Lifesaving Poems

Anthony Wilson, editor

Bloodaxe, 256pp

This expansive and intelligent poetry anthology, edited by the poet, academic and writing tutor Anthony Wilson, should cause considerable creative debate. Discussions should include its contents, the contexts of selected poems and writers, and the role Wilson has assigned himself as creator and curator. His love of poetry proves infectious, and his book is a stimulating encouragement to reading and analysis, both among those who have been involved in poetry for many years, and the perplexed who might be wondering where to begin.

Great poets leave rich legacies, and this book grew from a chance remark by Seamus Heaney. How many poems remain memorable in a reader's lifetime, he wondered. Wilson began writing down his choices. His list became a blog, and the blog became this book. It features 91 writers, each represented by a single poem. Criteria was pure subjectivity; poems are here because Wilson liked them. He includes a page of informed comment with each poem. This is where debates begin.

Initially these might surround content. Almost all the selected poems, apart from one psalm and a handful of European writers, are English language poets from the second half of the twentieth century. This is a literary collection without expected foundations. There are no Metaphysical poets here, no Romantics, nor Victorians; no War Poets. Even within Wilson's chosen time-frame there are surprising omissions. He records finding a poetry section 'in the furthest recess possible' of a library, and discovering among some surprises predictable 'Hughesheaneylarkinplath'. Philip Larkin is amongst the absentees in Wilson's selection.

Other notable omissions include R. S. Thomas, and Michael Longley, who is acknowledged among authors that widened Wilson's own poetic horizons. Among writers in the Christian tradition — and Wilson is a former poetry editor of this magazine — Norman Nicholson and George Mackay Brown have both been passed over. Feminists will be disappointed to note the absence of writers like Eaven Boland and Medbh McGuckian. Wales is denied the gale-force metaphysics of Dylan Thomas, and Ireland the mystical music of Yeats.

The writer we hear most about is Anthony Wilson, who filters each of his selected poets through the prism of his encounters. The book therefore raises the huge question of context: is it sufficient to know a poet through their work, or do we need some biography; further 'scene setting'? This is all the more pertinent when the methodology of this book appears to counter the way in which Wilson normally teaches the appreciation of poetry.

In a comment on Alison Mosquera's poem 'Tamoxifen', he writes: 'It is one of the unwritten rules of the workshops that I conduct that no-one is required at any point to discuss their personal lives or history: we discuss the poetry, not the biography'. In *Lifesaving Poems* Wilson includes a considerable amount of autobiography, understandably including his survival from cancer, while denying any biographical details to any of the writers he selected. Perhaps we should be expected to read his anthology with a copy of *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* at our elbow, but Michael Schmidt's *Lives of the Poets* showed how biography can provide context, fulfilling the understanding of poetry under discussion.

'I called this anthology Lifesaving Poems because I actually believe there is something redemptive and healing in the art of making, speaking listening to and reading poems,' Wilson writes in a commentary on a poem by Brendan Kennelly. This has all the more force as he outlines such 'redemptive and healing' potential among poets who shared his experience of cancer. They range widely, from Julia Darling's overt 'Chemotherapy' ('I did not imagine being bald/ at forty-four') to the hidden agenda within Jo Shapcott's award-winning collection *Of Mutability*, or Clare Best's poem 'The bookbinder', where the condition is not mentioned at all. With such work, as with the Swedish Nobel laureate Tomas Transtromer's 'Alone', Wilson draws together his own, and wider poetic experience in ways that enhance poetry under discussion.

Faith is another undercurrent in the anthology, with little overt identification, or elucidation. Wilson notes the 'strange merging of the language of religion... with that of the earth' in a poem by Charles Simic, and finds a sort of secular liturgy in W. N. Herbert's cascade of rainwater images in 'The Black Wet'. He also admires a poem by Gwen Hardwood for the way in which it 'merges religious language' with 'the technique of personification'. It was fitting that his anthology included a poem by Evangeline Paterson, who did so much to encourage the following generation of writers in the Christian tradition, including the gentle anecdote of her request to an audience to pray for her, because her writing was 'blocked'.

Wilson elevates poetry reading as important as writing, and in many examples deftly displays his talents as a 'close reader', bringing out the strengths of individual poems by their use of language, sound, identification, and sometimes by being tales of the unexpected, setting out one subject while effectively airing another. His choice of favourite poems by the big names in his book is often intriguing. Heaney is represented by 'Night Drive', Ted Hughes, more predictably, by 'Wind', and Carol Ann Duffy, less predictably, by 'Words, Wide Night'. The oldest contributor is the author of Psalm 102, where Wilson detects a prophetic reference to chemotherapy, and the youngest is an anonymous ten year-old girl whose work emerged from a creative writing lesson.

If we do not need to know that Wilson first heard a particular Maura Dooley poem 'stuck in traffic... in Tooting', the fact that he was teaching at Ted Hughes' former Pennine home on the day Hughes died adds to that commentary. More about the contributors to Wilson's 'desert island poems' would have made his ambitious anthology all the richer. **Martyn Halsall**

Martyn Halsall's latest poetry collection, *Sanctuary*, is published by Canterbury Press.