

18 Special Commendation

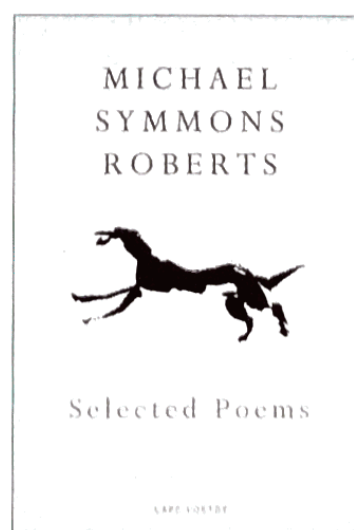
Selected Poems by Michael Symmons Roberts

Michael Symmons Roberts's *Selected Poems* brings together six collections of his frequently-prize-winning poetry. His oeuvre, at this stage, is remarkable; it is worth repeating that he is unlike any poet currently writing; he is, in his own realm, the nonpareil of British poetry. Like Hugo Williams, and possibly Alice Oswald, Symmons Roberts is inimitable, the exemplar that other poets hanker after but can't parody or echo, not only because he is an unusually gifted technician but because he busts wide open the many no-go areas of human experience, notably the world of the spirit, even nature of soul, that loaded word most poets stare at, occasionally prod, and weigh, but in the end, have no understanding to what meaningful purpose it should be put.

Each collection prepares a clear pathway for *Drysalter*, published in 2013, the book he has been waiting to write all his life. Setting himself the seemingly impossible task of 'restricting' each poem to fifteen lines, he made himself a formal penitentiary and found from within its walls the most remarkably expansive and liberated poetry I have read in many years. Compression is his fruitful addiction: he needs the smaller space in which to make the bigger space. The *Drysalter* poems are post-sonnet sonnets in which the octave is often the sestet, the sestet the octave. The volta,

poor thing, lumbered for centuries with the onerous job of making the precarious bid for meaning, becomes the roaming flaneur of its own cause. And if these are mutated sonnets, which they probably are not, there is not one final couplet or resolution that acts the tumbrel to the blood podium.

Perhaps drawing on Donne more than Marvell, Symmons Roberts long ago reinvented a metaphysical diction—that rare, unmistakable mix of grace and observation. Many of the landmark poems that helped to make this are included in this book. His celebrated 'The Telex', as early as 1993, threw down some important markers: "...a secretary / at your factory in the forest took / lunch in the sun and sent a telex / to God when she got back." By 1999, in 'Mapping the Genome,' it is time to interrogate "The desire to know, to map you to your / bodily soul". Throughout *Corpus*, in 2004, he leads us like Virgil first through life and after-life, then death, then resurrection. By 2008 he has introduced us to the knife that "...holds, in stasis, such a lethal bite / that it could fillet soul from spirit". *Drysalter* receives this arc and stirs it in its chemicals, dyes and salts.



Selected Poems is published by Jonathan Cape, priced at £14.00
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