the planet but grieves over its degradation. This grief functions rhetorically now (if indeed the planet is still salvageable) as an exhortation to action, but it also applies literally to the day we seem to be hurtling toward, when the planet has been irreversibly ruined. That is, the poem works one way now and will work another way later.

The alarm about the earth becomes clear in the sound as the poem lulls and then surprises us with jarring rhythms. After the nearly iambic “childbirth’s song, the lover’s song, the song of death. / Devoted as words to things,” the speaker looks upon destruction with three consecutive stressed (and alliterative) syllables: “I gaze, gawp, glare,” seeing not only “deserts / where forests were” but also the spondaic “sick seas.” The closing lament—“*what you have done, what have you done*”—receives emphasis from the stress on “what” and “done” twice over. Meanwhile, the speaker invokes language itself as a fellow protector—she calls herself “Devoted as words to things”—as if to suggest that words, despite their parallel inability to save the planet or even name its components accurately, are an alternate form of salvation. In Carol Ann Duffy’s “The Woman in the Moon,” language and listening may be imperfect and may not connect us. But the speaker seems to believe that if Earth is careening toward ruin, its inhabitants might as well go singing.