

Section E

GENERATIONS

Dannie Abse (b. 1923)

Imitations - page 70

Born into a Jewish family in Cardiff, his two brothers also became public figures – one as a Labour MP and the other as a psychoanalyst. Abse practised as a doctor until his retirement in 1982 and combined this career with writing. Both the vocations along with his Welsh and Jewish ancestry have served as his inspiration. He notes that his poems are increasingly ‘rooted in actual experience’, domestic and professional. He has published 15 collections of poetry and has also written plays and novels.

Simon Armitage (b. 1963)

Poem – page 68

He was born in Huddersfield. A former probation officer, he lives in the same part of West Yorkshire where he grew up. He worked as a Radio 1 DJ and also writes lyrics, plays and TV and radio scripts. Armitage’s poetic potential is suggested by *Zoom!*, in which poetry is represented as the sum of everything from the Mechanics’ Institute to the universe. He appears to have been influenced by Paul Muldoon’s inventiveness, and by various ways in which Irish poets, following Kavanagh, have made parish and universe a basis for poetic structure. He has said that his ‘word pool’ is coloured by the West Riding and by the language of ‘my friends, family or heroes’.

Gillian Clarke (b. 1937)

Baby-sitting – page 60, *Clocks* – page 72

Born in Cardiff, she is a poet, playwright, editor, translator (from Welsh) and President of Ty Newydd, the writers’ centre in North Wales that she co-founded in 1990. She has been a tutor on a postgraduate course in Creative Writing at the University of Glamorgan since 1994, as well as being a freelance tutor of creative writing for all ages, from primary schools to adults. She has travelled in Europe and the United States giving poetry readings and lectures, and her work has been translated into ten languages. She is married with three children and lives on a smallholding in Ceredigion, where they raise a small flock of sheep and care for the land according to organic and conservation principles.

Steve Ellis (b. 1952)

To Edwin, at Eight Months – page 61, *West Pathway* – page 74

Born in York, he is Professor of English Literature at the University of Birmingham. He has published books on Chaucer, T.S. Eliot and other poets, as well as three collections of his own poetry.

Ursula Askham Fanthorpe (b. 1929)

Growing Up page 62

A British poet, she studied at St Anne's College, Oxford, from 1949 to 1953, and then achieved a teaching diploma at the University of London Institute of Education. She became an assistant English teacher, and then later head of English at the independent girls' school, Cheltenham Ladies' College. She found the teaching post demanding and left in 1972 to take a job as an admissions clerk in a Bristol Hospital, which she did until 1983. Both jobs have influenced the subjects of her work. When she was nearly 50 she compiled her first collection, *Side Effects*, in 1978, and has since published a further six collections, which have all been published from Liskeard in Cornwall. From 1983 to 1985 she was the Arts Council Writing Fellow at St Martin's College, Lancaster. From 1987 to 1988 she was a Northern Arts Literary Fellow at the universities of Newcastle and Durham. She is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and was awarded a CBE in 2001 for services to poetry.

Tony Harrison (b. 1937)

from Long Distance – page 71

Born in Leeds, he won a scholarship and went on to teach at universities in Africa and Prague. He is the author of more than fifteen books of poetry. He is also a noted translator, dramatist, and librettist whose works have been performed by Britain's National Theatre and the New York Metropolitan Opera. His honours include a UNESCO fellowship, the Faber Memorial Award, a U.S. Bicentennial fellowship, and the European Poetry Translation Prize. He was made a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1984. He lives in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and New York. Memories of his working-class childhood and family life provide the material for much of his poetry.

Seamus Heaney (b. 1939)

Follower – page 69

He is one of the few modern poets to reach a wide audience. Heaney received a Catholic education at St Columb's College, Derry, and from 1957 studied English at Queen's University, Belfast. In 1972 Heaney left Belfast and a lectureship at Queen's to live in rural Wicklow and later moved to Dublin. In 1984 he was appointed to a professorship at Harvard. He became Professor of Poetry at Oxford (1989-94). In 1995 he won the Nobel Prize. The farmland of his childhood is a fundamental source to his poetry, with Heaney creating strong environments through a subtle and economic use of words.

Selima Hill (b. 1945)

The Flowers – page 72

She has spent most of her life working with children as a tutor in hospitals and as a child-minder. She also taught in prisons. She now lives on the Dorset coast. Hill's lyrics share the psychological concerns that shape her long poems into monologues by obsessed female speakers. Her work explores emotions and what drives people. The mental landscapes she creates have similarities with those of Sylvia Plath, but Hill's poetry has a greater narrative structure and focuses more on social issues. She sets contemporary women's lives in ancient cultures, the domestic into the wild.

Ted Hughes (1930 – 1998)

A Short Film – page 67

Ted Hughes spent his first seven years in the Calder Valley, a region of West Yorkshire that haunted him as one that was ‘in mourning for the First World War’. His father was one of the few survivors from a locally recruited regiment. Hughes went to Cambridge in 1951 after two years of National Service. He felt that the academic study of English was ‘killing’ his Muse and switched to archaeology and anthropology. Hughes has compared writing poetry with the way in which a Native American shaman communes with spirit-animals on behalf of his people. His turbulent relationship with his poet wife Sylvia Plath, who committed suicide in 1963, led him to take this mystical perspective possibly too far. He was made poet laureate in 1984.

Philip Larkin (1922 – 1985)

I Remember, I Remember – page 65

Born in Coventry where his father was town treasurer, he won a scholarship to St John’s College, Oxford. He was unfit to serve in the Second World War, and instead spent that time working as a librarian in Shropshire. He later worked for several years as a librarian at Hull University. His *Selected Letters* (1992) and Andrew Motion’s biography (1993) point to a disturbed inner life, living in solitude to pursue his poetic vocation. He is regarded by many as the greatest poet of his generation, although he wrote very little compared to his contemporaries.

In ‘I Remember, I Remember’ Philip Larkin represents his youth in Coventry as a non-event. He inverts Dylan Thomas’s ‘Fern Hill’ and satirises several Romantic poets. “You look as if you wished the place in hell” hints at unhappiness, and ‘Nothing’ as his real poetic source. Larkin had said that, ‘what you imagine makes you dissatisfied with what you experience, and may even lead you to neglect it’. Lawrence and Yeats influenced the visionary element of Larkin’s work, although Hardy’s ‘sadness’ is more in keeping with his own character.

Paul Muldoon (b. 1951)

Anseo – page 66

His poetic work has been influenced by his childhood in rural Northern Ireland and by the Troubles. He studied English at Queen’s University, Belfast, taught by Seamus Heaney. Until 1986 he worked in Belfast as a radio producer for BBC Northern Ireland. He moved to the USA and is now Professor of Creative Writing at Princeton and, since 1999, Professor of Poetry at Oxford. His innovative approach to poetic language has widely influenced contemporary poetry.

Norman Nicholson (1914-87)

The Tune the Old Cow Died Of – page 73

A poet, novelist, playwright and reviewer. Strongly associated with Cumbria and the small mining community of Millom where he spent most of his life, his poems often reflect the local people, the close-knit families and their struggles against poverty.

Sylvia Plath (1932 – 1963)

You're – page 60

She grew up in New England. Her father died when she was eight and his absence contributes to a poetic drama of insecurity in which traditional roles are both desired and resisted. Pressures to conform to both a feminine and academic ideal, together with her intense literary ambition, created inner conflicts and obsessive over-achievement led to her breakdown and attempted suicide in 1953. Two years later she went to Cambridge on a scholarship, where she met Ted Hughes. They married in 1956. Plath learned a lot from Hughes's style, but the dialogue between their poems exposes significant differences. Plath speaks for the unconscious forces, which Hughes to some extent disguises in animal life. Plath separated from Hughes in 1962. In February 1963 she committed suicide, less than a month after her only novel *The Bell Jar* was published. Her best known collection of poems, *Ariel*, established her reputation. She is renowned for her strikingly original and often disturbing imagery, and a brave and controlled treatment of extreme and painful states of mind. Although her greatest poems focus on suffering and death, others are exhilarating and affectionate, and her tone is frequently witty as well as disturbing.

Stevie Smith (1902 – 1971)

To Carry the Child – page 64

Florence Margaret Smith was nicknamed 'Stevie'. Born in Hull, she moved aged three with her mother and sister to her aunt's home in Palmers Green, North London. Her reputation grew unevenly, although her distinctively voiced readings later became famous. Critics were puzzled by Smith's fake naïve style, her strange cast of characters, the childlike drawings that accompanied certain poems and the sudden switches from comedy to theology. Philip Larkin said her poems 'speak with the authority of sadness'. In 1960 Smith wrote of the Muse: 'She is an Angel, very strong....The human creature is alone in his carapace. Poetry is a strong way out. The passage out that she blasts is often in splinters, covered with blood; but she can come out softly.' Her verse is witty, bitter and enigmatic, much of it illustrated by her own comic drawings.