

The Long Pale Corridor, ed. Judy Benson and Agnetta Falk (Bloodaxe 1996), 320 pp, £8.95 pbk

Stopping for Death: Poems of Death or Loss, ed. Carol Ann Duffy (Viking 1996), 133 pp, £8.99 pbk

There is infinite variety within the reality of death. For some it will happen in an instant and we may be unprepared. However, grief takes time and for many it is the greatest pain they will ever have to bear, for there is no anaesthetic. In other words it is unknown territory which most people face with little or no preparation. It is a subject about which many find difficulty in speaking openly. These two anthologies bring together a fine selection of contemporary voices which reflect the diversity of experiences. Both books embrace the complexity of death through the way they articulate the varied emotions that death can inspire—from quiet resignation to uncontrollable anger, despair, guilt, fear, relief, the humour, the love and the many questions which are asked in order to make sense of it.

Benson and Falk do a better editorial job on the organization of their selection, while the Duffy selection is both shorter and easier to use. However, both selections would be welcome resources for those teaching in this area from whatever discipline. Many of the poems here could well be used to deepen the sense of understanding and compassion for all those engaged in professional care. The Duffy book, particularly, lends itself for use in parish study groups. I shall very much want to use it in Advent to address some of these themes, with the practical challenge to participants to prepare and to consider how they would like their funeral services to be a reflection of their life and beliefs.

There is one notable omission. The poems of Mark Doty are probably the most powerful and rich exploration of death and loss that I have come across for many years. His work deserves the widest possible readership and theological reflection.

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