

Tony Thinking Aloud cxxiii

I felt rather than try to write a musing this week, I would share with you the Poet Laureate's appreciation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

The poem takes the form of a double acrostic and Armitage says he wants to humanise the Queen, stripping away, the pomp of her "ceremonial nominals" and bringing her down to earth. One of the things that has struck me in the last few days is the sense that even many of those who hold no fondness for the monarchy have felt a certain sadness at the passing of someone who has been a constant in our public life for so long. It also feels apt that Armitage has chosen to address her, first and foremost, as a woman rather than a distant monarch.

The flower at the centre of the poem is the lily of the valley, which was included in the Queen's Coronation Bouquet and was one of her favourite flowers. Armitage addresses the Queen, offering her the flower as "a gift" in return for her lifetime of service. In a speech she gave in 1947, the Queen spoke of her willingness to carry out her royal duties – "I declare before you all that my whole life ... shall be devoted to your service" – and this is the "promise made and kept for life" that Armitage invokes. The exchange of gifts depicts monarchy as a contract between the people and the Queen, one that benefits both sides and involves mutual respect. Armitage also uses the archaic name for the flower, "glovewort", which sets the Queen in a long historical context, as the modern figurehead of a family that has its roots in the Middle Ages.

Floral Tribute by Simon Armitage

Evening will come, however determined the late afternoon,
Limes and oaks in their last green flush, pearled in September mist.
I have conjured a lily to light these hours, a token of thanks,
Zones and auras of soft glare framing the brilliant globes.
A promise made and kept for life – that was your gift –
Because of which, here is a gift in return, glovewort to some,
Each shining bonnet guarded by stern lance-like leaves.
The country loaded its whole self into your slender hands,
Hands that can rest, now, relieved of a century's weight.

Evening has come. Rain on the black lochs and dark Munros.
Lily of the Valley, a namesake almost, a favourite flower
Interlaced with your famous bouquets, the restrained
Zeal and forceful grace of its lanterns, each inflorescence
A silent bell disguising a singular voice. A blurred new day
Breaks uncrowned on remote peaks and public parks, and
Everything turns on these luminous petals and deep roots,
This lily that thrives between spire and tree, whose brightness
Holds and glows beyond the life and border of its bloom.