

TAKING A RISK WITH LOVE

POEMS WITH A LOVE THEME

Sean O'Connor



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Dublin

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To Carmel

 You are a sunrise,
 If a star should rise instead of the sun.
 You are a moonrise
If a star should come in place of the moon.
 You are the Spring,
 Instead of an apple bough.
 If a face should bloom,
 You are my love
 If your heart is as kind
 As your young eyes now.

Vachel Lindsay



Sean O Connor is a native of Cork city and was educated at Presentation College and St Finbar's College in Cork, and at the then Bolton Street College of Technology in Dublin where he graduated with a Dip. in Health Inspection in 1970. He trained in Architecture with Michael McNulty & Associates, Architects & Surveyors and became a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Building in 2008. He obtained a Master of Science degree from Dublin Institute of Technology in 2003. Sean began writing poetry as a hobby around 1968 and the poems in this book represent those written by him between 1968 and 2006. He is married to Carmel and has five children and four grandchildren. He lives in Dublin.

For Carmel, Fionnuala, Kathleen, James, John and Claire

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INTRODUCTION

This is an affectionate collection of poems, the first to be published by the author. Like many first collections it brackets the wonder at a new medium with the uncertainty of the novice poet. But all this newness is refreshing. Sean O Connor sees the extraordinary in the ordinary. His eyes and poetic voice are unshaped by attempts at cleverness. He does not try too hard for effect. Rather he lets his thoughts do their own silent speaking. What happens in his epiphany moments is what you get.

Sean O Connor is a man who loves life. He worships at the shrine of love and human flourishing. There is a palpable feeling of delight as he witnesses a child succeeding in some endeavour. His love for his spouse is no moonstruck romance but comes from years of appreciating that love that continues to refresh itself.

His poetic forbears are obvious. One can gleam his respect for Robert Frost and Patrick Kavanagh. He especially respects Kavanagh's wonder at creation without pretending to reach that old soul's lofty heights. His affection for nature echoes too that great poet of the fields, Francis Ledwidge. As a child of the flower generation of the 60's, he addresses death not unlike the poet Emily Dickenson. His lovely poem for his grandparents reads like one by the great Scottish poet Norman MacCaig for his own Aunt Julia.

Sean's poetry is at its best when read aloud. He has a happy knack of making the minutiae of life, preserved perhaps for over thirty years, come alive for the listener

of today. When you have read this book you may be moved to say – I could have written that! And you would be right. It is in the unaffected capturing of the ups and downs of his life that he has succeeded in proving the aphorism ‘everybody’s life is worth at least one book.’

His themes include yearning and fear of loss, being overwhelmed by love, being captivated by a winter landscape, being in awe in the face of daybreak, of listening to silence, of respect for the oneness of nature and being moved to tears by injustice. I could go on and risk spoiling the reader’s anticipation of the book. Do yourselves a favour and settle down with a glass of wine by the fire and read Sean O Connor’s poems. Remind yourselves of your own love of life and let your heart swell. Celebrate your own life and its many epiphany moments. Resolve to capture them as Sean has in the lines of your own poems.

Sean Brophy

PREFACE

Like so many young people, I went through a period in my life when I wrote poetry. How good or bad my poems are is not really for me to say. What is important is that they represent a period in my life when I had such thoughts, lacking in maturity though they were.

I like many poets, but I love Robert Frost, as the thoughts he expresses are ones that I can identify with. I think also that he influenced me with some of my poetry.

Some of my earlier poems are poor: one can see the immaturity of thought and the inadequate construction. They are left in there for the reasons outlined – they show the beginning of what I hope can be described as a maturing process. Yet some of the thoughts are rather nice, as in:

Daylong vacant meditation,
Lying in a pram, staring at the ceiling:
Existence without reflection,
Knowledge not beyond
The harness, blankets and immediate feeling:
The smell of the pram and mother.

That is a sequence of events that I can actually remember and it is one of my very early poems. In my early twenties when I began to enjoy poetry a bit more, I came across Robert Frost. I love his poem “The Tuft of Flowers:”

I went to turn the grass once after one
Who mowed it in the dew before the sun.

The dew was gone that made his blade so keen
Before I went to view the levelled scene.

I looked for him behind an isle of trees
I listened for his whetstone on the breeze.

But he had gone his way, the grass all mown
And I must be, as he had been – alone.

I think the description in that is beautiful and vivid. In his poem “The Impulse” he describes the breaking of a bond and one can actually feel the sadness in the man who has just been abandoned by his wife:

He never found her, though he looked everywhere,
And he asked at her mother’s house
Was she there.

Sudden and swift and light as that
The ties gave
And he learned of finalities
Besides the grave.

I think that is an amazing poem: I tried a similar kind of theme with a poem called “Times Passing” which is a poem about the ravages that time can impose on a woman who was once young and beautiful. Carmel and I used to visit this old lady in an old peoples’ home.

I saw age, age creep slowly
Onto her once young face.

The zest of youth fade from her eyes
And sadness came, came in its place.

She worried not so much about,
The passing of time as day followed day;

But cared more that the same relentless time,
Caused her cheeks to fade, stole her youth away.

I wrote another poem of the loneliness of a countryman living in a big city, showing the transition from digging on his own patch of land to digging a road in the centre of Dublin. I actually like this poem as it reflects the lot

of very many of our countrymen in the not-so-distant past:

Yet the digging is the same
 You could say.
 Whether it is in Inshageela

Beneath the mountain's shade,
 On the streets of Dublin,
 Or amid Bermingham's weaving traffic.

But the dream is different –
 And so is the feeling
 Of being alone.

I suppose when it comes down to it (whatever that means), to write poetry is to write about life and its ultimate meaning: we probably also put our heads above the parapet a little. As my friend Sean Brophy states in his beautiful little book 'Girl through my Window' - "Ultimately, man should not ask what is the meaning of life, but rather he must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by 'Life'; and he can only answer to 'Life' by answering for his own life" (Frankl). I think this is a profound piece of philosophy and one that can be beautifully outlined by poetry.

All kinds of people write all kinds of poems. I recently, by a rather obscure path, came into possession of a quirky book of poems called "Development Poetry" by an author with the unusual name of *Hay Machine(e)*. It was a wonderful, unorthodox and irreverent book. Who could write lines like these?

"He was planning to cut hay
 Out by Ballycroy
 But the postman calls at noon
 Or thereabouts today
 And he will not speak with strangers
 Out by Ballycroy"

Or

“With a pliers he pinched a moonbeam
 Threading the needle fine
 Stitching his words and weaving them
 Into splinters of silver twine

When memory found a picture
 His light was a moonlit flame
 And he laboured into the nighttime
 Until out of the dawn it came”

Isn't that gorgeous? I think that is an absolutely beautiful piece of writing. As it happens I know some of the people and places *Hay Machine (e)* writes about – Cathal Duffy and the Travellers' Friend, Bar na Cuige (I drove on Monsignor Horan's runway for £5 before the airport opened) Cape Cod, and Beggars Bush, not to talk of Long Island and Manulla. (I wonder if he knew the tailor that lived on the Westport Road outside Castlebar near Patrician Park in 1968. He taught me the correct way to sew in buttons).

Two grand uncles of mine drove a bus for a living in the 1920s and 1930s from New York to Long Island: they left Curragheen on the west side of Cork city for America one summer day and never set foot in Ireland again. Whilst driving over that very same bridge to visit my son John in Montalk in 1999, I was struck by the overlapping of the generations – my grand uncles Jack and Bill, to my father and me and down to my son enjoying his summer holidays from TCD in Long Island. I think life is a very strange commodity. That's why people write poetry.

Another poem that I love is Robert Frost's "The Pasture." It starts off like this:

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
 That's standing by the mother. It's too young.

It totters when she licks it with her tongue
I shan't be gone long – you come too.

Isn't that the most beautiful simplicity? I think that's what poetry should be – beautifully descriptive and simple. I love descriptive writing, writing that makes you picture something in your mind. Take Seamus Heaney's "Follower:"

My father worked with a horse-plough,
His shoulders globed like a full sail strung
Between the shafts and the furrow.
The horses strained at his clicking tongue.

Beautiful, simple and descriptive. I tried something similar about my grandfather. I think it worked out well.

I never actually saw –
My grandfather plough with horses.
Yet he did.
For fifty years he walked behind them
Ploughing the land
And harrowing it.

What I missed –
Was the sound of the horses cutting through
The January frost.
The hiss of the silvery blade as it parted
The black earth
As he ploughed.

My old friend Christy Kenneally was unusual even when we were at school in that he wrote poetry then: indeed he had that kind of unusualness that comes from intelligence. He also became a priest and worked with old people, people who had a good chance of not seeing the morning; for such people often die, they say, with the coming of the dawn. He wrote a book that encapsulated his experiences - in St. Patrick's Hospital in Cork. Within it is some poetry, some of which goes like this:

For three short years
 I trod the winepress of their pain
 Until I could no longer tell
 Whose blood I wore upon my feet
 Their reaching out
 Surprised my hidden self to love
 To touch, caress and hold
 To walk the water
 Of a thousand tears
 Or sit quite still
 In their dark silence
 Simply being awake.
 The little music I could make
 They savoured, stored
 And measured back
 A hundredfold to me.

Or

The pools that were her eyes
 Flowed even fuller in her face
 As life began to ebb.
 The plumb-line of our talk
 No longer snagged
 On the trivial flotsam of our lives
 But daily deepened
 Till the line was taut and spent,
 And words refused to measure more.....

And though I banged the Temple door
 And flung my 'why?' before His face
 The morning brought me
 Humble to the mill
 That ground the kernel of their spirits fine
 And there was in the wine
 The blood their hearts had wept
 While mine had slept.

Talk about putting your head a little above the parapet!
 You see, as Sean Brophy says, it's all about love. He
 says "Love is the only way to grasp another human being
 in the innermost core of his or her personality." In my
 opinion, poetry is the perfect way to express that love.
 You don't love if you don't put your head above the

parapet – even just a little. You don't love if you don't take a risk with your heart, or as Robert Frost puts it "to learn to let go with the heart." You can't really love without risking rejection. Yet the risk is worth it: certainly my life was changed utterly when love came to me with a young girl from Mayo almost thirty nine years ago, and she accepted me. It was the philosopher Karl Jung who once said that there is no such thing as chance or coincidence, that all things are ordained by a Higher Being. I think I believe that.

In his book "Building the Earth", the philosopher Teilhard de Chardin asserts that "love is the most formidable and mysterious of cosmic energies.....is seen as a primitive and universal psychic energy which gives significance to everything around us." "Man must (instead) perceive the universal reality which shines spiritually through the flesh. He will then discover what has so far frustrated and perverted his power to love. Woman is put before him as the attraction and the symbol of the world. He can engage with her only by enlarging himself to the scale of the world." And yet, the kind of world we are now facing is one of deep concern, with so many horrible things going on. What is important, as Sarte has said, is that there are no absolute values or norms independent of what man individually and socially chooses. Instead, man is condemned to make man: we are alone responsible for what we do. And yet, we need love as we need food. We all have an idea of what would make us happy and what would make us unhappy. We need security and emotional peace; we want and need art, music and the dance, travel and a variety of experiences. "And poetry, music and art retain their beauty and enrich our lives even in the complete absence of God or the gods" says Paul Kurtz in his book "Moral Problems in Contemporary Society."

Be that as it may, I prefer De Chardin's vision on love and the working out of creation, even if it is a little impersonal:

Moved by the forces of love,
Fragment of the world seek out one another
So that a world may be."

For a love poem that says everything that needs to be said about love that is unrequited, we need go further than this beautiful poem by W.B. Yeates:

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft love,
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep.

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

Imagine reading that poem whilst listening to the Adagio of Brahms's Violin Concerto in D in the company of the one you call your soul mate. Add to that a glass of red wine and some nice food and we have what separates us from all else in Creation – love, culture and intelligence.

It strikes me too that the poems that follow have been written between 1970 and 2006 – thirty six years out of my life. That is a long time to gauge one's development.

Sean O Connor
April 2011

COVER STORY

A butterfly on a pink-white rose,
Softness and beauty interposed.
You are the rose and I the fly –
Let me alight.

Sunlight, dissolving in a turbid sea,
Dances on the surface with childish glee.
Let there be such fusion with you and me –
Let us become as one spirit.

Cloud drifts lazily across the sun,
Across blue sky on its well oiled run.
With such smoothness let our friendship grow–
Let us be lovers.

On our Engagement March 1st 1971

What more can be said? Beautiful occasion, beautiful time of my life. I think that finding love such as this is something to be celebrated – even with doubtful poetry. To be fortunate enough to find someone to love me sincerely and unfailingly for so many years should be appreciated for the wonderful thing it is. How can the average mortal adequately express such a thing?

AROUND THE HORSE ROCK

I sat crosslegged on the prow,
Watching the porpoise at their play.
A gentle breeze caressed my brow,
As we buffet through the choppy spray.

The heaving waves with their speckled tops,
Gleaming mirrors in the noon-day sun.
Wet my face with their salty drops,
Like God's own tears for some mischief done.

How many men in days of old,
Have kept vigil at that some sight.
Salty men both true and bold,
Yet others sorry with their plight.

Cutting through the heaving sea,
As it tries to rid us from its back.
A writhing monster from the deep,
Blue and green and speckled black.

The flaming sun deserts the West,
The stars invade the sky.
Yon wind blows cold behind the spray,
As we turn and bid this place goodbye.

Out along the golden sand,
Speckled silver retrace.
As if drawn by a mighty hand,
For use in some other place.

Kilbritian, Cork August 1970

I actually like this poem, though it has this silly rhyming system. It also recalls a time in my life that I enjoyed immensely when life was simple and uncomplicated. Sailing and fishing and hunting and playing music are all pastimes that I remember with affection.

THOUGHTS BY A RIVERBANK

The old mill wheel hummed low with its song of
age,
Moonlight river humming towards Two Mile Bridge.
An old fisherman passes quietly by,
Threading his path by the river.

A weeping willow stretches low,
Gently caressing the river's furthest shore.
Moonlit water, darkening, spreading cloud,
Fish jumping from its depth to catch the mayfly

All these trees that live along the riverbank,
Long dead spirits of another time.
They seem to stare at me as I sit here,
An intruder from another paradise.

The rippling water still runs on,
And I sit and think of times long gone.
Moonlight river humming and a girl I loved,
Now in my memory – can we be true?

The night is in, the dark moon stirs my thoughts,
The river and the mill hum on.
The lowing cow stirs my thoughts again,
On the cold wind from the mountain.

Frost
I have once been acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain – and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.
I have looked down the saddest city lane.

Banks of the River Suir, Clonmel July 1970

This is one of my very earliest poems and shows the signs of
it. The banks of the River Suir going from the Quay to Two-

mile bridge outside of Clonmel, is a favourite walk especially in summertime and is also popular with fishermen and lovers. That particular night I was neither.

SONG

Be as close to me as a swan's reflection
Of itself in a gentle river –
A fusion of light and water.
Or a rough sea washing over rocks
Making white foam
Or a seed of wheat embedded
In its protected home.
Or a wild deer drinking from a mountain stream,
Flicking a fly from its ear.
Or a coat of snow on a green meadow
Making it gently white.
That close be you mine.

Glenaire May 1971

This poem was conceived in the foothills of the Comeragh mountains above Clonmel during the summer of 1969 and written in Cork during the summer of 1971. I quite like it! I quite like most of my experiences in this area during this time. It is also a celebration of early love.

THOUGHTS IN A DOCKLAND

It was pleasant today strolling in the sun,
Along Cork's dockland getting some work done.
Watching pretty girls as they go their shapely ways,
And wondering where is Carmel, where is she
today.

The sun shone down as I walked along the quays,
The turbid yellow waters rippled gently in the
breeze.
I miss her now, I miss her love so true,
Her pilgrim soul, her heart wherein dwells mine
also.

I climbed upon the "Floristan," a mighty ship and
proud,
Unloading grains of barley from Boston's harvest
shroud.
That I might turn this ship around and sail it back
again,
Back to Boston and to Allston to where my love lies
in.

Ah! Dreams why do you plague me, but 'tis a
pleasant thought,
To think my love close by my side, her arms around
me wrought.
But now I have to stand alone on this bright and
sunny day,
And wait till she returns again to the waters by the
Lee.

Hope
The silken softness of your hair,
Where faint bronze shadows are.
Your strangely slight and youthful air,

No passions seem to mar –
Oh! Why since Fate has made you fair,
Must Fortune keep you far.

Cork August 1970

I think this is one of my poems with a “cringe factor” inbuilt. Yet at the time it sort of reflected how I felt when Carmel went for a holiday to America. It probably shows how immature and lacking in self confidence I was when I was twenty years old.

COMPASSION

He sat helplessly in his wheelchair
Crying, a little boy of ten.
With large tears running down his chin
Frightened by his coming ordeal –
A visit to the dentist.

His face was pale and drawn
His shoulders narrow, his legs were thin
His eyes were wide with fear –
Wondering why should this be him
Sentenced to remain in this chair
In a melancholy world of constant contemplation.

Cork June 1971

I worked for the Southern Health Authority at Cork City Hall between 1970 and 1971. We shared some space during that time with the Health Authority's Dental Service. This was a moment in somebody's life that I observed and recorded. I hope it all worked out well for the poor little mite!